

René Jean-Paul Dewil

The City of Ghent

1316-1337

Ghent in the fourteenth century

Rebellion

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The Characters

The Vresele family

Juris Vresele	(1260-1325)	
Mergriet Mutaert	(1265-1340):	wife of Juris Vresele.
Gerolf Vresele	(1285-1349):	son of Juris, monk.
Gillis Vresele	(1293-1360):	son of Juris.
Avezoete Wulslager	(1295-1349):	wife of Gillis Vresele.
Agneete Vresele	(1300-1335):	daughter of Juris, married 1320 to James van Artevelde.
Heinric Vresele	(1325-1390):	son of Gillis, clerk.
Marie Vresele	(1312-1388):	daughter of Gillis, married in 1332 to John de Smet.
Evrard Vresele	(1320-1387):	son of Gillis, monk.
Boudin Vresele	(1316-1395):	son of Gillis Vresele, trader
Jehan Terhagen	(1319-1390):	adopted son of Gillis Vresele

The de Smet family

Wouter de Smet	(1280-1348):	smith.
Lijsbetten Mutaert	(1283-1349):	wife of Wouter de Smet, cousin of Mergriet Mutaert.
Veerle de Smet	(1308-1349):	daughter of Wouter, married in 1329 to William van Lake.
John de Smet	(1310-1395):	goldsmith, son of Wouter, married to Marie Vresele in 1330.
Heyla de Smet	(1330-1385):	daughter of John de Smet
Wouter de Smet the Younger	(1335-1382):	son of John de Smet, goldsmith.
Amelberga van Dorme	(1336-1390):	wife of Wouter de Smet the Younger, married 1357.

The van Lake Family

Raes van Lake the Elder	(1280-1349):	weaver
Zwane Bentijn	(1285-1349):	wife of Raes van Lake the Elder, married 1304.
Raes van Lake the Younger	(1310-1349):	son of Raes the Elder.
Mechtild van Lens	(1311-1349):	wife of Raes van Lake the Younger, married 1330.
William van Lake	(1311-1370):	weaver, draper, son of Raes the Elder.
Veerle de Smet	(1308-1349):	wife of William van Lake, married in 1329.
Alise van Lake	(1331-1385):	daughter of William, married 1350 to Clais de Hert.
Avezoete van Lake	(1332-1390):	daughter of Raes the Younger, draper, married 1351 to Martin Denout.
Boudin van Lake	(1340-1382):	weaver, son of Raes the Younger
Agte Homberg	(1344-1390):	wife of Boudin van Lake, married 1362.

The Denout family

John Denout	(1283-1349): fuller.
Selie Scivaels	(1284-1349): wife of John Denout.
Pieter Denout	(1303-1365): fuller, son of John.
Kerstin de Hert	(1309-1370): wife of Pieter Denout, married 1331.
Martin Denout	(1330-1382): fuller, son of Pieter, married to Avezoete van Lake 1351.
Wivine Denout	(1331-1391): daughter of Pieter Denout, twin of Quintine.
Quintine Denout	(1331-1370): daughter of Pieter Denout, twin of Wivine.

The de Hert family

Arnout de Hert	(1279-1349):	shipper
Marie Scivaels	(1280-1352):	wife of Arnout de Hert, sister of Selie Scivaels
John de Hert	(1297-1361):	shipper, son of Arnout de Hert
Beatrijs van Vaernewijc	(1300-1366):	wife of John de Hert, married 1325
Nete de Hert	(1298-1370):	daughter of Arnout de Hert
Kerstin de Hert	(1309-1370):	daughter of Arnout de Hert, married 1331 to Pieter Denout
Clais de Hert	(1332-1382):	son of John de Hert, married to Alise van Lake

The van Artevelde family in this book

William van Artevelde the Elder:	broker of Ghent
William van Artevelde the Younger:	son of William the Elder, Water-Count of Flanders
Francis van Artevelde :	son of William the Elder, Castellan of Beveren
James van Artevelde (1295-1345):	son of William the Elder, captain of Ghent first marriage to ? (Agneete Vresele) second marriage to Catherine de Coster
Catherine de Coster (1314-1388):	second wife of James
(Agneete Vresele) (1300-1335):	first wife of James van Artevelde

The feudal Lords

Note: the dates stated are dates of reign, unless otherwise indicated.

Kings of England:

Edward I Longshanks (1272–1307), married (1) to Eleanor of Castile and (2) Margaret of France.

Edward II of Caernarfon (1307 – 1327), married to Isabel of France.

Edward III (1327–1377), married to Philippa of Hainault.

Richard II (1377–1399), married to (1) Anne of Bohemia and (2) Isabella of Valois.

Kings of France:

Philip IV the Fair – Philippe le Bel (1285-1314), married to Joan I of Navarre

Louis X the Quarreler – Louis le Hutin (1314-1316) married to (1) Margaret of Burgundy and (2) to Clementia of Hungary.

John I the Posthumous – Jean I le Posthume (November 1316)

Philip V the Tall – Philippe I le Long (1316-1322), brother of Louis X, married to Joan II Countess of Burgundy.

Charles IV the Fair – Charles IV le Bel (1322-1328), brother of Philip V, married to (1) Blanche of Burgundy, (2) to Marie of Luxemburg and (3) to Jeanne d'Evreux.

Philip VI of Valois the Fortunate – Philippe VI le Fortuné (1328-1350), grandson of Philip III, married to (1) Joan the Lame of Burgundy and (2) to Agnes of France.

John II the Good – Jean II le Bon (1350-1364), married to Bonne of Bohemia.

Charles V the Wise – Charles V le Sage (1364-1380), married to Joan of Bourbon.

Charles VI the Beloved the Mad – Charles VI le Bienaimé le Fol (1380-1422), married to Isabeau of Bavaria.

Counts of Flanders:

Guy I of Dampierre – Gwijde van Dampierre (r. 1251-1305), married to Mathilda of Béthune.

Robert III Lion of Flanders – Robrecht III Leeuw van Vlaanderen (1305-1322), married to (1) Blanche of Sicily and (2) to Yolande II Countess of Nevers.

Louis I of Nevers – Lodewijk van Nevers (1322-1346), grandson of Robert III, married to (1) Margaret of France and (2) to Joan II Countess of Burgundy.

Louis II of Male – Lodewijk van Male (1346-1384), married Margaret of Brabant.

Regents of Flanders at various periods:

William of Gulik (b. 1275-1304): grandson of Guy I of Dampierre from his mother's side, leader of the Flemish armies at the Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302), son of the family of Jülich (German) or Juliers (French).

John of Namur (1297-1330): count of Namur, son of Guy I of Dampierre

Robert of Cassel: second son of Robert III Count of Flanders. When Robert's first son, Louis of Nevers died, the succession to the county of Flanders passed on by French support to Louis's son, equally named Louis, who became Louis I of Nevers and count of Flanders.

Popes

Boniface VIII (1294-1303) - Benedetto Caetani
 Benedict XI (1303-1304) - Niccolò Boccasini
 Clement V (1304-1314): first pope at Avignon - Bertrand de Got
 John XXII (1316-1334): at Avignon - Jacques d'Éuse
 Nicolaas V (1328-1330): counter-pope for Avignon - Pietro Rainalducci
 Benedict XII (1334-1342): at Avignon - Jacques Fournier
 Clement VI (1342-1352): at Avignon - Pierre Roger
 Innocent VI (1352-1362): at Avignon - Étienne Aubert
 Urban V (1362-1370): at Avignon - Guillaume de Grimoard
 Gregory XI (1370-1378): at Avignon - Pierre Roger de Beaufort
 Urban VI (1378-1389): papal schism, Rome - Bartolomeo Prignano
 Clement VII (1378-1394): papal schism, Avignon - Robert de Genève

Kings of Germany and Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire:

Albert I – Albrecht von Habsburg (1298-1308): married to Elizabeth of Carinthia.
 Henry VII – Heinrich VII der Luxemburger (1308-1313): Holy Roman Emperor, married to Margaret of Brabant.
 Louis IV – Ludwig IV der Bayer von Wittelsbach (1314-1347): Holy Roman Emperor, married to (1) Beatrix Swidnicka and (2) to Margaret of Holland.
 Frederick the Fair – Friedrich der Schöne von Habsburg (1314-1325): rival king to Louis IV, married to Isabella of Aragon.
 Charles IV – Karl IV von Luxemburg (1346-1378): Holy Roman Emperor, married to (1) Blanche of Valois, (2) to Anna of Bavaria (3) to Anna von Schweidnitz and (4) to Elizabeth of Pomerania
 Günther von Schwarzburg (Jan 1349 – May 1349): rival king to Charles IV.
 Wenceslaus – Wenzel von Luxemburg (1376-1400): deposed as German king in 1400, continued to rule as king of Bohemia, married to (1) Joanna of Bavaria and (2) Sophia of Bavaria

Dukes of Brabant, Lothier and Limburg:

John II (1294–1312): married to Margaret Plantagenet, princess of England.
 John III (1312–1355): married to Marie d'Évreux.
 Joanna (1355–1406): married (1) to William IV, count of Holland and (2) to Wenceslaus I duke of Luxemburg

Counts of Hainault and Holland

John II of Hainault (1257-1304): married to Philippine of Luxemburg
 William III of Hainault (1304-1337): married to Joanna of Valois
 William IV of Hainault (1337-1345): married to Joanna Duchess of Brabant
 Margaret II of Hainault (1345-1356): married to Ludwig IV (Lewis) of Bavaria, German Emperor
 William V of Wittelsbach, duke of Bavaria-Straubing (1356-1388): married to Mathilda of Lancaster

Albert I of Wittelsbach, duke of Bavaria-Straubing (1388-1407): married to (1) Margaret of Brieg and (2) to Margaret of Cleves

Counts and Dukes of Guelders

Reginald I of Guelders and Wassenberg – Reinoud I van Gelderland (1271–1318): married (1) to Irmgard of Limburg and (2) to Margaret of Flanders.

Reginald II the Black of Wassenberg – Reinoud de Zwarte (1318–1343): Guelders was elevated to a Duchy during his reign. Married to (1) Sophia Berthout, Lady of Mechelen and (2) to Eleanor of Woodstock, daughter of King Edward II of England.

Reginald II the Fat Wassenberg – Reinoud II de Dikke (1343–1361): first time, Eleanor regent (1343–1344): daughter of King Edward II of England, wife of Reginald II Edward I (1361–1371): brother of Reginald III

Reginald II the fat of Wassenberg (1371): second time

Matilde of Guelders (1371–1379): and John II, count of Blois (d. 1381), her third husband Maria of Guelders (1371–1379): and William II, duke of Jülich (d. 1393), her husband. She disputed the Duchy of Guelders with her sister Matilde.

William I of Jülich-Hengebach (1379–1402): son of Maria and William II, duke of Guelders and duke of Jülich. Married to Catherine of Bavaria.

Chapter 1. Zele. 1316

Juris Vresele

The sky was drawn over the land like a dark veil, heavy and low. The uniformly grey ceiling hung pregnant with water and merged with the sodden ground in a dense fog that seemed as much to ascend from the moisture-saturated fields and to fall down from the threatening, sombre mass above. The spectacle was familiar to the man who stood, alone, on a small hill. The man could not see far, and he could not walk much farther, for his boots had already too often been sucked in by the soft, black mud. Pools of water flecked the wide expanse of grassy terrain unfolding before his eyes. He did not well know how and where the irrigation canals ran here, though he expected them to lead straight to the Scheldt, to the broad and mighty stream that lurked behind the haze. The mist fascinated him. He wondered whether death would come to him into such fuzziness to dissolve him into God's cauldron of destruction and creation.

The man knew that narrow, man-made brooks ran perpendicular to the canals, but he feared these might not have been properly maintained here and have been grown over by grass and shrubs, so that his legs could suddenly sink into hidden gullies, causing him to stumble and crack a leg. The water stood also high here in the fields. The pools, which reflected the scarce light that emanated from the greyness, might prove as so many deep and dangerous traps. The man had therefore preferred to seek out a small hill, merely a mole's heap high. He stood there now and contemplated, left foot firmly in front of the other, overlooking the polders of the stream. Polders were how these lands around the stream were called, the swamps that announced the stream from far, the territory the stream had created to guard itself from intrusion. The man granted the stream its tranquillity, but he desired this land as much as the stream.

The soil of the polders was very rich. It had been saturated over the ages with the deposits of dead leaves and plants and with the alluvial rests of earth brought from hundreds of miles upstream. The Scheldt was a Nile, here. The man stooped, dug his long fingers in the ground, and brought his hand filled with mud to his mouth. The earth tasted grainy and acrid, probably too acid for rich harvests, but that could be remedied. The land could be wrenched from the stream and from the sea, but that meant building high dikes far beyond the horizon, very long dikes too, to harness the stream as man wanted it to flow, to clean and deepen the canals, and to dig a lot more transverse channels than he suspected lay here.

Juris Vresele owned better land farther to the north, and those acres had been profitably transformed into very fine meadows and fertile fields. Juris coveted the land he saw lying fallow as far as his eyes could peer, but he would not win and tame this land this year, nor maybe even the next years. This land could only be won by generations of hard work and heavy investment. It had also rained too much to allow him to think of the prospect of golden harvests and of herds of fat cattle here. It had been raining without mercy for two years, and for the second time crops had not ripened by autumn. Cattle that had to graze in water-logged meadows, had sickened and died miserably. In the untended polders, the water rose and suffocated anything that grew. Did God want to drown the world once more? Was this the end of all living things? How many sins had brought the flood and were cleansed in death?

The lands of Juris Vresele had thus been devastated, and here, the state of the terrain looked even worse. He sighed. He prayed for God to spare mankind and the earth, but he doubted his prayers would divert the design of God. He was growing old. The land was finally defeating him, but that could not be true. Nobody and nothing could win from a Vresele! Juris would never, never, acknowledge himself as defeated, unless God himself in all his vengeful, terrible splendour appeared before him. A Vresele was too obstinate, too obdurate, too tenacious, too relentless to ever be overcome by nature or the contriving of other men. Any obstacle could only be temporary. If nature had proven angered for many months, and God unforgiving, God and nature would yield in the end, show their love and revert to normal conditions, to dry periods alternating with the showers that had been the wealth of Flanders for generations of hard-toiling farmers.

Not this autumn, and not this winter, though, Juris expected. Maybe in next spring, and by then he had to be ready. Juris wanted this land, these polders near the village of his forefathers, and he would own this soil one day, kiss it and tame it, and push back the stream to where it belonged, but before that, he would have to perpetrate the worst abomination of his life.

A man's destiny lay in his name.

Juris Vresele did not know exactly how his name had been moulded by his forefathers, but he was fairly certain it had been derived from the name of the village he originated from, from Zele.

Maybe Vresele meant 'free Zele', a free man from Zele, and he liked that explanation, though he had heard from a family called Verzele, a name that sounded closer to what 'from Zele' might indicate in Flemish. Maybe his name was simply older than that one. He did not live in Zele, but his grandparents did originate from there, and he too had spent the first twelve years of his life in the village, with his parental grandparents, before being taken to his father and mother who lived in Ghent, the fabulous city that lay south-west of Zele. His mother was from Ghent. Ghent also was the town he had lived in ever since he had first set eyes on it as an alert boy of twelve, and Ghent he would not leave, for that city held what he loved and cherished now, even though much of what he needed to guarantee his income still came from the land north of what he was contemplating.

Evening fell. The fog thickened. Gustier winds tucked at Juris's rough woollen coat. He should soon return to the road. It was this road he had come to inspect a last time, for by this earthen path he would have to escape from Zele to the Scheldt, to the banks where a boat would be waiting for him. If all went well. The boat would come from Dendermonde, over a wide eastward bend in the Scheldt, leading to another vast region of polders called the Sand. The small boat would have to sail against the current into the bend, upstream, and then stop past the curve, not far from this place. It might already have arrived. That boat would bring him and his friends to the safety of the city of Ghent.

Juris Vresele was about to rob the abbey of Saint Liudger of Zele of its treasury, and then flee to Ghent, laden with the riches.

Juris knew where the treasury of the abbey was hidden. Many people knew, especially the boys who served mass in the abbey church. A huge oak cupboard stood in the sacristy against the south wall. The sacristy was a small stone building erected next to the church, a building that could only be reached from within a side chapel, passing a sturdy door that remained closed always except during the religious ceremonies. A large iron chest was hidden in that cupboard below, covered by a fisher's net, a box too large to get through the door of the sacristy unless one tilted it. The chest was closed by two locks, and in that chest lay the spare chalices, the abbot's crucifixes, the crosiers, the plates, the silver and golden ceremonial

utensils offered to the abbey over the last centuries and decades. Juris, a boy of ten, had seen that chest moved and open only once, but his eyes had widened from astonishment at the glitter of the gold and the silver and the gems, all artful objects of great value, some enveloped in felt, filling the chest up to the iron cover. This was the treasure of Zele, and Juris needed it.

Zele had been founded when Emperor Charlemagne had offered the territory to Saint Liudger, the founder of the abbey of Werden in Germany. Liudger was a holy bishop, the missionary of Friesland and of the towns of Groningen and Deventer far to the north of Holland. He was the son of a nobleman of Friesland who had escaped persecution to Liège. Liudger had become a learned man, who had studied under Alcuinus of York in England, and who had then managed the court school of Charlemagne. Later, Liudger was sent to convert Friesland to Christianity, and since he spoke the language, he succeeded where others had failed and been martyred. Liudger built churches and abbeys in Friesland.

Still later, Charlemagne ordered him to Saxony for the same good work, and finally, Liudger had founded a large abbey at Werden, the monks of which had founded in their turn the abbey of Zele.

The founding of the abbey of Zele had happened more than a century and a half ago. Juris had heard that story be told over and over again by his own son, a monk, who had read the old charters of the abbey and who had spoken to the monks and the prior of the Saint Liudger abbey of Zele. His son, Gerolf Vresele, was as eager as Juris to learn about the place of his forefathers. Gerolf was interested in everything. He had a mind formed and trained for curiosity. He was very intelligent, but of the scholarly type, and Juris had known early this son was useless in business. Gerolf took after his mother, who liked to read Latin books in the library of the *Bijloke* convent in Gent. The abbess had allowed her to take books home, despite the value of the volumes and despite the protests of the other nuns. The abbess of the *Bijloke* was very fond of Ver Mergriet Vresele born Mutaert, a member of her own family, and so Mergriet had access to the books. Gerolf Vresele would of course not participate in the expedition of his father. He would probably call hell and damnation on his father for the act.

To get at the treasure of Zele, Juris Vresele had need of several trustworthy, loyal men, men of specific skills. He needed a blacksmith to open the massive wooden doors of the church at night, to open the iron chest and to smelt down the gold and silver into bars the origins of which could not be traced. He also needed two strong men to guard and to carry.

At first, he had thought to load the chest on a cart and drive that straight to Ghent, but that scheme was far too dangerous. A rattling cart drawn by a horse would be heard far in the silent night. The road to Ghent was too long and too obvious. If the alarm was sounded, the villagers of Zele, under the direction of the constable, would first hurry along that road too, tracking the men who stole their possessions. Juris had to leave his cart at the outskirts of the village, and then flee by another road than the Ghent one. The solution to his dilemma was to flee to the Scheldt, not southward but eastward to the stream, and so he also needed a shipper and a boat.

Luckily, Juris had friends who were as desperate as he was.

His first thoughts wandered to the comrades-in-arms with whom he had fought the Battle of Kortrijk in the year 1302.

Wouter de Smet was a blacksmith and a very dexterous man in his profession. He worked as much as a blacksmith, but wanted to be a jeweller. Wouter could curve the largest bars of iron as well as draw the tiniest threads of silver and gold. He worked red-hot iron to forge the most common tools. He was the best blacksmith of Ghent. Wouter had forged for himself a large

collection of keys and he could pick any lock, however strong, large or intricately small. More importantly, Wouter did not have the money to settle as a silversmith or a goldsmith though he ardently desired to do so, and his business had waned during the current famine. The famine created many desperate men, and that was the leverage Juris used to lure Wouter into the expedition to Zele. Juris knew Wouter's mind like the back of his hand, for Juris's wife and Wouter's wife were aunt and niece. Wouter was almost Juris's brother-in-law. They met several times a year for banquets, at Christmas and Easter and for Carnival, and Wouter and Juris could drop in at each other's house at any time. Juris knew Wouter's issues and Wouter's dreams.

The weaver Raes van Lake was one of Juris's best friends, always an accomplice in the most daring and risky operations. That had brought golden eggs to Raes and to Juris, until in these last months all their eggs had broken in the same basket. The constant rains and the slump in sales of cloth and other goods had worsened the famine and the pecuniary situation of Flanders. Raes van Lake had eaten through his cash and lost the rest, so he was currently as destitute and funds-eager as Juris to pay his rents, to invest in new ventures and to regain his former prosperity and standing. The theft was the only alternative they both had to starving.

Raes had insisted on an additional man to carry and guard, a stronger man even than he was, so he and Juris had decided after much weighing and neighing to call on John Denout to accompany them. Denout was a worker among the poorest of the poor, yet still a citizen of Ghent. He was a fuller, depending entirely on Raes van Lake to supply him with cloth to full. Van Lake controlled Denout entirely. John Denout's family currently depended exclusively from the income provided by van Lake.

John had perpetrated a crime in his youth, paid the retribution money, but nobody wanted to have anything to do with him afterwards. Many years ago, John Denout had turned to his companion-in-arms, appealed to Raes van Lake, begging him for work. Van Lake had offered John his trust, at first a little reluctantly, for he too had heard of John's reputation. He had given Denout fullers' work, and that arrangement later had went well for both van Lake and Denout.

These last months, however, Raes had not been able to give much work to Denout, so that John had no money left to buy fullers' clay. Denout was broke and desperate to get more work from Raes, as well as a loan to continue his craft.

John Denout was eager enough to accompany Juris and Raes on the expedition to Zele. He would have accompanied these two men to hell and possibly back, for he too had fought in 1302 in the lines of the *Gentenaars* against the French knights. Juris and Raes trusted John, and he them.

Juris had then only needed a shipper to wait with a boat on the Scheldt close to Zele, and once more Raes van Lake came up with a name, with the name of Arnout de Hert. De Hert owned his own boat. He transported grain from Ghent to Dendermonde and to Antwerp, sometimes also to Damme, Sluis and Bruges, but with the disaster of the failing grain crops in Picardy, his business had simply vanished.

Most grain for Ghent and northern Flanders came up the rivers Leie and Scheldt, from northern France. The shippers of Douai exercised their unwritten rights to transport the grain from France up to Ghent, to the port no farther than *Tussen Bruggen*, Between the Bridges, the port of Ghent on the Leie between the bridges the *Veebrug*, the Cattle Bridge and the *Sint-Michielsbrug*, the Bridge of Saint Michael. The *Gentenaars* in their turn were not supposed to enter Douai. All the grain, the daily food for the sixty thousand people living in Ghent, and

more, was transported by boat down the Leie and the Scheldt, brought to the Ghent staple, and sold or changed hands in the Grain Hall near the Cattle Bridge.

Shipper de Hert now obtained much fewer transport contracts for grain and other victualing goods than in the past, due to the failing crops. The coins of his meagre reserves were rapidly dwindling and he expected nothing better in his trade for many months, not before the end of next year. He had already thought about selling his boat and seeking work as a journeyman in the port, loading and unloading other boats, but that would be the ultimate humiliation for a free shipper of Ghent.

It had thus not been hard for Raes van Lake to convince Arnout into helping friends on a dangerous but very rewarding endeavour. Moreover, John Denout and Arnout de Hert were brothers-in-law, having married two sisters of the same parents, of the Scivaels. Family ties ran very strong in Ghent.

The plan fixed and the crew assembled, Juris Vresele had shown himself discreetly in Zele, only passing through with a small cart drawn by an old hack. He had looked admiringly around the abbey buildings, visited the church, strolled by the chapel leading to the sacristy, and briefly inspected the sacristy door. He had watched and spied on the people and on the sites. He saw nothing that might have deterred him from his project. Juris had not stopped at the inn, though he might have met people there he knew from his youth. He had just passed through the main street, lingered at the abbey, and now he stood here on this hill and watched the polders of the Scheldt while reflecting on all the things he had to do.

The cold wind tucked in gusts at his clothes. He was impervious to the cold. His thick woollen cloak kept his body warmth comfortably in. Juris turned inwards also with his thoughts, and he liked the feel of the wind blowing in his grey hair while he felt protected. He revelled in the flatness, the endlessness and the monotony of the landscape, the unity of earth and sky in the same uniform colours, the harmonious tints and the equal brightness. Few people came here to take possession of the land with eyes and feet, and fewer were aware of the wealth that could be wrung from the ground and water.

Juris stood, a squat, stout man of fifty-six years, with a proud demeanour that did not betray his desperate mind. Juris's back was still straight and rigid, though he felt the weakness of the years insidiously creeping in on him. His face was square and wrinkled like a cracked, weathered rock. His greying hair tousled in the wind. He never wore a cap or hood, not even in the streaming rain. He was a bull of a man, obstinate and commanding, as should be expected of a Ghent family master. Juris Vresele was intelligent, industrious, always thinking of new enterprises, of business ventures, of expeditions, fine manager of his money and what he undertook, until he had been defeated, as so many of his generation, by the famine years. He stood, and he knew he would never be a beggar. He would survive and rise and be wealthy again.

'God,' he prayed, crossing his hands, 'I know I am stealing from you, but I will give you back what I steal a hundredfold. I have never asked something from you, not even my life when that was in danger. Please forgive me, but if I don't do this, and if you don't help me doing this, my family will starve. This time, I really and humbly appeal to you.'

Juris Vresele's thoughts wandered off. He had lost much.

Most of the chattels and houses he owned in Ghent had been taken away from him before 1300 for rioting against the aldermen of the city. That had been the heaviest blow to his family, but it hadn't killed him, nor forced him on his knees.

Only wealthy landowners, always members of the same old families of Ghent could be chosen as aldermen, and most of those families remained loyal to the crown of France, were therefore

called *Leliaerts* after the lily flower, the royal symbol of France. When he and his friends had spoken out in favour of the count and of the county, and declared against the king who wanted to annex and plunder Flanders, the aldermen had confiscated his possessions. Some of his lands outside Ghent, to the north of Dendermonde, along the Scheldt and also more inland, had been taken from him by force when he protested against the corruption and the taxes of the aldermen.

His best friend, William van Artevelde, whose family originated from Ertvelde, a village not far from Zele, had also lost lands. William, always a fine counsellor, had died a few years ago, torn by sadness and regrets. William too had lost part of his wealth but survived.

Not everything the Arteveldes and the Vreseles owned had been noted in the archives of Ghent, though, and had been remembered by the aldermen, or else they had been lenient. Juris and William had retained businesses far away from Ghent. Their peat bogs were intact, their trade connections remained active. Juris and William had not been able to openly flaunt the revenue from their remaining tenures, so they had feigned being broke and hired themselves for a time into the armed troops of a son of the count of Jülich. That had been in 1302.

Flanders' Struggle for Existence

Wilhelm von Jülich originated from a small county of the German Empire that was stuck between the archbishoprics of Liège and Köln. He was called Willem van Gulik in Flanders, Guillaume de Juliers in France.

Willem van Jülich was by his mother the grandson of Guy de Dampierre, the count of Flanders. The then count of Flanders and his son, Robert of Béthune, the Lion of Flanders, had been imprisoned by the king of France because that king coveted the county of Flanders and wanted to annex it to his crown lands.

Flanders was the wealthiest territory by far in the feudal kingdom of France, but it was composed of regions very diverse in character and language.

The count of Flanders owned land where French was spoken, the territories to the south with cities like Lille and Douai, as well as vast territories where dialects of Dutch were spoken. These last counted some of the richest cities of the mainland such as Bruges, Ghent and Ieper. The count held these two territories in feudal liege from the king of France.

The count of Flanders also owned to the north-east land that depended in feudal rights from the German Empire, such as the region called the *Vier Ambachten*, the Four Crafts. Also the lands of the town of Aalst and the *Land van Waas* were among these. The count was the lord of the town of Vere on the island of Walcheren in Zeeland. The count of Flanders had inherited from lucky marriages the vast counties of Nevers and Rethel in France. Guy of Dampierre had also bought the county of Namur from Baldwin of Courtenay.

Bruges, Ghent, Ieper, Lille and Douai, were the pearls that gleamed in the eyes of Philip the Fair, Philippe le Bel, the king of France. They were by far the wealthiest cities of the realm.

Yes, Juris Vresele reflected, Flanders was wealthy indeed, resourceful rather than rich in resources, and the largest miracle was probably that Flanders suffered no dearth in able leaders in times of distress or upheaval.

The count of Flanders had sired many sons and his family reached wide, from Flanders to Nevers and Rethel in France, to Jülich in the German Empire, and in lesser measure to other counties. Marrying into the family of Flanders was arduously sought after.

With the count and his successor imprisoned in France, Willem van Jülich and Guy de Namur had taken the lead as the representative of the authority of the counts of Flanders. Willem was a grandson of the count, Guy a son. Willem and Guy led the Flemish revolt against the aspirations of the king of France. The revolt, supported by the guildsmen of the cities, but mostly not by the aldermen of the cities, spread and had led to the Battle of the Golden Spurs of 1302, where the French and the Flemish armies clashed. Flanders had dared to confront the mighty kingdom of France, and she had prevailed! The Flemish troops had defeated the French army near Kortrijk in the Groeninge field. The golden spurs of the noble French knights fallen in the battle had been collected by the Flemish victors, hung in a church of Kortrijk, to lend their name to the battle. A little later, two other sons of the count joined them, John of Namur and Philip of Chieti. The youngest son of Guy de Dampierre, Henry also fought in the wars, while their still other brothers were imprisoned like their father.

William van Artevelde and Juris Vresele had been dizeniers, sergeants, troop leaders, in that battle for van Jülich, and they had met Raes van Lake, Wouter de Smet and John Denout in the army camp. These had arrived late, a shad been the thousands of *Gentenaars* under John Borluut, coming to the aid of the Bruges militia and the knights of Flanders. The aldermen of Ghent had refused to take sides in the conflict, remaining loyal to France. Borluut and his men had slipped out of the city and participated in the heat of the battle. A joy the battle of Groeninge had been, a jolly battle had been fought and won, and Juris had felt a very young man in that confrontation, though he was quite older than his friends van Lake, de Smet and Denout. He had been almost twice their age at that time, and considered their leader by mutual consent, by charisma and by fierceness in the duels of the battle.

Juris remembered vividly how he had stood next to his banner amidst the Flemish troops, in a terrain such as lay here in front of his eyes, a sodden field, littered with shallow ditches half filled with water, waiting behind deeper brooks as defence against the impetuous charges of the French knights. They had waited with their *goedendags* stuck in the earth to impale the French destriers and knights. They had formed a wall of spiky steel.

Goedendags were short lances with a lumpy cylinder of wood and iron just behind the one-foot long spike. The weapon could be used as a lance and as a mace, and the Flemish had wielded it with particular skill that day of July. Juris and his friends had stood in a defensive line in the middle of the army on a small hill.

The French crossbowmen had attacked first and caused many casualties among the Flemish knights and guildsmen. The French knights, fearing victory would be stolen from them by their men-at-arms on foot, had then surreptitiously attacked, trampling over some of their own crossbowmen and their helpers, who had been crushed under the hooves of their horses. Juris had heard the cries of pain and mercy.

When the horses galloped to the Flemish battle lines, the heavy destriers had broken their legs in the brooks around the Groeninge Field. The brooks had been filled by whining horses, by the dead and wounded animals and by the corpses of the felled knights. The gruesome wave of French riders had charged into the dense rows of *goedendags*. The thundering assault of the knights clad in iron, gold and silver had been stopped. The knights had been slaughtered by the guildsmen. The Flemish footmen only wore mail-coats, layers of woollen tunics or leather jerkins beneath iron plates on their breast.

Thousands of proud French noblemen had been killed mercilessly. The *goedendags* had been put to bloody use that day, maces as well as spikes, crushing and piercing armour.

Very little mercy had been granted to the French knights, few prisoners made, and that was also on orders of Willem van Jülich and Guy de Namur as regents of Flanders. Willem in particular had wanted to take his revenge for the slaughtering by the French of his uncle, Walram van Jülich, during the battle of Bulskamp of 1297.

The Flemish people hated the politics of annexation of the French King Philippe le Bel. They fought more against the greed of the king than for love of their count, suspecting their freedom rights and their charters would be ignored by the king.

The guildsmen and knights of Flanders had therefore won a desperate but famous victory under the leadership of Willem van Jülich, Guy de Namur and especially the Zeeland knight John van Renesse. They had forced for ever since the French to feel fear and apprehension at the sight of a group of Flemish men-at-arms.

Juris Vresele and William van Artevelde had not seriously been wounded. They had accompanied John Borluut on his return to Ghent, where their former sentences had been diligently forgotten. Strong bonds of friendship had been forged, the friendship of comrades-in-arms, between the families of Artevelde, Vresele, van Lake, de Smet and Denout, and little mattered whether one was rich and the other poor.

The Battle of the Golden Spurs had taught Juris Vresele a life-long aversion for more violence. Juris had experienced the horror of a battlefield, the maimed and dead men lying on the bloodied, wet ground with cut gullets, skulls crushed, long open sword wounds, bellies pierced by lances or sliced by axes so that the men died eviscerated, daggers pushed through knights' visors in eyes and brains. He had smelled the stink of the battlefield, the urine, the shit, the vomit, mixed with warm blood. He had seen the ravenous dogs eat at human flesh and brains. He had seen the animals lick at the blood. Later, crows had picked at the more tender morsels, at eyes and lips and noses. Other scavengers had arrived then, old men and old women who roamed between the corpses in search for a golden button or a hidden coin forgotten by the victorious warriors on their defeated enemy. Battles were a very expensive way of winning a cause, maybe triumphant for the winning survivors, but catastrophic for the families of the dead. Juris suffered from nightmares for months. Battlefields were hell on earth!

After the Battle of the Golden Spurs of the eleventh of July 1302, so called because the Flemish gathered three hundred golden spurs on the battlefield, which they hung first in a chapel of Groeninge and later in a church of Kortrijk, the Flemish armies under the sons and grandson of Count Guy de Dampierre seemed invincible. Had they wanted to advance, they might have captured Paris.

John Borluut and his troops returned to Ghent. They were received with spectacular applause by the population, and then the killing of the *Leliaerts* and the revenge of Artevelde and Vresele, of Borluut and of many other leaders of the Ghent militia began.

The fleur-de-lys banners of the thirty-nine *Leliaert* aldermen were torn to pieces, the aldermen dismissed from office, and a message sent to the count's sons that henceforth the city of Ghent participated entirely in the revolt against the king of France.

On the fifteenth of July 1302, four days after the battle, Willem van Jülich and Guy of Namur entered Ghent in triumph, and from his cell in France the old Count Guy of Dampierre

ordered all possessions of the *Leliaerts* to be confiscated and sold to the benefit of the courageous guildsmen who had fought at the side of his sons.

Juris Vresele remained in Ghent after 1302. William van Artevelde remained for another year under arms in the service of Willem van Jülich. He witnessed the recapture of Lille and Douai by the Flemish. All the lands of former Flanders were recovered from the French garrisons, and even Lessines in the county of Hainault was taken.

In April of 1303, the Flemish and the French armies clashed once more, at Arques, close to the town of Saint-Omer. The French army was once more defeated.

A new war threatened then. The count of Hainault, Holland and Zeeland was John I d'Avesnes. He was a descendant from the house of Avesnes who were perpetual enemies of the Dampierres and the Béthunes. John attacked and captured the town of Vere on the island of Walcheren, a town that belonged to the count of Flanders. Count Guy de Dampierre could claim Zeeland more than John d'Avesnes. He had given Zeeland to his son Guy de Namur. Guy wanted Zeeland! He used the triumphant Flemish army to attack the islands. The Flemish leaders assembled an invasion fleet at Sluis to conquer Walcheren, but Juris Vresele had returned to Ghent, to his home town and to the business he had neglected for too long. For him, the war was over since long.

The war in Flanders continued.

Juris Vresele did not forget that when the new regent of the count of Flanders, the second son of the count, John of Namur, tried to arrange an alliance with the king of England, King Edward I, that king chose to remain neutral in the conflict, in exchange for the stopping of French support to the Scots who were warring with England. Juris learned with some bitterness that no country and no lord was the natural ally of Ghent and Flanders. Alliances were made in the spur and the interest of the moment, and alliances only lasted as long as interests coincided. It was all a matter of pragmatics and of one's economic and military power. Luckily, Flanders possessed plenty of both. The county was wealthy from its industry and trade, and its citizens were hot-headed enough to grasp their weapons whenever a leader with some eloquence could convince them of an urgency.

After 1303, after the Battle of Arques, Philippe le Bel experienced severe, painful issues with his own military readiness.

The king had so little funds left that he could not pay his mercenary forces anymore!

The state of his treasury might have been the reason he had wanted to annex Flanders in the first place. His troops mutinied, ransomed their leaders, and started pillaging the villages of northern France.

When he heard of the king's setbacks, John of Namur opened negotiations with the king, and an armistice was signed on the twenty-first of September 1303 that was to last for a period of eight months. Under that treaty, the French army had to withdraw to west of Tournai under the pressure of the Flemish militia. Count Guy of Dampierre, seventy-seven years of age, was released from prison, as well as his other son, William of Dendermonde.

King Philip's aim with the release of the count of Flanders was to install a durable peace. Military leadership of Flanders passed then yet into other hands, now in those of Philip of Chieti, fifth son of Count Guy.

Philip of Chieti had been living in Italy, where he managed the Chieti estates of his first wife in the Abruzzi's. He abandoned his possessions in Italy and arrived with a mercenary army in Flanders as new regent.

Meanwhile, the war of Flanders in Zeeland and Holland still raged unabatedly. John II, duke of Brabant, also wanted a piece of Holland, the whole of Holland, and he did not consult the Flemish for his claim and intervention.

The French King Philippe le Bel relished the confusion. He engaged the Genoese sea-admiral Rainier Grimaldi to harass the Flemish fleet in the north. Grimaldi's galleys sunk most of the Flemish ships near Zierikzee, and they made John of Namur a prisoner after a hard battle. Flanders lost many men.

New negotiations for a Flemish-French peace did not succeed after that sea-battle. Count Guy of Dampierre had therefore to return as a prisoner to France, for he had sworn to do so if a lasting peace could not be concluded. At the end of April of 1304, Count Guy and his son, Willem van Dendermonde, returned to their prison at Compiègne.

That same month, at the end of the armistice, the French garrisons attacked Flemish villages on the frontier, which meant a new war.

France and Flanders mustered new armies. The two forces confronted each other in Flanders' territory, turned around each other a long time before giving battle.

On the tenth of August, the French army occupied the heights of *Pevelenberg*. The two armies observed one another but did not move. Finally, the French withdrew, so that on the seventeenth of August the Flemish troops could take position on the *Pevelenberg*. When the next day the French returned, the battle was waged.

King Philippe le Bel led the French knights, and he nearly escaped death on the battlefield. The three leaders of the Flemish army were John of Namur, Willem van Jülich and Philip of Chieti.

At the end of the day, when victory had been gained and lost on both sides, when both forces had suffered more than three thousand dead, the two armies were exhausted. When they withdrew, both claimed victory. King Philippe le Bel lay wounded in a tent, Willem van Jülich had been killed.

Juris Vresele learned of the new horror in Ghent. He had not fought in this battle.

After *Pevelenberg*, the French king first laid siege to Lille, the town in which troops of Philip of Chieti had sought refuge. The French knights left that siege to halt John of Namur who threatened them with another army.

At that critical moment, Duke John II of Brabant, Flanders' neighbour, intervened with peace proposals for the belligerents, so that in September a peace treaty was signed between John of Namur, Regent of Flanders, and the king.

These negotiations took place in the abbey of Marquette. The peace treaty of Marquette was merely a new armistice, concluded for an indefinite duration. Nevertheless, all prisoners of both parties were released, the *Leliaerts* of Flanders were allowed to return to their cities and lands, their possession restored. The Flemish obtained amnesty for having revolted against their liege lord, but they were forced to pay in retribution four hundred thousand pounds, an enormous sum, plus an annual rent of ten thousand pounds. The counts of Flanders were released from prison, but Robert of Béthune, eldest son of Count Guy, returned to Flanders only in July 1305 with the corpse of his father, Guy of Dampierre, who had died in March of that year.

Most importantly, Flanders secured its integrity, its autonomy under the counts, its freedoms and its charters.

Under the armistice of Marquette, new negotiations between Flanders and the king took place. The delegates of Flanders were four noblemen, of whom three represented the interests of the count of Flanders and only one the concerns of the cities.

These talks ended in the Treaty of Athis-sur-Orge, concluded on 23 July 1305, the most shameful treaty ever accepted by Flanders in its long history, and therefore immediately called the Treaty of Iniquity by the Flemish cities.

The negotiators for Flanders had been desperate to get Robert of Béthune, the new count of Flanders, released from his obligations to imprisonment. The only positive point for Flanders was that its integrity, as declared in the armistice of Marquette, was confirmed. Flanders remained inviolate and secured its freedoms. But the county still had to pay the four hundred thousand pounds of retribution money, spread over four years, plus a doubled annual rent of twenty thousand pounds. Flanders moreover had to provide to the French king for five years six hundred knights to serve in the royal army, and within two years the fortifications around the cities of Bruges, Ghent, Ieper and Lille had to be demolished. The castellanies of Lille, Orchies and Douai would be occupied by French troops in guarantee of the treaty, which meant that the Flemish count in effect lost these territories to France.

The treaty contained more humiliating conditions, the worse of which was a clause stating that the nobility and cities of Flanders were subject to excommunication by the pope, to be pronounced by French bishops at the demand of the French king solely. Only the king could end the excommunication.

The treaty could also at any moment and at will be modified by the French king.

Nobody right in his mind in Flanders, least of all the *Gentenaars*, understood why the Flemish negotiators had accepted such humiliating clauses, but that was the price to be paid for the release from prison of the count. Flanders quite liked Robert of Béthune, the Lion of Flanders, but with the Treaty of Athis something broke in the respect for their count by the Flemish inhabitants of the cities.

Flanders grumbled so badly, that a new pope, Clement V, asked for a meeting between the two parties. The meeting solved nothing, for Pope Clement was a Frenchman, Bertrand de Got. The pope merely confirmed the Treaty of Iniquity.

In March 1309, revolts against the treaty broke out in Bruges, and this revolt spread to the other cities of Flanders. The French king understood that if he wanted avoid the risk of having to march once again against Flanders with an army, he would have to yield something. He agreed to transform the perpetual yearly rent of twenty thousand pounds into a lump sum of six hundred thousand pounds.

Flanders might have agreed with this proposal, until the Flemish nobles found out that the king had created a new coin with three times as much value as the old one, and the six hundred thousand pounds had to be paid in this new coin, tripling Flanders' debt.

The revolt in the county grumbled louder, until King Philip the Fair agreed on the Treaty of Paris of the ninth of April 1309. This treaty once more confirmed the integrity of Flanders, and the amnesty for the Flemish rebels. The fortifications of the cities did not have to be destroyed anymore. Count Robert of Béthune insisted for the cities to ratify this treaty, for he too sought to avoid as many issues with the French crown as possible. Bruges, however, refused to sign, and the other cities followed its example, so that these agreements would never be subscribed to by the Flemish.

The integrity of Flanders was put into question then by another treacherous development.

The oldest son of Count Robert of Béthune was Louis, count of Nevers, a rather frivolous man, who had already received territories of his father, the counties of Nevers and Rethel, but who was always in need of money.

King Philippe le Bel sent messengers to Louis de Nevers with the proposal to buy Louis's heritage of Flanders for one hundred thousand pounds and an annual rent of twenty thousand pounds. In return, Louis would receive some extension of his county of Nevers, and the king promised to provide for magnificent marriages for the future count's children. Louis hesitated too long, so the king caught and imprisoned Louis's children, who had been living in Nevers. He held the children in custody in Paris. When Louis de Nevers protested before the king, he was imprisoned for insult in the prison of Moret near Paris. Then, Philippe le Bel invited Louis's father, Count Robert of Béthune, to Pontoise for yet new negotiations.

Count Robert's son and heir, as well as his grandchildren held in hostage, Robert could not but agree with the demands of the king.

By the Treaty of Pontoise, Robert of Béthune, count of Flanders, surrendered his feudal rights on Béthune, Lille, Douai and Orchies to France. Flanders would not have to pay anymore an annual rent to the king, but to the count. The crimes of the count against his feudal lord, the king, were remitted. Nothing in the treaty specified explicitly that the son and grandchildren of the count would be released from prison.

In January of 1313, Louis de Nevers arranged to escape from his prison of Moret. He fled to Ghent. The king sent troops to arrest Louis, but Louis escaped to his eastern lands, which were part of the German Empire, where the French knights dared not to intervene.

Philippe le Bel, very angry, declared Louis de Nevers forfeited of all rights to the counties of Nevers, Rethel and Flanders. At Easter Sunday of 1313, however, Louis de Nevers had a speech be read in the Church of the *Predikheren* of Ghent, the church of the Dominican Friars, a speech directed at the nobility and at the cities, in which he called the ordinances of the king of France contrary to the Divine Power, contrary to nature and to reason.

A new war with the king of France threatened.

Pope Clement V intervened to organise a peace conference at Arras for the end July of 1313. These negotiations lasted, but brought little change. Philippe le Bel also had other affairs on his mind, foremost the trial against the Templar Knights and the scandal of the Tour de Nesle. The trial against the Templars finished in March 1314 with the Grand-Master of the Order, Jacques de Morlay, dying on the pyre, cursing Philippe le Bel and his progeny. Hundreds of thousands of Flemish wished the king no better fate.

The scandal of the Tour de Nesle was more damaging for the royal image of France. The three daughters-in-law of Philippe le Bel had together two lovers, two handsome squires. They met in the Tour de Nesle, one of the barbican towers of the fortifications of Paris. When the adultery was discovered and made public, the three princesses were shorn bald and had to be present at the execution of their lovers. The two men were broken upon the wheel until not one bone in their body remained whole, then they were flayed alive, their genitals cut off, and they were decapitated.

One of the princesses was strangled in prison. Another princess heard her marriage annulled and she was thrown in prison until she took the holy vows to become a nun in a convent. The third lady escaped such punishment, was set free a year later, and could even become a queen of France.

With the end of these two conflicts in the early summer of 1314, the war with Flanders could resume.

Philippe le Bel began to scheme anew in his desire of Flanders by having three of his bishops pronounce the excommunication of Flanders. No holy sacraments could be administered in Flanders, no baptisms, marriages or funeral ceremonies held in church, no communion service celebrated.

Count Robert of Béthune ignored that act. Robert also refused to present himself at the royal court of Paris. Instead, he sent an embassy of nobles, which was refused by the king. The Parliament of Paris therefore confirmed the excommunication, and declared all possessions of the count of Flanders forfeited and confiscated.

The armies of France and of Flanders were assembled once more. They drew against each other, but no leader dared to give battle.

King and count preferred to talk at Orchies near the abbey of Marquette, and a new armistice was signed at the beginning of September of 1314.

A little later, Philippe le Bel was badly wounded in a hunting accident. He died in November of that year. His son, Louis X le Hutin, became King of France.

In May of 1315, this new king and the count's son Louis de Nevers signed a secret treaty in which the son of Louis, who was also called Louis, would follow as in case Louis the Elder would die earlier than his father, Count Robert of Béthune. That agreement meant that Robert, the second son of the count, would be passed over as legitimate heir.

Robert protested bitterly. The aim of the French king of dividing the count's family had succeeded, and Louis le Hutin chose to remain silent, for Robert had been one of the most vocal opposers of the last treaties, refusing to recognise the Treaty of Iniquity, the Treaty of Athis, for Flanders. The king wanted the young Louis to become count, for he thought this young man more malleable and more dedicated to the French king's cause.

Robert threatened with war, but then started the terrible famine years of 1315 and 1316. The famine lasted, making it impossible for either side to levy an army.

In July of 1316, Louis X le Hutin died from sickness. He was only twenty-seven years old. His successor was Philip of Poitiers, called the Tall, the brother of the deceased king. He served only as Regent of France, for Louis's wife was pregnant.

Pope Clement V also had died in April of 1314, but his succession was arduous. After interminable disputes between factions of cardinals in Rome and Avignon, an arrangement was only reached in this year 1316. The new pope was John XXII, a pope who also preferred to stay in the palace of Avignon rather than to return to Saint Peter's in Rome.

Matters stood thus in Flanders. The events in the struggle for supremacy over Flanders had been multiple, complex and expensive.

More importantly for the Vresele family, Juris Vresele was broke.

The famine had destroyed the reserves of the Vreseles, as it had eaten the reserves of two-thirds of the best families of Ghent.

Ghent seemed doomed. The corpses of the starved littered the streets of the city. People died each day from famine and weakness. The skeleton faces of the hungry people showed hard lines; skin was pale and strung as parchment over bones. Skinny, starved boys and girls accosted the men and women who looked healthy and fed. When the children received a coin or a loaf of bread, they would hurry home and spend or eat their fortune there. Brawls over

food erupted all over town, only the strongest and the most cunning survived. Ghent was dying.

At this point, Juris Vresele had to do something desperate, for he would never accept his ruin. If God had taken everything away from him in the famine, he, who had always been honest and hard-working, could take something back from God. He would not really steal, he would only take a loan on God. Juris did not want his family to suffer for the sins of others.

Juris reflected in sadness on the events that had led Flanders and his family to disaster. He cursed the king. He cursed the count. He cursed the *Leliaert* aldermen who had not taken to heart the cause of the interests of the people of Ghent.

Darkness fell over Zele. Juris had chosen this night because a full moon shone. Only a diffuse shimmer pierced the thick clouds, showing the lay of the landscape. Juris drew out of his musings and walked down the hill in the polders, more determined than ever. If king and count and the noblemen and the aldermen did not care for him and his family, he had to care for them.

Saint Liudger's Abbey

Juris Vresele backtracked to his cart. He stepped on its bench, took the reins, and made his horse listlessly trot back on the road to Zele. Juris feared the animal would fall asleep on the trip. He skirted the village and stopped on the road to Ghent near a crossroads where three oaks grew.

There was no traffic on the road, for darkness had set in, and Juris was grateful to ride unseen. He found the spot he had shown to his son, Gillis. Gillis had been to Zele several times with Juris, so he knew the surroundings of the town. Gillis had a keen eye for the peculiarities of the landscape, so he had would find his way. Gillis brought the *Gentenaars* on horse to this peaceful place, appropriately called the 'Three Oaks'. The men waited for Juris in a small wood near the road, hidden from people on their way to Zele and Ghent.

Juris drove his cart to behind the three oaks. He remained there, well hidden by the trunks, and he bound his horse. He dared a few paces in the wood, though darkness here was total, calling out the name of his son.

Juris heard a strong voice answering, 'here, father! We're here!'

Juris stepped on, cursing for he expected at every stride to stumble over roots and plants, but he soon saw the dark figures of a group of men behind the trees. Gillis ran up to his father, relieved, Juris embraced his son, and a little later he shook hands and patted shoulders with Raes van Lake, Wouter de Smet and John Denout.

Even without distinguishing their faces, Juris would have known who was who, for his friends were quite different in stature, and that was one more feature he loved in them. He liked men who did not resemble him in physics and character, and could therefore complement him.

Wouter de Smet was tall and heavy, the most muscular of the group, with high tousled light brown hair on his head.

Raes van Lake was short and lanky, a small bundle of nerves, always active and bursting with energy, talkative and jovial, loyal as a mastiff, with dark brown and greying hair although he was still young.

John Denout was a square and angular man, with shoulders and breast as wide as a Flemish wardrobe, as tall as Wouter, a taciturn man. He was dark haired, with a square head that seemed sculpted from the hardest old wood.

It was a small miracle that men so different were such good friends. They always had arguments and squabbled, of course, but that was integral part of their liking each other. They took no offence at heated objections.

Gillis stood next to Juris.

They were five determined men. They had discussed the pro and con ten times, but in this decisive moment Juris's determination wavered once more. What had he drawn these men, his friends, into? Why had he involved his friends in this expedition? If all went well, they would be rich and survive the famine, become prosperous and live a fine life. If all went wrong, if they were caught in the act of stealing from the abbey, they would be imprisoned, tortured and then executed in the most horrifying way, on the wheel or by hanging or decapitation, and their families would be doomed and have to live in shame for ever after.

No, thought, Juris, we shall succeed in getting back to Ghent, and there we may be imprisoned by the bailiff and tried by the aldermen of the town, by the *Schepenen*, ruined by atonement money, sent into exile and pilgrimage to Rome or Santiago in Galicia, but not killed. The aldermen of Ghent only very seldom killed a *poorter*, and inhabitant of the city, and they tortured practically never. Still, the punishment would be harsh enough.

This was definitely not the time to vacillate.

Juris dared to ask, 'are you all fixed then? Are you sure you want to do this? Very sure?'

'Of course! Too late to start debating, isn't it?' a coarse voice came back. 'Don't start talking gibberish. Let's get on with it!' John Denout spat.

'Not yet,' Juris retorted. 'We must wait a while longer. We have to hold on for a couple of hours. People are going to sleep only now. We have to wait until they sleep profoundly. Then we go in. You might take a nap. I'll wake you up. Better not talk too much, lest somebody on the road hear us. Where are the horses?'

'Right behind us,' Gillis whispered. Juris sensed the anxiety in his son's voice. 'We were putting cloth on the hooves so that nobody in Zele would hear us coming in the night.'

'Good thinking, but we will not enter the village on horseback. Too dangerous! We'll ride around and leave our horses and cart on the road to the Scheldt. Then we go in, on foot. I'll lead you there. We must not risk bringing horses to near the abbey. We'll carry the chest on foot to where we leave our horses.'

'I don't understand,' Raes van Lake objected. 'You said we would not take the road to Ghent in returning. Yet, here we are with three horses and a cart. Are we going to abandon the horses? We rented them from two different stables. If we return without the horses, that will cost us dearly!'

'We'll ride faster out of Zele than out of hell, straight to our boat,' Juris snorted. 'The boat will ferry the horses to the other side of the Scheldt. While we sail, Gillis will ride to Ghent by a longer way, on the roads from Dendermonde to Ghent, east of the Scheldt, saying the horses were mine and had been working on my lands to the north. One horse he will turn in, straight in the stable where we hired it. One horse he will bring to Raes's stable and the two other to my stable. Raes and I shall return the horses then to the stable we hired them from. Nobody

will suspect anything. You men, think about an excuse for having been out of Ghent this day, or find somebody who is willing to swear you never left your house.'

'And the cart?'

'The cart is old and worm-eaten. This is its last journey. We'll smash it up and throw the pieces in the Scheldt, except for the wheels. The wheels are almost new. Arnout de Hert can keep them and sell them later or bring them to me. Anymore questions?'

Raes van Lake grunted, asked no more, settled comfortably against a lichen-covered tree trunk and closed his eyes. So did the other men. Juris and Gillis stayed awake, alert for every sound.

After a long time, which Juris Vresele hoped was about three hours later, he woke the men. They yawned, stretched, found with consternation that the night looked blacker than they had feared, but they groped for their horses. John Denout came to sit in the cart with Juris Vresele. In coming, two men had sat on one horse. Raes cursed, for his foot caught in a stubble of high grass and he fell, but soon he too sat in the saddle and followed the cart.

Juris led. He knew the road to Zele by heart, eyes closed, so he could do with the barely visible slight difference in shade between the borders of the earthen road and the grassy meadows to guide the horse. He had to look constantly down at the road, though, fearing the cart got stuck in the muddy fields and ditches to the side. The driving was difficult amidst the deep tracks made by the numerous wagons that had passed here during the day. The horse sulkily ploughed on.

At a crossing, Juris turned right, followed by Raes, Gillis and Wouter on horse. He drove on for some time, until he found another crossing. He took right again there. He thought he was then to the east of Zele, and on the road to the Scheldt, the same road he had taken a while ago. The dark shadows of willow trees in the scarce moonlight told him he had not driven the cart to a wrong road. He brought the cart to a small wood, stopped the cart beside the road, and put the reins on the horse to force it to enter the tangle of trees and bushes. He halted the cart between the trunks. Raes van Lake, Wouter de Smet and Gillis bound their horses. Juris and Gillis pushed the cart on until it stood well hidden by high bushes.

Juris whispered, 'remember this site! From here we go to Zele on foot, but whoever comes her first without the others, takes the horses to the Scheldt without waiting! Wouter, do you have your instruments?'

'I have what is needed. John carries more.'

'Raes, do you have the candles and the tinder-box?'

'I do! They cost me, but I have three wax candles.'

'One should be enough. Now, follow me, and keep silent! Gillis, you stay here with the horses and the cart. Keep them quiet,' Juris commanded.

The four men advanced in the night. Juris was the only one who could find his way to the abbey in the dark, and that was quite an issue, for he was also the only one who could lead his friends out again. The men walked cautiously on foot on the road to Zele for what seemed an interminable length of time, until the first houses of the village appeared as huge, dark masses in the night. Juris felt harder ground under his feet. The *Gentenaars* stepped inside the village.

A dog barked, owls called out plaintively. The men froze at each sound, waited until they heard no more, then advanced more rapidly.

No guardsmen patrolled at night in Zele, unlike in Ghent, where a few night watchmen might roam in the city. Even in Ghent, these watchmen, the *scerewetters*, though often accompanied by a few men of the bailiff, roamed very wide. There was little chance Juris and his men

would meet a *knaap* or a *garsoen* or a sergeant in Zele, this night. Zele also had no tower with watchmen, such as stood in the tower of the church of St. Niklaas in Ghent, watching out for strange lights in the city, and hence for robbers or fires.

Juris lead his friends through three, then four streets, some only sparsely lined with thatched houses, until they reached long, high walls. These were the walls of the abbey, Juris whispered. They saw no lights in any house, and also the abbey lay entirely in the dark. Juris stopped at the abbey gate.

Juris had taken Wouter de Smet right behind him.

He whispered, ‘this gate should be open. The lock was never closed in my time. There is another wall further on, leading to the abbey buildings proper. This gate only gives access to the church.’

Juris pushed against one of the oak panels and felt the door swing open. The panel gave way, creaked ominously, and then he slipped into the small yard beyond which loomed the church and the churchyard. He shuddered. He did not like walking in a churchyard at night. Wicked souls might lurk here.

‘The dice are thrown from here on,’ Juris reflected. ‘Do I go back now or do I go on?’

His feet decided for him. He hurried to the porch of the small abbey church.

‘This is it,’ Juris said to Wouter. ‘Your turn now. This door will be closed. The lock is here. Do you need light?’

‘No, I can feel around in the dark,’ Wouter answered. ‘One cannot look inside locks anyway, can one?’

He waited for John Denout to come up to him.

‘John, you grease those hinges like I showed you. We do not want that door to creak. The hinges of the right panel will suffice. Feel with your hands until you find them. Grease the hinges with your fingers while I work at the lock. Do not use all the grease. We’ll need some for the door inside.’

John Denout did not answer. He shuffled to the other end of the door and groped for the side, holding a small, wooden box in his other hand. He found the hinges, opened the box, and began applying the grease. He massaged the iron and worked the grease between the parts. Wouter de Smet opened his cloak, took a large purse from his belt, felt for a set of narrow iron bars, and forced two into the lock. He turned and twisted his bars, waited and listened, felt and turned on. Juris became desperate, though Wouter had only been working for a few moments.

John Denout continued greasing the hinges, wringing his strong hands over them, not daring to stop before Wouter told him to. Wouter de Smet turned his iron keys, cursed, and turned again. Time passed. Wouter cursed again. Juris wanted to tell him to forget the whole business. Raes van Lake was about to explode from anxiety, but Juris placed a rough hand on his mouth. He whispered to Raes to spare whatever useless remark he wanted to utter for later on. The four men thrust their bodies against the door under the porch to become one with the dark stones.

After a very long time, way too long for Juris and Raes, they distinctly heard a dry sound of moving metal inside the lock and in the door, a sound that clicked in the total silence like a fishwife’s call. Wouter cursed again, but this curse was a triumph. Raes muffled his comments in time. The men thought the entire village of Zele had heard that lock open!

Wouter held his breath for a few more moments. No dog barked, no human voice broke the night. Slowly, very slowly, Wouter drew his bars out of the lock and he pushed open the right

oak panel, pushing Juris and Raes back into the churchyard. The door barely creaked, the panel opened gently.

The four men entered the church nave. Juris feared the monks had left pieces of furniture inside, so he halted his friends after they had closed the panel behind them, and he asked Raes to light a candle. Raes did so with trembling fingers. He shielded the light away from the left windows, at the abbey side, holding his hand to the flame. Juris remarked Raes's hands quivered like a plume.

The small, flickering light of the candle grew in the church, giving the men barely enough light to distinguish the interior. The men's eyes were accustomed to little light then, so they distinctly distinguished the long nave, the two rows of supporting columns, the painted walls, and the dark shadows of the side chapels. Raes stepped forward, for Juris had told him the sacristy was accessible through the last left chapel, the Chapel of Our Lady. The four men hurried past statues of saints and holy martyrs, who surely looked down at them in scorn and disapproval. Raes managed to make the sign of the cross with his candle. The men walked on, on the tip of their leather shoes, making no noise.

They arrived at the door of the sacristy, which was embedded in a heavy roman arch.

'Same job for you, John,' Wouter ordered. 'Grease those hinges!'

John Denout began working. He greased the iron bars and hinges of the sacristy.

Wouter de Smet felt around the lock, which was considerably smaller than the one he had tackled at the main doors of the nave. He felt and pried at the lock with smaller, finer iron levers. He whispered to Juris that this lock was better oiled. Soon, Wouter mastered this lock too, and he pushed open the door. The men missed a heartbeat. They heard no sound but their own breathing. They stood for a few moments in the door of the sacristy, expecting angry shouts from alerted monks, but no sound disturbed the peace of the night.

'John, you'd better guard the outside door,' Juris demanded.

John passed into the nave.

Juris entered the sacristy. He went up to the huge wardrobe standing against the left wall. Raes van Lake held the candle to search for a lock, but Juris knew there was no lock on these wooden panels. The three men bent forward, until Juris cursed and whispered there was no need to stand there like hunchbacks. He straightened, opened the wardrobe by the handle, looked down, moved the robes that hung in the closet, and remarked the large chest he had always known in the same place. He thanked all the saints he remembered. He hoped the monks had not changed their traditions.

The chest was not made of iron but of heavy, hard wood, and iron bars ran on all sides around it. The mass of iron and oak must weigh a lot. Two locks hung on the side that faced the three heads bowed above it.

'We have to move it,' Raes pronounced the obvious.

The three men put their hands on the iron, drew and shoved. The box at first stubbornly refused to give in, then it moved reluctantly, and the men placed it half out of wardrobe.

'Step aside,' Wouter de Smet grunted.

'What is the matter?' Juris asked, suddenly fearing something unexpected might have happened.

'You said we had to carry a heavy chest. I constructed something that should make the carrying a lot easier!'

Wouter slung down a narrow sack he had worn all the time over his shoulder. Metal clinked inside. He opened the sack and took out four sturdy iron bars, two long and two shorter ones. The long bars were L-shaped in profile. He drew the box a little further, out of the wardrobe. He placed the two longer bars under the longer side of the chest. He placed the two shorter bars at the other two sides. Then, he positioned these on top of the longer bars, got from his sack four smaller U-shaped bars, put the U-bars around the sidebars and he pushed two round screws into holes in the U-bars and into the longer bars. He fastened the screws with bolts and rings.

What Wouter was doing was a marvel for Raes and Juris, who drew their mouths in a sign of admiration. It took Wouter some time to fasten the chest on the bars. Raes and Juris kept watching in silence, with growing astonishment. They still feared an alarm and intruders running into the church, but all remained silent and dark.

After a while, Wouter grunted with satisfaction and he straightened.

‘We can now carry the box at the handles of the bars,’ Wouter explained. ‘I designed this for any size of box. I was not very confident in us being able to carry a heavy load, and wooden boxes can be awkward to carry about. This contraption will make it easier for us. Simply grab the handles!’

Juris went to the doors and brought John Denout back to the sacristy. The four men grasped a handle each, with both hands.

‘Wait!’ whispered Raes van Lake, a little too loud for Juris’s taste.

Raes had remarked two large, linen sacks in the wardrobe, stacked carelessly on the other side. He opened a sack, held the candle near, and gasped. His hands went feverishly to the other sack. He opened that sack too, peered into it, gasped again.

‘What is it?’ John Denout asked.

‘These two sacks are filled with silver and golden objects too,’ Raes whispered back. ‘The monks could not put all in the chest. You take one sack, I’ll take the other! We cannot leave this!’

Raes handed a sack to John and he slung the other sack on his shoulder. He gave the candle to Juris. Juris heard metal clinking inside the sacks. He wanted to curse at the sound, but didn’t dare to do so in the church. The four men grabbed the handles once more and carried the chest to the door.

‘We have to tilt the chest,’ Wouter called. ‘Hold the chest with one hand, for it merely rests on the bars. It is not fixed. Don’t drop it!’

That manoeuvre proved to be more difficult than they had thought. Raes and John had to put down their sacks, Juris the candle. Then they tilted the chest until it stood almost vertically on one side. They stepped very slowly through the door, placed the chest outside the sacristy, retreated to get the sacks and the candle, heaved the chest up again, and stepped awkwardly through the nave of the church. The chest was very heavy and the iron bars cut their hands, but Juris wondered how they might have worn the chest without Wouter’s ingenious bars. Wouter de Smet and John Denout went first, Juris and Raes carried the chest behind them.

Suddenly the four men froze. A shimmer of light appeared at the outer door of the church. Juris blew out his candle.

‘Box down!’ Wouter de Smet whispered in a commanding tone.

The chest on the ground, the four men ran to the sides of the church door. They flattened against the walls. They heard steps, a lantern approached and threw light into the nave.

A shadow appeared in the open door, the panels flew open wider, and a voice shouted, ‘who is there? Why is the door open?’

The next few moments passed as if in a nightmare. Juris saw a heavy sack being flung at the figure blocking the entry. Metal rang loudly, and the man who stood there received the hard sack squarely in the face. The man, a monk, staggered, and Juris grasped for his lantern. The sack lowered but came back up and fell heavily on the monk’s head. The monk fell on the stones. Blood oozed from his face and head. Juris waited in fear of death, but no further sound was heard in the church or in the yard. He blew out the lantern.

Raes van Lake found his voice first, ‘all grace in heaven, what was that? A monk! You killed a monk! Grab the chest, let’s get out of here, fast!’

The men took the handles, but Juris first went out into the porch. He saw no other monks arriving. The abbey basked in silence, no torches were set to light. He stepped back into the church, turned over the felled monk. Juris felt the monk was still a young man, clean shaven. When he moved his hands upward, they became sticky.

Juris lighted the candle. He looked closer at the monk. Blood dripped from the man’s eyebrows and from higher up on his head, but he breathed regularly. He had only been knocked unconscious by John’s blows. Juris sighed with satisfaction and relief. He blew out the candle, waited until his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and took his place at the bars.

Carrying the heavy chest and the sacks, daring not to say one word, not even Raes, they went out of the church, closed the doors and stepped as fast as they could, which was not fast at all, because they had to synchronise their movements and that proved difficult in the beginning. They hurried out of the abbey. They closed also the gate in the wall behind them, and then they sped through the streets of Zele, to the road of the Scheldt. It took them an agonisingly long time to reach the point where Gillis Vresele waited with the horses. They had to stop two times before they reached the small wood, for carrying the chest and the sacks exhausted their forces. Juris found the cart and the men pushed the chest and the sacks on it. Raes cursed like the greatest sinner of Ghent.

‘Follow me,’ Juris shouted, and in the first, very dim light of the morning, the men rode to the Scheldt.

Raes van Lake, Gillis and Wouter de Smet rode on the horses. Juris and John Denout sat in the cart. Juris held the reins while he stood. The men were euphoric, Raes began to chant a ribald song of wine and loose girls. John Denout sat in the cart, holding his head with both his hands.

‘What’s the matter, John?’ Juris wondered.

‘I killed a monk, I killed a monk, my soul is doomed!’ John growled gloomily.

‘I forgot to tell you. The monk was only beaten unconscious, John. I felt his breath. The man must be screaming his throat dry by now.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘No, I don’t think so. I know! Don’t worry.’

John Denout grinned, obviously relieved. Juris cursed himself for not having said earlier on how the monk was.

John continued, however, a few moments later, ‘what have we done, what have we done? The curse of Saint Liudgerus will be on us. We have forfeited our souls!’

‘Nonsense, ballocks,’ Juris grumbled. ‘Those ornaments come from the people and to the people they return. There is no such thing as a curse of Liudgerus. In time, we confess our sins to a priest we can trust, and, believe me, what we have just done is a minor sin in the eyes of God compared to the other ones we committed!’

John Denout kept moving his head to and fro, and this time, Juris could not really console him. Raes van Lake had heard about the curse of Liudgerus. Juris saw him whispering to Wouter de Smet a little later.

It was still dark when they arrived at the stream, but the veil of utter darkness had been pulled up by the sun. A red ball of fire rose from behind the horizon, straight in front of them, dissolving the mist. The road had become muddier and muddier before they suddenly saw water glistening in front of them. Juris's horse could barely draw the cart on. The animal drudged forward, ever more slowly. Juris laid the whip on the horse, encouraging it yet to advance. Finally, the cart stopped at the border of the Scheldt, on the banks of the water. The men looked out for the boat.

'Where is the boat?' Raes van Lake shouted in panic. 'Should it not be here already?' 'It should indeed,' Juris replied, whitening in the face, utterly astonished. 'The boat should be waiting for us here. I explained it all to shipper de Hert. This is the place, no doubt about that.'

The men looked over the large river, to left and right, but they saw no boat.

'There he is,' John Denout pointed downstream. 'He is coming toward us. Good man! He is coming towards us. He is lighting a lantern!'

Shipper de Hert had been hiding behind a turn in the stream. He had spotted the men now, so he steered his boat to the bank, where the group of Juris stood weaving and jumping up and down.

This place had once been used as a ferrying site, for the bank sloped gently into the water. Juris reversed the cart and the men helped the horse push the cart as close to the Scheldt as they dared. The boat stopped right in front of them.

Arnout de Hert called out to the men and Juris answered. The boat stopped, de Hert spoke no more, but the men shouted a cry of victory and joy. Arnout threw a large plank to the shore. The men first brought the chest and the sacks on board, then the horses. The boat was cramped with the animals, but Raes van Lake, knowing his way with horses, bound a cloth over the eyes of the animals so that they would not be frightened by the glimmering water.

Wouter de Smet and John Denout then began systematically to smash the wooden beams of the cart with powerful blows of hammers Arnout de Hert provided. Soon, they could throw the two wheels in the boat, and the loose beams and planks. They would throw that expendable wood in the Scheldt a little farther.

Arnout de Hert steered his ship to the other side of the stream. The men unloaded the horses, and Gillis Vresele went on land. Juris's son was an excellent horse rider. He would bring the animals via oblique routes first east, then south, and later west towards Ghent. He was only expected back in Ghent late in the day. Gillis rode on, holding the three other horses behind him.

The five men in the boat cheered, even John Denout and even Arnout de Hert, as the boat sailed upstream. They sailed slowly. De Hert had brought a small ship, a boat called a *duerme*, called so after the river Durme on which it was used most. He normally transported peat in this ship, and it still smelled a bit of peat. He could sail this boat, push it along the banks with a pole, even row it, or have it towed by horses or drawn by his own force. The wind blew with sufficient strength from the north-west to move the boat. Here and there on

the way, Juris and Raes dumped the beams and planks of the cart in the muddy waters. Arnout showed them the best places.

Arnout de Hert could sail only as far as the first bridge of Ghent.

The sky remained grey and dark, though by when they arrived the light of the sun diffused sufficiently through the thick clouds and the fog had broken by the warmth of the city that merged proud and massive with its church towers and belfry before them. It was halfway through morning. They would have to get off the boat and continue on foot.

‘No need to go on foot,’ Arnout de Hert announced. ‘I have another, smaller boat here, a boat with a flat bottom. I loaded it with hay. We can bring the sacks and the chest onto the smaller boat and I can push it to a place near Wouter’s house. No need to walk around with a heavy, conspicuous chest in Ghent! I can get this boat from the Scheldt to the Leie, easily. I suppose you can use some hay for your stables, Juris. This way, we have a fine excuse for bringing this boat to near your street.’

Juris nodded, quite satisfied with the excuse. He did need hay for the horses in his stable on the *Kalanderberg*.

Wouter de Smet lived near *'s Gravenbrug*, the Counts’ Bridge, which lay in front of the *Sint Veerleplein*, the Square of Saint Pharaïldis, near the *Gravensteen*, the Count’s Castle. In that neighbourhood lived many blacksmiths, many of which lived from forging armoury for the castle. Juris and Raes looked at each other, and they accepted gratefully. Arnout de Hert took a small cargo of old hay on board, hiding the chest and the men, but Wouter de Smet was already at work on the box, trying to pry it open. He worked on the two locks at the same time, holding and turning his magic bars into the openings.

Arnout de Hert did not immediately push his boat on. They lay in hiding here too, nobody could see them from the banks of the river.

It lasted an eternity, but finally the monks’ chest gave in, and Wouter de Smet opened the lid. The bow opened, revealed its contents, and the men relished at the wealth of chalices, crucifixes, silver and golden plates, crosiers, and other precious objects, enveloped by green velvet cloth. Arnout de Hert threw a dirty, linen sack to the men, and they transferred the contents of the chest to the sack. They needed a second sack. Shipper Arnout showed them a quiet place, still east of Ghent, where they dumped also the chest and even the iron bars of Wouter into the deep. Wouter watched the chest and his irons disappear in the muddy water. He would have liked to keep them, but he knew it was better to get rid of them before they entered the city.

The boat of Arnout de Hert passed under five bridges and then reached the *'s Gravenbrug*. He stopped the boat at the *St. Veerleplein*. Raes van Lake and Juris went with John Denout and Wouter de Smet to the square, carrying the four sacks. The Saint Veerle Square lay right in front of the Count’s Castle, and as Wouter’s smithy was near the inn the *Kraan*, many people passed them. Nobody seemed to recognise Wouter, who hid his head behind the sack he wore and he also had drawn his hood over his hair. The four men looked like journeymen unloading one of the many boats at the quay.

When they arrived at Wouter’s house, they dropped the sacks in a corner of the forge. Wouter promised to hide the sacks where nobody could find them. Juris suspected secret corridors and rooms under Wouter’s house.

Raes, John and Juris said rapidly goodbye to Wouter. They did not linger, and hurried back to the boat. They felt light and joyful, relieved of all evidence of their theft. The men jumped in the boat.

‘I can bring you to the *Braembrug*, to the Brabant Bridge,’ suggested de Hert. ‘Hide under the hay. Nobody will see you.’

They did as Arnout suggested, but they did not really hide. Why should they? They were innocent *poorters* of the town, helping a friend with a cargo of hay.

‘Are you sure we can trust Wouter de Smet?’ Raes asked.

‘As much as I trust you,’ Juris replied.

‘Where will you sell the objects?’

‘I am not going to sell them. I would have to bring them too far into France, and then still I would always fear somebody might recognise them. Wouter will smelt the silver and the gold, but he will pry out the stones first, and those I will sell in France, in various towns. The gold and silver I will sell in other towns. It will take a while before you have your money, but some should start to come in four or five days from today. The bulk within a month. The first money will be enough for you, Raes, to buy contraband wool, for John to buy clay and food, for Wouter to enter the silversmith business, for Arnout and me to continue our trade.’

The men thought about that. They nodded in satisfaction.

The small boat passed six more bridges. Nobody had ever counted the bridges of Ghent, but the count must have been close to a hundred. Ghent lay at the confluence of the Leie and the Scheldt, but the two rivers meandered in many bends through the city before they became the mighty stream Scheldt, and the *Gentenaars* had dug out canals between the bends, as well as a canal to Damme, the port of Bruges. Ghent was a water city, and a mighty one, for more than sixty thousand people lived within and beyond its walls. That was less than Paris in France, but Ghent was nevertheless the second most populous city of Western Europe, and by far the largest of the county of Flanders. Bruges held only thirty thousand people, Ieper and Lille about half that number.

The boat pushed back to the Scheldt, from the Leie through the *Ketelgracht*, the Kettle Canal. When they arrived at the *Braembrug*, de Hert stopped his boat. Juris, Raes and John hurried off. Juris would send his servants with a horse and cart to fetch the hay. Arnout turned the boat. Later, the hay unloaded, Arnout would have to navigate all the way back to the *Ketelgracht*, then down the Leie to the centre of the town, and then he would take the *Lieve Canal* up to the *Betsgravenbrug* where he lived. He could leave his boat there, not so far from the arsenal and the shipyards of Ghent. Arnout waved a goodbye, then Juris, Raes and John went their own way.

John Denout stood on the *Braembrug* and he went east. He had only a few steps to go. He lived in the street that ended at the *Braembrug*, on the other side of the Scheldt, in the *Brabantdam*. The *Brabantdam* lay near a vast area filled with textile frames used by the fullers to stretch the cloth, the area between the four streets called the *Brabantdam* in the west, the *Boomgaardenstraat* south and the *Winkelstraat* east, and the *Reep* to the north, along the Scheldt.

Raes van Lake and Juris Vresele headed west, over the other side of the *Braembrug*. Raes van Lake lived in a quarter where many weavers lived, in the *Brabantstraat*, the continuation of the *Brabantdam* over the *Braembrug*. He did not live far from his main fuller, John Denout. When Raes reached his house, Juris Vresele continued his way over the *Koestraat* and its square, to the *Kalanderberg*.

The *Kalanderberg* was a rather wealthy street in Juris’s times. Wealthy people lived there, such as the Vreseles, the van Arteveldes, the van der Pales. Many smiths and armourers had their workshops here, so that it could be a noisy street. Clothiers lived near the junction with

the *Voldersstraat*. The Vresele house, as the van Artevelde complex, had their entry on the *Kalanderberg* but their houses continued in barns and stables that gave out on the *Paddenhoek*.

When he arrived home, Juris Vresele sank on a chair, grabbed a large bottle of wine and filled a cup. He had to drink three cups before his hands did not shake anymore. Then, he called for his servants and ordered them to take a horse and cart and unload a cargo of hay under the *Braembrug* from a shipper called Arnout. When the servants left, he shouted a cry of victory and relief, which made his wife Mergriet Mutaert run out of the kitchen, supposing something bad had happened to her husband. Juris, already a little inebriated, drew her to him, patted her ample bottom and kissed her passionately. That had not happened since a very long time, so Mergriet looked at her crazy husband with some disbelief and apprehension, but Juris was only happy, very happy. He also became very drunk that day.

Gillis Vresele arrived at his parents' home in the *Kalanderberg* very late in the evening of the same day. He was probably the most exhausted of the six men. He was also the youngest, so he did not complain. He told his father he had brought the horses to the stables at the outskirts of Ghent. Nobody had stopped him, nobody had asked him questions. He did not think somebody had even remarked him.

Gillis went to sit at the long table in his father's hall, and Juris brought him a platter of bread, cheese, sausage and a cup of wine. Gillis wondered with some astonishment why his father served him. Why did his father not order one of his servants to bring him something to eat? Juris thanked his son, patted him on the shoulders, for Gillis was a fine son, and told him to eat well.

During the night, when Juris Vresele lay in bed next to his gently snoring wife Mergriet, he imagined the alarm sounding in Zele. He saw the monk who snored unconscious in the church, suddenly wakening from the dead at Matins, brought to life by the first bells. The monk would have a bad headache, and it would take him a while to recall what had happened to him. Then, he would sound the alarm with shouts and flaying arms. The monks would all come running towards the church, then to the sacristy, notice the open doors and then tear their few remaining hairs from their skulls, for their sacks and chest were gone. The monks would alarm the entire village, including the bailiff, and the lords of Zele would arrive on swift courses. The theft would be announced.

By that time, Juris knew, he and his friends had already been sleeping soundly in the great town of Ghent, cosy in their beds, after a night's wake.

Why had there been two sacks additionally to the chest in the abbey? Where did those riches come from? How many days would Wouter need to pry out the diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and other stones from the jewels and transform the ceremonial objects into bars of silver and gold with the sign of the county of Flanders, of which he claimed he had copies? Where would Wouter hide the objects and later the bars? What if something happened to Wouter? It had been so easy, but many things could still go awfully wrong.

Juris turned and turned anxiously in his bed, the pearls of sweat dripping from his front. It seemed to him the last he remembered was Saint Liudgerus making a threatening finger at him.

Finally, he slept.

The Castelet

Four days later, Juris Vresele was astonished at how little news of the assault on the abbey of Saint Liudgerus of Zele had oozed through the common gossip in Ghent. In conversations with other members of his guild, especially with men from the association of this own trade, the brokers, he heard close to nothing about the theft. True, Juris never breached the subject himself, he never asked anything that might have induced his companions to attract their attention to Zele. Juris also totally avoided meeting the friends with whom he had passed the night in Zele, having agreed with them on the boat trip from Zele to Ghent not to see each other for at least two weeks, and to have Juris only initiate contacts. It had not been difficult to convince Raes, John, Wouter and Arnout of the necessities of this procedure. Everything depended on the confidence they had invested in the blacksmith, in Wouter de Smet, so the others prayed nothing happened by way of accident or betrayal to Wouter, but Juris had sworn his unrelenting trust in Wouter. Juris knew Wouter to be a simple man, who was utterly reliable and loyal to his friends.

In the middle of the morning of the fifth day after the expedition to Zele, the bailiff of the town of Ghent, accompanied by two *garsoenen* and two *knapen*, two senior and two junior men-at-arms under his command, knocked at the door of Juris Vresele on the *Kalanderberg*. When Juris opened, most of his neighbours stood already at the doors, wondering what the fuzz was about.

The bailiff was a man of action and of few words.

‘Juris Vresele, you are suspected of theft and assault on the abbey of the town of Zele. I arrest you in the name of Count Robert. Please stand aside. My men have to search your house for evidence.’

The bailiff, a man Juris knew well for he had seen the man at town meetings and spoken several times with him on the best terms, was a stout man, red of face, a sensual man given to drink and women. He was also a fine military man, with a grave demeanour and a growing, impressive pouch, balding though only in his fifties like Juris. The bailiff waited at the door, dressed in a dark jerkin in which steel plates were riveted to hardened leather, and a short tunic decorated with the coat of arms of the lion rampant sable, armed and langued gules of the counts of Flanders, his masters.

The bailiff treated Juris Vresele with respect, for Juris was a *poorter* and a landowner of Ghent, a powerful guildsman, and more importantly, a free man of Ghent who had fought for the count and with Willem van Gulik in the Battle of the Golden Spurs of eleven July 1302. The bailiff could not alienate the guilds who were the prime allies of the count. The Vreseles were a respectable family of Ghent. Moreover, the bailiff harboured serious doubts about any connection of the Vreseles with the crime of Zele. He did not comprehend why or how Juris Vresele could have perpetrated such an audacious and heinous act. Still, he had come to perform his duty, so demanded of him by the aldermen of the city.

Juris Vresele nodded, ‘I have no idea what you are talking about, lord bailiff.’

Juris politely addressed the group.

He continued saying, ‘and I am innocent of any wrong-doing you might hold against me, but I will follow you without resistance. Search my house if you must, but please do not disturb my servants, my wife and my daughter-in-law who is pregnant. Please allow me to take my coat.’

Juris had paled and he stood in shock, but he understood he could not and should not withstand the bailiff at this point.

The bailiff grunted orders to his men-at-arms, following Juris to inside, to the room adjoining the great hall, where Juris would take his fur-lined cloak.

For a few heartbeats, the bailiff and his men looked stunned at one another. The hall of Juris Vresele was large, much larger than they had expected. A great fire blazed in a monumental hearth topped by the stone chimney, which was rare in a house constructed from wooden beams and wattle-and-daub walls. The bailiff recalled this house had not a thatched roof, but a roof of dark slates. There had been talk in the board of aldermen of prohibiting thatched roofs in the city because of the frequent fires, but so far nothing had come of a compulsive regulation. Devastating fires were common in Ghent. The bailiff's eyes also wandered to two tapestries of religious scenes hanging on the walls, scenes of the life of Joseph the Egyptian, the kind of decoration one would only find in the stone city manors of the nobles and knights, the manors called *stenen* for stone houses, in Ghent. Juris Vresele seemed to be a devout man, and a wealthy man. Why would such a *poorter* steal from an abbey? The bailiff's determination for harshly arresting a supposed criminal began to waver.

‘Can you tell me why you suspect me of having anything to do with an assault on the abbey of Zele?’ Juris managed to ask with a steady voice.

‘Witnesses have seen you returning from Zele in a boat, and a piece of evidence of your involvement was found,’ the bailiff growled. ‘You shall be questioned until you confess the truth.’

Juris paled further, for questioning might mean as little as a polite conversation, or as much as questioning under torture. He took his coat slowly, mind raging, but waited with the bailiff in the front hall until the men of the bailiff returned.

Juris's wife Mergriet and his daughter-in-law Avezoete ran into the hall, and Juris tried to soothe them with a few words.

The bailiff stuck two fingers in his belt but refused to tell more.

Juris heard shouts in the kitchen, shouts of angry women, and the clatter of pots and pans falling to the stone ground, but he did not move. He merely drew up his eyebrows at the bailiff, who seemed slightly embarrassed.

Two times, men came back to the bailiff with silver and gold objects in their hands, with jewels, but each time the bailiff shook his head and the men ran back out of the hall, back to the other rooms in the vast dwelling.

After a while, the four men-at-arms stood again around the bailiff, empty-handed, having found nothing that might have proved Juris Vresele's implication in the theft of Zele. Juris suppressed a smile.

‘All right. We are taking you to the Castelet,’ the bailiff concluded.

Mergriet Mutaert, Juris's wife burst out in tears.

She wept and cried, ‘what is happening, Juris? Why is the bailiff taking you to prison? What will become of us?’

‘There must be an error or a misunderstanding, wife. The bailiff has come to arrest me, but I have done nothing wrong and I'll be back soon. Don't worry.’

‘Don't count too hard on being back soon,’ the bailiff exclaimed callously. ‘We'll keep you in prison for more than a few days at least!’

When the bailiff and Juris stepped into the *Kalanderberg*, a considerable crowd had gathered in the street.

At first, the crowd waited in silence, but then the people gesticulated angrily and they shouted, ‘why is Juris Vresele being arrested? He cannot have committed any crime. The count cannot arrest free *poorters* at will!’

‘Make way,’ the bailiff bellowed with a forceful voice. ‘Would you men be obstructing the justice of the count? If so, I will come back with more men and arrest each one of you who stood in my way! Make way for the representatives of the count! Stand aside, all of you! This man is accused of a most heinous crime, and must be brought to justice.’

The people split in two thick rows, between which the bailiff, his men and Juris moved. Fists went up and shouts of outrage continued, but the bailiff could step on. The group moved down the *Kalanderberg*, the *Kattestraat* in, past Saint Nicholas Church, on to the *Koornmarkt*, the Grain Market, the square on which stood the Castelet, the central town prison.

Juris almost fainted with apprehension, but he also remarked the bailiff had not bound his arms behind his back, a sign of exceptional respect. The Castelet was an ugly building of rough-hewn stones with a small, strong tower. This was the town prison in which Juris was to be detained.

Juris was glad he was not to be imprisoned in the formidable, dark and cold *Gravensteen*, the Count’s Castle, where the bailiff lived, for the Castelet held no torture chamber. Ghent had no torture system installed! The town of Ghent counted several prisons, among which this central one, but this building, though of stone, was not very strong in all places, and not very well guarded either, maintained not by the count’s men but by the *amman*, the head guardian. Juris could of course at any moment be transferred to the Count’s Castle for questioning under stress, but the fact that he was not brought immediately to the *Gravensteen* taught Juris nevertheless a few positive elements.

The bailiff was lord and master in the *Gravensteen* in the count’s absence, torture almost at will, but he could not do what he wanted with a *poorter* such as a member of the Vresele family, who remained under the jurisdiction of the aldermen. Juris surmised he would be treated with some deference. Probably also the aldermen, the *Schepenen*, had already been informed and insisted on bringing the accused to the Castelet. Juris would be treated moderately well in the town prison, detained only awaiting trial, though such a trial might be weeks, maybe months off. The aldermen would not be quick in a matter of this size. Juris sighed.

The bailiff and Juris entered the Castelet. The bailiff’s men remained at the door. The *amman*, who knew Juris well, and who had been waiting in a warmed room, took Juris to a cell on the first floor. It was cold in the stone room, and dark, but Juris was allowed to keep his coat, in which he rapidly wrapped himself. The *amman* did not even search Juris for hidden weapons. He pushed Juris roughly into the cell, and shut the strong wooden door behind him. He shoved an iron bar in place to fasten the door. Juris heard the bailiff and the *amman* discussing heatedly outside.

When Juris’s eyes accustomed to the dark, he saw only a stone bench in a corner, long enough for a man to lie upon, a little straw on the bench and also dirty straw on the flagstone floor. A bucket stood in the other corner. Scarce light gleamed through a very small window high above, too high for Juris to reach, and that window also drew a cold draught straight to a small hole in the prison door. Juris sat and leaned his back against the cold, humid wall.

Juris's mind surged in all directions. He had a thousand questions to think about. Who might have betrayed him? Who of his friends had accused him? What mistake had he made, where? What evidence could he have left behind? Had Raes, John, Arnout or Wouter lost their nerves or their senses? No, Juris refused to believe that. But what then had happened? Who in Zele had observed the group? Who had recognised him? No one! Impossible! How could the bailiff have known he had returned in a boat on the Scheldt? Juris refused the obvious answers. Who would judge him?

The government of Ghent was formed by two groups of aldermen, two groups of *schepenen*. The two bodies of aldermen were called the aldermen of the Law, the *schepenen van de Keure*, and the aldermen of the Estate, the *schepenen van het Gedele*. Each body counted thirteen members, and each body was led by a First Alderman. The aldermen managed the affairs of the city. The *schepenen van het Gedele* formed the judicial power in Ghent, and they managed the smaller administrative affairs. The *schepenen van de Keure* determined the internal policies of the town and they were also responsible for the management of the relations with other cities and other lands. The First Alderman held the power that was in other cities held by men called the Mayor. Clearly, the aldermen of the Law enjoyed more prestige than the aldermen of the Estate, though both voted together in the Council of the town.

The current organisation had succeeded on a similar government of thirty-nine aldermen, hence called the Thirty-Nine, constituted of three groups of thirteen. The aldermen then, before 1297 when the system was modified, merely turned as members upon themselves, all aldermen being members of always the same powerful, landowning families of Ghent, some of which were knights and some not. Many among these families had been jealous among each other and disputed over their power over the city. Intrigues among the families ran wide.

In view of the growing protest by the inhabitants of the city over corruption among the *Schepenen*, the count had decided in 1297 to replace the three bodies of thirteen aldermen by two bodies of thirteen, but the *Schepenen* were to be chosen not by the aldermen in function, but by two groups of four men, of whom four were designated by the count and four others by the outgoing aldermen. Aldermen remained in function for one year only, going from the fifteenth of August of one year to the fourteenth of August of the next. The aldermen also had in the future to present their accounts to the *poorters* of the city.

Gradually, representatives of more families than before obtained a seat as alderman. The influence of the guilds increased among the aldermen, though still only wealthy men could dedicate their time to the function. The aldermen were paid by the city for their services, but the aldermen also had to dedicate most of their time to the position and to the tasks. The count recognised the freedoms of the city, but he also sought to gain at least some control over the *Schepenen*. The former aldermen from the wealthiest families had therefore turned to France, to royal support.

The aldermen had opposed the count of Flanders, who wanted to curb their power to his own designs. They had sought support from the king of France then, the feudal lord of the count, and hence were called *Leliaerts* after the royal emblem, the fleur-de-lys of royal France. The count turned to the guilds, who did not want to be the victims of corruption and who favoured decent rule and administration, for it was they who paid the bulk of the taxes and who had insisted on open accounts in the first place. From 1297 on, therefore, the power of the now infamous Thirty-Nine aldermen had been waning and be handed to the new organisation.

The rising power in Ghent was constituted by the guilds!

The guilds were associations of men exercising particular crafts and trades. There were over sixty guilds in Ghent, and each guild had its dean, but the main guilds were three: the weavers, the fullers and the many other guilds had more or less associated themselves to the so-called small guilds. Each of these represented approximately thirty per cent of the male population, though the guild of the weavers was larger than the guild of the fullers. Among the small guilds was the guild of the landowners, of the noble men of Ghent who had originally founded the city and owned land within its walls. The dean of the weavers and the dean of the fullers were powerful people too in Ghent. The small guilds were scattered in numbers, so there had been talk about electing one of their deans as overdean, but so far nothing had come of that still controversial idea.

Ghent jealously guarded its charters, its freedom privileges, and its law, preserved in the town belfry.

The belfry was a huge tower. Only a small door led to the inside of the tower, and the inner room led to a small door at the far end, which led to another room called the 'secret'. Here stood the coffers that held the charters of the town. In this tower also hung the storm bell of Ghent, the Bell Roeland. On the side of this huge bell one could read, 'when I clang, there is a fire; when I am tolled, there is a storm or a blessing in the land of Flanders.'

One or more trumpeters of the city always stood guard at the highest point of the tower. They looked out for dangers of armed troops.

The freedoms that were preserved in the belfry had been recognised and even enforced by the count. Free people of Ghent had to be judged by the people of the town, represented by the aldermen. Only severe cases of manslaughter and of treason against the count could be judged by the count, whose representative was the bailiff. Nevertheless, in all cases of crimes, the bailiff arrested the accused, but he usually let the trial and judgement be held by the aldermen. The bailiff only had a military force at his disposal in time of peace. The aldermen commanded almost no military men, merely a token force of militiamen roaming the city to keep the peace. Most crimes came to trial before the aldermen of the Estate, also therefore called the *paysierders* or guardians of the peace, but the more important cases remained the privilege of the aldermen of the Law, of the *Schepenen van de Keure*.

Juris Vresele considered all this in the loneliness of his cell, and he assumed a crime such as the robbery of an abbey would be tried not by the *paysierders* but by the aldermen of the Law, for the crime was great, and had not been committed in Ghent but in another town, so some element of respect and some considerations of diplomacy toward the town of Zele would be involved. The bailiff of Ghent was over-bailiff of that region too. An act of thieving and assaulting an abbey might be regarded as an act of sacrilege. The *paysierders* would not intervene, and also not the count, for Juris was a free *poorter* of Ghent. The crime would be judged by the aldermen of the Law! That thought comforted Juris a little, for he knew most of the *schepenen van de Keure*, by name and face, and some he might even call his friends. These men would be reluctant to judge him. They certainly would not allow him easily to be tortured, his greatest fear. Still: who had accused him, on what grounds? Were others beside him imprisoned in the Castelet? Not in the cells near him! He had called out his name and heard a few answers, but he knew nobody among the two or three other men in cells close by.

Juris spent a very bad night tossing and turning on his straw, a very cold and hungry night. In the morning, he only received a piece of hard bread and a pint of water for breakfast, and he feared that would be all for the day.

In the afternoon, the *amman* opened his door and brought him to a room with a large barred window, through which he remarked the bustle of the Grain Market. It felt good to see the life of Ghent for a few moments. The *amman* remained in the room, and then the bailiff entered and went to sit behind a table. Both men were armed with swords. Juris was not armed, of course. A guard waited behind the door with a spear. Juris had his hands not bound, but he didn't think he could master three armed men. He remained standing, proudly, impassive, while also the *amman* sat.

The bailiff snorted, 'so, who have we here? Ser Juris Vresele himself!'

Juris was no knight, so he sensed this address to be a sneer, a sarcasm. Something bothered the bailiff. The bailiff could have used the polite Mer for *Mijnheer*. Juris did not feel much sympathy for the bailiff and the *amman* that day, but his cause obviously formed an issue for the bailiff and the *amman*. What was on?

'You, Juris Vresele, have stolen a considerable treasure from the holy abbey of Zele. Your accomplices are Raes van Lake, weaver, John Denout, fuller, and Arnout de Hert, shipper. These have equally been arrested. What have you to say to that?'

Juris began meekly, 'I hadn't even heard Zele had been robbed until your men told me so. I am innocent of any crime.'

'You returned from Zele in a boat of shipper de Hert. Will you confess now or do we have to lay some of our instruments on you?'

'I don't know what you are talking about,' Juris shook his head. 'I wonder where you got the idea of accusing me of being a thief. I have enough money, I am a landowner and a broker, a trader. Why would I steal from an abbey and endanger my eternal soul? I am a devout man. My son is a monk of the *Fremineuren*, the Franciscan friars!'

The bailiff and the *amman* laughed at what they considered maybe a rich joke, but the *amman* grinned more than he smiled.

'You were seen doing suspect things in the boat of Arnout de Hert the day after the theft, here in Ghent, hiding behind stacks of hay. A ring belonging to the abbot of Zele was found in that boat. Do you confess now?'

Juris paled a little, but his determination remained strong. He feigned as if he suddenly remembered having used de Hert's boat.

'I do know a shipper called de Hert. I hired his boat after ordering a stack of hay for my stable in the *Kalanderberg* a few days ago. I was in the centre of Ghent with my friends, Raes van Lake and John Denout, discussing matters. We remarked de Hert's boat and went aboard. We enjoyed the trip on the Leie and on the Scheldt that day. We had never been on a boat on the *Ketelgracht* before. The views are splendid from the canals and on the Leie, especially at *Tussen Bruggen*. Of course, the view from the *Ketelgracht* I found less interesting. We were only enjoying life that day, we were not hiding ourselves. Why should we? We were brought until the *Braembrug*, and then my servants recovered the hay for my stables. That is all. You can verify that story with my servants. How does that prove I was accomplice in a thievery? As to any ring, I saw no ring, not in that boat, not in any other place. Had I really stolen anything from Zele, would I have been so stupid as to have left a ring in the boat? Preposterous!'

'Enjoying your day while the world around you was starving, were you? Well, that is interesting!' the *amman* sneered.

Juris did as if he had another thought. He frowned his eyebrows.

'Who told you we sat in a boat that day?'

‘That is exactly what you are a bit too eager to learn, isn’t it?’ the bailiff chuckled. He continued immediately with, ‘you are a man from Zele, aren’t you? Your name says so.’ ‘My family originates from Zele,’ Juris admitted, ‘but I was born in Ghent and my forefathers were *poorters* from Ghent, and landowners within the *kuipe*, the barrel, the first centre of Ghent. I own land on the *Kalanderberg* and in half a dozen other streets of the city. I also fought for the count, as a leader of men for Guy of Namur in 1302. You know that, bailiff. Didn’t we fight together when you arrived with Ser John Borluut’s men? I already stood in the field then, and we saw you coming. I fought with Raes van Lake and with John Denout. We risked our lives for our good city and for the count, as you did. You, *amman*, fought there, too. Is this how you thank an honest *poorter* for having saved your lives?’

The bailiff grinned once more, ‘I don’t recall you saving my life, Juris. Maybe we saved your life!’

‘Aye, that may be true. We had a jolly battle though! I still remember the cries of the French knights when they died in the ditch in front of our *goedendags*.’

‘That it was, yes’, smiled the bailiff and remembered with relish that battle in which he had gained glory and his function.

What Juris did not add was that his resentment toward the count had grown with the taxes he had to pay for the release from French prison of the sovereign after the Treaty of Iniquity. Juris had barely escaped being banished and sent on a pilgrimage to Santiago in Galicia by the *paysierders* for disturbance of the peace and vile language against the count. The count also had gradually re-installed the former families of aldermen in power, especially four years ago, seeking once more support from the wealthy landowning *poorters* rather than from the weavers’ guild, currently the most arduous protesters against the taxes. Two years ago, to soften the opposition of the weavers, the city of Ghent had therefore received a rare and valuable privilege from the count. By that privilege it was prohibited everywhere in Flanders producing quality cloth such as was produced in Ghent and within five miles of its walls, except in the villages or communities that possessed a charter already granting them that right, which were only a few sites. These grants had particularly ingratiated the count with Juris’s friend Raes van Lake, the weaver, and also to a lesser extent John Denout the fuller, but Juris’s taxes had not diminished.

‘I have avoided trouble in the city and elsewhere. I have stolen no treasure. The accusation against me is preposterous!’

‘Would you be willing to swear on that, knowing that your soul would be condemned for eternity on perjury?’

‘Of course,’ Juris growled, ‘and I would challenge any man who stated the contrary. I am a broker! Competitors and enemies crawl at my door. Tell me the name of my accuser and I’ll show you a liar. I’ll also explain why I am being accused, the reason not being any theft of an abbey.’

The bailiff nodded involuntarily, and he hesitated. His eyes blinked more rapidly than before, but he did not reply.

Juris continued, ‘the origins of my family are in Zele and I own land there, but I’m a *poorter* of Ghent. I spent my childhood in Zele, but tens of years have passed since I lived there. I have no links anymore with the people of Zele.’

‘We know that,’ the bailiff admitted. ‘Well, that must be all for the moment.’

Juris was surprised and relieved. He understood that Raes van Lake, Arnout de Hert and John Denout had provided no information to the bailiff. Had they done that, and confessed, the bailiff would have reacted with much more determination and contempt. What had really

happened? Juris had also not heard the name of Wouter de Smet mentioned, nor the name of his son. Just how much did the bailiff and the aldermen really know about the expedition to Saint Liudgerus Abbey? His mind brightened a little, his shock subsided. He could show more assuredness in voice and words.

The bailiff called a guard, and Juris was brought back to his cell.

Juris Vresele remained in the same, small cell of the Castelet for three weeks. He had not lost count of time, for he scratched a tally on the stone walls with a chip from the flagstones. He suffered cold, hunger, desperation, pangs of uncontrollable fear, and surges of bright hope. He slept badly. He could not shave and not wash. He tried to train his muscles to stay fit, but he could do not much more than walk two paces forward and three sideward. His arms and legs and his back ached from lying on cold stones for so many days. He felt dirty. He received no visitors, but suspected that had been refused by the bailiff and the aldermen. Occasionally, better food was brought, but he was sure most of what his wife and friends had brought was held back by his gaolers.

Then, one day, the *amman* came to fetch him in person, releasing Juris, telling him without any additional explanation he could go home. He was a free man. No excuses were offered. Juris almost wept from relief, but he showed no emotions on his face. What had happened? The *amman* opened the door of the Castelet for him.

‘Wait,’ Juris turned, one foot already out of the door and in the *Koornmarkt*. ‘Wait! Don’t I have to pay a composition to the bailiff?’

‘The composition has been demanded and paid,’ the *amman* smiled. ‘You are free.’

Juris was astonished again. His eyes went briefly to the *amman*, then he turned and stepped into the market square. His wife possessed no ready cash.

The bailiff only released prisoners when he thought an accused would not have to go to trial by the aldermen, or anyhow be freed at the trial. Such act of setting a man free from prison generally involved the payment of a substantial amount of composition, which could amount to as high a several tens of pounds. From where had Mergriet and his son gathered such a sum? Juris had no cash left in his house. He had always had little cash, most of his funds invested in land or trade anyway. Had Wouter de Smet already provided the money from the treasure of the abbey?

‘Who paid the composition?’ Juris insisted.

‘Your wife did that, and she was accompanied by your neighbour, James van Artevelde,’ the *amman* replied grinning.

‘You’d better go now, before we change our mind,’ the *amman* added, pushing Juris quickly onto the *Koornmarkt* as if he had more urgent business to deal with. The man smiled at Juris’s discomfiture, but closed the heavy, steel-enforced door with a bang behind him.

Juris walked slowly home. He did not want to grant the bailiff and the *amman* the satisfaction of seeing him running. He suspected them grinning behind the windows of the castelet. His legs ached and he felt unsure on his feet, but he walked.

He enjoyed the liveliness of the city and the warmth of the sun, though when he looked up he was much blinded. He was not used anymore to the brightness of the light of mid-day. The people he passed and greeted happily, looked at him with curiosity. Juris realised he probably had dishevelled hair, a straggly beard, grimy clothes. He stank like a pigsty, and he stepped awkwardly. He smiled, however, smelled the odour of Ghent with obvious delight and listened to all the sounds he heard around him. He walked with his head in the air, sniffing like a dog seeking a delicious bone. He forced himself to walk slowly, not to start running, for

surely the *amman* would still be watching him from behind the castelet's windows. He even began to whistle a joyous tune through his pouted lips.

The common men of Ghent Juris saw in the streets were clad in a short tunic of coarse wool that hung from their neck to their knees. The tunic was constricted at the waist with a leather belt. Some men wore a purse at the belt, all had a long knife in a scabbard, their *knijf*. At the back of the tunic hung a hood, which was useful in rainy days or to protect the head when the cold fell rapidly, or when the wind blew hard. The men wore stockings of wool or linen, from their shoes to under their tunic. They wore leather shoes. The tunics were of brown, red, sometimes green or black wool. The stockings were coloured green, red or brown, in harsh hues. One could distinguish the men who lived inside the barrel, inside the *kuipe* or the centre of Ghent, from the men who were living in the outskirts of the town. The men from out of the barrel, the *Buitenkuipe* men, wore black and white diamond patterns on their stockings.

The women were dressed in more colourful, diverse tunics. Their tunics were long, fell to their feet, and the wool was of various qualities, which Juris appreciated while he walked. The women might wear a white apron of linen, and some also had a hood of white linen on their head, which might be folded in various ways around the head. The women's dresses were in brighter colours, red, blue and green.

Juris walked, and he admired the signs hanging from the walls to indicate the shops and artisans: the butchers, the bakers, smiths, saddlers, and so on. Each sign was different, brightly coloured, and each panel was a marvel to him. Juris revelled in the colours of his city. Ghent seemed flecked with colours everywhere one walked.

Who were these *Gentenaars*? Proud and intelligent men, hard-working, inventive and industrious, fine family men, devout but liking a drink and a laugh. The *Gentenaars* showed high respect for their church, their abbeys and convents, their institutions. They would risk their lives for their freedoms, for *vrijheid en nering*, for freedom and craft or income, for the craft that ensured their living. They were generally peaceful men, but for a few rich braggarts and high-born men who would fight for anything. A *Gentenaar* was hot-tempered and vindictive, but only when his family and his freedom and craft were concerned. He didn't much care for count and king, but he always wanted to become less poor. The average *Gentenaar* was very much aware of his status in society and constantly desired to make someone better of himself.

Juris arrived a very happy man in the *Kalanderberg*.

He reached his house, threw open the door, and called, 'Mergriet, I'm back! Prepare me a bath, woman! Get me new clothes!'

Juris did not want now to go bathing in one of the public bath houses of his street. He felt too dirty, unshaven and in rags. He was too tired. He desired the comfort of his own walls.

Mergriet hurried to him, hands in front of her face, weeping and laughing at the same time, shrieking for servants. When she neared her husband, she smelled the stink of prison, and she refrained at the last moment from embracing Juris.

She pinched her nose with two fingers and said, 'yes, a bath is more than necessary, husband! You stink as if you had been tossing around in dung. You must be flea-bitten all over your body. Your clothes must be burnt. Come on. Welcome in your house.'

She managed a kiss on his forehead.

Juris grinned. He began throwing his clothes to all sides, despite the amused looks of the two female servants who also had come running into the hall. Juris walked rapidly to the back rooms, while dropping down the last piece of his underwear and his stocking to the flagstones and to the fresh straw on the floor. He continued walking to a room where an iron bath waited for him. He sat on a stool there, stark naked, waiting for Mergriet to warm cauldrons of water and pour those over him. The maids and Juris's daughter Agneete filled the bath with hot water, and then he sank, sighing from happiness in the fragrant tub and began to scrub. The maidservants were still young, so they giggled a lot when they poured more hot water over Juris's shaggy mat of hair on his chest and on his hairy arms. Mergriet scolded the girls with hell and damnation, but she smiled with her deep-brown, warm eyes which were still wet from tears.

In the late afternoon, Juris Vresele sat at the table in his hall near the dancing orange flames of his fire, drinking a large cup of white Rhine wine, purring with happiness regained, refusing to reflect in the least about what had happened to him in the past weeks.

Suddenly, his front door was pushed open and a strong voice called, 'people!'

The voice announced somebody foreign to the family entering the house. Only men and women who knew the owner well dared to burst in thus, merely calling out loudly, '*volk!*' and thrusting immediately to the hearth for warmth. Juris glanced up, surprised, expecting Raes van Lake. The man who rushed in on his privacy was none other than his neighbour, James van Artevelde.

James ran from the cold to the hearth, throwing his furred cloak on a chair in a corner, pushing his hands to the heat of the flames.

Juris's chairs were old but fine, covered with leather from Cordoba, decorated with scenes and patterns and tightened with gilded nails. Skilfully cut scenes also decorated the wood of the massive oak table.

'What freezing cold,' James bit. 'I can't get used to the humidity of these incessant rains. I feel it in my bones. When will this damn bad weather stop?'

Before Juris could answer, Avezoete Wulslager, the wife of Juris's son Gillis, entered the hall. Avezoete was Juris's daughter-in-law, a plump, small woman of just over twenty, pretty and lively, the good-hearted wife who always wore a quite determined look on her face but could be turned around your finger with nothing more than a smile and a hug. Juris liked Avezoete, though she was sometimes a choleric, impulsive girl. She was also intelligent, a good wife to his son, and she kept Gillis out of trouble. Avezoete cradled her first daughter Marie in her arms, and she was very much pregnant with her second child. When Avezoete remarked James van Artevelde near the fire, she went immediately to a cupboard, placed another cup on the table and served wine to James. She did all that without saying a word, but she nodded a short good day to the visitor and she smiled. Juris wondered since when James van Artevelde had become so familiar in the Vresele household. Avezoete fetched a large porcelain plate from the cupboard and returned to the kitchen.

James van Artevelde smiled thankfully at Avezoete, raised his hand but stopped just in time from hitting her bottom, and grinned at Juris who was already throwing scorning looks at James. The women of this house were not to be trifled with!

James van Artevelde, though also only barely over twenty years of age, was still a bachelor. He was a handsome man, but not extremely tall and imposing of figure. He was powerfully built, but not extraordinarily so for a *Gentenaar*. His brown eyes sparkled with intelligence

and cunning in front of the fire, and a smile lingered on his fleshy, almost unlined lips after Avezoete sailed proudly out of the hall. James's features were very regular, somewhat square and angular, with a determined jaw and straight cheeks. Juris thought of him as of a good-looking, elegant fox. James did not gaze at Juris for a few moments. He studied the flames in the fire.

Then he asked, 'how are you, Juris? I see you survived the Castelet well!'

'I did,' Juris asserted. 'Nevertheless, it is not an experience I would recommend to anybody.'

Mergriet, Juris's wife also erupted into the hall, warned of James van Artevelde's arrival, making once more Juris wonder why his womenfolk arrived one after the other with happy faces to honour their guest.

Mergriet's daughter Agneete, very young and a great beauty, blushing like a ripe apple, followed her mother. Agneete was sixteen, a late child in the marriage of Juris and Mergriet, but ready for marrying, though she had already rebuked two demands for marriage and torn her face in an ugly rictus when Juris had tried to explain in the best words of eulogy the fine qualities of the suitors. Juris looked with open mouth now how Agneete lowered her eyes like a beguine and then threw ogling looks at his guest. James van Artevelde seemed at first to be oblivious of the attention Agneete gave him, until he became truly aware of her presence, and then he had eyes only for Juris's daughter.

Mergriet interrupted the silence, saying, 'Juris, if you wonder who paid the composition money to the bailiff for your release from prison, you must know it was James, here, who lent me the money. He cared for many other things, for which you must thank him.'

James van Artevelde was not really listening, for he had his attention concentrated on Agneete. He leaned sideward and backward to watch Agneete move behind her mother. Juris looked at the scene with growing surprise and apprehension. What, James and Agneete? Agneete was so young! Juris wondered with new definite apprehension about what had been going on in his house while he stayed in prison.

Mergriet then addressed James van Artevelde directly, 'we had not yet the occasion to talk, my husband and I, James. I could not yet explain to him how you comforted and helped us while he was in prison.'

James waved the address away, and Mergriet and Agneete fidgeted a while in the hall.

'Forget it, Mergriet,' James replied. 'It was the least I could do. Neighbours should help each other. I did not forget Juris sprang in front of my father in the battle of 1302 when a Frenchman wanted to pierce him with a spear. My father told me that story a hundred times, I know every detail. It was a duty to my father I did with pleasure. I would have liked my father to be still alive and help his friend. I miss him often in times like this.'

'Your father was a good man and a fine friend indeed,' Juris remembered. 'You paid for my release?'

'Oh, I only lent the money to Mergriet,' James van Artevelde stammered. 'I knew Mergriet must be temporarily out of cash. Not worth mentioning it!'

'He did a lot more than that,' Mergriet objected. 'Ask how he helped, Juris. I have to go back to the kitchen. James, you are welcome to stay and have supper with us. I am stewing a capon with mushrooms. I see you have your wine, James. Thank you for everything you did for us. We owe you!'

While Mergriet and Agneete left the hall, Juris asked, 'what was it you did, James, that I don't know about?'

James grinned. ‘The bailiff didn’t allow us to see you in prison. We were on our own. I first wanted to tell you I understand why you got that treasure in Zele. I would have done the same had I been pressed as hard as you. You lost two ships. I know, I shouldn’t tell you about that disaster. I also know Raes van Lake, John Denout and Arnout de Hert indeed helped you in Zele, as well as Gillis. There must have been yet another man, but Raes and John, Arnout and Gillis always refused to give me that name. That is where the treasure must now be. He must have been a silversmith or a goldsmith, I surmise, or a blacksmith with special skills. I suspect Wouter de Smet, another of your and my father’s comrades-in-arms. A fine lot you form, veterans of 1302! Anyway, I also found out who denounced you to the aldermen. We still have a few friends among the *schepenen*, Juris. With some assistance from your sons Gillis and Gerolf, my particular friends, we thwarted our enemies’ malevolent designs.’

‘Enemies, Gerolf, Gillis, what are you talking about?’ Juris spat, totally stunned.

‘Well, it’s a long story, Juris. You remember your ship, the *Pharaïldis*, sent to Gascony to buy wine? I invested quite some money too in that cargo, as you recall. The ship was to take on wine from Gascony at more northern ports too, at La Rochelle and at Saint-Jean-d’Angély. The *Pharaïldis* disappeared somewhere between the French and English coasts. In fact, I could locate it. My trade partners in England spotted it in Great Yarmouth, in Norfolk, on the English east coast. Impossible to recuperate it, for English pirates caught it. I also found out that it was Gilbert de Grutere the elder who had been trumpeting in Damme and Sluis what the approximate course was of the *Pharaïldis*, and what its contents were. We did not particularly keep our cargo a secret among our fellow-traders. De Grutere must have heard about it. A lot of strange people hang out in the inns of Damme and Sluis, and information can be sold and bought as much as wine or grain, it seems!’

‘De Grutere? Why de Grutere?’ Juris exclaimed, sitting suddenly very upright in his chair.

‘I don’t know why the de Grutere should hold a grudge against us,’ James van Artevelde replied, ‘but they sure are competitors of us. We deal in grain like them, in spices, in pigments, and in goods from foreign countries, such as strong beer from the Rhine lands. That must be a thorn in the eye of the de Gruterer, especially since we have been a lot more successful in this business than they. We worked them entirely out of various businesses, well, not just the two of us, of course, but the de Grutere must blame us for their own lack of competence. They must blame someone, mustn’t they? Also, my father and you, Juris, supported the count in 1302, but later on, when the count was more inclined to re-install the knights and landowners, the old aldermen lineages, you and I, we went our own way, and you avoided the *Leliaerts* as much as people like the de Grutere although you are a landowner too. The de Gruterer were and remain ale brewers. Ale is made by fermenting grout, a mixture of herbs, on which the de Grutere family holds the monopoly. They sell it out of their warehouse in the *Donkersteeg*. We, however, import hop beers from Germany, and also hop itself. Hop beers are being brewed increasingly in Ghent, hurting the monopoly of the de Gruterer! For all those reasons and maybe for a few more my father may have known of but not I, Gilbert de Grutere bears us a grudge. Gilbert was walking in the city one day, when he remarked a boat loaded with hay gliding under the Bridge of the Jacobines, and in that boat he found with some interest, I assume, his good friends and co-brokers Juris Vresele, Raes van Lake and John Denout, men of the gang of the Vreseles and the van Arteveldes. Who can still afford a boat full of hay these days?’

James van Artevelde paused and drank.

He continued, ‘from now on in my story, I am telling you merely what I assume happened, but I believe my story is the right one. A couple of days after having seen that boat pass under him, Gilbert de Grutere heard of the theft in the abbey of Zele from James Soyssone. Soyssone holds some land near Zele, between Zele and Ghent, and Soyssone has a house in Zele. James Soyssone doesn’t like us either, because my father clashed with him over property claims on land near Bornem. Soyssone is a prominent man in the guild of the butchers. He lives in the *Drabstraat*, a street of bad reputation for many violent men live there. The butchers are violent, hot-tempered men. Soyssone also doesn’t like us because we started importing salted meat from France and Germany. Two enemies of us joined forces. The two of them, James Soyssone and Gilbert de Grutere, made the connection between the boat, your origins from Zele, and the theft in the abbey.’

James van Artevelde drank, and then he continued.

‘Soyssone was acquainted with the abbot of Saint Liudgerus. So, they went to see the abbot, told him a bunch of lies probably, and convinced the abbot of handing them a signet ring of his, which they planted the next day in Arnout de Hert’s boat. I know from the bailiff that de Grutere denounced you all to the aldermen, and that he and Soyssone accompanied the bailiff to de Hert’s boat, where the ring was found. When I heard the ring was found, I considered that evidence right away suspect. How could you have forgotten a ring in de Hert’s boat? How could de Hert use his boat for four days without seeing the ring lying in a hollow on deck, sparkling its gold and rubies? I could not speak to de Hert, but his wife told me Arnout did not use his other boat those days, only the boat in which you were seen, and only in Ghent. De Hert did not use his *duerme* boat at all in that period! I was convinced the signet ring, a signet ring among all objects, as if the abbot’s name was written on it, to have been planted by de Grutere and Soyssone.’

‘That story makes sense,’ Juris replied, nodding to what he heard. ‘I also came to the conclusion something must have been planted. Had an object remained anywhere in the boat, we would have remarked it. The objects were either in sacks and we did not get them out, or they lay in a chest but were enveloped in velvet. I had the impression, soon after the bailiff arrested me, that neither the bailiff nor the amman gave much credit to the fact we might have forgotten something in the boat. The bailiff did not even seem to believe we might have stolen anything at all! I didn’t know who had denounced us, however. I thought one of my friends had betrayed me.’

‘No, they didn’t,’ James remarked. ‘They sat tight, as I supposed you ordered them to do beforehand. I could not speak to them, the bailiff forbade that, but even de Hert, who was after all the most exposed, for the ring was found in his boat, didn’t waver. Cool-headed chaps your lot are! As long as no other evidence was brought to them, they did not move, and they all guessed one object found in a boat was not enough to convict them. Your steadfastness was logical, but also sheer miraculous. I was amazed!

I acted a lot behind the screens, discussing with Gerolf and Gillis about what we could do. Gerolf is still convinced of your innocence, by the way, so Gillis and I had to modulate our talk when Gerolf was with us. Anyway, I told the aldermen and the bailiff I was convinced the ring had been planted. I talked with the aldermen who were already half on our side, and I always talked to them as if by accident, informally, in chance conversations, in the market, and during banquets. The matter remained a mystery for long, but the Ghent magistrates seemed inclined towards thinking the theft in Zele was an affair to be solved by Zele, not necessarily by the people of Ghent. They disliked the affair, were also suspicious of the object found.

I never accused de Grutere of having planted the ring, but the bailiff understood. He never really wanted to touch you. He also fought in 1302, and that made a difference. When he heard bye and bye most of the aldermen were not eager at all to press the charges, he assumed there would never be a trial, so he released you. I paid your composition, which nearly depleted my cash too, for I have everything invested, but I guessed I was only proposing a loan to you. I ask no interest, but in due course I would like to have the composition sum be reimbursed.

My greatest sorry was that I did not succeed in seeing you in prison. The bailiff and the aldermen did not even allow Mergriet in prison. Nobody was allowed to talk to you, so we could not bring any messages to you. We dared not bribe one of the guards, realising your case advanced well. At one point, the bailiff even seriously considered locking up de Grutere for slander, for the bailiff began to think it more probable the ring had been put in the boat rather than lost by accident. The aldermen refused to imprison de Grutere, however. The de Gruterers are among the five best known wealthy landowner *poorters* of Ghent, as you know. Each year, at least one de Grutere is chosen as alderman. One does not touch a de Grutere on mere suspicions! Mind you, not all de Grutere are enemies of us. Some of them have openly shown their sympathy for me.'

'I have to thank you then, for your involvement. You have been a great support for my family. Why did you help us? We have not been close friends to you.'

'You were comrades of my father. I believe the de Grutere wanted as much to harm me and my family as your family. We are neighbours aren't we? We are members of the same guild. My father held you in high esteem. We are involved in joint businesses. Gillis is indeed my special friend, though you might not know that. We must close ranks. The de Gruterers and the Soyssones aim at excluding us from the trade, at ruining us, have us out of their way. They suffered from our trade. We should block them when and where we can, and then too, I felt lonely without my father. I recognise the value of sound advice, of second opinions. I had Gillis and I didn't want to lose his friendship. I would be honoured if you could advise me in certain ventures. I'd like you and your family to stand beside me when I have to take risks.'

'That kind of friendship you have won. The Vreseles, the van Lakes, the Denouts, the de Herts, and a family I will name only later will be grateful. We owe you.'

'Lend it no more thought,' van Artevelde chuckled.

'I must give it more thought,' Juris snarled back with bared teeth. 'Betrayal must be punished.'

'Don't even start considering it,' James threw in. 'If you murder a de Grutere now, the authorities will know the theft was committed by you. They may react with less good nature and show you to the torture room. We barely avoided that ordeal, and disaster. Even if you escape such fate after a murder of a de Grutere or a Soyssone, you will either have your son Gillis killed in his turn, or you will have to pay a considerable atonement sum. I learnt some aldermen do know you are very short in cash. If you cough up new money, you will be suspect once more. No, you have to sit tight for now, enjoy your newly found money, invest it in secret, live a happy life, wait for the right time to strike, and watch out, for the de Gruterers may seek yet to do us harm in business. We are warned men, now so we must act more cautiously. The Vreseles and the van Arteveldes should not forget, though, nor forgive. But we must wait for a better moment.'

'Those are very wise words for a man so young,' Juris sighed.

James van Artevelde stretched his legs, poured himself one more cup of wine.

'Have you any idea what exactly you stole in Zele?' he suddenly asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Abbot of Zele made much noise about the assault,’ James went on. ‘I wondered why he made such fuss. Gerolf wondered too about that. He asked questions among the clergy, here and there. You did not just steal the treasure of the abbey of Saint Liudgerus, you know!’

Juris guffawed. He looked at James van Artevelde with innocent eyes.

‘A shipment of precious objects was on its way from the Friesland Liudgerus abbeys to the abbey of Liudgerus in Werden, in Germany,’ James told, smiling. ‘You laid your hands not only on the treasure of the abbey of Zele, but also on a special treasure of presents and contributions sent by the Frisian abbeys founded by Liudgerus to the mother-abbey of Werden. The abbey of Zele was also founded by monks of Werden, a long time ago. The Frisians sent their valuable ceremonial objects by ship to Damme, accompanied by three monks, to have it transported from there to Zele, to their sister-abbey closest to the German Empire, and then by wagon over the duchy of Brabant to Werden. Brabant is very close to Zele, and in Brabant the treasure would be protected by the Empire. You see, you stole not one small treasure. You stole a far more fabulous hoard!’

Juris Vresele’s hands began to shake. How could his son cope with such a revelation? His throat went dry.

He said, ‘we must drink to that, then, James, my friend.’

The men clinked their cups. James grinned much, studying Juris, but Juris’s face remained closed and of steel. Nevertheless, Juris tried to avoid James’s piercing and probing glances.

‘What a man,’ James assessed, ‘he knew it all!’

In the following weeks, Juris Vresele dared not move from his house. The prospect of returning to the dungeons of the castelet haunted him. He desperately needed cash to vent new breath into his ventures. He slashed in all expenses of the household, even in food, and remained sitting, sulking and lingering idly in front of the hearth in the great hall of his house in the *Kalanderberg*, replaying schemes of trade in his head. He did not taunt fate by passing his door to roam in the streets and markets of Ghent. He feared being spied upon by the Soyssones and the de Gruterer. He calculated he could live like this for six months. After that period, he would have to start selling some of his possessions, and for that he would have to step past his door anyway.

Finally, after three weeks, Juris, unable to sit in inaction any longer, his patience vanished, arrived at a decision and he pulled himself up by his bootstraps. His enemies must have abandoned hope of unearthing new evidence by then, abandoned having Juris followed. Standing near his door for weeks would have cost fortunes to his opponents. Juris shook off his paranoia like a swarm of flies. He dressed up and stepped resolutely over his doorstep. He was somewhat surprised to find the world had not changed during his voluntary confinement. He even found the sky somewhat brighter than he had imagined.

Juris Vresele walked to the house of Raes van Lake. He found Raes in his great but cosy hall. He talked to Raes.

When Juris left, Raes van Lake went for a walk by several meandering streets, looking many times over his shoulder, to warn John Denout. Denout walked in the same way to Wouter de Smet, pretending to buy pieces of metal for his textile frames. Juris Vresele strolled through the city in search of Arnout de Hert. He did not find Arnout at home, but he explained to Arnout’s wife, to Marie Scivaels, what he wanted.

The first meeting of the conspirators after their audacious deed of Zele was to take place three days later in Juris’s house on the *Kalanderberg*. The men arrived one after the other in Juris’s

hall. They were warmly welcomed. They received ale, beer, mead or wine according to their tastes. Mergriet Mutaert recognised the added gravity that pervaded the friends' minds. Juris's friends went to sit around the oak table, Raes, John, Wouter and Arnout.

Juris scraped his throat and silence fell immediately. Juris spoke first, gave an introduction, but then the conversation heated rapidly. The men discussed first the accusations launched against them. They swore revenge on the Soyssones and the de Gruterres, but that subject was but a subterfuge to be told by all if the bailiff or the aldermen would erupt into the house, a fear they now all shared.

The real discussion was on what Wouter de Smet had done with the precious objects, on how to turn the objects into coins, and how to proceed further.

Juris introduced that subject. 'I am not a man of many words. We gathered to discuss how to turn the treasure of Zele into readily disposable money. Wouter, you had best explain what you did so far with the chalices and plates and the rest of the objects.'

All eyes turned to Wouter, who was not used to drawing attention on his person, and also not on taking word in an assembly. He had good news, however, so he gathered his courage and talked with broad gestures of his arms and hands.

'I first hid the objects in a secret place in my workhouse. During the day, my smithy had to remain open to all, so I could not work on the objects. I worked in the evenings, when I could close and bar my doors. I worked for days on a row, painstakingly, trembling with fear as you can imagine, not only fearing the bailiff but also the wrath of God. I worked on object by object. I can assure you my heart bled and ached from seeing such marvellous artefacts destroyed, but that is exactly what I had to do.

I pried out the precious stones, which in itself was an arduous task. Then I melted down object after object, the silver ones first and then the golden ones. Some objects had parts of fine wood. The wood I burned, however precious and beautiful the carvings were. I also found a few ivory objects. I destroyed the carvings until I had only plain tablets and small pieces of ivory left in my hands, untraceable to Zele. These plaques can be sold, but we will not get much money out of them, for not much was left after I cut away the carvings that might still lead somebody to the treasure of Zele. The silver chalices and plates and croziers I melted and poured into bars of Parisian weight, God help my soul. I forged the stamps of the silversmiths of Paris. That took some intricate silversmith's work, but I doubt anybody will notice the difference. I really did a good job at the forgery, forgive me saying so myself. You might ask how I could copy the stamps. Well, before we got the treasure, I visited the silversmiths and goldsmiths of Ghent and asked questions such as how much weighed a bar of Parisian silver and gold. I made imprints of the Parisian marks, and drawings, hiding what I was doing to the silversmiths. I did nothing of that kind after our expedition, attracting no attention, or so I hope.'

'And?' Juris Vresele asked. All men were leaning over the table on their elbows by then, gaping expectantly at Wouter.

'We have now a heavy sack of precious stones, tens of them, a few tablets of aged ivory, forty-four heavy bars of silver and twenty of gold. I say the booty exceeds our expectations. The issue is how to get the bars and the stones out of my workhouse, and how and where to sell the lot.'

A loud sigh rose from the table in Juris Vresele's hall and the men looked at each other. Then, laughs erupted and the men shook hands, drank and toasted. Wouter de Smet was much surprised by the effect of his words on the men. The tension of the past weeks fell from them like the veil from the face of a bride. Wouter suddenly understood, and he grinned, proud of having broken the spell of Liudgerus that might have oppressed his friends.

‘Yes, but,’ began John Denout, who was not as quick of mind as the others but could nevertheless ask the right questions, ‘what does that mean in value for us?’

‘The total value depends of course on which prices we can get for the silver, gold, and especially the precious stones,’ Wouter remarked, ‘but I suppose we shall arrive at about sixty thousand to eighty thousand Flemish Grossi. Split over our five families, we should get each twelve thousand to sixteen thousand Grossi per family!’

These figures were received in total, stunned silence. Then, the cheers and laughter once more filled the hall.

When the cheers finished, Juris said, ‘getting the bars and the stones and the ivory out of your workhouse should not be difficult. The stones and the bars I can get out in a belt of cloth I will be wearing under my tunic and cloak. Another way would be for you to bring it, hidden in your toolbox when you come to put new irons on my two horses. I have a farrier who does that usually, but you too know how to iron horses. The real issue is how to sell the silver and gold bars, but solutions can be thought of. I have business partners in Douai, Lille and Amiens, at Calais too. I would not sell the bars too close to Paris. Calais might be a fine place, a port, so the gold and silver may quickly be diffused over the sea. I sell and buy a lot on the markets of those towns. I’ll sell the silver and gold for Venetian Ducats and Florentine Florins. In a couple of months, we should have sold it all. We definitely must not sell the bars in Ghent or Bruges, for our enemies will lay in waiting in Flanders. We may be watched. What do you think, Raes?’

‘I am selling cloth and sending it to Amiens. I can take some bars with me and sell them at Amiens. Not too much at a time, mind you. I can sell a few to different silversmiths.’

‘That is settled, then,’ Juris told and he slammed a fist on the table. ‘How long can you guys hold out without new cash?’

‘I desperately need coins,’ John Denout exclaimed. ‘I must buy fullers’ clay and hire new frames or I’ll starve this winter!’

‘I can lend you money to survive, no interest applied,’ Raes replied. ‘Within two months you’ll be able to repay me, and have more from what we sell.’

Raes addressed Juris, ‘what do we do with the precious stones?’

‘Calais is also a good place to sell them,’ Juris proposed. ‘All kinds of goods arrive in the harbour. I can only sell some at a time. You also can sell a few stones at your markets, but not in Flanders. We have to sell the stones to jewellers in different large towns. I may have to travel to Paris, see the most important jewellers there, and sell through middlemen. I’ll do so with my son Gillis. It may take many months before all the stones are sold. The silver and gold can be sold more quickly. The largest profit will come from the stones, though.’

‘A year is a long time,’ John Denout stated, disappointed. He had hoped on more rapid transactions.

‘The price of not being caught is that high,’ Raes remarked. ‘We have to sit tight for a while. Don’t worry, though! You’ll have coins soon enough in your purse. More than you can spend this year. Don’t go too fast with the spending. That would raise suspicions. Arnout also can help, sell some stones in Antwerp.’

‘I’m not a wealthy man,’ Arnout replied cautiously. ‘I can sell some stones in Antwerp, all right. I know where. I cannot sell much, lest I attract attention. Yet yes, I can sell some in Antwerp, in the Jewish quarter.’

‘Fine,’ Juris concluded. ‘A last thing I must tell you. One more person knows who stole the ornaments in Zele. He knows about all of us, except of Wouter de Smet. He put two and two

together, has no definite proof, but he acts as if our theft was a proven fact. He asks nothing for his silence. It was he who bought me, Raes, John and Arnout out of the hands of the bailiff. He asks nothing, except our support in business and in other matters of life, but he also promised his own support with funds, and acts of friendship. I accepted the offer, though I would not treat him equally as I would do you. I trust him, and he can be a valuable ally. I suggest we all, together, accept him as our very best friend.'

'Who is this man?' Raes van Lake wondered, a little angry.

'He is my neighbour, James van Artevelde.'

Raes looked relieved. 'James is a good man, a friend. He is honest and loyal. I support his friendship.'

The others nodded. They too knew James van Artevelde.

'We must name our group, and form an association,' Raes van Lake suggested. 'Only our five families should be part of the association, but James van Artevelde and his family can be considered friends. We must repay him.'

'Right,' Juris added. 'We pledge to secrecy, to mutual support with friendly relations, help in difficult times and mutual protection. Our families are henceforth close friends. Do you pledge with me to that?'

'We do!' the others acquiesced.

'For a name, how about the Saint Veerle Group?' John Denout brought forward.

'Yes, why not,' Juris agreed. 'But Wouter lives on the Saint Veerle Square, a little too obvious. Why not the Pharaïldis Group? Pharaïldis means Veerle in our language. The *Gravensteen* stands on the Veerle Square.'

'I don't fancy the count too much,' Raes van Lake objected.

'Neither do I,' Juris replied. He grinned, 'if ever our secret becomes commonplace, we can always refer to the name as being in support of the count. Who can tell, it may come in handy.'

'Agreed,' the men gave in unison, and they shook hands.

The theft of the treasure of the abbey of Saint Liudgerus in Zele was never formally resolved. The thieves were never identified.

Within a year, out of the modest fortune that befell Juris Vresele, his business grew and prospered. With added investments of the van Artevelde family, Juris Vresele became once more a wealthy man. He invested in breweries, bought one more sea-going ship in Damme, traded in wine and spices with Portugal, Spain, Guyenne in France, and Italy. He could build new dikes and dig new canals to dry out his polders of Bornem and East of Zele. He shovelled out more peat at Axel and sold that throughout Flanders. His son Gillis proved to be a trader as cunning as his father. Especially, Gillis agreed well with James van Artevelde, so that the two men of approximately the same age became inseparable friends. James liked the children of Gillis as if they were his own.

Raes van Lake bought higher quality wool and wove his cloth. Soon, he too was more than ever a trader rather than a weaver.

John Denout could buy fullers' clay and hire more textile frames. He expanded by having several more fullers work for him, and he fulled more cloth than Raes van Lake could provide him. From a poor man he became a well-to-do *poorter* of Ghent, so he bought property, land and houses, in the Saint Peter's new suburbs.

Arnout de Hert bought ships for the navigation on the Scheldt and the Leie, larger boats than his *duermen*. He mostly worked on Antwerp, but he also send ships on the *Lieve Canal* to

Damme. His best clients were Juris Vresele, Raes van Lake and James van Artevelde. Flanders lay at the marine crossroads of the north and the south of the continent. From Spain, it imported leather, oil, iron, hides, almonds, saffron, raisins, honey and wax, as well as dyes. From the harbours of northern Africa originated dates, sugar and especially the precious alum needed for dyeing. In southern France, Gillis, James and Raes bought wine, nuts and salt. They brought in lumber, charcoal, hides, bacon and herring from Scandinavia. James traded in large quantities of hop beers from Hamburg in Germany. The sea routes were of course much more desirable, inexpensive and commodious than the land routes. Over land, one could transport goods only in minute quantities, in ox carts for instance. Oxen were slow, could only walk so many hours a day, had to be given fodder and often found the carts bogged down on muddy roads. Ships could sail all day and most of the night, did not need fodder nor constant care, and they were impervious to most weather except frontal winds.

Wouter de Smet could realise his life's dream. He remained a blacksmith, but he began to work on jewels in gold and silver, and also a few precious stones were worked into his first products. He sold chalices to the abbeys of Ghent. Two years later, he changed guilds. He became an esteemed member of the silversmiths and goldsmiths guild.

The Pharaïldis association worked in alliance with the van Artevelde family. They formed a tight, secret, powerful economic and political association in Ghent's fourteenth century. Their added fortunes consolidated to a strong force that changed the configuration in the trading habits of the town.

The wool economy of Ghent

The friends of Juris Vresele, the men of the Pharaïldis group, were all in one or other way involved in making cloth. Making cloth was the main industry of Ghent in Juris's times. Nobody knew who had started producing cloth in the town, but Ghent had developed into a gigantic cloth-making factory that attracted thousands of people from other towns and from the countryside, so that it had grown into the largest town of the continent, Paris excluded. The cloth Ghent produced was of the best in the world. Particularly sought after were the scarlet, blue, green, brown and striped cloths.

The cloth of Ghent was almost exclusively made of wool. The wool Ghent preferred was English wool, imported through the royal staple, the centrally controlled depot, from regions such as the Cotswolds, the Yorkshire dales, or Norfolk. Sheep were reared in Flanders and in France, but not nearly enough for the production of Flanders, and not nearly of the quality the weavers of Ghent liked.

The English sheep were sheared several times a year. The woollen fleeces were cut off the hides of the animals. The shearing took normally place after the winter, so that in spring the rush for the first and usually best bales of wool was crazed. The bales of wool were delivered by the purchasing merchants at the harbours Sluis or Antwerp, and then transported to the port of Ghent, to *Tussen Bruggen*.

The wool fleeces had to be treated before the wool could be spun to threads. The fleeces had to be separated, the ugly and dirty parts cut away, the quality wools separated from the lesser quality ones. The wool was beaten to work out some of the impurities and then washed a first

time to remove the oils and greases of the sheep hides. Then, the wool had to be combed or carded so that the fibres of the material lay in the same direction, as was necessary for spinning. Carding disentangled, cleaned and mixed the fibres of wool together, into a material that could be used for spinning. The resulting wool was hung on pegs in the rooms of the women who spun it.

The wool was then spun into yarn. During spinning, the fibres of the wool were drawn out of the wool and twisted together to form a long thread or yarn. Most spinning in Ghent was done in Juris's time on spinning wheels, by hand, and by women. Spinning was a task for women, but the spindle and distaff were gradually being abandoned for the faster spinning wheel. The whirling motion given to the wheel turned and twisted the fibres, and then the yarn was wound on a spindle. A good spinner gave a regular motion to the wheel and to the spindle, so that the yarn was evenly twisted and of even thickness. For warp threads, the spinsters still preferred the spindle and the distaff, whereas for the woof they more and more used the spinning wheels. The quality and coarseness of the yarn depended on the quantity of fibre used to spin the thread, and the yarn might have been twisted loosely or tightly to form lesser or better quality thread.

The threads of wool, and more usually the wool itself before it was spun, could be cleaned further by kneading it in a mixture of water and a substance called fullers' clay. Nobody really knew how fullers' clay worked, but it absorbed more dirt, rests of oil and grease, which contaminated the fibres. This work was done by the fullers of Ghent, who were employed and paid by the weavers. Nobody knew which elements hid in fullers' clay, but different sorts existed, and for the best cloth the best fullers' clays were used. Each fuller had his preferred clays. Fullers' clay could be used in conjunction with wash, stale urine, which assisted well in cleaning and whitening the wool or thread.

The woollen thread or even the original wool might be dyed a first time. Dyeing was accomplished in great vats of warm water to which alum was added to have the dye powders grip in the thread. The dyers dyed yarn, as well as the woven cloth. Their dyes came from France over the Leie, usually bought by the hostellers, from whom the dyers brought their materials. Flanders produced no dyes.

Alum was brought in from Castile, from the Iberic Peninsula, and from the coasts of northern Africa, from the Greek islands such as Chios by the port of Genoa, or from Italy. Natural dyes produced from plants were used. Almost any shade of colour could be obtained from plants, except the finest greens. Many of those colours faded in bright light or in water, however, such as the red of madder or the browns of tannins. Mixing the right ingredients and using an excellent mordant was adamant. The best colourfast dyes were madder, indigo, weld and kermes among many other.

The weld for yellow hues was imported from central Europe.

Madder was imported from southern France, from Normandy or Guyenne, far in the south. Madder could also be imported from the island of Schouwen in Zeeland. Mordanted with alum, madder produced a nice red hue on wool.

Woad was a plant that created the fine blue that was also called indigo. It rapidly impoverished the soil, but it too was brought over the Leie and the Scheldt from Normandy or the Alsace regions, from Picardy and Artois, and from Thuringia in Germany. Real indigo blue was extracted from the indigo plant, the best powders imported from the Orient over the port of Marseille in France.

Dyers of blue were specifically distinguished guildsmen, and appropriately called blue-dyers. Among the dyers, the blue-dyers were the most specialised craftsmen, guarding ancient secrets of how to create the finest blue hues on the cloths. They often walked in Ghent with blue hands.

The wool was first soaked in the mordanting bath with a selection of alum, and then transferred into larger vats still containing the dried, powdered plants and hot water. These would give the colours to the wool or cloth. The mixture of dye and alum was a well-guarded secret of the dyers.

After spinning, the wool yarn was woven by weavers on looms. Weavers worked mostly at home. Weaving was in principle a simple process, whereby two different sets of threads were interlaced at right angles to form the cloth. The warp, holding very many threads, were fixed vertically on the loom, on thread next to the other. The weft thread, or woof, crossed them horizontally. The weft was attached to a piece of wood, the shuttle. It was thrown through the vertical threads, the warp, which was pried open between even and uneven individual threads to let the weft or shuttle through. In the next movement, the loom mechanism pressed the even and uneven warp in the other direction and the shuttle with the weft passed in the opposite direction. Thus, a cloth mesh was formed, which in the finest cloths, was beaten together by another long piece of wood. Then the process repeated. The weaver could propel the shuttle by throwing it from side to side by hand; his feet actioned the movement of the pieces of wood that opened the warp backward or forward to open the warp threads. In the weavers' quarters of Ghent, the rattle and the banging of the shuttles was heard loudly in the streets.

The weavers could buy their own wool and spin it and weave it, later sell it, or they got their wool from merchants for whom they only weaved, after which the merchants sold the cloth. In such cases, the cloth merchant purchased the wool, provided it to the weaver, who sold his cloth back to the merchant. Raes van Lake was such a merchant, after having been a weaver.

After weaving, the cloth still had to undergo several further processes before it could be sold as quality produce. The last impurities had to be removed. This was the fullers' work. The cloth had to be scoured and then milled or thickened.

The fullers' clay removed the last impurities in baths, but the cloth had to be pounded hard for the fullers' clay to work well. The pounding could be done with the fullers' feet or hands, or by using clubs. In Ghent, some fulling was carried out in water mills. The mills drove the hammers that worked the cloth. Several water mills had been installed along the water courses of the town. With time, John Denout had acquired the funds to buy a watermill of his own.

In the quarters of the fullers and of the dyers, the stench of the vats could be smelled from far.

Fullers were the poorest workers of Ghent, men who worked hard in dirty shops. They were paid by the weavers, so they depended from the goodwill of the weavers.

After fulling, the cloth had to be thickened by matting the fibres together, the felting process, so that the cloth was stronger and increasingly waterproof. The felting of woollen cloth was also done by hammering upon it.

The cloth was almost ready then. It had to be cleansed with clear water from the rests of the fullers' clay and other ingredients used in the fulling and thickening. Finally, it was brought

wet to the textile frames to dry. The cloth was bleached in the sun to attain the desired colour. The cloth was stretched on great frames called tenter, and stretched to the standard measurements. Ghent had installed several large tentergrounds along the Leie, inside and outside the city centre. The stretching and drying was done in these large fields, where all the fullers placed the cloth together. The frames also served to stretch the cloth to the right dimensions. This was done by *strikers* or burlers, who smoothed the cloth on the frames. Their helpers were called *ramenknappen* in Flemish.

Lastly, to produce the finest cloth, it was worked on with brushes of teasels. The cloth was brushed so that it became supple. One brushed vigorously in one direction, so that all hairs of the wool stood in that one direction. When the tailors transformed the cloth to a coat for instance, the hairs had to stand from above to below, so that the cloth was more waterproof. The water drops of the rain flowed in that direction over the hairs. For the best cloths, the brushing was done on both sides.

The most expensive cloth was shorn. It was first carded again, with brushes formed of the dried flowers of the teasel plants, called *kaardebol* in Flanders. This drew the smallest, more or less loose hairs or fibres back out of the cloth. Then, with large scissors, all the minuscule protruding hairs were cut off until the surface became very even and smooth to the touch.

The weavers could sell their cloth to finishers or *gereeders*, who would finish the work. The weavers could also order the finishing themselves and sell the cloth as traders. All bales of cloth were brought to the *Lakenhalle*, the Cloth Hall, so that inspectors of the guild could inspect it on quality, define the amount of taxes, and indicate with their stamp the cloth had been accepted as the highest quality cloth of Ghent. The cloth inspectors were chosen once a year by the lords of the Cloth Hall, who equally were chosen for one year by the guild.

Ghent did not only produce cloth of the finest quality. The coverlet weavers lived mostly in the Saint Peter's quarter, south of the centre, the *kuipe* of Ghent. The size and quality of their produce was controlled by the abbey of Saint Peter, and by the inspectors of their guild. The abbey allowed the coverlet weavers in a special privilege to sell their cloth in the Saint Peter quarter. The guild hall of the coverlet weavers stood in the *Heiliggestraat*.

The various ingredients used in the cloth producing industry were wool, fleeces, dyes, fullers' clay, alum, wood to burn and provide heat for the vats of the dyers and fullers. These materials had to be brought to the city over the Leie and the Scheldt or by the *Lieve Canal* from the ports of Bruges, in boats owned by people such as Arnout de Hert. The blacksmiths provided iron for the vats and looms and forged the iron to the necessary forms, to bars and scissors and knives.

The cloth industry needed many crafts. Wool carders, spinners, fullers, dyers, weavers, shearers, tenterers, blacksmiths, carpenters, shippers and merchants worked and earned a living from the produce of cloth.

These men organised in guilds, which had their deans, their regulations, their controllers, their own chapels and guild houses. The shearers and the dyers were not gathered in the weaver guild. They formed part of the small guilds. The largest group in the small guilds were the shippers, and then the tailors.

The weaving industry attracted people, and the families had to be fed. Butchers, bakers, fishmongers, cheesemongers, fruitmongers and brewers proliferated in Ghent.

The town centre counted two meat halls. The large, central meat hall, was situated between the *Veebrug* and the '*s Gravenbrug*, at the end of the Fish Market. All imported meat had to be controlled there. Many meat stalls stood at this hall. The small meat hall had been erected at the *Braembrug*, even though only few butchers lived nearby.

The other consumer goods were sold on various markets, large open spaces in the town: the Grain Market, the Fish Market, and the Friday Market.

With the wealth came the need for the nice things in life, such as jewels, which were delivered by the silversmiths and goldsmiths such as of the de Smet family.

The victualing trade boomed as grain, wine, ingredients for ale-making, beer, vegetables, honey and many other foods were brought into the city from the countryside and from far away.

Ale in Ghent was made by fermenting grout. The de Grutere family had obtained the monopoly over these herbs. The de Grutere had almost each year an aldermen from their family in the government of Ghent. Some of them lived in a steen of the *Donkersteeg*. The de Grutere also owned the city rights to tax beer that was imported from the harbour of Bremen in Germany. It was forbidden to import beer made from hops, for Ghent brewed one kind of hop beer itself, called Easterling, and other brewers had begun to brew more beers from hops imported from Germany. The Vreseles and the van Arteveldes nevertheless imported beer from Germany through other, dark channels.

The weaving industry was the basis of Ghent's economy, but the wealth produced by weaving distributed some of that wealth to many other craftsmen and traders.

James van Artevelde and Gillis Vresele mainly profited from this, second, trade. James and Gillis bought grain from Picardy and Artois in France, sending a part of that grain over the Scheldt and the Dender to Brabant and Hainault. He also bought other sorts of grain in Hainault and had it transported over the Dender to the Scheldt, to be brought to Ghent. Dendermonde lay at the confluence of the Dender and the Scheldt, a very important inland port also for James van Artevelde and Gillis Vresele for the commerce of wood coming in from the vast forests of the county of Namur.

German wine too came through Dendermonde. French wine, claret mainly produced in the Guyenne region, was brought in by ships navigating from Bordeaux to Sluis or Damme, and then transported in smaller boats over the *Lieve Canal*. Claret was wine mixed from several sorts of grapes. James van Artevelde complained about the taxes on wine, which were one of the major sources of income of the government of the town, but the wine trade was still very profitable.

Spiritual goods were provided by the many churches. The finest church was Saint John's. Ghent counted as many abbeys and convents. Masses were performed by the priests, monks helped to support the poor.

Medical needs were administered by the doctors and the hospitals, many of them organised by the abbeys and convents. Ghent not only cared for the physically sick in many hospitals, but also for the mentally ill. There was also a hospital for lepers.

The economy of Ghent developed thus in two different aspects. The first wealth of Ghent was its production of cloth from imported wool. Some flax was grown around the Leie and woven into cheaper linen, but Ghent foremost wove high-quality cloth from wool, destined for the rich nobles and the wealthy merchants. kings, dukes and counts bought cloth from Ghent. Wool had to be sheared, threaded, dyed, woven, dyed again, fullled, and then sold. A

substantial proportion of the cloth was sent to Bruges, bought by Bruges merchants and sold by Ghent merchants, transported to the ports of Bruges over the *Lieve Canal*, to Damme and Sluis. So many weavers and fullers lived in Ghent, that the city counted twice as many people within its boundaries than Bruges.

The city had substantially grown out of its walls, burst out of the *kuipe*, its traditional centre. It expanded for instance to the south into the Saint Peter's quarter and to the east, into the New Lands. The *kuipe*, or barrel, was the old centre of Ghent, fortified with walls. Ghent was already much, much larger than its original old centre, but those newer parts had only in part walls to protect it. Especially to the north and east, the city remained very much open, but the lands there, especially those east of the Scheldt, were extremely marshy.

Ghent enjoyed the special privilege to weave high quality wool into dense, fine, nicely dyed cloth. It guarded its secrets, the processes of its manufacture, very jealously. Most of the weavers had but small businesses, working with at the most three or four other weavers. Ghent had become the largest city after Paris, and Ghent plus Bruges and Ieper, three towns that lay close together, held more population than Paris.

The second wealth of Ghent came from its geographic position, an aspect Juris Vresele had much thought about and remarked very clearly to his friend, James van Artevelde. Ghent had been founded at the confluence of the rivers Leie and Scheldt. These rivers, the Scheldt a stream, flowed from out of northern France into Flanders, coming from Picardy and Artois. Picardy probably was the richest grain region of France, connected by its waterways to other prosperous regions of France such as Normandy, the Île-de-France with Paris, Champagne, Burgundy and Berry. The goods from these lands were cheaply and rapidly transported north over the Leie and the Scheldt to the point where these rivers joined, which was controlled by the city of Ghent.

All the goods coming from the south over the Leie and the Scheldt had to be unloaded into the staples of Ghent, and then transported farther north by the shippers of Ghent. The shippers brought the goods from *Tussen Bruggen* to Bruges, to the ports of Damme and Sluis in the west, and to Antwerp in the north. Ghent thus linked effectively the vast plains of the north of France to the rest of the world, especially to the other Hanse cities in the Baltic Sea. Goods from these last countries flowed south from Bruges to France. Ghent also brought French produce to the duchy of Brabant, to the Holy Roman German Empire, and to the eastern nations. Flanders, and to some extent also Brabant, depended on grain imported from France, as much as Ghent depended for its industry on the excellent wool coming from England, from the gentle Cotswolds and the fertile marshes of Norfolk.

In its second wealth, Ghent was the focal point of the victualing trade between France and a large part of western Flanders, with northern Flanders and Zeeland and largely also with Brabant.

Juris Vresele and James van Artevelde excelled in this victualing trade, while Raes van Lake and John Denout profited from the first wealth. Arnout de Hert transported goods north on the Scheldt and on the *Lieve Canal*, and he grew rich from the trade once he could extend his fleet. Wouter de Smet, as a member of the many small guilds, benefited from serving all the inhabitants of the roaring town, and when he had established a silversmith and goldsmith business, especially from the men who had become wealthy in the city.

In the quarters of the weavers and the fullers the rattles of the weavers' looms, the turning of the spinning wheels and the stamping of the fullers' feet could be heard loud. The stench of the urine vats, of the vats with alum and dyes and the containers of fullers' earth could be

smelled from far. Hot, humidified air from the vats rose up from out of the open doors. Logs of wood, piles of ash and fullers' clay leaned against the walls of the smallest houses or vast stores. The workers of Ghent started on their labour and ceased toiling by the bell in the belfry.

When the work was hardest, though, the finest songs were sung in the streets of Ghent, sung by women and men alike.

Chapter 2. Violence and Love. From 1317 to 1328

A wedding

In the spring of 1319, on a fine though chilly day, James van Artevelde was driven to the sun of the very first very bright day of the year. He ran impetuously out of his house on the *Kalanderberg*, passed the house of the Vresele family, and jumped down the *Kattestraat* past the huge Saint-Nicholas church, on to the Grain Market. He spun around on the Grain Market and admired the splendid *stenen*, the stone houses of the rich, which prided in the basking sunrays around the square. Even here, the thatched houses were more plentiful, but the view of the broken lines of the blackened beams in the façades seduced him to admiration.

James hurried first to the grain staple along the Leie, where he had to say a few words to his stewards who were buying and selling grain according to his orders. James was only twenty-four, but already an accomplished businessman, trader and tough negotiator. He turned outside the building and sauntered towards the *Korte Munt*, next to the grain staple. He revelled in the bustle on the Grain Market with its businesses and stalls where tradesmen and artisans were bickering over prices and quantities of sacks. The liveliness cheered James up considerably, as had the prices his stewards were receiving for his French-imported grain. He walked past the bakeries in the *Korte Munt*, knowing which baker bought flour from him and who not, considering how much he would like to buy a pastry to a certain girl. He stopped at several of the bakeries, winking at the opulent bakers' daughters, throwing them a greeting. He did not stop to buy bread. His maidservants and cook had asked him only to buy fish for dinner and supper, so he ran on.

James was also not interested today in the houses of the moneychangers in the *Korte Munt*. He did not like to loan money from these men and he had no foreign coins to change into Flemish pounds. He preferred to keep his Florins and Ducats! Still, he inquired briefly after the current value of gold and silver, of the Florins and the Pounds Parisis. Joyful of mood, James arrived at the Fish Market, where his heart stopped beating for a few moments.

Just beyond the place where peas were sold in quantity, at the corner of the *Korte Munt* and the *Lange Munt*, a little further than where the herrings were sold, James van Artevelde recognised the backs of Mergriet and Lijsbetten Mutaert, of whom Mergriet was the wife of Juris Vresele.

The two women were very slowly strolling between the fish stalls, ignoring the enticing cries of fishmongers, but yet here and there taking up a fish, fingering it, appreciating it, and lowering it again with mouths drawn in disgust. The women advanced towards the 's *Gravenbrug*. The Mutaert women wore large baskets of woven reed in one arm, but it was not the fish they had bought and that protruded from those baskets, nor the swinging, ample hip movements of the two matrons that attracted James's attention so much. The two women walked slower than a saunter, because they were engaged in very interesting conversations that absorbed them totally, no doubt gossiping about their female friends or complaining about their devils of husbands.

James was enthralled because behind the women walked another fish, a fish James would have liked very dearly to catch, Mergriet's wonderful daughter Agneete.

Agneete Vresele did not resemble her stout mother and her would-be aunt at all. She stroked a very fine, pretty, slim and elegant figure with a blond head of thick, golden hair above the joyous colours of her simple dress. James would have recognised the glimmering of the sunrays in Agneete's silken hair from miles away! Agneete wore no basket. She crossed her hands on her back, and she seemed utterly bored with the rigmarole of the marketplace. She followed in her mother's footsteps, craning her head proudly, a little angrily. Agneete was not pleased at all at having to follow like a puppy her two watch-dogs of formidable mother almost and aunt.

James van Artevelde had seen Agneete Vresele for the first time about three years ago, when she had only been sixteen, and he had seen her again several times since then in her father's house, but he had not been able to exchange more than a few idle words with her. He knew, after having insidiously interrogated her father, that she was about five years younger than he, though she wore her figure well. James had been convinced by her looks and by her flirting glances, which he could not but notice, that Agneete fancied him.

James had a reputation among his friends of being a terrible womaniser, but that was only because he was friendly with the women he did business with, the women of the bakers and grocers of the town. The women returned his friendliness and many flirted openly with him, but that was as far as their relations remained, though his friends obviously thought otherwise.

James fancied Agneete too!

James had not frolicked around with many girls and women in the past. Yes, girls looked at him with the glimmering of flirts in their flashing eyes. Yes, women swooped more strongly with hips and shoulders when he neared, and yes, of course, he had winked at not a few of them, kissed another few, but he had never sought amorous adventures beyond a kiss on the cheek and a caress on a soft chin. He had avoided married women.

James acknowledged he was more scared of than wise at engaging enduring friendships with women. Agneete, however, who now danced a few steps in front of him, was a delight for the gods!

Agneete was the palest, most delicate and most delicious beauty James knew in Ghent. The features of her face were what impressed James most with delighted feelings, her small bright blue eyes, long eyelashes and thin, dark eyebrows that seemed to be finely painted on a high front. He admired her short, straight, uplifted small nose. Her ruby lips, which might be just a little too thick for her face, remained always moist, softly wrinkled and changing to scarlet when she frowned. Her lips shone on James with an exquisite effect, which ensnared him in soft feelings of undefinable longing. When Agneete was in the same room with him, his knees trembled, his words came less smoothly, and he could not bring himself to draw away his eyes. What delight it would be to be kissed and loved by this girl who was nineteen now, to be held and comforted in her white, immaculate arms!

James had not yet dared declare his desire for the Vresele girl, not to her and not to her family, even though Gillis Vresele was his best friend. Gillis thought of him as of an eternal bachelor, but James desired Agneete. The last months, James had lived in agony over paining his brain with schemes to find himself alone with her in a room for a few moments. Here, in the marketplace, he saw his chance.

James stepped surreptitiously to right behind Agneete, daring at the brink of insult to grab her arm to force her gently to turn. Agneete did turn, but with anger in her eyes when she looked

straight at him, with the surprise and fury of being importuned without being asked. James brought a finger to his lips and thereby implored her silence. A sparkle of joy lighted Agneete's face then, and a smirk of smart conspiracy appeared in her eyes. A smile that opened her lips turned James's heart to jelly. Agneete threw a furtive glance to her mother and aunt, and came rapidly to a decision. She stopped in her track and drew James behind a stall of haddock-sellers, so that she and James could not be seen anymore from the main path left open between the fishmongers' stalls. Mergriet and Lijsbetten continued to saunter. Soon, the space between them and James and Agneete was filled with a crowd.

James spoke first, a little nervous, 'how nice to find you on the fish market, *Jonkver* Agneete. Do you enjoy the walk and the shopping?'

'Quit the small-talk, what do you want to tell me? Come out with it, now or never!' thought Agneete.

She pouted and answered sweetly, in her softest, warm voice, sounding sufficiently husky to make James feel she was not a girl anymore but a young woman, intelligent, quite daring a risk, 'hardly, Mer James. My mother and aunt insisted I accompany them, but the market is quite boring today.'

Agneete took James's arm, then his hand, and she drew him on in a direction perpendicular to that of her two chaperons, who she did not lose sight of. She did not want her mother and aunt to turn around at this moment and come looking for her. Not yet!

James recognised clearly what Agneete was doing. Although she was a very slim girl with a tiny waist, her other features, her breasts and her hips were as voluptuous as of the most alluring *deerne* of Ghent. Agneete drew him further in the alley, but then she stopped so abruptly, turning, that James bumped against her, feeling the softness of her breasts for a fraction of a moment, which brought a blush on her face, although James was not at all sure she had obtained the effect she desired. He was delighted once more.

'Well, Mer van Artevelde,' Agneete exclaimed, 'is it a habit of yours to stalk on young girls like this?'

James's mouth fell open, for it was Agneete who had taken his hand and was drawing him on. He played the game and answered, slightly embarrassed, understanding she was already amusing herself with him like a girl with a top, 'not at all, *Jonkver* Agneete! I never really had the chance to talk to you alone, however. I wondered whether we might have a few words of our own, here, in the market.'

Agneete smiled naughtily, teasingly, holding her head a little obliquely so that he could admire her tempting eyes and charming lips.

She said, 'if that is so, what then would you like to say to an honourable maiden of Ghent?'

'I don't know yet,' James stammered, put on the wrong foot.

He suddenly became aware that he was being led on. Agneete was his master in flirting. He, the ruthless negotiator, the predator in business, who dominated so much the trade in Ghent by knowledge, cunning and insight, was utterly lost to this divine creature, spellbound by her wonderful eyes, her magic smile.

He stood fascinated, almost turned to stone while she waited for more phrases, but he remained at a loss of words, so that he felt like the biggest fool of Ghent. He frowned. So, this bewitching woman of whom he had thought as a delightful, precious, brittle, yet still very young girl, was his better! She had already totally subdued him, and as in a flash of lightning he realised he was for the first time in his life hopelessly in love. Agneete was the woman he wanted in his home, in his kitchen, in his council, his sole advisor and judge, and he wanted her in his bed. James blushed, and Agneete sensed immediately what he was thinking off, her

eyes lowered to his legs, and then she threw her head in her neck and let go of a pearly laughter. James laughed with her.

‘If I ask your father for his permission to see you sometimes alone, would you like that?’

‘I am nineteen, Mer James, not twelve. I see whoever I want!’

James’s face darkened.

Agneete helped him, ‘true, but it would be right, would it not, to ask my father. So, you can ask, and I would like to walk with you alone. I cannot speak for my father, though. What if he says he doesn’t want to leave me in your custody? After all, the strangest stories are told in Ghent about your adventures with women. Are you a serious man, Mer Artevelde?’

‘Do not believe the stories of vixen and fish-wives, Jonkver Agneete. I am a very serious man!’

‘My, my, and I hoped not to be bored!’

Agneete leaned towards James with moist lips and she held her face up to him.

James laughed, ‘I think I can persuade Juris,’ he whispered.

‘How would you persuade him, Mer James,’ Agneete whispered back and came closer still, ‘when you seem to have it difficult to persuade me?’.

‘I would tell him how enchantingly beautiful and attractive you are and how honourable my intentions,’ James dared, placing a hand on her hips.

James saw Agneete liked him to hold her. She held her face to the other side.

‘What are your intentions then, Mer James?’ she whispered.

James blushed dark red. His intentions were to press this charming, finest among the beauties of Ghent, this pale, shining jewel to his chest, and kiss her for the rest of the day without interruption. He kept silent a few moment more, while they stood and locked glances. He lowered his face towards hers and Agneete did not recede, so they kissed. The kiss was not light, chaste and tender. It was a passionate kiss, for both had sought this moment for a long time.

Before they could stop the kiss, they heard shouts a few steps behind James.

Two women cried, ‘Agneete, Agneete, where are you?’

Agneete withdrew and smiled triumphantly. Also James smiled, and he turned his head, for the formidable Mutaert women had realised Agneete did not follow them anymore. Where was the damn girl?

Agneete shouted back, ‘I’m coming, mother! I’m here. I’m coming!’

Agneete ran past James but grasped his hand still. She drew him back to the main path. Hand in hand they burst out from between the fish-stalls, from behind the haddocks, the herrings, the shrimps and the sea-crabs.

Mergriet Mutaert had been craning her neck and shouting higher than the fish-women. She stopped suddenly when she saw her Agneete and James van Artevelde. Her mouth opened and she snorted audibly. Mergriet found no words, but she looked in anger, lips tight. Her massive niece, Lijsbetten, stood with her fists on her hips, on the outlook for Agneete, but she understood quite more rapidly than her aunt what was going on. She noticed the entwined hands, and she laughed hard but warmly. Lijsbetten remained a little aside.

‘I only met Mer James van Artevelde, mother. We talked some and lost sight of you.’

Agneete confronted her mother holding hands with James, eyes insisting on what fine fish she, Agneete, had found on the market, smiling, looking alternately at James and at her mother.

‘Well, well,’ Mergriet Mutaert stammered, not entirely sure of what was happening. She too fixed the entwined hands of her daughter, her daughter leaning against James van Artevelde.

‘Well, well,’ Mergriet repeated, stunned, discountenanced, which made Lijsbetten only laugh harder.

‘Come on then,’ Mergriet managed to find her motherly authority. ‘We thought you were lost!’

‘I was not lost at all, mama! I was with James! We shall never be lost, James and I!’

Mergriet remained speechless at so overt a declaration, not of James but of her daughter.

Lijsbetten succoured her aunt, ‘It seems that is true, Agneete. You’ll never be lost again.

James seems to have found you and want to keep you, won’t he?’

James answered, ‘that is so indeed, Ver Mutaert. We will follow you now, while you do your shopping. May we follow you? I must buy some bass! Where might I find a bass?’

‘A bass? A boss you have already found, it seems, my dear,’ Lijsbetten smiled, then roaring with laughter. ‘For the bass you can follow us. I know a fine fishmonger who sells perch and bass!’

Lijsbetten took an arm of the still somewhat angry Mergriet, drawing her on, and the two women tittered nervously, Lijsbetten obviously pleading with her aunt, until James could buy his bass.

Two days later, early in the evening, James van Artevelde showed up in Juris Vresele’s great hall. Juris knew, of course, why James entered. James had recovered his natural dignity and he did not wait long. In his usual, direct way of speaking, he asked Juris for the permission to date his daughter. He spoke immediately of marriage. Juris had been made quite well aware of what happened in the fish-market by his wife, and he had interrogated his daughter, discovering with some surprise Agneete had hooked her fish and was not going to let James van Artevelde out of what the boy had strung himself on.

Juris was secretly delighted by his daughter’s determination. He recognised the true Vresele character, and he could not have wished a better son-in-law. He agreed to the dating, putting on a reluctant face at first, until he burst out in laughter and embraced James. They called Agneete in, who fled in James’s arms.

Agneete Vresele and James van Artevelde had hovered around each other much too long to show patience. Before the end of the year 1319, they were married. A great feast was staged by James van Artevelde and paid by Juris Vresele in James’s house, for the Artevelde hall was considerably larger still than the Vresele hall. Flemish ale, German beer and French wine flowed abundantly, and the guests of the Vresele and of the Artevelde ate until their bellies burst. The first child of Agneete and James, a daughter called Margaret, was born the year after, in 1320.

The happiness of Agneete Vresele and James van Artevelde overshadowed the events of the times of their wedding.

The Counts of Flanders

The conflict between the count of Flanders and the king of France lasted unabated for more than two decades.

At the end of 1316, while Juris Vresele was imprisoned in the Castelet, one of the sons of the count of Flanders, the one named Robert after his father, as well as a delegation of the cities

of Flanders, rode to Avignon to present to the pope their proposals for peace with France, hoping for the intercession of Pope John XXII, the Frenchman Jacques Duèse.

The Flemish asked for the abolishment of all the previous treaties forced by France on Flanders, and especially the Treaty of Iniquity of Athis-sur-Orge, in exchange for added financial sacrifices. The delegation proposed the prominent powers of France to swear to support Flanders in case the king did not act according to his obligations as a feudal overlord, and they demanded to submit the king to the interdict in such cases. The Flemish declared they were willing to discuss concessions to the king if only he returned the French-speaking territories of Flanders he had annexed earlier.

The count's son Robert thus defended the interests of the counts of Flanders.

In March 1317, the pope presented his recommendations to the king of France, and to the pope's surprise, the king accepted them in exchange for a contribution of Flanders to the French crown of two hundred thousand pounds.

This peace between Flanders and France was not concluded, for the cities and the count of Flanders refused to pay the exorbitant amount. Further talks with the pope resolved nothing. The pope, angered, threw the interdict on Flanders in April of 1317, but this terrible measure failed to curb the determination of the Flemish. The interdict remained largely inactive until a new, failed meeting at Compiègne in October of 1318 confirmed it, and the king of France prepared for war against Flanders.

The count of Flanders, under the threat of war with France but hard-pressed by low finances, could only levy a new army by the summer of 1319, when Agneete Vresele and James van Artevelde passed what they thought were the finest months of their existence. But then, the cities growled against the count's taxes.

The famine of the previous years had been followed by a severe economic crisis in Flanders, as all reserves of money had been spent. The enormous amounts of money that went to taxes and which were then sent to the count and the king, who spent it all and only for their personal comfort in France, had withdrawn so many financial resources from Flanders that new business ventures and investments in new enterprises had been strangled. The city aldermen could not add expenses of war and battles to the ruin of the traders, of the weavers and the fullers, and to diminishing returns on existing taxes for the government of their towns. The cities needed peace, which meant reconciliation between the count and the king of France. The *Leliaert* aldermen urged the count to patch up the old grudges.

Count Robert of Béthune therefore returned to Paris as if he went on his knees to Canossa, but he was well received at the royal court of France. He went to Paris to negotiate, having to fight with words for the continuance of the county and for the independence of his fief. It became rapidly clear the king still had his eyes on rich Flanders and wanted to annex the land to his own territories, but the king also feared the might and wealth of Flanders.

The talks advanced well at first, in a cordial atmosphere, until the matter of the already annexed territories of Flanders was laid upon the table by the Flemish negotiators.

Robert of Béthune insisted upon the unity and inviolability of his county, confirmed in so many treaties signed by the king. The king had other views. Robert of Béthune stood alone before the king and a mass of courtiers, over-shouted by arguments he felt false, often unable to retort.

There would be no change of policy by the current king! The king and the court were not willing to grant gracious concessions. Realising that the court of France had no intention at all

to hand over the former French-speaking territories of Flanders, Count Robert of Béthune fled, embittered, from Paris. If the king of France wanted war, he, the Lion of Flanders, would give war to France.

Robert did not ride far. He was brought back by his son, Louis of Nevers, who convinced him to continue negotiating.

Again in Paris and at the royal court, the seventy-year old Robert of Béthune slowly but steadily broke and gave in to the courtiers pressing on him with arguments, enticements and menaces.

In May of 1320, Robert of Béthune, count of Flanders, agreed to and re-confirmed the Treaty of Athis-sur-Orge, the former Treaty of Iniquity. Count Robert bound himself with the Treaty of Paris never to claim back Lille, Douai, Orchies and Béthune from the French crown. He also agreed to the marriage of his sixteen-year old grandson, who was also called Louis de Nevers, to Marguerite, the eight-year old daughter of the king of France.

These agreements were received very badly in Flanders, and considered a betrayal of the county's main interests. The enormous amounts of money the Flemish would have to pay to the King of France in the harsh period of the years after the famine, the amounts agreed to in the Treaty of Iniquity, created distress in the cities and in the countryside of Flanders. The wisdom and authority of the once beloved count was challenged.

The year 1322 brought several earth-shaking events. In January of that year died King Philip V the Tall of France, to be succeeded by Charles IV, the third son of Philippe le Bel, of Philip the Fair.

In July died Louis de Nevers, son of Robert of Béthune, count of Flanders, and in September the count himself succumbed.

It was not immediately clear who would succeed on Robert of Béthune, for normally his son who was also called Robert should receive the county. A treaty agreed in 1315 with King Louis X le Hutin, however, appointed the son of Louis de Nevers as count in a case such as happened. The Flemish nobility preferred Robert, but the cities, or rather the *Leliaert* notables, wanted Louis's son, the one called Louis of Nevers also. This Louis was French-bred, French-educated, French-controlled, married to a princess of French royal blood, and utterly loyal to the king of France, his liege lord.

In October of 1322, the Flemish cities recognised Robert de Béthune's grandson Louis de Nevers as rightful successor, foregoing the claims to the seat of Flanders of Robert son of Robert. The agreement with King Louis X, with France, was thus honoured.

In January of the next year, the new king of France, Charles IV, accepted Louis de Nevers formally as new count of Flanders, the more so because he felt this young man more inclined to the interests of the royal court of France.

Count Louis was nineteen years old when he acceded to the throne of Flanders. He had been educated in France, and he was married to a royal French princess. He was bred and educated in France, and had been imbued with chivalrous convictions of feudal loyalty to his overlord, to the French king. Charles IV took advantage of Louis de Nevers' youth to impose French counsellors on him: the bishop of Arras and the abbot of Vézelay, a man who was no less than Artaud Flotte, the son of Pierre Flotte, a former agent of King Philip IV. These courtiers showed little sympathy for the Flemish, and Louis estranged more and more from his subjects in Flanders.

Louis de Nevers loyally enforced the Treaty of Iniquity in Flanders.

Young Count Louis of Nevers immediately ran into issues, for Flanders did not react as harmless, humble servants. Count Louis thought his words were orders, to be executed with joy. The Flemish cities reacted otherwise, which came as a very bad surprise to the new count.

Louis also experienced bad issues within his own family, not only with his uncle Robert, the rightful heir of Flanders, but also with John of Namur, the sixth son of his great-grandfather Guy of Dampierre and erstwhile Regent of Flanders.

Count Louis had to console his uncle Robert for having deprived him of the county. Louis offered Robert the castellany of Cassel and the region around the town and port of Dunkirk in compensation. In fact, Louis thereby merely re-confirmed the castellany to Robert, though it was his to give. Henceforth, Robert would be called Robert of Cassel. Robert seemed to accept his fate, for Louis had been acknowledged as count by the king and by the Flemish cities, but his feelings of rancour continued to stick in his throat and grated there.

Louis de Nevers also had to find a solution for the conflict with the count of Hainault over Holland and Zeeland. The two counts reached an agreement by which Louis recognised the rights of Hainault over Zeeland, in exchange for the rights of Flanders over the region north of Ghent, the so-called *Vier Ambachten*, and the lands around the town of Aalst. This also was merely a conformation of the former state of the county.

In the beginning of July 1323, Louis also tried to appease John of Namur by granting him rights of law over the waters before Sluis and over the bay of the Zwin, at which lay the ports of Bruges. Bruges felt threatened by this measure, for John of Namur might in case of conflict with Bruges, and conflict seemed inevitable, close or block these vital harbours, and deviate the ships from Sluis and Damme over the *Lieve Canal* to the mighty city of Ghent.

Bruges therefore directed its militia to Sluis, where they had to give battle to the troops of John of Namur and of the count. At first, Bruges seemed to have lost that battle, but the city became alarmed in time, amassed more men, sent new troops, and these defeated the count and his great-uncle. John of Namur was even taken a prisoner and led to Bruges, where he was forced to abandon his rights on Sluis. He refused to comply, but Sluis was not from him anymore in fact and in power.

Embassies sent to Bruges by the king of France could not mollify the bitterness of the city's aldermen and artisans. Even not a peace conference called by the king at Saint-Omer could change matters, but that conference ended when John of Namur managed to escape from Bruges during a religious ceremony.

Louis of Nevers had tried to enforce the payments of the Treaty of Athis on his Flemish subjects, but in July of that same year 1323, the Flemish cities, assembling in parliament at Ieper, refused openly to pay the outrageous amounts demanded from them by the count. The count had not understood that the Flemish would only grant something when asked politely, and after they had granted only what they and only they were willing to grant.

Unrest and uproar in Flanders was the result, and increased indignation, so the count preferred to flee to France for a while, weary with his unruly countrymen.

In November of 1323, negotiations to resolve the differences of opinion began anew between the count and Bruges. The conference had been organised on intercession of the aldermen of Ghent. The peace between the count and Bruges could only be restored when John of Namur relented his rights on Sluis and the Zwin. Bruges also wanted to be forgiven for its military intervention in revolt against their lord, the count. Count Louis of Nevers conceded to these terms, but he made another clumsy decision.

Count Louis returned happily to his calm county of Nevers, appointing a French knight called the French Knight of Aspremont as his regent in Flanders. Aspremont immediately began to demand the retribution money decided in the Treaty of Athis, plus additional taxes for the count.

The count could not have done worse to incite new revolts, this time mainly in the coastal regions of Flanders, in the *Westhoek*, in the west of Flanders, and in the *Brugse Vrije*, the *châtellainie* or countryside castellany around Bruges. Representatives of the count were imprisoned or killed, manors and castles destroyed and burned down. Noblewomen were raped, knights of Flanders tortured and killed. By the end of 1323, the count's authorities of the regions of Veurne, Saint-Winoksbergen and Broekburg had been annihilated, and the same anarchy had been installed in the *Brugse Vrije*.

The revolt had an agrarian origin, caused more by the oppression of the countryside by the nobles of Flanders, the lords of the lands, than as a revolt against the authority of the count, but the artisans and people of Bruges joined the rebellion. The exorbitant taxes demanded by the king of France, under which Flanders suffered, was the basic reason for the revolt.

The city of Ghent did not participate in this uprising, mainly because the *Leliaert* landowner *poorters* could maintain their dominance over the city, in favour of count and king. Ghent had been hurt too much by the famine and by the economic depression to have the energy to react against the count. Also, an earlier uprising of some of the guilds in 1313 had been suppressed, and the weavers, who formed the largest guild, were subjected to additional taxes, which had left the guild bloodless, without leadership, deprived of a dean.

The revolt against the payment of the Athis taxes began in earnest as late as the spring of 1324. In February 1324, Count Louis de Nevers had to return to Flanders to put matters to order. He dared not ride more northerly than Kortrijk, however.

In that month of February also, the aldermen of Bruges had to be renewed. The people of Bruges reproached the landowners and wealthy traders of the city of corruption. They joined the revolt around Bruges, the rebels of the *Brugse Vrije*. The aldermen were then chosen among the guilds and the more moderate *poorters*.

In April, during ensuing talks between the rebels and the count. Robert of Cassel and delegates of the large cities were called in as arbitrators. These judged that the representatives of the count were indeed guilty of severe exactions, so that the rebels gained general amnesty from a commission led by Artaud Flotte. Bruges also obtained the right of staple, an important economic advantage, and its power over the bay of the Zwin and its ports was strengthened. The count would henceforth appoint the aldermen. If he chose not to exert that right within eight days after the formal election start of the second day of February, the previous aldermen would appoint their successors. Also other cities of Flanders, among which Ieper, gained amnesty for their revolt. Sanctions were decided against the corrupt lords of the regions. Peace seemed to be restored, but the peace was very brittle indeed, for many issues had not been solved.

The ruling of the arbitration commissions did not satisfy the rebels at all, for the Treaty of Athis remained valid, as also the extreme payments due to the king of France and to the count. Pressed by the French king, Louis of Nevers pressed Regent Aspremont, who pressed the Flemish to pay the sums stated in the Treaty of Athis. The count, however, fled from Flanders like a coward. Aspremont was in no position of power to enforce the payments, so he too shortly afterwards fled to Paris, leaving Flanders to anarchy.

In the autumn of 1324, major uprisings happened in Bruges and in the *Brugse Vrije*. Groups of angry farmers and journeymen then roamed the country in a renewed revolt, plundering castles and killing landlords and their families. The insurrection organised into a more coherent set of actions, led by leaders such as Zeger Janssone and Lambert Bonin, Walter Ratgeer and Hugues Blauwel, wealthy farmers who rose against the overlords who had sought to ruin them. Louis de Nevers could only think of appealing to Robert of Cassel to crush the revolt in Flanders and to arrest the leaders of the revolt.

The rebels of Flanders had by then indeed chosen one man as captain-in-chief to coordinate their military actions, a man called Nicholas Zannekin, a former wealthy fishmonger and farmer from the village of Lampernisse, who had been very vocal against the taxes imposed on countryside Flanders. Zannekin had been the captain of the castellany of Veurne in the *Westhoek*, but he had also become a *poorter* of Bruges, where he was a member of a group of men dedicated to the revolution.

Very vocal in this group was a man called William de Deken. The influence of de Deken and of Zannekin grew in Bruges and around. Zannekin had an innate sense for organisation and leadership among the captains of the rebellion, so he could rally them under his advice. Under the informal direction of the revolutionary group of men of Bruges, as of 1323, the chaotic revolt was organised into an orderly uprising everywhere in Flanders. The revolt remained in the inspiration of the group of radical-minded men such as William de Deken and Nicholas Zannekin in Bruges. Zannekin served as military leader, William de Deken as the political leader.

Zannekin's troops campaigned systematically. Small fortified towns such as Gistel and Aardenburg were captured by the rebels.

These events and the murderous uprisings in the countryside of Flanders surely alarmed the inhabitants of the city of Ghent, but they felt safe behind their walls in the knowledge of their grandeur and the fact they could appeal to a powerful militia of thousands of warriors for armed protection. As long as the waterways remained open, they could trade and bring in wool and grain, so that their well-being did not diminish. They suffered no hunger or deprivation of anything. The *Gentenaars* bothered their minds with other, more everyday matters of common life.

The Swan

Raes van Lake the Elder lived near the *Braembrug*, not far from the *Waalpoort*, in the main quarter of the weavers of Ghent. He had been a weaver and therefore knew everything there was to know about wool and cloth and dyeing and fulling, and he was still a member of the guild of weavers, even though he traded in cloth as a *lakensnider*. Raes bought and sold woollen cloth of the finest quality. He sometimes had his cloth fullled a second time, or dyed deeper, until it corresponded to his standards, or rather to the standards his exacting customers desired. Raes bought cloth from the weavers who lived in his neighbourhood. He attended mass in the Weavers' Chapel and he participated in the meetings of the weavers in the Weavers' Hall at the end of his street, the *Brabantstraat*.

Raes sold his cloth to the Lombards of Ghent, who took it to the south of France, to over the high mountains into the land called Italy, and to the pope's territories. Raes also traded directly with merchants of the near-by duchy of Brabant and of the county of Hainault, mainly

with the traders of Brussels and Leuven. He sent cloth to Sluis to be sold in England and in the northern coastal lands of the Holy Roman Empire of Germany. He also did a few things he was not supposed to do, such as trade in German beer when he had to send a ship to far Lübeck or Hamburg.

Raes van Lake seldom financed an entire shipload alone. The Vresele and the Artevelde families provided him with funds and shared in the profits.

Raes was a lot wealthier than he showed in the city of Ghent, a little ashamed still from the origins of his fortune, but he cherished his peace and humility. When his conscience over the expedition of Zele gnawed at his mind, he told himself he had augmented his money fifty-fold by his own work and dexterity, and he had contributed amply to the abbeys of Ghent.

Raes's best friends were Gillis Vresele and John Denout, as well as Arnout de Hert, the shipper, with whom he worked most often for the transport of his goods. Raes appreciated the honesty of Arnout and John, preferred to pay a little more but enjoy the work of people he could trust. John Denout and Arnout de Hert did not have to cheat on him, for they were growing almost as rich as he was. John Denout gave him the quality of fulling he needed, and Raes could talk with John the fuller about how dense he wanted his fulling of certain cloths. Arnout de Hert advised him on how to move his goods over the waters, and de Hert had contacts with reliable shippers at Sluis and Damme until he had his own seafaring ship built in the arsenal of Sluis.

Raes lived with a happy family in a large house, still thatched, a wattle-and daub house, but he had extensively modified the structure of the house, bought the neighbouring house, connected the two to one, and he was thinking of changing his walls to stone and place a roof of tiles. He had the means to build himself a *steen*, a stone house, but he was used to his thatched roofs and wooden beams, happy also not to show off with his wealth among the other traders. Raes had known poverty in the house of his parents, so he hesitated to demonstrate his newly found richness. He hesitated transforming his family home.

Raes's two sons, Raes the Younger and William, were thirteen and twelve years old. Raes had observed his sons. William would become a weaver, for the boy was dexterous with his hands and intelligent. Raes the Younger was destined to continue the trading business, for that boy had cunning and a mischievous streak. The boy worked twice as many tricks as his brother on his parents and on the servants, was remarkably alert and quick of tongue, often hiding his hand till the last moment. Raes the Younger also got away with his tricks twice as many times as his brother.

Raes van Lake had married into the distinguished Bentijn family, a family of weavers also, renowned for their pretty women. Zwane Bentijn was a petite, very fine blonde gifted with light grey eyes in a face of delicate bones, small but sensually thick lips and a short, straight nose. Zwane Bentijn had seduced Raes van Lake in the nick of a moment, moved as she had been with Raes's handsome figure, elegant manners and force. Zwane had not sought money then, or she had detected the potential in Raes before even Raes himself discovered his strength in business. Zwane's family had objected to the marriage with a then not very well-to-do weaver, but when Zwane had set her mind on something, nobody could oppose her determination, even if she was only a small woman. Zwane van Lake was still a very attractive woman at the age of thirty-eight. Her figure was charming and generous, her demeanour proud and elegant. Her name, Swan, fitted her well, people said, and she therefore liked to wear the finest cloth her husband could buy, dyed in the lightest of hues.

Had Zwane Bentijn realised how truly rich her husband had become in the last years, after the terrible famine of seven years ago, she would have walked like a queen and held court in the finest steen of Ghent. Raes, however, had discovered soon in his beautiful wife the one little fault of Zwane, her vanity. So, Raes divided his profits by five when Zwane asked him how his business fared, and he brought coins but not opulence on the oak table of his household. The rest of his golden Florins, he invested in more ventures, some of which were daring but brought in tremendous further profits. Raes could take risks now with part of his money. If he lost a shipload, he cursed, but invested in a new cargo. Raes van Lake could follow up to seven projects at the same time. Lately, each and every one of his initiatives brought him more revenue than he dared to dream of. He traded in vast quantities of cloth these days of 1323, and every sale won him profit.

Zwane Bentijn considered herself the dignified female head of a fine family, but she never suspected she was wealthier than she surmised. There was always enough money for clothes, whenever she desired a new dress, always enough money for anything she desired for her or her children, and Raes brought her a jewel each time he had to travel far, but she never fathomed her husband's true standing. Still, Zwane set some of the fashion for ladies in Ghent. Her robes were a bit lavisher than most, her colours brighter, her sleeves longer, her hair better made up behind her head, her front a little plucked so as to be broader and higher, her skin paler, her shawls of silk gaudier, her hoods wider, her shoes of red Cordovan leather more pointed. Zwane was in good health and kept her slim figure. She had easily given birth to two fine sons, survived the pains, so her duty had been accomplished. She walked a content woman, and yet she missed something vital.

Zwane Bentijn missed the sparkle of magic that would have sent her to the heaven of delight. She was the woman of one man, as fitted for a *poorter* lady of Ghent, she had never known intimately another man but her husband, but she craved now for the ecstasy of a devouring passion which had not come and which she supposed would soon never come when her age advanced and her beauty dwindled. Zwane had been wondering how it would feel to be cherished by someone else but her oaf of a husband. How would it feel to be whispered sweet words of longing to, to feel finer arms around her and broader chests crush her in the heat of love? Raes van Lake travelled so much these months, leaving Zwane alone and hungry for a man's hands on her body. Zwane noticed with alacrity how the years passed. She would be an old woman soon, her prettiness faded, her status reduced to that of a matron housewife, hardly better than a maidservant.

These last weeks, Zwane remarked how a very handsome, charming man, tall and lanky, a man with flowing dark hair and gleaming dark eyes, who held his head high and proudly, a man who was always dressed elegantly, looked insistently at her when she met him in the street or in the Weavers' Chapel. His name was Tomis Sleepstaf. He was a prominent weaver, who it was rumoured might one day make it to alderman of the town. Sleepstaf lived in the *Nederscheldestraat*, close to the church of Saint John and to the Gerard the Devil *Steen*. Zwane had walked to the house indicated by her friends, to the Sleepstaf *Steen*, to find it a small house, actually smaller than her own complex of rooms, but a steen nevertheless. How would it feel to live in a *steen*? Why could she not live in a *steen*?

The furtive glances of Tomis Sleepstaf lingered longer, probing, in church. Zwane felt Sleepstaf's eyes wandering lecherously over her chest and waist and hips. At first, she had been obfuscated, bewildered, then a little angry at his open scrutiny, and finally intrigued and pleased with the attention nobody else seemed to pay her. She felt flattered and thrilled.

On a warm afternoon, when Zwane returned home alone, coming from Saint John's Church, Sleepstaf addressed her. He had only exchanged a few polite words with her, that time, but afterwards when they met again, he spoke longer, more familiarly, wishing her a good time in a sweet, mellow voice. Tomis introduced himself to her as a member of a prominent weaver family. Later, when she walked alone, he came closer to her and whispered a little gossip to her, making fun of some of the elderly ladies in the street. Alone, Zwane was often! Was Sleepstaf stalking her? When Zwane walked from Saint John's or near the Scheldt, she looked around and spied the other side of the streets. Sometimes, Sleepstaf suddenly appeared when she expected him least. Tomis told her his family was known for its elegant women and Ver Zwane Bentijn was also a very beautiful woman. Zwane knew Tomis Sleepstaf was a widower. His wife had died two years ago while giving birth. Mother and daughter had died. Zwane showed empathy when Sleepstaf told the sad story, flashing her translucent eyes at him.

Zwane Bentijn and Tomis Sleepstaf met frequently. Tomis never accosted her when she was with friends. He then merely said a fine good day and passed on. He spoke to her only when she was alone. They arranged to meet each other by walking along the Scheldt, from the *Braembrug* to the Gerard the Devil Steen, along the *Reep*. Zwane had made a habit of it taking a stroll in the late afternoon there, and Tomis had soon caught her regularity. Zwane was certain to be remarked on those walks, so she told Tomis when and where she would stroll the next time, farther towards the abbey of Saint Peter, away from the town centre. Zwane put on darker dresses and cloaks, and she hid her blond hair in a brown hood. Tomis did not comment on these disguises. He grinned, satisfied with the schemes. The swan was being caught in his net.

One evening, Tomis Sleepstaf asked whether Zwane might want to visit his steen, to see how the rooms lay inside, how his house had been decorated, admire his stairs to the upper floor. Tomis assured Zwane his wooden beams had been carved with excellent craftsmanship. Zwane wanted to call in a fine carpenter to carve her beams, so she accepted Sleepstaf's invitation enthusiastically, the more so because Sleepstaf assured her he had many servants who filled his house at all times.

On a sombre, rainy afternoon, Tomis Sleepstaf opened his front door to Zwane, after having looked to right and left to see whether somebody noticed him ushering a woman into his home. Zwane Bentijn's heart beat fast, but she entered the Sleepstaf hall nevertheless, exclaiming in little shouts of admiration at the weaver's finely decorated walls and stairs. She did not immediately notice the dust on the wood and the age of the worm-eaten furniture. Contrary to what Sleepstaf had told her, no servants were hurrying through the hall, and where was the rest of Tomis's household?

Once inside and his door closed behind them, Tomis Sleepstaf grabbed Zwane Bentijn, pushing her against a cupboard and covering her face and breasts with ardent kisses. Zwane went out of breath, and then Tomis's hands found her shirt, tugged at the leather throngs on her, finding it too hard to open her linen, and drawing his rough fingers under her robe. Zwane's blood cooked. She suddenly lost all sense of dignity. Her face was flushed with desire under Tomis's caresses and kisses, which went frantically to her cleavage while his hands cupped her breasts. Zwane let Tomis do with her what he sought, and what – she had to admit – she had sought fervently too. Tomis Sleepstaf made love to Zwane Bentijn in his hall, Zwane being bent over the heavy oak table, but the act was only the fulfilment of very earthy desires, not the joining of two souls, a conclusion Zwane realised too late. When Tomis gasped, panting over Zwane's back, cursing and closing his codpiece, Zwane eased the pain in

her belly, put a quick order to her clothes, and ran. She darted past Tomis, put on her hood, opened the door, and sprang into the street hoping nobody would recognise her. The last she heard when she fled through the door was the hoarse, high-pitched laughter of Tomis Sleepstaf in his hall, a laughter louder than a curse.

Zwane Bentijn hurried home. The following days, she did not go anymore to the church of Saint John or to the Weavers' Chapel. She went to mass at Saint Nicholas, praying she would never meet any Sleepstaf for the rest of her life. She went to mass as far as the *Freremineuren* near the Leie, close to the bridge of the same name. She asked friends to accompany her.

Tomis Sleepstaf sought out Zwane at the usual places, to be disappointed in his search, for she stayed much indoors. In full summer of 1323, she even enthralled her husband by asking him to take her to their manor in the countryside, at Beervelde. Sleepstaf, wondering anxiously what had become of his credulous, sensual swan, was thwarted in his further efforts to meet Zwane and in drawing her again to his hall. He did not find her anymore at regular masses in the churches she frequented, and she had disappeared from the markets, as well as from her usual walking streets. He dared not ask his and her friends of what had happened to her, fearing to draw attention. After a few weeks of raging and racking his mind for ways of seeing her and forcing her to come to him, he thought he had found a way of getting into the family house of the van Lakes and wreaking revenge on what he considered by then to be Zwane's disdain. The woman had got what she wanted, mocked him. She had to suffer!

A few weeks after their last encounter, Tomis Sleepstaf dressed up and walked decidedly to the *Brabantstraat*. He knocked at the door of the van Lakes. He enjoyed much luck, for the lady of the house opened the door for him. Zwane paled as white as snow when she recognised the visitor and she wanted to throw the door in the face of Tomis Sleepstaf, but he pushed a foot and then a leg in the opening, and Zwane was shoved two paces into her hall where she grasped her heart, allowing the triumphantly grinning Tomis to advance farther into the house, so that he could not anymore be ushered out without a considerable stir. Zwane feared the scandal. Tomis asked in polite words to see the master of the house.

'I have business to discuss with Master van Lake,' Tomis added, which helped Zwane to regain some of her weak composure.

'Have you come to throw this house into shame and disarray?' Zwane managed to hiss. She threw a glance at the black iron she used to poke burning wood in the hearth with. Sleepstaf followed her eyes and grinned, hushing, 'no, no, Ver van Lake, I do have urgent business to discuss with your husband, but I wondered when you would renew a visit to my humble steen.'

'I shall not come to your rat-hole again, Tomis Sleepstaf, and I do not care to see you ever again. I intend to be left in peace,' Zwane spat, and then she said in a louder voice daubed with honey, 'come in, Mer Sleepstaf. I will fetch my husband. Have a seat by the table.' Zwane refrained from getting herself a chair for the distinguished visitor, as should have been the proper way of showing respect for a master weaver. She strode instantly to the kitchen, and from there Sleepstaf could hear her calling out for her husband. Zwane was gone before Tomis could sit down. He sat then on a comfortable, leather-cushioned and nicely carved oak chair. He looked around, waiting for Raes van Lake, noticing the wealth of a well-to-do *poorter* of Ghent: the fine furniture, the tapestries hanging on the walls, newly brushed straw on the tiled floor, heavy blackened oak beams and carved ceiling above his head, the arched glass windows. He cleared his throat. The van Lakes showed better living inside than what Raes spoke of in the guild meetings and on the streets. The van Lakes must have the funds for what Tomis was about to propose.

Zwane Bentijn remained in the kitchen as long as her husband did not enter the hall. She sent a servant in with ale and water, but he heard her refuse to allow pastries to the visitor. A maid hurried into the hall with a plate and returned to the kitchen. The door opened once more and Raes van Lake stepped into his hall. He welcomed Tomis Sleepstaf, a little astonished to hear such a distinguished visitor had come to his house.

Raes van Lake and Tomis Sleepstaf talked for about an hour, after which time Zwane heard the front door open and a little later close again. She went to the door of the kitchen, and heard Tomis Sleepstaf's last words of departure. Raes entered the kitchen, astonished to find Zwane still sitting near the table there, picking at some vegetable.

Zwane pushed Raes back into the hall, closed the door to the kitchen behind her, and asked what Tomis Sleepstaf had come for.

'Mer Sleepstaf had a business to propose to me,' Raes answered little harshly.

He was not used to share his selling and buying ventures with his wife.

'What kind of business?' Zwane wondered innocently, playing with her fingers, not daring to look her husband in the eyes.

Zwane had understood from the lack of anger in her husband that Sleepstaf had told nothing about the affair she had experienced with the weaver.

She added, 'I don't trust this Sleepstaf, for all he is worth.'

'Why don't you trust him? What do you know about trusting a man such as Sleepstaf?' Raes asked suspiciously, astounded by the sudden interest of his wife in his business.

'I don't like his manners. He seems an arrogant person to me, capable of cheating and double-crossing,' Zwane gave to Raes, venom in her voice.

Raes had learned to care for every advice given to him.

'He asked me to stand surety for a business venture he is setting up with Boudin Mayhuus, another weaver,' Raes explained. 'Mayhuus will pay for the surety, of course, and providing surety for other business partners is something I do regularly.'

'Have you done this before with Sleepstaf and Mayhuus? Are they your business partners?'

'No, not at all,' Raes admitted, 'but Sleepstaf is a prominent member of the guild, a man who wields influence and who seems to have been successful so far. He promised to support me in becoming a lord of the Drapers' Hall, in the coming elections. That would bring our family a step further to distinction in Ghent.'

The lords of the Drapers' Hall measured the length and breadth of the cloth that was presented for sale in Ghent. They checked the cloth for quality and origin. Without the stamps of the lords of the Hall, no bale of cloth could be acquired or sold in Ghent, and infringement of the regulations was severely punished. Lordship of the Hall was a function of high esteem in the town, with considerable power over the weavers and the drapers, and the function came with a non-negligible income. Raes van Lake could count on leniency by his colleagues for his own cloth, first view of the better quality bales, occasions for fine and new business. Raes had been trying to gain support for his appointment as lord of the Hall from other weavers, so far without great success. Based on the status of lord, and since he was also a landowner now, he might propose his candidacy for alderman too.

Zwane Bentijn raised her head when she understood what Raes was thinking of, and she recognised the possibilities immediately. She felt flattered and proud, though she did not show her immense pleasure to her husband. She still stood near his table, fists in her hips, defiant and cross. Why had she spent time with a worm like Sleepstaf? She realised her error.

‘You should ask your friends about Sleepstaf and Mayhuus,’ Zwane relented, withdrawing to another room.

Which dresses could she still use as the wife of a lord of the Hall? Where should she parade?

Raes van Lake followed the advice of his wife a few days later. He conferred with James van Artevelde and Gillis Vresele. James and Gillis knew who Sleepstaf was, found him more predictable and reliable than not, so they proved to be quite in favour of having a Pharaïldis man as lord of the Drapers’ Hall, and maybe later as alderman of Ghent. Sleepstaf’s proposal to stand surety for the sum of a thousand pounds Parisis so that Boudin Mayhuus could set up a trade of importing wine from the region south of Paris to Ghent and Bruges seemed sound. James van Artevelde had occasionally bought wine, but from farther south, from Gascony, over Sluis and Damme, not yet from near Paris, but he knew the wine business was booming as with more wealth also more wine was drunk in Ghent. Gillis, James, nor Raes knew well Boudin Mayhuus. Mayhuus was a weaver who delivered moderately fine cloth, not cloth of extraordinary quality, and he was neither particularly wealthy nor enterprising. Gillis and James had done no business with him, so they had no idea how good or how bad the man’s reputation might be. James van Artevelde proposed to find out more about the weaver who was changing to trade.

‘Why does not Tomis Sleepstaf stand surety for Boudin Mayhuus?’ Gillis asked suspiciously. ‘He told me he had lent money to Mayhuus, but he was short of funds for the moment, and too much exposed already in other ventures,’ Raes explained, ‘otherwise he would have helped out Mayhuus more. Mayhuus must be one of his friends.’

‘I shall seek information with my relations,’ James van Artevelde snorted. ‘How soon does Sleepstaf expect an answer?’

‘Sleepstaf insisted on an answer by tomorrow.’

‘That is too soon. It makes it hard to decide upon,’ Gillis threw into the discussion. ‘We cannot check out on Mayhuus by that time. I say you refuse the offer, Raes.’

‘Wait,’ James intervened. ‘I propose we split the security in three, one part each, but unknown to Sleepstaf and Mayhuus. Only Raes is to stand security, but we should support him. If Mayhuus fails, we shall have to pay with Raes, but the loss will look as if it is entirely covered by you, Raes. Sleepstaf’s support for getting you appointed to the Drapers’ Hall is important. We need a lord and an alderman among our friends. We can survive the loss of one third of the surety, and the return would be great. Can you step in with us, Gillis?’

‘I can,’ Gillis sighed, ‘I suppose you two also. We are taking a high risk, though. I don’t like at all having to decide on so little information, so soon. My experience and instinct tells me trouble always comes from too early and too little knowledge. This feels like pure gambling.’

‘Once in every while we do have to gamble,’ Raes concluded. ‘The failing of Mayhuus and the loss of the security money would not mean a major disaster for me. If we enter this deal the three of us, the risk would be a lot smaller. I’ll tell Sleepstaf I agree. Do you pledge to support me for two-thirds of the amount, as silent partners?’

‘We do,’ James and Gillis nodded.

The next day, Raes van Lake announced to Tomis Sleepstaf he accepted the surety, but he asked for higher interest rates on the security. Sleepstaf accepted eagerly for Boudin Mayhuus, smiling, relieved, and he told the contract would be sent to him to be deposited with the aldermen of Ghent. Raes van Lake added the loss of the surety money would hurt him badly in his business. He hinted that if Mayhuus failed, he, Raes, might fail too, for he was far-stretched in his exposure to risks.

The surety contract was drawn up and signed by Raes.

Raes van Lake heard nothing of Mayhuus for three months. Then, Gillis Vresele burst into Raes's hall, panting for he had run, bringing the frightening news that Mayhuus had borrowed as much money as Raes had stood surety for, merely to disappear from Ghent. Nobody knew where he was, and creditors banged at Mayhuus' door. The creditors were at Mayhuus' neck, but Gillis did not expect Mayhuus to turn up and pay. The creditors were thinking of putting their case to the aldermen of the Law, have Mayhuus sentenced for theft, but the surety would be called in.

Raes and Gillis hurried to the steen of Sleepstaf. Sleepstaf confirmed the rumours, told he had been deceived, for he too had borrowed money to Mayhuus, expressed his sorrow, but he could do not much more than telling Raes the surety would indeed be called to effect. Gillis remarked a grin of gloating on Sleepstaf, a reaction he disliked totally. He showed his contempt for Sleepstaf and threatened to explain to the aldermen the role Sleepstaf had played in proposing the surety, hinting Sleepstaf had known Mayhuus might be failing. Sleepstaf was much indignant at this allegation, assuring Gillis and Raes he too had been surprised by Mayhuus.

Raes van Lake's face lit up like a fierce red candle, his cheeks seemed ready to explode, but Raes kept control of his fists. He would have liked to smack Tomis to the wall, for he too remarked the grins on the man. Gillis moved to Raes, but Raes simply turned on his heels and left, Gillis in his wake.

Raes cried from the street, 'the aldermen will hear about your lack of honesty in business dealings, Sleepstaf!'

Had Raes heard the hysterical laughs of Sleepstaf inside the house, Raes might have turned yet and smashed Sleepstaf's door with all his might, and done worse to the man himself.

In the meantime, James van Artevelde had gathered information on Sleepstaf and Mayhuus. Sleepstaf was not nearly as rich as James, Gillis and Raes had thought. Mayhuus had proved to be a swindler in other cases, though never for the amount at stake in the surety of Raes van Lake. Mayhuus had been a small-time swindler so far, and some of his business had indeed flourished also. Had Sleepstaf proposed a greater, more daring stake? James found out that Sleepstaf held a grudge against Raes van Lake. Sleepstaf never said a good word in favour of Raes. On the contrary, he slandered Raes in his circle. He would never support Raes in his ambitions of lord of the Hall and alderman. Sleepstaf was a liar.

James heard later with much pain and effort from his wife, Agneete Vresele, through his wife's female friends, the never acknowledged and unproven gossip of a possible sentimental affair between Zwane Bentijn and Tomis Sleepstaf. The affair seemed to have ended, though. James put the obvious two and two together, and concluded that Sleepstaf had been the master swindler in the affair of the surety, as bad or worse than Boudin Mayhuus.

James did not tell this news to Raes van Lake, but he did explain what he had found out to Gillis Vresele, who also had heard a few disturbing matters about Sleepstaf's womanizing habits and his little luck in trade. Gillis and James swore vengeance on the Sleepstafs for the rest of their lives. Raes van Lake also placed a wall of contempt and hatred between himself and the Sleepstafs.

Raes at first refused to pay the surety to Mayhuus' creditors, claiming a fraud. At the pressing demand of the creditors of Boudin Mayhuus, including Tomis Sleepstaf, the aldermen of the Law then officially called in the surety for Mayhuus from Raes van Lake. Raes asked Gillis Vresele to speak for him.

At the meeting in the *steen* of the aldermen, Gillis claimed the business venture of Mayhuus to have been a sham, organised by Mayhuus and Sleepstaf. The aldermen were embarrassed. They suspected Mayhuus and Sleepstaf indeed of having colluded to extract money from the loaners and to have lured Raes van Lake, a respected *poorter*, into the surety. The aldermen smelled a double swindle, but lacked evidence. The surety contract did exist, however, and had been deposited with the aldermen, and the aldermen did not wish to undermine the surety system. They told Raes he would have to pay.

Gillis Vresele contested the amount to be paid in the surety to Sleepstaf, claiming Sleepstaf to be a fraud as much as Mayhuus. He explained how Sleepstaf had come to Raes van Lake to propose the deal. There followed a heated discussion among the aldermen, and the aldermen agreed that Sleepstaf should assume some responsibility for the fraud. Sleepstaf, who was present, protested after having admitted he was involved for half of the total sum, but the aldermen stuck to their wise decision. Raes van Lake was convinced that Sleepstaf had lent no money to Mayhuus at all, and regarded the surety only as an additional means to extort money from him.

Raes van Lake placed the surety amount on the table without frowning the least muscle of his face. He explained the sum total was here, except the five hundred pounds which had been lent by Tomis Sleepstaf. Sleepstaf slinked off without a penny. At the same meeting, the aldermen condemned Boudin Mayhuus to a pilgrimage to Compostela and they banned him from within twenty miles of the city for three years.

Tomis Sleepstaf was angry, as his scheme had not entirely worked out to his satisfaction, and he stood in awe at the money Raes van Lake could place on the table without having to declare his own failing. Sleepstaf felt tremendously disappointed hearing Raes van Lake had been quite capable of coughing up the surety fund without hurting his business too much. Sleepstaf remained in awe, for he understood he had underestimated grossly the wealth of the van Lakes. It dawned on him now why Zwane Bentijn had always been dressed like a princess and why the tapestries he had seen in Raes's hall were among the finest of Ghent.

Later on, Tomis Sleepstaf did meet Zwane Bentijn again in the streets of Ghent and on the market places, but when she saw him she held her head high and threw him condescending looks. Sleepstaf had been weighed and found too light. Zwane looked down on him in open contempt and went her way, dressed still in the richest robes of town.

From those times on, Sleepstaf had it increasingly difficult to do business with other *poorters* of Ghent. Business deals were cut off at the last moment, his potential partners breaking off half promises. Raes van Lake had told them of Tomis's unreliability, and also Gillis Vresele and James van Artevelde. Shippers suddenly refused to transport loads for him, and the source of that originated with the de Hert family, who seemed in some way to be connected to Raes van Lake.

Tomis Sleepstaf's life became very hard in Ghent. After a year, he married a wealthy but ugly widow and began squandering her heritage as well as his own already dwindling fortune.

Armistice

The rebellion raged in Flanders for two years of destruction, burning, killing, raping and plundering the castles and manors of the noblemen. Count Louis de Nevers, who had dared to

advance to Ghent, as well as Robert of Cassel, organised punitive expeditions from out of Ghent against the revolt in the *Brugse Vrije*.

In January of 1325, due to the increased pressure in Flanders, fearing to be cut off from France, the count of Flanders, Louis de Nevers, and his uncle Robert of Cassel had retreated southwards to the town of Ieper. There, the count gave power to Robert of Cassel to fight against the rebels of Flanders in his name. Robert was to confront Zannekin. The rebels, however, captured town after town.

Zeger Janssone captured Gistel that same month, also Nieuwpoort, Veurne, Saint-Winoksbergen, Dunkirk and Cassel. Robert of Cassel had to retreat, barely escaping the ordeal. Zeger Janssone captured Poperinge a little later. Another group of Flemish troops surrounded Kortrijk. In March 1325, the southern and south-western regions of Flanders had been conquered by the rebels. Ieper and Kortrijk remained loyal to the count, but the count worsened his situation by once more revoking the privileges and freedoms of Bruges. The conquest by the revolutionaries of northern and north-eastern Flanders fared with more difficulty. Lambert Bonin besieged Aardenburg, but he did not succeed in taking the town. Walter Ratgeer captured Assenede. The rebels were driven back by the knights of Flanders to the region of Bruges, then advanced once more, and in the summer of 1325 they controlled the *Vier Ambachten* and the *Waasland*.

From out of Ieper, where Count Louis resided, Robert of Cassel then accepted negotiations with a delegation of Zannekin's rebels and of the cities of Flanders.

In the city of Ghent, Juris Vresele and the Pharaïldis associates followed these events with cold apprehension. Their general reaction was not to intervene as long as their trade and businesses did not suffer significantly.

The economy of Ghent was very different from that of Bruges and Ieper. Bruges' wealth was derived from trade over the seas, from exchange of goods with England, Germany, and the Baltic states. Bruges formed the link of Portugal, Spain and Italy with the northern and eastern states of the continent. The most powerful guild in Bruges therefore was the Hanse of London, the association of mutual support of the traders who dealt with far regions and the farthest lands. Bruges held the staple for the redistribution of produce of all sorts over the European world. The goods originated from everywhere, even from the Islamic lands, and went everywhere else, shipped by the traders of the city, via their ports of Damme and Sluis. With the trade came extensive financial services, so practically all the important Florentine, Roman and German bankers had representatives in the city. Bruges was a town of warehouses and of transactions of buying, selling and transport, not really of production.

The Pharaïldis group might have shown sympathy for the cause of the count of Flanders as a source of authority and hence of stability in the county, as long as the count fought for the privileges and freedoms of Flanders against the greedy annexation politics of the king of France. Flanders was many times wealthier than the domains of the king, so the king lusted for Flanders' riches. The king desired Flanders, to annex it to his lands instead of having it merely in feudal lordship over a recalcitrant count, who possessed also other rich regions of France such as Nevers and Rethel, territories so very close to the cathedral in which the king had been crowned, to the city of Rheims.

The king wanted to exploit Flanders for his own purposes of power and expansion.

The king of France needed money to wage his war with the counts of the regions that surrounded the royal domains. He had to wage war in Brittany, hoping to gain also that large duchy with its ports and access to England. He waged war over Guyenne, over the vast territories of Aquitaine, over which he had feudal rights, but which belonged to the king of England as inherited from the French Plantagenet house. The king occasionally waged war with the count of Champagne, and with the lords of the south, of the Provence and the Dauphiné.

When the king fought the count of Flanders, the count had sided with the guilds of the Flemish cities against the wealthy families from whom the aldermen of the cities were chosen. These families had exploited the inhabitants of Ghent, imposing taxes for their feasts and tournaments and for their own expenses. The families of aldermen of Ghent had exploited the people of the city for their own glory and added wealth. They sided with France when the Count vied with them for the power over the towns.

Juris Vresele and his friends hated the corruption of the great families, so they had remained pro-count, even though lately Count Louis de Nevers danced more and more to the pipes of France. This Louis was married to a daughter of the king! The count was known to be a rather weak and dubious figure, a doubter, a hesitant man, whereas the countess was renowned for her strong character. She dominated Count Louis. Louis had been educated in France! He preferred his quiet lands of Nevers to those of Flanders.

With the courtiers of France, Louis wanted the county of Flanders to pay the enormous amounts stipulated in the Treaty of Iniquity, in the Treaty of Athis, and in the subsequent pacts, which had each time augmented to the amounts due. The count wanted the debts paid, but he wanted the farmers and the towns to pay.

Juris Vresele and his friends, as most of the people living in the Flemish cities, hated the additional taxes that proved a hinder to their expanding business. They also knew quite well that not the nobles and not the clergy would have to pay the gross of the taxes, not the wealthy landowners and aldermen who could extort the taxes for count and king from them. Juris therefore felt much sympathy for the revolts against the count, even though the rebellion was organised mainly by wealthy farmers and traders from the countryside of western Flanders, and by people from Bruges. Bruges, Juris had heard, increasingly led the rebellion. Bruges would have to pay most, of course, and since Bruges had not as large an industry as Ghent, the tax money would have to come mainly from the merchants of that city. Juris Vresele's sympathies were divided, so he remained rather neutral in the conflict, reserving his comments for his household. His friends, such as James van Artevelde, listened to him and agreed. Also, the people from the guilds such as of the Pharaïldis group, though rather wealthy, lacked the overarching organisation of powerful guilds to react in force, even if their awareness and power grew by the month.

The guilds lacked for the moment the leadership of forceful deans. The small guilds had organised, however, this year of 1325, and with the absolution of the aldermen, they had chosen an overdean. They formed now, with the weavers and the fullers, the third guild force in Ghent. The weavers, considered too powerful by the aldermen, were deprived of a dean. Ghent paid a salary to the dean of the smaller guilds and to the dean of the fullers, not to any weaver.

Wouter de Smet cared not for war and skirmishes outside Ghent. The wealth of the city was hard to destroy so much it might hurt his business. His prosperity came from Ghent alone.

Arnout de Hert did not like the insurrection, not when it disrupted his transport business, which it rarely did, but they made his travels more dangerous. The war was waged on land, not on the waters. Only the towns and inland harbours were less secure.

When negotiations for a peace settlement between the count and the insurgents were initiated at Bruges, representatives of the cities of Bruges, Ieper and Ghent were called to meet. An arbitration commission was established by the count, a commission headed by Robert of Cassel, constituted of noblemen of Flanders.

By the end of March 1325, the count and the leaders of the insurgence installed an armistice. The deputies of the cities travelled to Bruges and the talks started as of the seventh of April.

The city of Ghent sent three aldermen to Bruges, and feeling the delegation was not very strong and rather not very pro-count, the aldermen also decided to send Juris Vresele. They thought Juris had travelled much, knew Bruges intricately, and he had landowner interests in the country. Juris had not wanted to ask for a function of alderman, though he might have, because he did not want to be associated with the *Leliaerts* of the town such as the de Grutere family, and he did not want to be distracted from his business. He might have refused to attend the negotiations at Bruges, but he was flattered to be asked, and curious over how such meetings might happen. He also speculated that the peace had better be installed sooner than later, for the war had begun to ripple through his trading business. James van Artevelde harboured the same opinions as Juris, and Juris's other friends urged him to accept.

Juris saddled his horse unperturbed, while Mergriet wept from the first instant to the last. He packed his finest clothes and food for the road, and he rode in one trot to Bruges. He took two rooms in an inn near the Belfry, happy to have his expenses paid by the city of Ghent. This was the inn in which he usually stayed when he came to the Hanse town. The owner knew him well, appreciated him, and offered him the cleanest rooms free of fleas and bedbugs. Juris could have a warm bath whenever he wished here, served by polite, willing servant maids.

The negotiations were held in the *Ghyselhuus* of Bruges on the *Burg*, a former prison of the counts near the old castle, in the oldest centre of the town, the building in which currently the aldermen of the city met.

The delegation of the count was led by Robert of Cassel, son of the former Count Robert the Lion, uncle of the current Count Louis de Nevers, and by John of Namur, son of former Count Guy of Dampierre and therefore grand-uncle of the count.

They were seated at a table, together with three aldermen of Bruges, two aldermen of Ghent, and two aldermen from Ieper. Five noblemen stood behind the delegates of the count, all gaudily dressed in colourful tunics, richly decorated sword scabbards at their sides, their coats-of-arms brocaded on their breast. Some of the aldermen also were knights. These wore their own arms. Other representatives were dressed in simple tunics of coarse grey or brown wool, wearing only a long dagger at a leather belt.

Juris Vresele and other deputies of the cities stood behind the city delegates. Also two delegates from the rebel troops sat at the table. These men were Zeger Janssone and Nicholas Zannekin, men Juris had never seen before. Servants hurried to bring glasses of wine. Clerks sat at the other side, taking notes from the proceedings.

Juris studied the men at the table. He said little or nothing. The first day was dedicated to courteous words of welcome and self-glorification. Robert of Cassel, the head of the arbitration commission, spoke for most of the day. He presided over the meeting, which now and then drew sarcastic grins on John of Namur's face. Robert presented the aims of the meeting, and an agenda, which was to have each delegation in turn present arguments for half a day. He granted a day or two for debate, and one day to draw up conclusions, one day of rest during which the clerks would prepare a final text, and one more day for discussions to reach a final agreement over a treaty.

Juris Vresele remarked the stern, angular face of Robert of Cassel, the roughly hewn features and the stouter figure of John of Namur, the faces filled with apprehension, fear or resignation on the aldermen, and the defiant glances of the rebel leaders.

During the next days, Juris heard the long tirades of arguments given in high-flown terms by the various parties, but he heard nothing he had not really expected. He detected no willingness to move toward the arguments of the other parties, no understanding of mutual interests. He disallowed his mind running into wild conjectures, which seemed not to be the case for many of the other delegates who showed their discontent, outrage and surprise in shouts, mimics, gestures and loud exclamations.

The representatives of the count emphasised the duty of obeisance to the overlord and owner of the lands. The count would rule with wisdom and moderation, but the authorities of the cities and the countryside had to swear loyalty and submission. Robert of Cassel also pleaded for the complete fulfilment of the treaties concluded with the French king.

The delegates of the cities wanted the count to recognise their privileges and freedoms. They demanded respect for their freedoms by the count and by the king. They complained long about the weight of the enormous taxes they would have to pay, and they asked for the interdict not to be used anymore as a weapon against the entire territory, especially not to force only a few into submission. Conflicts had to be settled by negotiations, not by arms. They rejected the term of rebels used by the nobles for people who fought for their survival and freedom. The cities remembered the count and the king that due to the heavy taxes, Flanders could suffer ruin and become a poor county that would bring no more revenue to the nobles.

The rebel leaders spoke only for a short time. They fustigated and complained about the bad treatment they had to endure in the countryside from the petty nobles. They enumerated the exactions they suffered continuously from the lords and bailiffs. They provided examples of the tortures and killings ordered on farmers and journeymen outside the cities.

Zeger Jansone wanted the persecutions, the vindictiveness of the nobles, the cruelty, to stop once and for all. He presented many more concrete tales of dire injustice, of people maimed for pleasure in the cruellest way by the landlords. He told the lords wanted to lay their hands on the possessions of the farmers, artisans and traders in the villages, and he proved that by precise examples.

Nicholas Zannekin mocked the high taxes the nobles forced upon the weakest to pay for the atonement money to the king and the count. Why, he argued, did the people of the countryside have to pay for the release from imprisonment of the former Count Robert of Béthune? The rebels wanted peace, of course, but the taxes had to stop and the nobles were to be punished for their deeds of terror. Only then would the army captains of Flanders depose arms and return to their work. They demanded general amnesty.

The aldermen of Ghent spoke in favour of the count, but they too emphasised the count should try to understand the reasons for the uprising, and address the reasons. They asked for a general amnesty for the insurgents.

The meetings dredged on for an entire week, but nobody was willing to advance towards any understanding for the arguments of the other parties. The faces of Robert of Cassel and John of Namur became grimmer by the day, their remarks more sarcastic and acidic.

In the evening of the sixth day, Juris Vresele sat alone at a table in the inn, eating a portion of bread and cheese and dried bacon, drinking a tankard of ale, when a stocky man dressed in black slid to his side. Juris looked up, surprised, thought for a moment somebody wanted to steal his purse, but then he recognised a man who had stood with the captains of the rebel troops, a man called Lambert Bonin. Juris was still good at recognising people and at connecting a name to a face, so he said nothing and looked expectantly. He was intrigued. The man introduced himself, ‘good evening, Master Vresele. I am Lambert Bonin. We both attend to the negotiations in the *Ghyselhuus*, don’t we?’

‘We do,’ Juris acknowledged, continuing to eat and drink.

‘You are a man of few words, not unlike me,’ Bonin remarked.

‘Is there really so much to say?’ Juris wondered. ‘The arguments are simple. We know what everybody wants.’

‘We do, we do,’ Bonin grinned. ‘I am a farmer, you see. I own some land in Westkapelle, north of Bruges. I was born there. The taxes the nobles demanded from me were squeezing me to ruin, and I do not even believe much of the money was sent to the count. The lords of Westkapelle threatened to confiscate my land. Other farmers of the neighbourhood faced the same ordeal.’

Bonin sighed, and continued, ‘so we founded a militia and we attacked the castle of Westkapelle. We feared reprisals. We joined the troops of Blauwel Bockel and Walter Ratgeer to stand mightier, and we took control over our regions. What else could we have done?’

‘What else indeed,’ Juris reflected aloud. ‘Desperate men do desperate acts.’

Bonin looked up, surprised, ‘you understand why we revolted, then, against the nobles? You concur?’

‘Of course I do,’ Juris grumbled.

‘I though the delegates of Ghent supported the count unconditionally!’

‘Ghent does support the count,’ Juris nodded. ‘Who else should we consider as our lord? Who else would be able to install the peace in Flanders? We need an authority to organise matters and to defend the county against men who would want to abolish our freedoms to exploit us even more. What other authority could enforce peace and order than the one recognised by the Church and Our Lord Jesus Christ?’

‘We could rule ourselves, in the name of Jesus Christ,’ Bonin hissed back. ‘I happen to know of cities and regions that manage themselves with some form of parliament in which many speak, and which is chosen by the people. The people also chose their leaders themselves. Are not the Italian cities republics, led by an assembly of chosen aldermen?’

‘Such organisation might work in Italy. It does not in Flanders,’ Juris objected. ‘The feudal structure in Italy is not as strongly established as it is in Flanders and in France.’

‘And what can we realise, how can we avoid our families being ruined, raped, forced into famine by an incompetent count who seeks only to destroy us by extorting taxes from us that are simply scandalous? The count looks to his own interests only. He has to lick the king of

France's arse because the king is his liege lord, who can give and take. He appeals to the nobles to support him, but we, the poor, the peasants, also the common people of the cities, we have to work until we fall and die. Bloodsuckers, I call them!

'I suppose we will have to lead the count to other thoughts, to show clearly how the nobles pain the count's subjects, and ruin our livelihood. We can show the count how what happens is counter-productive to the generation of wealth and welfare in Flanders, counter-productive for him, too. If the count squeezes too hard, he may soon have nothing anymore to squeeze on.'

Juris ate, waited, and then said, 'I condone some degree of violence, Lambert Bonin. I fought at the Golden Spurs in 1302. Continuing to apply extreme violence all over Flanders, now, can only cause more hatred and more violence among our people. When a castle is burned, a village is burned somewhat later, and the rigmarole starts all over again. Very many people are killed in this war. Count Louis may well appeal to the king and then the king may arrive with a mighty French army. You will give battle, and you may win or you may lose. I do not underestimate your skills. They have been rather efficient so far. But the French knights and the knights of the count will be led by men who have done nothing else in their lives than learn the art of war. The king, if not too stupid, Lambert Bonin, will have discovered by then among his lords the best fighter, the man who can foresee matters and lead men into battle. You will have mercenaries of the worst kind against you, men-at-arms expert in killing, and a huge mass of armoured knights cantering on huge destriers. The outcome of a battle is always unsure, but the French must have learnt something out of the Golden Spurs and out of *Pevelenberg*. This time, I am not sure the Flemish troops will win, all the more so because you will not have Flanders in its entirety with you. Ghent will not move. A few militiamen may join you, but the White Hoods will remain inside the city. The knights of Flanders will not fight at your side. There will be no William of Gulik, no Robert of Cassel and no John of Namur this time, to bear the grunt of the battle attacks, for these nobles will fight on the opposing side. They know the terrain of Flanders as well as you. Your defeat seems probable to me.'

Lambert Bonin sighed, 'so what should we do, Juris Vresele? Should we let us be slaughtered in our farms, see our wife and children die from hunger in our homes, lose our heritage?'

'No, surely not,' Juris threw back angrily at Bonin. 'The uprising has fared well. The count must have realised by now the uprising is general and dangerous for him. He cannot ignore your successes, so he will be forced to act. Your demands to the commission to look into the misdeeds of the nobles is legitimate. The killing must stop, however. Why not tell the count you lay down arms as a gesture of appeasement, for a certain time, the time of an amnesty, or even subjecting yourselves to the wisdom of the count, hoping for that wisdom to prevail? A delegation of the parliament of Flanders can place the grievances at the feet of the count. The count has made a gesture by installing an arbitration commission. The commission can be tested.'

'Zeger and Nicholas will never agree to such surrender and humiliation,' Bonin shook his head.

'Then the killing and the war will continue,' Juris concluded, and he bowed closer to Bonin's face, 'until a final showdown. I do not rule you. Accept this good advice from me then, Lambert Bonin. You seem to be a reasonable man. When a French army comes, run! Run and disperse! Return to you farms for a few months, disappear in the woods. I do not think you can win a battle against the knights of the king. You may be destroyed, and your families will suffer even more. True, you will not see the suffering, for your body will either lay on the battlefield, where the rooks will eat out your eyes, or you will be taken prisoner by the

knights, to be torn apart on the wheel and your head be decapitated from what remains of you. Think about that, Lambert Bonin, think! Disperse your forces when the French arrive, and reunite them months later. The French can come, but they cannot stay for long, and when they turn their backs on Flanders, you can emerge once more and harass the count into conceding real measures.'

Juris thumped his tankard of ale hard on the table, so that the beverage spilled out over the rim. Lambert was shocked out of his trance from listening intently to Juris's words. He sighed, moved on his chair, remained silent, then seemed to come to some sort of a decision, and said, 'you may be right, Juris Vresele. I do not know what it is like to stand and confront a stampede of steel riders. I have led my men into many skirmishes, never into such a major battle. I'll think about what you said. Your opinion needs reflection. But what if the count doesn't listen to us, gives us nothing but contempt for our cause. What should we do then, Juris Vresele?'

'Then you fight to the end,' Juris whispered sadly, 'for that indeed will be the only honourable recourse left to a Flemish free man. And then I will mourn you, Lambert Bonin.'

Juris sighed in his turn and drank, but his ale tasted bitter now. He was nevertheless much surprised by what Bonin told, for he had not expected a rebel leader to take any of his sayings to heart. Bonin seemed a very intelligent person. Juris still wondered why Bonin had come to him, he who had said but few sentences during the negotiations, though he had whispered his opinion to the aldermen of Ghent.

Lambert Bonin stood from his chair, looked as if he wanted to say something more, but he reconsidered, and shut his lips to a hard line. He slid away from Juris's table and went over to another table, where three of his companions sat. Bonin had been sent, Juris felt, for the rebels were seeking alliances in Ghent, and they were obviously in need of better comprehension of what lay on the mind of the other negotiators. The rebels would get no support from the *Leliaert* aldermen of Ghent, and also not of Juris Vresele.

Two days later, Lambert Bonin, as sole insurgent leader, proposed to the commission to lay down arms and to submit to the count in return for fair treatment of the people of Flanders, for justice in the grievances brought forward by the Flemish militias of the countryside, and for amnesty of his warriors.

Lambert Bonin's strong sign did not save the negotiations. The noblemen of the arbitration commission did not want to lose power to the farmers and traders in their lands. The rebel leaders were divided over the matter. Bonin proved to be a moderate man who truly sought solutions, but Zeger Janssone and Nicholas Zannekin remained hard and stubborn in their determination.

The talks of the rebels of Flanders, the representatives of the Flemish cities and the noblemen of the castellanies who were represented by the arbitration commission, dragged on. Juris Vresele, weary from the constant promises and return on promises, considered returning to Ghent. He detected no progress, nor wish to progress. The aldermen of Ghent implored him to stay and counsel them. He only got more infuriated, desperate, excited, outraged and vainly impatient.

The conference did not reach a compromise, because the knights appointed by the count, led by Robert of Cassel, refused to yield to any restriction of their god-granted power over the farmers and the villeins of their territories.

At the beginning of June of 1325, Robert of Cassel jumped on his horse and left the conference, which had by then petered down to but a few meetings per month. Robert rode off in distress over tensions within his own arbitration commission. The influence of John of Namur, who had proffered more intransigent views against the rebels, seemed to gain the day among the nobles of Flanders.

It had been decided in the previous month of May to continue the Bruges talks on neutral ground in the abbey of *Ter Duinen*, near Koksijde on the Flemish coast. Some of the negotiators therefore moved closer to the abbey. Juris rode to an inn near the village of Koksijde.

The first meeting at *Ter Duinen* had been scheduled for the eleventh of June. On that day, the rebel leaders and the aldermen of the Flemish cities assembled solemnly in the chapter hall, but Robert of Cassel did not show up, and also nobody of the arbitration commission. Robert sulked in his lands of Nieppe, leaving the commission in disarray to fight its internecine disputes.

The noblemen of the count felt not at all inclined to investigate on the deleterious acts of their own class and even less to judge their peers for the sake of rebels. The knights reproached Robert of Cassel for his leniency towards the men they considered to be inferior to their kind, and they agreed more with the radical exclamations of revenge uttered loudly by John of Namur. The count shared the opinions of John.

The conference of *Ter Duinen* thus smothered at the first spark. The delegates left the abbey and the peace negotiations of Bruges ended with their leaving. The armistice and the negotiations of April of 1325 with the cities and the counsellors of the count of Flanders ended in failure.

With the conference also ended the armistice. Juris Vresele expected the war in Flanders would intensify during the summer and autumn. He said goodbye to the aldermen of Ghent, refused to accompany them to the city, pretending some business in the neighbourhood, and preferring a lonely return.

Juris remained a few days at the coast. He marvelled at the sea. He had been at Damme and Sluis before, so he had already seen the sea, but at those harbours the land was not far off on both sides. The view one had from out of these small cities was still on the bay of the Zwin. Near Koksijde, when he walked on the beach, the small thatched houses and the sand dunes in his back, the shoreline extending in a straight line for as far as he could see, he had the total fullness of the water with the eternal waves in front of him. The vastness of the water disappeared beyond the horizon and melted together with the sky, sometimes in curtains of rain, sometimes shimmering like silver strips under the bright light of the sun that sunk into the sea right before him. The unending breaking of the waves, small or thundering and furious, the caress of a sea-breeze or the howling of stormy winds, had an appeasing effect on his soul. Juris had become more melancholic of late, even depressed in mood. Maybe that was because he thought his contribution to the peace talks had been so humble as to be futile. Greater battles and greater distress would henceforth roar over his beloved Flanders. He feared his town of Ghent would be engulfed in the horror. He also had it often difficult to breathe when he walked for a longer time, and he experienced sudden streaks of pain in the left side of his chest where his heart beat. Juris felt his life ebbing away, he felt his dying. He

was saying goodbye to the world on his own, here, goodbye to God's nature, until he decided to ride back to the abbey church of *Ter Duinen* to pray for his soul. He confessed to the abbot having stolen goods from the church, refusing to give details, and stated he had restituted far more value to the religious institutions of Ghent than he had taken. His soul came to rest when the abbot of *Ter Duinen* forgave him his sins. Juris stayed on a few days, and then he rode back to Ghent.

Juris Vresele arrived in Ghent on the first days of July. He rode to the towers of his town totally exhausted from his solitary ride. When he arrived in the *Kalanderberg*, he threw the reins of his horse to a servant, rushed into his hall, sank in a chair, and a little later he went to his bed. Mergriet had to take his clothes off him. Juris would not get out of his bed soon.

While Juris Vresele was still at the Flemish coast, the war in Flanders accelerated tragically. Throughout the second part of the year of 1325, the towns and villages of Flanders that had been fortified by the count came once more under attack, and many were captured by the rebels.

Count Louis of Nevers, fearing an attack by the Flemish rebels on his life, fled Ieper for the town of Kortrijk, accompanied by a large number of knights. The army of Zannekin and of Bruges, however, moved so fast against him that Louis wanted to withdraw in a hurry to Lille. Before fleeing once more, Louis ordered to burn a few houses near the defence walls of Kortrijk in order to clear the space before the walls, but that fire was driven by the wind into Kortrijk so that it caused great damage in the town. The inhabitants of Kortrijk were outraged. They took prisoner the noblemen who lighted the fires, and hanged them. Even before the count could leave the town, they arrested him and his French counsellors, holding him a prisoner in the castle of Kortrijk. The people of Kortrijk opened the gates for the rebels of Bruges, joined forces with them, so that the count of Flanders fell into the hands of the rebels. Louis de Nevers was dragged to Bruges and imprisoned. A short time later, Ieper also expelled the knights and aldermen who had sympathised with the count. In the summer of 1325, the towns of Bruges, Ieper and Kortrijk were led by rebels, and the count remained a humiliated prisoner at Bruges.

In Ghent, the city was still dominated by the *Leliaerts*, by the landowners and the town knights who had remained loyal to the French king. John of Namur rode to Ghent, having escaped from Kortrijk when the militia of Bruges entered the town triumphantly.

The family of Count Louis of Nevers was still divided over the succession. From out of his prison in Bruges, the count nevertheless appointed Robert of Cassel as regent or *ruwaard*, military leader, in June of that year, making of him in theory the legal head of the rebel army.

The arrest of the count angered King Charles IV the Fair. One did not imprison one's liege lord! In September, King Charles of France appointed John of Namur as *ruwaard*. The rivalry between Robert of Cassel and John of Namur soared openly.

The rivalry between the count and the rebels became then also a rivalry between Ghent and Bruges. Many skirmishes were fought between the men of Ghent led by the knights of John of Namur on one side, and the rebel militia of Bruges on the other. A strange, paradoxical situation developed, for the rebel leaders Janssone and Zannekin fought together with the *ruwaard* appointed by the count, together with Robert of Cassel, against the royalist knights

led by John of Namur, who sallied in raids out of Ghent, fighting for the release of the count from prison.

John of Namur had not more success in his military interventions than Robert of Cassel. His troops of Ghent were defeated by rebel troops of Bruges at Rekkelingenburg near Deinze. Robert grinned and in his turn spoke of incompetence.

In Ghent, Juris Vresele wept at the absurdity of the war. He could not get up from his bed. He felt his forces waning. He refused to talk, responding only with a nod, a smile or a tear to his wife and his servants when they brought him food and cleaned him. Juris sank in a benign stupor.

Juris Vresele lay dying in his bed in the *Kalanderberg* of Ghent. His son, Gillis, took over the businesses of his father. Juris explained to his son the last secrets of his trades, of his fortune and of his possessions. Gillis was surprised at the extent of the wealth of his family. He began visiting the lands his father had outlined to him near their home town of Zele.

Gillis Vresele remarked that some of his polders there near the Scheldt had been inundated recently. The Vresele farmers in the neighbourhood complained to Gillis about the loss of cattle and crops due to the sudden heightening of the water. Gillis investigated, discovering his lands had been quickly swamped with water because the de Grutere family had built extensive new dikes around land they had bought recently, drying them at the expense of the polders belonging to the Vreseles and also to the van Arteveldes. James van Artevelde had lost cattle and harvests too. James and Gillis went together to the de Grutere steen to discuss the issue with Gilbert de Grutere, but Gilbert still bore a grudge against the Vreseles and the van Arteveldes, so he merely showed papers provided to him by the aldermen of the city of Dendermonde and by the counts of Bar in whose territories the lands near the River Scheldt lay, granting de Grutere the right to erect new dikes around his polders. De Grutere haughtily refused any claim for compensation of damages. Gillis would have become very angry at de Grutere then, he would have raged in the de Grutere steen and threatened with bringing the affair before the aldermen of the Law, but the wiser James van Artevelde drew him out of the door. James surmised the influence of the de Grutere family would be far more powerful than the justified outrage of the Vreseles and the van Arteveldes. Gillis and James remained bitterer than ever against the de Grutere family men.

When his head cleared, Juris Vresele, who knew nothing of the issues his son was handling, heard from out of his deathbed many muted voices converse in his great hall. His family and friends had come to say goodbye. They entered his room, one by one, and shook his hand and blessed him. Juris thought about the friends and relatives who would be talking about him. He imagined his hall and the people in it.

Juris imagined his wife sitting in the hall with his sons, Gerolf the monk and Gillis the trader. Juris was proud of his sons. He would have liked to die in full possession of his power, not wasting away forceless in his bed. Gerolf was forty years old now, a scholar and a traveller, called to Ghent to witness Juris's death. Gillis was thirty-two, a fine young man, handsome and strong. Gillis would be the worthy leader of the Pharaïldis group, a moderate and cunning man. Avezoete Wulslager was Gillis's nice wife, who seemed simply to adore her husband. She would be comforting Mergriet.

Wouter de Smet and his wife Lijsbetten would walk in the hall, Lijsbetten to near her aunt Mergriet, Juris's wife. Wouter had done well. He had worked to become a respectable goldsmith in the town, even though he continued also his smithy near the *Gravensteen*. His son John would be fifteen, and that boy had already proven an extraordinary talent for fine work with silver and gold thread. John's sister Veerle might hold Mergriet's hand, a young maiden of seventeen, a flamboyant beauty ready to marry.

Of the van Lake family, there would be Juris's friend Raes, now forty-five, though still in the strength of his years, a very wealthy draper. His wife, Zwane Bentijn, would show her uppity nose, but she was a good friend of Mergriet and Lijsbetten, and she would not leave the women's corner. Raes's son William was still only fourteen, a shy but equally intelligent boy. John Denout, the quiet best friend of Juris, forty-two years of age, would have come with his wife, Selie Scivaels. Pieter Denout, a proud young man, John's son, barely twenty, would be hanging around Raes van Lake the Younger, twenty-five, with John de Hert, twenty-eight, son of Arnout de Hert. There was a new generation made brilliantly!

The other friend of Juris Vresele in the hall would be Arnout de Hert, the shipper, forty-six years old, who would have come with his wife Marie Scivaels, the sister of John Denout's wife. So, among the women would be two times two kinswomen, the Mutaert women and the Scivaels women, forging bonds among the families and forming an army of gossip and command to be reckoned with. The two de Hert girls, Nete and Kerstin, daughters of Arnout de Hert, would be part of the conspiracy, fluttering in the hall to show off with their best dresses. Nete was twenty-seven but as yet unmarried, and Kerstin fifteen. Whose eye would these catch?

Lastly among Juris's friends would stand a few Artevelde. James van Artevelde sat in the hall, the point of attention of all the wisest and the best informed, accompanied by his radiating wife Agneete Vresele, Juris's splendid daughter. Probably also William, son of Juris's erstwhile very best friend would be present. With old William, Juris had fought in the Golden Spurs, and that memory suddenly emerged lively in Juris's mind. One had no better friend than the man who had fought next to you in a major battle. Also the priest, John van Artevelde, who owned houses in the *Kalanderberg*, would present his views on the rebellion of Flanders to Gerolf Vresele.

The men and women in the hall of Juris Vresele did not doubt Juris would die soon. He would not die alone, for so many good people had gathered around him. Death was natural, part of everyday life. Their conversation focused on who would be the next leader of the Pharaïldis group. The consensus was to hand over leadership to James van Artevelde, but James refused the honour. He did not want to become involved in politics, he told, and he explained the Pharaïldis group would have to work to have representatives in the management of the city if they wanted to wield more influence to further their business. James also secretly feared as yet becoming involved in the affair of the theft of the abbey in Zele. The eyes of the Denouts, the de Herts and the van Lakes, and of James van Artevelde went therefore to Gillis Vresele. Gillis was considered the more capable man among them to lead them into the new era. Gillis Vresele was indeed chosen as the next leader of the Pharaïldis men.

While the men and women spoke, drank, laughed and argued in his hall, Juris Vresele sank his head in his pillow and sighed contentedly his last breath. He had lived a fine life and created a generation. He wondered how life in Ghent would evolve and what would become of his friends.

The Children of de Hert

Shipmaster Arnout de Hert was deeply touched by the death of his mentor, Juris Vresele. Arnout was a good friend of Wouter de Smet, of Raes van Lake and John Denout, who were about his own age, but since the expedition to Zele, he had always considered the older Juris Vresele as someone who had replaced his long-deceased father. Arnout had lost his father when he was still a young boy, so he had brought some of the affection and respect he would have felt to such a figure on Juris Vresele.

Arnout's father fell overboard from their flat-bottomed boat near Douai when Arnout had been only twelve years old, and his father must have hit his head on stones in the whirling water, for he never rose from the river. Arnout could not swim well enough then, so he remembered the horror of having to look into the dark river and waiting in vain for his father to emerge. He had waited and waited, then jumped into the water nevertheless, not found his father, until other shippers drew him out of the Scarpe, out of a certain death in his turn. He had stayed on the boat afterwards, refusing any aid. During the night, he left Douai. Arnout navigated the ship and its precious cargo all alone to Ghent, to *Tussen Bruggen*. People who knew him well still regarded that feat as the miracle of a stubborn boy. Arnout had arrived at the first houses of Ghent in tears, but holding the helm firmly, steering the ship as his father had taught him, drawing at the ropes of the sail as he should, running on deck to lower the sail when necessary and gliding his ship softly to quay. The cargo had to be brought to town, for it meant the difference between starvation and life for himself, his mother and sisters. He could not allow another shipper to bring in the de Hert boat and claim part of the load.

Arnout's mother was terraced by grief at the news of the death of her husband. Arnout continued his father's shipping business, despite his youth, begging for loads wherever he could, often speaking in the name of his father as if the family head still lived. He had mainly worked between Ghent and Antwerp on the Scheldt at first, and a little on the *Lieve Canal*. He had avoided Douai and other ports in the regions of Picardy and Artois.

Later, a grown-up man, Arnout's real breakthrough and the beginning of his greater fortune had come by the expedition to Zele, led by Juris Vresele. The money from the abbey treasure had allowed Arnout to buy two more ships. With the ensuing profits of added trade, he had bought a seafaring ship at Sluis. Arnout de Hert was no seafaring man. He preferred the business transactions on the rivers and canals of Flanders and Brabant, but his son, John had sea-legs.

John, though still young, had accompanied captain Dario on the large, clumsy cog and seemed to like sea travel inordinately. The boy had asked for more. Captain Dario assured Arnout the boy had done well. Dario had given John a hard time, making him scrub the deck more often than anybody else, more than the boy had worked and scrubbed at home. Dario also taught John de Hert how to navigate on the sea between the ports of Guyenne and Sluis, and John had relished in the sailing trips. They had sailed as far as Bordeaux on the travels of Arnout's ship, and the old salt Dario covered John with his wings, taught John to love the sea, and considered John as his own son. Dario definitely saw in John a successor. He brought him up at sea this way, more so even than John's true father.

Arnout de Hert's life had been good after Zele, sheltered as he had been by the other men of the Pharaïldis group. They had thought him how to seek business and how to better handle his

projects. They provided him with steady orders, so that he grew together with them, and Arnout treated them with honesty and care. He transported wine and beer for James van Artevelde, bales of cloth for Raes van Lake, fetched fullers' clay for Pieter Denout, loaded peat for Juris Vresele and charcoal for Wouter de Smet. His reputation as a reliable shipper was now well settled in Ghent.

Arnout de Hert also had a fine wife and a fine family. Only lately had he encountered issues in his family, involving, of course, the women of his household. Arnout loved and was grateful to his wife Marie. Marie was very faithful, unlike the wife of Raes van Lake. Raes van Lake was not aware of what had been happening right under his nose, although half of Ghent knew by now of the affair she had with Tomis Sleepstaf. Arnout sometimes wondered whether such a shame could happen to him by Marie Scivaels, but he immediately rejected the thought. He sensed Marie was no Zwane. Marie Scivaels was the sister of Selie Scivaels, the wife of his friend John Denout. Marie, a very cheerful and loyal woman, had given Arnout a son, John the seafarer, and two lovely daughters, Nete and Kerstin.

Kerstin had arrived late in the marriage, a welcome surprise and diversion, but a late surprise. Kerstin was a girl of merely sixteen years old in this year of 1325, a stout, lively young girl with thick auburn hair, matching dark brown eyes under thin black eyebrows, a large forehead that showed intelligence and a mind of her own, maybe even more brains and wit than his other children could claim. Arnout and Marie had spoiled Kerstin a lot, for she had been the sun in their house ever since her birth. She was a very honest, parent-loving child, who fitted her mother better than any of the other children in the family, and she became rapidly the sweetheart of her brother and sister. Arnout could not stay cross with Kerstin longer than a few moments, for the girl displayed an astonishing amount of natural charm in eyes, quick lips which proved her agile mind, sweet words, fluent body language. Kerstin would have enchanted the coarsest devil. The problem with Kerstin was, thought Arnout, that she was too charming, too flirtatious, and with her thick, sensual lips, alluring hips and heavy, uplifted breasts, she attracted the men of Ghent who watched her walk in the streets like bees to a hive.

Arnout had noticed how his daughter had totally ensnared the son of his wife's sister, Pieter Denout, her cousin. Pieter was a fine young man, a diligent, polite and respectful youth. Pieter had inherited the good qualities of his father. He was probably not of extreme intelligence, but he had an earthy way of knowing what to do in every situation, and the boy also did not lack charm and elegance. Pieter was much older than Kerstin, however, shy with girls, so that he had not married yet though he was twenty-two. He was a hard-working young man, and that pleased Arnout. Pieter was a friend of Arnout's son John, and also a friend of Gillis Vresele. These three formed a solid, reflective, serious group of men. Gillis and John had taken the younger Pieter under their protection and Pieter worshipped his two friends. Also James van Artevelde, the wisest and most composed man of Arnout's acquaintance, usually hung out with them.

Pieter Denout was in love with Kerstin, Arnout noticed. He liked that. He liked Pieter, and though some of the same blood flowed in the veins of Pieter and Kerstin, for they were cousins by their mothers, Arnout would have welcomed a marriage. Still, Arnout feared, his daughter Kerstin looked a bit too saucy for the serious, shy Pieter Denout.

Pieter Denout brought presents to Kerstin de Hert, hoping to catch her attention and to show his interest and affection. Kerstin liked small jewels. She had always looked in awe at the

older, strong, grey-eyed Pieter, a powerful man with broad shoulders and the heavy muscles of a fuller. Pieter liked to talk. He didn't brag. He was expansive over what he saw and learned, explained what had happened to him in as lively terms as Kerstin could, so their conversations often became heated with argument. They seemed not to mind that, though, and sought each other often out when they had something to tell that seemed important to them and but a trifle to others. A marriage between these two would be most interesting to follow, Arnout de Hert and John Denout smiled. Arnout and John watched the couple from a distance, tried to note how the relation evolved, but knew better than to intervene. Arnout and John had spoken about the possibility of a marriage. John Denout also agreed the pretty Kerstin would make a fine wife for his son.

Kerstin de Hert was a natural charmer. Her mother, Marie Scivaels, had bought the right to set up a stall at the end of the Fish Market. Marie sold all kinds of things there her husband, Arnout de Hert, brought with him from his travels: sacks of grain that remained in surplus on his boat, vegetables left over in his hull, rests of bales of cloth that had gotten stained, a few smaller barrels of wine given to him for services rendered. Arnout did not need to sell these, but Marie didn't know how to get rid of them at home, so she sold them and bought her jewels with the money, proud to buy her pleasures with her own money. Today, Kerstin helped her mother with the selling, and Kerstin drew more clients to the stall than her mother could serve. After a while, Kerstin wanted to see the fish market for herself. Marie Scivaels called Kerstin back, but she only gave her daughter the money to go and buy meat in the *Vleeshal*, the meat hall, near the 's *Gravenbrug*, and some coins more for the girl to buy a new scarf or a few ribbons.

Kerstin did not go to the meat hall by the shortest way, simply traversing the Fish Market. She strolled through the *Korte Munt* to the Grain Market and from there she sauntered to the end of *Tussen Bruggen*, the port of the Leie, to have a look at the ships near the quays of Ghent, hoping to find her father near the *Veebrug*, the Cattle Bridge. The meat hall stood between the *Veebrug* and the 's *Gravenbrug*.

When Kerstin passed the *Korte Munt*, she met Pieter Denout, who had been at the drapers' hall looking for work, for cloth to full. The Denouts also were well-to-do citizens of Ghent. They controlled several fullers' businesses in the town. They enjoyed a nice reputation of being among the finest, the best fullers of Ghent, so they could afford to serve only the weavers and drapers, the *lakensniders* who produced the best quality wool. Pieter was in heaven to have met Kerstin, so the two young people walked together to *Tussen Bruggen*. When they arrived at the port, they saw two other youth striding hurriedly in their direction, two braggarts and trouble-makers, the weaver's son Simoen Stocman and a man they recognised as Gerald Sleepstaf. Kerstin had not heard of what had been told between her parents of Tomis Sleepstaf, a kinsman of this Gerald, and Zwane van Lake. Such matters were not discussed with the children of the house, whatever their age. Gerald, however, was well aware of the damage being done to his family by a group of people among which the de Herts. Stocman and Sleepstaf coveted Kerstin de Hert. Kerstin was a tart, they told each other, an easy girl, ready for fun, the fun they liked themselves, a saucy girl ready for promising pleasures.

Simoen Stocman in particular longed for the alluring Kerstin de Hert. When he saw her walking close to Pieter Denout, he first paled very white in the face, then scarlet, and he went berserk for jealousy and loathing.

Simoen Stocman stepped a little too close to Pieter Denout, tripping him. Pieter fell heavily to the cobblestones of the quay. In the meantime, Simoen grabbed at Kerstin, groped for her breasts. Kerstin shrieked, and Gerald Sleepstaf tried to draw Kerstin into a narrow alley between two houses. Pieter Denout was desperately trying his best efforts to still get up, but Simoen Stocman kicked Pieter savagely in the face with his boots. Pieter struggled to get on his feet, but Simoen pinned him down and continued kicking Pieter. Pieter rolled over, seeking time to push himself on his elbows and feet.

Before he succeeded at that, a man ran past him and Pieter saw a very strong, broad-shouldered figure hit Simoen Stocman in the face. Blows fell hard, with thumping sounds on Simoen.

Pieter Denout stood, and recognised Arnout de Hert, Kerstin's father downing Simoen Stocman. He also heard Kerstin shriek high again, and he ran into the dark alley where Kerstin had disappeared with Gerald Sleepstaf. In that alley, Pieter drew Gerald around and delivered a few well-directed blows of his own on the hard head of the Sleepstaf youth, so that Gerald released Kerstin, not without tearing her shirt. Gerald looked for Simoen, found his friend not in the alley, so he fled as hard as he could run.

Kerstin threw herself in the arms of Pieter. They held each other and returned to the quay, to Arnout de Hert, who kicked still at Simoen Stocman who had fallen on his back to the stones of *Tussen Bruggen*. Pieter had to tug at Arnout's arms to make him stop. Arnout looked up, surprised, wondering who halted him from killing the Stocman boy.

'It is not necessary to kill him, master Arnout,' Pieter whispered.

Arnout then saw Kerstin, weeping, tugged in the arms of Pieter.

Arnout grinned at the sight of the two youths, so he gave a last kick and a last glance at the miserable heap of bleeding Stocman. Stocman would suffer from a few nasty bruises, and he bled from a torn eyebrow, but he would live. The fight had drawn onlookers, who also stood merely grinning at the view of the bruised, bloodied Stocman boy.

Arnout and Pieter receded quickly back to the Grain Market, refusing to draw more attention. There, Kerstin confirmed she was all right, unharmed, but for her torn shirt. She wept and said between two tears she had to buy mutton for supper, which made Arnout and Pieter laugh out loud, drawing angry looks on them from Kerstin.

Pieter Denout had rolled through a pool of water, so one of his legs was wet and muddy. Nevertheless, he said he would accompany Kerstin to buy her meat. The incident had ended well. The Stocman and the Sleepstaf boy would have ran off by now. No knives had been drawn, only fists had been used.

Arnout judged the fight a matter of the past already, not much harm done. He let Kerstin go to buy her mutton, accompanied by Pieter. Arnout stood a while in the Market, seeing off the two walking hand in hand, loudly discussing the fight, Kerstin gesturing and Pieter soothing. He smiled. A marriage was in the making.

Arnout smiled less the following weeks and months. He became aware a campaign of slandering was directed at him and at his business. He was steadily losing transports. When he asked a friend for whom he had transported grain in large quantities, asked why the man suddenly used other shippers but him, he obtained vague, evading answers. Other friends told him the Sleepstaf and the Stocman families spread rumours about him, but proof was hard to come by. Arnout was unreliable as a shipper; he did not clean his boats between transports; he was slow and expensive. He worked sloppily and he lost parts of his cargo. He was not as honest as before. The campaign was systematically aimed at destroying his reputation and credibility. It took some time, but Arnout's business began to wane, so that he thought of having to sell at least one of his ships.

Arnout de Hert felt depressed. He shared his feelings with the Pharaïldis group. Gillis Vresele and James van Artevelde, who had heard the Sleepstafs loomed behind the rumours, helped by Raes van Lake and John Denout, began therefore a counter-campaign, dismissing the bad rumours, and explaining in gatherings of the guilds what a fine shipper and honest businessman Arnout de Hert was. The Vreseles, Arteveldes, van Lakes and Denouts forced their business partners to accept Arnout de Hert for their transports. They insisted colleagues to trust de Hert. Arnout de Hert worked twice as hard with his son John to satisfy his customers at the lowest prices, offering transport to the very doors of the warehouses of Ghent of the people he dealt with. Slowly but steadily, Arnout turned the tide, his business expanded again. The de Hert family graved the names of Stocman and Sleepstaf on their walls as their fiercest enemies, as the Vreseles, the Arteveldes and the Denouts had surely done already.

By the middle of the summer of 1325, yet another amorous story shook the de Hert family. One afternoon, Marie Scivaels went to buy beef at her favourite butcher's in the *Drabstraat*, just over the *Veebrug* at *Tussen Bruggen*, on the other side of the Grain Market and the Fish Market. It took Marie about half an hour walking to the *Drabstraat*, but that was mainly because she rarely walked alone, inviting one or other of her friends to go together.

The women were looking at the stalls in the markets on the way to the butcher, and of course they gossiped a lot. That day, her meat bought, eagerly engaged in conversation with two other women of the *Betsgravenbrug*, Marie walked back home. One of her friends stopped abruptly in her track, giving Marie Scivaels a meaningful nod, directing her looks to the other side of the *Minnebrug*. Marie watched in the direction of the eyes of her friend, and she saw her son John looking out over the water of the Leie. Marie's first reaction would have been of calling out to her son in joy, waving at him, but her hand was left hovering in mid-air, because John stood not alone on the bridge. He even held his arm around the waist of a tall girl, and that girl rested her head on John's shoulder!

Marie's darling son John was twenty-eight years old, and unmarried. Marie and Arnout had suspected for several years that John must have a sweetheart somewhere, or more than one, but they had not worried about that. They loved to have their son in the house. John was a joyful, open-minded boy. On the subject of his heart, however, he remained as stubbornly taciturn and closed as a fortress, not unlike his father had been at that age. Marie had complained to her husband and to her sister on how unnatural it seemed for a handsome, warm-blooded boy as her John not to be moved to marriage yet. Arnout had merely scolded her and told her to leave the boy to himself.

'He'll decide when he wants to marry, all right, and he'll reach a decision when he's ready! Don't bother him with such questions, woman,' was all Marie got from Arnout.

Marie also dreaded having to cede her favourite son, her firstborn, to another woman, who could be nothing but a slut.

Now, John held such a woman by the waist, and he was obviously in love, for he caressed the girl's back with great tenderness and brushed her hair with his lips in a soft kiss.

Marie's loins turned to stone. The three women stood, stunned in utter surprise, until Marie gathered her wits and drew her friends on. She did notice the young woman John held was dressed in fine clothes, though her dress was of subdued, brown hues. The girl wore what looked like silk at her sleeves and at her cap. Once every second, Marie Scivaels stared from

behind her at the couple. The girl held her back to her, but Marie could discern the thick and yet very fine and light auburn hair, the fine neck, a beautiful though somewhat thin figure, and the long legs, which made the girl stand taller than her son. The girl looked like the daughter of a better family, for her cap and shawl were of the whitest lace, and on the girl's robe Marie thought she spotted the finest silk. Had John began an adulterous relationship with a married woman? Marie's heart went cold.

The three women walked on, the two but not Marie giggling, because they too had supposed John de Hert to be an adventurous youth and a staunch bachelor who loved to have life his own ways, a man bound for the sea and long, far travels. They stole glances at the couple until they sauntered into the street over the *Hoofbrug*.

There, Marie ventured to ask, fearing the unavoidable gentle mockery, 'do you know the name of that girl John was with? I didn't recognise her!'

'Haven't you noticed then?' the woman on her right side, Lieve, exclaimed in feigned surprise. 'That girl was Beatrise van Vaerneuwijc!'

The fame of the name was enough for Marie Scivaels to halt the little group once more.

'You must be mistaken, Lieve! Not Beatrise van Vaerneuwijc!'

'Oh yes indeed, she was,' the woman on her left asserted. 'That was the van Vaerneuwijc girl, surer as certain. Beatrise van Vaerneuwijc, you know!'

No, Marie de Hert did not know at all about Beatrise. She did know of the van Vaerneuwijc family, though! The name inspired such awe.

The van Vaerneuwijcs were members of one of the very most distinguished wealthy landowner and *poorter* families of Ghent, knights of the city, one of the very first families to have founded the town. The name of van Vaerneuwijc went far back. There was no greater or better known name in Ghent. The men of the van Vaerneuwijcs were noblemen, by the grace of the counts, knights. They should be addressed as Sers. They rode on horses near the count when he visited Ghent. They were eminent noblemen and aldermen of the city, wholesale cloth traders, lakensniders, though members of that famous family dealt in everything, and they also owned vast territories outside the city. There existed no better family to marry in. A van Vaerneuwijc girl, any van Vaerneuwijc girl, pretty or ugly, was a prize for noblemen, not for shippers, however well-to-do the shippers might be.

Marie Scivaels whispered, 'that cannot be. My John cannot be friends with a van Vaerneuwijc girl. There must be some mistake.'

'Maybe he can't, but he is,' Lieve snorted. 'She must be about twenty-six, that girl, unmarried still. The poor lass!'

'Poor lass?' the third woman, Mergriet, remarked. 'She is as rich as a queen! John must have very fine hooks in such a one!'

'Oh shut you up, Mergriet' Lieve threw in rapidly. 'The girl must be pitied.'

'Why is that?' Marie asked, suddenly made suspicious.

Something nasty would be coming, she knew.

For the third time, the women stopped.

'You don't know anything about that girl, do you,' Lieve uttered in a low voice.

The three heads drew together, ears got longer.

'It is told that Beatrise van Vaerneuwijc has been raped when she was about sixteen. She walked alone near the *Gravensteen* one evening, when two men grabbed her and drew her into the alley of the blacksmiths, into a nearby forge. The forge's gates stood open, so I heard, but the blacksmith was out. The men must have known that. Only one man raped her savagely, the other stood guard outside. Since that time, it is told, Beatrise refuses all men.'

She refuses to marry. The van Vaernewijc tried to find a decent husband for her, but in vain. There has been talk of an abortion.'

'Who raped the poor girl?' Marie asked, whispering back.

'Nobody knows, especially not the van Vaernewijcs,' Mergriet told. 'Had the van Vaernewijcs known who did it, there would have been one family less in Ghent! Among the shippers, though, stories are told.'

'What stories?' Marie insisted.

The heads got still closer together.

'A rumour runs among the shippers that John Mayhuus did the raping! John Mayhuus works on the same river stretches as my husband and once, when Mayhuus was very drunk in an inn on the way, he seems to have boasted to guildsmen about it.'

'But, John Mayhuus is married! How old must he be?' Marie cried out.

'John Mayhuus is married. He has been married since he went on twenty, but he was always a horny devil, that one,' Lieve informed. 'He must be thirty-four by now, that man. He was always ruled by desire, John Mayhuus, a scoundrel with women. Mind you, the other Mayhuuses are no better! Poltroons, all of them in that family! John Mayhuus was besotted with Beatrise, I guess. He desired her, and he took her. Must have been drunk too, when he grabbed her. A van Vaernewijc!'

'I never heard of any conviction or scandal,' Marie said, frowning. 'The punishment for rape is death. Mayhuus still walks around.'

'I know, I know,' Mergriet continued. 'Like we told you, the van Vaernewijcs still do not know who raped the girl, and they will never find any evidence it was Mayhuus who did the act. My guess is they also kept the shame of Beatrise in the dark, and hid the matter. Few people know what we told you. Nobody would dare explain to the van Vaernewijcs who might have raped their daughter. Who would dare confront the anger of that family? The van Vaernewijcs might kill the messenger on the spot! Who would have dared to shame the van Vaernewijcs? They hid their dishonour, I tell you, but their daughter Beatrise remained unmarried. I expected her to enter a convent and purge her sin as a nun, but the convents must have heard she is not a virgin anymore, and I surmise Beatrise is not inclined to become a nun either!'

Marie Scivaels exclaimed, 'what sin? It is not the girl's fault she got raped! I would rather think it proved her virtue!'

The women resumed their stroll. Marie Scivaels stayed silent for a long time. She was worried. A de Hert boy with a van Vaernewijc girl? That seemed impossible, and it meant big trouble for her son John. Marie decided she had to find out more about that girl, Beatrise, of whom she knew almost nothing. How might John have become involved with her?

As matters stood, Marie knew as little about her son John as she knew about Beatrise van Vaernewijc. John had been in love with Beatrise for as long as he could remember, having set eyes on her first when he was still very young. The first time he met Beatrise near the *Gravensteen* was when he was no older than sixteen. Beatrise had been thirteen then, and he had noticed her walking at the hand of her mother. John de Hert thought he had seen the Virgin Mary walk with Saint Anne that day, for someone so perfectly beautiful could not exist in Ghent! Later, much later, he marvelled at how the lines and curves of Beatrise's face could have struck him with such power, such instant admiration, and such fascination. Why could a face so impress him and subdue him into the warmest of feelings so that he was immediately induced to idolisation? Exactly that had happened, however. John felt the purest of emotions, feelings of respect, and almost divine adoration for the elegance and the beauty of the girl,

and those feelings stayed with him the following years. Beatrise had remained his unreachable idol.

John de Hert had run in rags, that day, and though he was not really hungry, he also did not have much more to eat than just to satisfy his ravening hunger. Those had been the darker days of Ghent, the times of bad weather and failing crops and little work for Arnout, his father. When John remembered how he had stared at the girl, he could still picture her stopping, glancing at him too. Beatrise was probably curious why a boy looked at her that insistent way, but John had sensed in that first moment a glimpse of warm recognition, of sympathy, and the girl had nicely smiled at him. They had not spoken that day, but John had followed her from the far. The girl once every while had looked behind her at where he was, her eyes had sought him, and she smiled each time she spotted him, a little harmless smile. Then, he had seen her enter the imposing van Vaernewijc steen, and all he might have hoped for was shattered, for a shipper's son was not to come near a van Vaernewijc girl, never! A match with her was as unthinkable as that of the wedding of a princess with a toad.

Beatrise van Vaernewijc and John de Hert met again, for John more or less stalked her in her neighbourhood. He saw her play in the street with her friends. He saw her at mass in Saint John's Church with her father and mother. He followed her to the abbey of the *Fremineuren*, the abbey of the Franciscan monks, where a monk taught her to read and write. He first spoke with her when she was fifteen, when she had developed into a fine young lady, a greater beauty than before. He knew already she was clever, a little melancholic and shy, but she had grown into a radiant beauty with a delicate white face and very light, splendid grey eyes. John de Hert found out he only could imagine women with striking, grey eyes as beautiful! Beatrise was a humble person. She did not have blond hair, she did not look haughtily, her voice was not sharp and high but warm and husky. John approached her while she stood with friends of her age on the same bridge as where Marie Scivaels had now seen her son, on the *Minnebrug*. John had remarked he found the sunrays warm that spring, the sky pure blue, and the colours of the day bright. Beatrise had seen John coming, and she had expected him to say a few words to her, finally. Beatrise deigned to reply to him as if he were a boy of her own class. Her friends tugged at her sleeve, telling her one did not speak to beggar boys, but Beatrise had ignored them, and she and John had exchanged a few inconsequential phrases. As little as that, however, had sent John de Hert to heaven.

John had met Beatrise more often, thereafter, and he dared to talk more to her. He told her about ships, about shipmasters and shipwrights, and later still he showed her boats as far as on the *Lieve Canal*, explaining what kinds of ships she saw, which ships belonged to his father. Beatrise explained what Brother Andrew taught her in the *Fremineuren* Abbey. John de Hert could read his letters, but only painstakingly, and the only language he knew was the Flemish dialect of Ghent. Beatrise was studying Latin and French. John de Hert learnt Latin and French too, much later. The French he got on his travels, the Latin from another shipmaster. John astonished his father one day by reading Latin words and translating them. John might have been poor, poorer than the van Vaernewijcs, but he was no fool. Beatrise and John became true and good friends. They hid for the world, spoke under bridges and behind hedges, walked together in small streets.

Suddenly, when he and Beatrise sought each other out more and more, matters changed tragically. Beatrise remained confined in her house. She did not go out anymore for many months. Then, the de Hert family also changed dramatically.

It looked as if John's family suddenly had become owners of the world, as if his father had become prosperous overnight. Arnout de Hert had bought another boat, then rapidly a fourth one, and Marie Scivaels could afford nicer dresses. His sisters walked in fine robes, and more and better food was put on the table at suppers and breakfasts.

John, however, grew into a sadder, gloomy young man, for he did not see Beatrise again. Beatrise had vanished from the earth. John dared not knock at the door of the van Vaernewijc steen and ask how she was.

At long last, John heard Beatrise was not in Ghent anymore. She lived somewhere in the countryside. John then had met Captain Dario, and he asked to work on his father's seagoing ship. He sailed for a few years before returning to Ghent a man, tall, broad-shouldered, tanned, handsome, forceful, but still sad and uninterested in girls. He did not long for young women, however alluring and tempting. His eyes sought what he did not expect to find, Beatrise van Vaernewijc.

Four years ago, he had stood once more on the *Minnebrug*, the bridge he was always drawn to when he was in Ghent, when a hand was laid softly on his shoulder and the voice of a young woman said huskily to him, 'John de Hert, isn't it? You have grown, John! You are a man, now. We haven't met for such a long time! What has become of you?'

John sprang sideways as if he had seen a ghost, but before him stood the beautiful Beatrise van Vaernewijc, a sad but glorious beauty with gleaming eyes and an open smile.

They had talked thereafter, as they had done when they were much younger. Beatrise told him that same day what had been done to her, how she had been drawn into an alley and into the dark workshop. She had not seen the man who had assaulted her from behind, but she had known it had not been John. She had been ill, she explained, and then pregnant, and then her mother and other women had forced herbs on her until she was pregnant no more. Beatrise explained every horrible detail. She spared nothing to John. She wanted John to know and see his reaction.

John stood weeping on the bridge afterwards, but he had made a gesture as if he had wanted to draw her to his breast, and Beatrise had seen that gesture clearly enough, and cherished it. John had been twenty-four that day, of an age to dare confess he desperately loved her. Those were the two confessions Beatrise and John had hidden in the deepest part of their minds, and in a moment they confided in each other. John vowed to love her forever. Beatrise had not answered him on that vow, but she had been very happy. She had just continued looking at John with her limpid grey eyes, studying his face, probing for the truth on his face, and John understood how many years of suffering it had taken her to be her real self again, at peace with what had happened to her.

John de Hert and Beatrise van Vaernewijc met regularly after that day, walking far beyond their own quarters, even outside the *kuipe* of Ghent, the old town centre, in quarters where nobody knew them. They often escaped to the quarter of Saint Michael's, to near the *Houtlei*, near the *Zandpoort* and the *Posternepoort*. They walked and talked. There was much to say. They agreed they loved each other, but they were aware the van Vaernewijcs would make it extremely difficult for her to marry a shipper, even a de Hert. The shippers of Ghent were considered by the landowner *poorters* as people of the lowest class, almost as low as serfs or villeins. John de Hert, the shipper, could not hope to vie for the hand of a van Vaernewijc, especially not since almost nobody in Ghent knew about what had happened to the girl. Rich young men vowed for her hand, not merely because she would bring a rich dowry and connections to a famous, powerful family, but also because she was pretty and intelligent. Yet, Beatrise had refused them all. In aversion she had developed a mind of her own, and her parents seemed to respect that. They supposed she had acquired such a distaste for men that

she could not stand the touch and the breath of a man on her body. She wanted no man's glance even glide over her. Beatrise secretly only cared for John de Hert, the young man who made the world stand still around her when she was with him.

For four years now, Beatrise and John had thus hid, seeing each other only when they could steal a quarter of an hour here, an hour there, a walk near the *Zandpoort* or a brief moment at one of the hundred bridges or the many markets of Ghent. Markets they avoided often, for too many people assembled, but there the young lovers learnt how to hide in crowds. They became so used to each other that their defences slowly broke down. They could be seen lately without hiding.

John de Hert lost the patience to hide. He urged a decision from Beatrise before he reached thirty. He wanted to force matters, even though Beatrise told him to wait some longer. She feared her parents might refuse John and take him away from her. When John asked if she didn't want to marry him, which he could have understood after what she had been through, she blushed and asserted to him in a thousand nice, passionate words she desired nothing more. Beatrise was afraid and clung to him, demanding patience still.

Beatrise was not only afraid of losing John. She was also afraid she could not have children anymore. She had heard her mother whispering about that risk to a friend, and the thought terrorised her, lamed her power of decision. What use would John have of a woman who did not bless him with children? What good was to come of such a marriage? Beatrise was torn by doubts and fear. She could come to a decision. She lived in the present, moment by moment, with what she had, however little that was. She clung to the present.

John de Hert was fully aware he experienced feelings out of the ordinary for Beatrise, close to obsession. How many men had found a woman of whom they realised immediately, at first sight, particularly at first sight, she would be the only love of their life? How many had felt true, pure, instant love? How many could have pursued such love and found it was answered? God had given John this extraordinary gift, so should he not exercise the right of the gift? He was not going to give up Beatrise! He should claim their right on happiness!

John had nevertheless to admit, even at his age, that the odds of ever having the van Vaerneijcs of Ghent agree to a wedding of their previous daughter with a poor shipper – what did the van Vaerneijcs know about the success of the de Hert family? – were minimal. John was no longer willing to wait. His patience was spent. He was ready to force the issue and if he could not have Beatrise, he would sail the known and unknown seas to forget her, though he was certain that was an impossible task and would make him miserable for life.

The issue was decided for John de Hert when his mother found out about his secret. Marie Scivaels recalled in all colours of the rainbow what she had seen of John and Beatrise to her husband, Arnout.

Arnout and Marie were no people to let matters rest. They too were *poorters* of Ghent, and *poorters* of Ghent were decisive people. That same evening, they organised what in other families would be called a family council. They sat sternly at the table in their hall and told they wanted to speak to their son John.

John de Hert sensed something serious was about to be discussed. When his father called for him, he had to sit on the other side of the table, in front of the tribunal of his parents, as had happened rarely, only on other solemn occasions. He had no idea why he had been summoned, for he had not noticed his mother on the *Minnebrug*.

Arnout de Hert scraped his short beard with his hand and began, ‘boy, John, your mother has told me something that upset us both. We need clarification. Are you seeing a girl called Beatrise van Vaernewijc?’

John stiffened, reddened, swallowed, and then answered in truth, ‘I do. I like Beatrise very much, and she likes me.’

John thought there was not much more to discuss, but this time the dice were thrown, and he would have to bring his relation to the world. He felt anxious but lightened of the burden of secrecy.

‘Trifling with a van Vaernewijc is not a small matter, son,’ Arnout scolded. ‘It does not merely affect you, it affects our whole family!’

‘I am not trifling at all with Beatrise, father. We have a serious relation. I don’t care about the van Vaernewijcs,’ John retorted defiantly.

‘You don’t care about the van Vaernewijcs?’ Arnout gave him. ‘The van Vaernewijcs are the most powerful and probably the wealthiest family of Ghent. If a van Vaernewijc decides in a whim to have you vanish from the earth, he or she can do that faster than you can twitch your little finger, and nobody in Ghent will intervene.’

‘Maybe,’ John acknowledged, ‘but I shall not let the van Vaernewijcs do whatever they want with me and Beatrise. Besides, I have no quarrel with the van Vaernewijcs.’

‘That girl, that Beatrise,’ Marie rapidly interjected, ‘has been deflowered. She is not a virgin anymore. Are you sure she is a devout, honourable woman, and not a slut who attracts men in her nets at the caprice of the moment?’

John’s face turned scarlet. He would have downed with his fists anybody who called Beatrice a slut. He showed patience with his mother. She meant well.

‘Beatrise has been raped when she was sixteen. She explained to me what happened. A man violated her, a man she cannot identify, but she swore she did nothing, ever, to entice men. I believe her, mother, for she is a beautiful, virtuous girl. She does not flirt or attract men more than in normal behaviour. She is so beautiful men watch her, of course. However, we know each other since almost twenty years, twenty years, mother. We have been seeing each other regularly for four years, in secret. Beatrise refused to be touched by other men, but she does allow me to hold her, and she confides in me. She is a good woman, mother. She does fear her family, as you do. She knows not much about my family, for we hid. I did talk to her about you, and she heard we are not poor. We are no knights, but respectable *poorters*, though not as rich as her own family.’

‘Do you intend to marry her, son, or just dolly around with her?’ Arnout asked gravely.

‘Marry a van Vaernewijc, is that not asking to grab for the silvery clouds in the sky? Are you not a bit too naïve?’

‘I probably am,’ John acquiesced, and his mother felt the pain in his words. ‘I would like to marry Beatrise, and she told me she wanted nothing better. A hundred times she has said she would have wanted not to be a van Vaernewijc but a girl like any other. We are not frolicking about, father! Yes, we fear her family, and that is why we wait and wait, but our waiting must come to an end, one way or the other. One of these days, I am going to the van Vaernewijc and ask for her hand.’

‘You may be thrown out of the door much faster than you entered, son,’ Arnout replied calmly.

Arnout sighed. The three of them let a long silence sink in between them.

Then, Arnout continued, ‘I need to think about this, boy. Give me some time to think. Wait a little longer before doing anything rash.’

‘How long should I wait, father? Beatrise and I, we are serious about how we feel. I want her, and she wants me. If necessary, if the van Vaernewijc do not allow us to marry, I shall abduct her and flee with her from Ghent. Captain Dario will help me!’

‘Do not rush into fast and harsh actions, my son,’ Arnout said. ‘Give me some time. You can wait a few days more.’

‘Fine,’ John told. ‘I can wait some more. I shall not wait for weeks or months, however, father! The waiting is over. Either the van Vaernewijcs give me Beatrise, or she shall elope with me without her family’s consent.’

John stood before his father could say a closing word. He wished his parents a good evening and stepped out of the hall, out of the house, and into the *Betsgravenbrug*. He needed fresh air.

‘This is far more serious than I might have imagined,’ Marie Scivaels said, the tears appearing in her eyes. ‘The poor boy and girl!’

‘It is indeed,’ Arnout answered, ‘and their affair is coming to a conclusion, because your friends will trumpet all over Ghent that the van Vaernewijc girl Beatrise is seeing our John. The van Vaernewijcs will hear about it, soon. I have to talk to a few people, maybe have a talk with the van Vaernewijcs myself. John is capable of doing something inconsiderate. You know how young people can be rash. It might bring more shame to the van Vaernewijcs and to the de Herts. We must avoid that. I heard the van Vaernewijcs are reasonable men. They should understand reason. After all, the happiness of their daughter and a harmonious family are at stake. Who would want to marry a raped girl? Who says she is a virtuous woman, indeed?’

‘John is a good boy,’ Marie protested. ‘He knows women. He is a shipper. Shippers have occasions enough to fall over all sorts of women, virtuous as well as dishonest ones. You should know how much I feared for you while you were on travels. If John says he is with this girl Beatrise since she was very young, I received all the confidence I need about her. John is a decent boy. He would not fall in love with a slut. Moreover, she is van Vaernewijc, Arnout, a van Vaernewijc. As you said, there is a family of reasonable, honourable men and women! What do you suggest we do now?’

‘I have to talk to people I can trust, ask for their advice. I must speak to the Vreseles and the van Arteveldes. They know the van Vaernewijcs much better than we. They know how these people react.’

Marie Scivaels did not object.

Arnout de Hert breached the subject of his son’s relation to Gillis Vresele, to John Denout and to James van Artevelde in the bathhouse of the *Kalanderberg* they frequented regularly. The men sat naked but for a loincloth in a large wooden tub filled with very hot, almost steaming water. They sat in a private section of the bathhouse, separated from other sections by thin wooden panels, but they were still sufficiently secluded not to be seen or heard to left and right. They spoke in low voices. When an attendant poured in hot water, they stopped their discussion for a moment. They had developed this mode of arranging their business initiatives and follow-up together. Today, Raes van Lake and Wouter de Smet were absent. It was a rare event when all Pharaïldis members could gather, for all were very much engaged in their businesses. Raes van Lake was out of town, Wouter de Smet too busy with delivering his latest orders.

After the business talk, Arnout de Hert explained the problem with his son and asked for advice. Gillis Vresele and James van Artevelde offered the information. They met with Thomas van Vaernewijc regularly, and considered him a fine, honest, loyal business partner,

if not a friend. Thomas was of their age, a modest and agreeable man, affectionately called Maes although he had been alderman twice already. Beatrise was Thomas's younger sister. After some weighing of alternatives, and projecting of what the situation might lead to, Gillis and James sighed and declared they could take up the role of match makers. They proposed to talk openly with Thomas van Vaernewijc.

'The girl refuses anybody else but John,' Gillis said, 'suitors will not come in numbers because of what happened to the girl. Your son John is not without means, and a decent fellow. We owe him our help. We are John's friends, aren't we? We must stand by him now, as if he were of our own family. Why hasn't he confided in us much sooner? Of course we must help him. What kinds of heartless friends would we be if we didn't support him? We'll have to bring the matter discreetly to Maes van Vaernewijc, with tact and fine arguments. Love supersedes over business. We must carefully prepare how and when to break our purpose to Maes.'

'We'll do that,' James van Artevelde agreed. 'Leave the matter to us for the moment, Arnout. Give us two weeks. We may have to negotiate a little. We'll let you know how we fared with Maes.'

A week and a half later, Arnout de Hert and Marie Scivaels called their son once more into their hall. Again, they sat at one end of the table and had John sit on the other side. They sat with a smile on their face, so John was not too surprised.

'We shall talk about the young Beatrise van Vaernewijc,' Arnout began. 'We have reached a conclusion.'

John saw the faces of his parents brighten happily. His heart beat faster. John's desperation had not eased. His mood remained gloomy, and he stood really at the point of forcing Beatrise and the van Vaernewijcs to a decision.

Arnout continued, 'we had discreet negotiations with the van Vaernewijc family. We probed on how they would feel about a marriage between you and their Beatrise. We had to show a little patience, and I had to prove our financial credentials.'

'Who do you mean by 'we'?' John interrupted impatiently.

'Gillis Vresele and James van Artevelde, helped by John Denout, prepared the way in a few talks with Thomas van Vaernewijc. The van Vaernewijcs discussed the issue. Your mother and I were called to a van Vaernewijc family council. We had to explain who we were. They had done some discreet investigation about our family and our possessions, so we didn't have to prove much on that account. We were received with warm interest and, I must say, with some sympathy. The van Vaernewijcs also had found out about their daughter's and sister's feelings, but they had not exposed the issue to Beatrise yet, waiting for her to declare. We sensed they loved Beatrise much, pitied her, and did not want to force her into avowing her relation before her own time. They told us they lived in fear of desperate acts. They showed remarkable confidence in Beatrise.'

Arnout stopped speaking, looked at his son, remarked the interested glances sent to him and to his wife.

He continued, 'well, I can be brief. The van Vaernewijcs expect you two to meet them formally and declare your feelings. They let us understand that if you desire to marry, they would welcome such a linking of destinies. James and Gillis vowed for you. They spoke well of you. You may breach our understanding to Beatrise. Do not scare the girl away! In fact, Thomas's wife and your mother have already been talking about how and where the marriage would take place, the girl's parents are too old for that. The marriage arrangements, the financial agreements, you should not worry about. Thomas van Vaernewijc and I will discuss that part, Gillis Vresele will be our mediator.'

John de Hert did not weep often. That evening, however, he found no words. He merely jumped out of his chair and embraced his parents, a rare feat for him. Tears of happiness rolled down his cheeks. It was not just marriage his parents were offering him. They offered him a life. He could stay in Ghent, found a family of his own, have a confident to come home to, be loved in his own rooms. John wanted to run immediately to the van Vaerneuwijc steen. Arnout could barely hold his son in the house, withholding him from doing such a rash act. Arnout told to let the matters decanter for a while, let a few days pass before talking to Beatrise and obtain her firm consent.

John did not really have to discuss with Beatrise, for a very unusual event took place already the next day.

Thomas van Vaerneuwijc's wife knocked on the door of Marie Scivaels' door. She announced to the maidservant she wanted to have a talk with Marie, and Marie was very proud to show her hall to Kateline van Vaerneuwijc. The meeting went very informal and warm. Kateline had brought Beatrise with her. Marie let her heart express her feelings, so she went up to Beatrise instantly, without hesitation, and embraced her. Beatrise wept. Marie Scivaels pressed Beatrise to her bosom and in her heart, as she would have done to her own daughter. John de Hert was not in, luckily, for he might have disliked the initiative being taken from his hands this way. Had he protested, his father would have scorned him, saying in Ghent no man who was part of a family and who had friends, was alone. Families and friends acted for the happiness of their offspring.

The women conspired and discussed on when their men might be in the right mood for an official confrontation. They arranged that next Sunday, before mass, Arnout and John de Hert would be expected at the van Vaerneuwijc steen for John to ask formally to be wedded to Beatrise. Marie Scivaels wondered why her son had told Beatrise had hesitated to make up her mind, for now, when the girl saw her family agree readily, she wanted to get married as soon as possible.

The marriage between John de Hert and Beatrise van Vaerneuwijc was concluded in the early autumn of 1325. The marriage ceremony took place in Saint John's. The feast was a grand affair, held in a large hall of the *Bijloke* Abbey, graciously offered by the abbess, who was present at the festivities, together with the abbot of the *Fremineuren*. The marriage was the sensation of the year in Ghent.

Near Axel

After the death of his father, Gillis Vresele visited a lot more all the places his father had vested interests in, either because the Vresele family owned land, or had stakes in land, or because Juris had concluded contracts on the produce from the lands. At the end of his tour, he rode far north, to the *Vier Ambachten*, to the Four Crafts, the territories of the county of Flanders that were part with the Land of Waas and the county of Aalst of the Holy Roman Empire of Germany. The county of Aalst belonged to imperial Flanders, as a parcel of land called *Over-Schelde*, east of Ghent. The Four Crafts were the regions, the castellanies of the towns of Axel, Hulst, Assenede and Boekhout. The village of Ertvelde, from where the van Artevelde originated, belonged to the *Ambacht* of Assenede. The county of Flanders was subdivided for her management in castellanies, over which knights and lords of a castle ruled, and some of the castellanies were further subdivided in *Ambachten* or crafts. Hence the name.

The Vresele family owned land near Axel, near a village called *Zuiddorp* for South Village. Close by spread villages simply called East Village or *Oostdorp* and West village, *Westdorp*. South of Axel and north of *Zuiddorp* lay a convent called *Ter Hage*, On the Hedge, in a polder or wetland called the *Boostenblijde*, close to a few houses and farms built near and because of the convent. Gillis Vresele had visited the convent of nuns with his father before. He had met a few times the abbess of the Cistercian convent, Mother Amalberga.

Juris owned valuable land north of *Zuiddorp*, which he did not entirely dry out at that time to use as pastures. He exploited the moors for peat. Gillis liked this territory because it was entirely flat but peaceful and very green, of the lush, warm green one finds only in water-logged ground. In spring, the colours of thousands of small flowers broke out of the green vastness, and small woods of diverse trees littered the landscape. The land of Axel was vast, gentle and the people hospitable.

Axel was also a territory of small lakes. The lakes had been formed by the exploitation of the ground for peat. Peat was used as a fuel in Ghent. It gave little warmth, but a steady glow, small flames, a dark and heavy smoke that smelled foul, but in winter peat was welcome as the basis of a fire in the hearths of Ghent. It saved logs of wood, though still a little wood provided the atmosphere, the orange flames and the blazing heat needed on the coldest of days.

Gillis Vresele dug out peat in the polder of the *Boostenblijde*, and he also bought peat from the Cistercian sisters of the convent. He had his own groups of men to dig out and dry the peat from the moors, and found reliable overseers to manage the exploitation in his absence. Gillis Vresele had first thought of bringing the peat in chariots to Ghent, but the bay of Axel threw its water deep into the land near Axel, so Arnout de Hert had proposed to rather transport the peat by boat to Sluis and Damme, and then bring it over the *Lieve Canal* to Ghent.

Then, Arnout de Hert preferred to transport the peat over the Scheldt to Antwerp and farther up the Scheldt to Ghent. That journey was longer, but safer and easier. The way over Antwerp was much longer, but fast and less dangerous.

Nowadays, Arnout used once more the waterways down to Zelzate and from there to Ghent, the most direct ways. He had tried these out a few times, found them feasible, but he had experienced trouble in the swamps near Zelzate. On certain days his boat remained stuck in the mud. The advantage was that he could bring the dried peat directly to the *Turfbriel*, the peat staple, the place near the waterway to Zelzate in Ghent, where the peat had to be brought in to be counted in volume.

Peat was quite expensive in Ghent, so the trade in peat brought a fine profit to Gillis, despite the assizes he had to pay on its import in Ghent. Peat bogs also were quite expensive these days, so Gillis found them a worthy investment. Some peat bogs had become entirely depleted of peat, leaving small lakes in the landscape as the water mounted into the large pits formed by the exploitation.

Gillis Vresele rode to his moors on a cold but dry day in the autumn of 1325. He rode below *Zuiddorp*, on the path to Axel, when he first smelled and then remarked smoke rising high from behind a small, low wood. The smoke was dark, heavy and thick, and Gillis considered that a bad sign. No hay or dried leaves were burning there! Houses or barns were burning in the far. Gillis had to reach *Zuiddorp* and the convent or Axel before nightfall, however, for he did not want to sleep in the open in the cold, humid autumn weather, so he did not skirt around the fires in a large circle.

Gillis continued his journey north. In doing so he saw ever more clearly the smoke and later the flames under the black, whirling fumes. The fire seemed to emerge from two large barns, one to the left and the other to the right of a large manor. The manor and the barns were surrounded by high walls, so Gillis could not really distinguish what happened inside the enclosed courtyard. He considered for a moment continuing his ride past the manor, but then his heart, not his mind, forced him to leave the earthen path and to push his horse into a canter to the manor. He might offer his help to the lord, in fighting the fire.

When Gillis rode near, he found no gate on his side of the road. He suspected there was a gate on the other side of the walls. When he rode to there, he saw many men in arms at the gates, which he discovered to the east side, whereas he had advanced north at the west of the manor. The manor looked like a large fortified farm with a fine stone house for the master. Gillis erupted at the gates rather unexpectedly. The men at the gates were quite surprised at Gillis rapidly riding towards them. Gillis had thought the men to be armed, but he soon noticed the men wielded no real arms. One held a wooden flail used to thrash grain stalks, another a sickle bound with leather in a long wooden staff, a third a pitchfork with three tines, a fourth even brandished a shovel as if he held a falchion. Behind the men and behind the walls, the flames consumed the thatched roofs of the barns, sparks of fire spewed high onto the slated roof of the manor. Dark smoke writhed upward in the windless afternoon.

The men, peasants, journeymen and no doubt serfs, Gillis recognised, threatened him by holding their improvised weapons at him. They came to form a circle around him. One man held a rusty sword but he wore no scabbard at a leather belt. None of the men wore a coat of mail.

Gillis addressed the man with the sword, ‘what is happening here? Can I help to quench the fire?’

‘The fire does not need to be quenched,’ the coarse, dirty man replied. ‘We lit the fires. Fire is what all the lords who despise us and force famine on us deserve. Who are you? What are you doing here?’

Gillis understood the men he had in front of him were peasant rebels, but men of the worst kind, crude journeymen, bandits, not part of any regular rebel troops. They were hard, cruel men who had trooped together to attack a lord’s manor, as happened everywhere in Flanders. Gillis answered to the truth, ‘I am a *poorter* of the town of Ghent. I have business in Axel. I deal in peat. I was on my way to Axel when I remarked the fire. Are you men of Walter Ratgeer?’

Gillis knew Ratgeer was many miles south from the *Vier Ambachten*, but he hoped the name of the leader of the peasant revolt in eastern and northern Flanders might inspire some respect in the men. Even they must have heard of Ratgeer!

The peasants did look up when Gillis mentioned Ratgeer.

‘We are men of Ratgeer indeed,’ the leader sneered after some hesitation. ‘What is your business here?’

‘I have no business here at all,’ Gillis said calmly, resting his hands on his saddle. ‘Like I said, I was on my way to Axel when I saw the smoke. If you don’t need my assistance, I’ll be on my way again. I’d like to arrive in Axel before night falls!’

Gillis saw greed and the craze of hatred in the eyes of some of the men. These pushed closer. The peasants were in strength here, and they might have assaulted Gillis to steal his purse and his horse, maybe even his clothes and cloak. Gillis was in danger of being assaulted. His hand moved back, closer to his sword. He tugged his tunic free from his scabbard. He might get wounded, but at the first real threat he would throw the hooves of his horse in the face of the

man with the sword, and flee. He would probably not be able to avoid a thrust of that pitchfork in his horse or in his leg, but he saw a chance to escape. He cursed between his teeth for not having followed his mind telling him to mind his own business.

At that crucial moment of tension, the men heard shrieks in the courtyard and everybody, also Gillis, looked through the open gate at what happened inside the yard. The space inside was cobbled, in front of the house. A horse fled in panic through the gate, mane on fire, and Gillis smelled distinctly now burned flesh, which he surmised was pushed with the smoke out of the barns. Had the fools not taken the cows and pigs from the barns? Had they forgotten about the animals? The shrieks had not emerged from animals, however.

Gillis saw two men and two women being dragged out of the manor. Two children, a boy and a girl of about six or seven years hung at the skirts of one of the women. One man, well dressed in expensive velvet, was wounded at the left arm. He held the bloodied arm with his other hand. The two men shouted at another gang of a dozen peasants, who threatened them with the same farmers' utensils as the men that stood near Gillis. The inhabitants of the house should not have done that, for one of the armed men, a sturdy farmer with very red cheeks and wrinkled eyes, hacked with a large sickle in the wounded man's spine, so that the wounded man fell instantly to the ground. The second man from the manor moved towards the killed, but another peasant planted the tines of a pitchfork in his neck. Blood spat amply out of the man's gullet. He grasped the tines with his hands and he might still have drawn the pitchfork out of his flesh in the last moments of his life, but then he sank on his knees, whereupon another peasant slashed with a sword from behind at the man's head, and sawed. Blood sprouted wide again, and the man fell forward to the cobbles. The man seemed to live a while on, his body twisted, rolled over in a last twitch, and then remained quiet.

The women had followed the scene with wild eyes of fear and horror, had stopped crying. Now, after a few moments of silence, when they realised the deaths of their husbands, they shouted, screamed and wailed again. One woman could draw herself out of the strong arms that withheld her. She ran to what was probably the corpse of her husband, lying innate in a widening pool of blood.

Gillis was abhorred, then, to witness how two other men killed the boy and the girl behind the other woman with vicious thrusts of crude pikes in their belly. No screams passed the lips of the children when they sank to the ground, but the howling of the woman was horrific to hear. The woman attacked the peasants with nails outstretched. The men mocked her, played with her, pushed her to right and left. While the woman tried desperately to grab them, the men tore at the woman's clothes. They tore at her shirt until her breasts were bared, then at her skirt. The other men focused on the second woman, tore her away from her husband and began also to open her clothes. The men drew the two women to the side, so that Gillis could not see what happened next, though he could very well imagine what would happen to the women before they would face horrible death in their turn.

The men at the gate stood grinning at the scene, a few took steps forward to watch what happened in the courtyard, lowering their weapons. Gillis did not hesitate. He made his horse prance high. The animal jumped up, whinnied and struck its hooves at the man who stood in Gillis's way. Gillis then galloped on. The wild men at the gate stood mesmerised for a few seconds, enough for Gillis to be a horse's length farther when the men lunged at him. Gillis drove his horse on. The peasants ran after him, wielding their weapons, but Gillis was rapidly out of reach. He escaped.

Gillis did not ride long in sight of the men. He passed left behind the walls of the farm, back to the road to *Zuiddorp* and Axel. The peasants cursed and shouted after him, but did not pursue him far.

While Gillis sped on along the wall, he noticed that also thick, black smoke began to whirl upwards from out of the living quarters of the manor, on his left side. He sped on. He did not know how many more peasants might linger in the environs, and he feared other riders. He galloped on, hoping his horse would not stumble and break a leg in the tufts of high grass or in the holes that might lay hidden in the grass. He arrived back at the path to Axel, where a line of willows indicated a water-filled ditch or irrigation canal near the road. There, he halted his horse and he looked back.

He saw not more different than before: the flames raging above the thatched roofs of the barns, flames spewing out of the windows of the manor, heavy, black smoke rising high, drawn upwards by the heat of the fires. He heard the first rafters break inside the barns and draw the roofs down. The manor would be ruined rapidly.

Gillis wanted to turn his horse and ride on, when he thought he remarked a movement behind the willows, a shifting of colours in the shadows of the diminishing light of the afternoon. He also heard sobs. Gillis pushed his horse two steps back, and then he distinctly saw the bright red hues of a small tunic half-hidden behind a tree. A child!

Gillis again decided with his heart, jumped down his horse, bound the reins to a bush, and he stepped cautiously behind the tree in a wide arch, hand on his sword.

A small boy of about six or seven years stood leaning against the tree, weeping, looking at the fires. When the boy saw Gillis appear suddenly, he darted away in panic, but Gillis caught him with his long arms. The boy fought Gillis for a while, until he realised his efforts were in vain.

Gillis said, ‘stop it, boy, I mean no harm. Are you a boy from that manor, over there? Have you escaped?’

The boy still began to struggle, but Gillis hushed him, holding him firmly in his arms.

The boy sobbed, ‘yes, I am the son of the manor. Who are you? Are you going to kill me?’

‘No, I’m not going to hurt you! I am not with those hoodlums who attacked your manor!’

Gillis whispered. ‘We have to ride from here, and fast. I have a horse. I’m taking you to the convent of the sisters, a little farther. We’ll be safe there. I am not one of the group of bandits that attacked your farm. They wanted to hurt me too, but I escaped, like you. What is your name?’

‘Jehan,’ the boy replied, in what seemed Gillis to be the French language.

Jehan was a name that sounded French to Gillis, and the word had been pronounced the French way.

‘Yes,’ Gillis then thought, ‘this is a boy of the lords of the manor.’

He said, ‘I’m bringing you to the convent. The sisters will take care of you until the ordeal is over. You’ll be safe in the convent. We’ll look for your parents later!’

The boy still wept. Heavy tears ran from the corners of his eyes, but he had stopped sobbing noisily. The boy nodded. He understood the Flemish of Ghent. Gillis drew him on, reached his horse, placed the boy in front of the saddle, jumped on the horse behind the boy, holding his arms around Jehan to direct the horse by the reins, and he forced the animal again in a canter. Gillis did not look behind his back again. He wanted to be out of view of the rebel peasants as soon as possible.

The boy sat before Gillis Vresele. He looked often behind him, tried to distinguish still something of the fire and the smoke, but always looked at Gillis with large, grey, very sad eyes.

‘How did you escape, boy?’ Gillis asked after a while.

The boy answered in a strange Dutch, the dialect of Axel.

‘My mother lowered me down a window,’ he explained. ‘I hid, but when my cousin was also held at the window, the wicked men came and drew her back in. I ran to the road and hid behind the trees until you found me. Will you protect me? You are not going to kill me?’

‘Of course not, boy! No, I’m not going to hurt you. Hold on tight to the horse. We’ll soon be with the nuns, we can rest there.’

In fact, the boy had not been lowered down a window. He had escaped by a half-ruined, low tunnel that led from the manor to the road to Axel, but the boy did not want to reveal that secret until much later. His father had told him to creep through the tunnel, his cousin too small and too frightened to flee by the same way.

After an hour’s ride, Gillis found the walls of the convent of *Ter Hage*, his first destiny. He had considered for a while hurrying on to Axel, but he had lost time in skirting *Zuiddorp* because he wasn’t sure how he would be received there. Somebody might have known who the boy was, and Gillis did not know how the villagers would react. It was also getting very dark. Gillis rode to the gate of the convent. The gate was closed. He banged on the wood, called out, shouted his name, and only quite a while later, when he had shouted several times, the gate creaked and opened. The nuns let Gillis ride into their courtyard. Several nuns in long, grey robes ran to him, and when they saw the boy, they shouted a welcome. The nuns seemed to know and like Jehan.

Gillis let Jehan slide from his horse. He jumped down himself, and discovered Mother Amalberga, the abbess of *Ter Hage* among the nuns.

Gillis asked for shelter for him and his horse until the day after. Amalberga whispered a word to another nun, who took the reins of the horse. Then Amalberga, the boy Jehan at her hand, now again weeping, pointed to the abbey’s visitors’ hall.

Somewhat later, Gillis sat at a table next to Mother Amalberga, sharing her evening meal of bread, milk, cheese and the last apples. He received a cup of light wine.

Gillis explained at long the horrors he had witnessed.

Amalberga sighed, wept a short while.

‘The lords of the manor are called Terhagen, the same name as the site of our convent. They own lands here. They were two brothers. The father of Jehan was a gentle man, an intelligent man, too. His wife was a nice woman. Jehan’s uncle, the older brother, was a bad man, cruel and pitiless, and therefore he was hated by the peasants and the small farmers of the environs. No man or woman in *Zuiddorp* would have helped that lord to escape his fate. We know of a few of similar assaults on manors, but none happened so close to *Zuiddorp* or Axel or our convent. Our lands have been left relatively at peace by the rebels. The lords around us live far away, far from us, and most of them are kind to the people. Jehan’s uncle should have known what was coming to him and left a long time ago. Still, I pray for his soul. I deduce from what you told me Jehan is an orphan now. You did not see the women being killed, but that will certainly have happened. He cannot stay here. We have no orphanage in our convent. There is an orphanage in Axel. We’ll take him to there after a few days.’

‘An orphanage?’ Gillis exclaimed. ‘Surely, the boy has family. He must have relations of his father, his uncle, his mother or aunt!’

‘No, he hasn’t,’ Mother Amalberga denied decisively. ‘We know the family well. Jehan has no relatives. The boy was instructed by us, nuns of *Ter Hage*, on demand of his father. Jehan is a smart boy, kind, obeisant, charming, and he has a natural hang for languages. He speaks Flemish and French. We have been teaching him Latin and Greek. His father has served as

ambassador to Holland. He has come back to the manor he was born in, right after the birth of his son. The mother was a Frenchwoman, we know not from where. Jehan is the heir of lands around the manor and even some around our convent, not many, though. The manor is destroyed, the money very probably stolen. Except for the lands, Jehan will inherit nothing. We shall see to his interests concerning the land, maybe to his education, but that is all we can do. He cannot stay here.'

All through the night, Gillis Vresele saw the large eyes, sad eyes of the boy Jehan in his mind. He continued to think about how the boy had come in his way. Had God once more given a sign? Why was it he, Gillis, had passed near the boy, not any rebel?

In the morning, he had come to a decision that surprised even himself.

Gillis spoke to Mother Amalberga.

'It would be a pity, Mother, to send the boy to an orphanage. I have the impression God has set me on a path to meet him and rescue him. It seems to me I have a duty,' Gillis sighed. 'If you agree, Mother, I am quite willing to take Jehan Terhagen back with me to Ghent, to bring him up in my household. He will get a better education and a better life in my household of Ghent than in an orphanage.'

Mother Amalberga smiled, for she had already felt Gillis's pity for the child last evening. She had hoped for such a development, and who knew how the ways of God worked? She definitely knew Gillis to be an honest man. He had proven that in business contracts with the convent. It would indeed be far better for a child of Jehan's age and standing to be brought up in a real household among other children, loved and cared for with warmth, than in an orphanage where people would abuse of him, steal his heritage and turn the boy into a scoundrel.

'You are a good man, Gillis Vresele,' Amalberga said, touching Gillis's hand. 'The Holy Spirit has troubled your mind. You do not have to feel remorse, for you could not have saved the lords of Terhagen against two dozens of crazed, hatred-filled hoodlums. It would be much, much better, yes, for Jehan to go with you. I shall arrange for the papers of his heritage with the authorities in Axel. Better not to bring him back to the manor to see his parents and uncle, now. We shall bury them. This convent can manage his lands. Some of the lands are peat bogs, so they should bring in good money, which we will hold for him. I propose our convent to be the warden of the boy, so nobody will ever reproach you of having sought to take advantage of the boy. We will send money to Ghent for his upbringing. Would that suit you?' 'It would,' Gillis replied, relieved.

He had given some thought to the jurisdictional issues. Nobody would counter Mother Amalberga in Axel.

'I don't need money, however. Keep it for him until he is of age. I would not want to steal from the boy. When he is of age, he can recuperate his lands and the money from the produce of what he owns. Meanwhile, I will raise him like my own son.'

'You are not alone, though, Gillis Vresele,' Amalberga warned. 'You have a wife. How will she react?'

Gillis had also thought of Avezoete, and he was sure about what Avezoete would do.

'Avezoete will take the boy in and love him without hesitation,' he assured the abbess.

Amalberga smiled.

Mother Amalberga explained the same day what had happened to his parents to Jehan Terhagen. She talked a very long time with him. The boy was inconsolable, but when he was given the choice of being sent to an orphanage or to accompany Gillis Vresele to Ghent, he looked earnestly with his large, grey eyes at Amalberga, probing how sure she was of Gillis, and then he said with a firm voice he preferred to remain with Gillis.

Gillis Vresele left the boy a few days more with Mother Amalberga, but when his tour of business around Axel was finished, he rode back to the convent. The nuns of the abbey had warned the aldermen of Axel, the bailiff had been sent to the manor, the corpses had been buried. The manor was totally destroyed. Gillis placed the boy Jehan then on his horse, at his back, told the boy to hold him tightly, and after saying goodbye to the nuns of *Ter Hage*, they rode to Zelzate and Ghent. All the way, Gillis Vresele felt the hands of the boy around him, and he felt content.

Gillis told of the terrible fate of Jehan's parents to Avezoete. With tears in her eyes, she embraced the boy.

Jehan Terhagen came to live in the house of the Vresele family of the *Kalanderberg* in Ghent.

Tax Collection

In that same year of 1325, a group of weavers revolted in Ghent, hoping to bring the city to support the peasant rebels revolt. An angry crowd of weavers took arms and ran to the city hall to force the aldermen to take sides.

The aldermen had heard of the uprising, however, so they had organised. They had already re-enforced the militia of the city to fight for Count Louis de Nevers. The aldermen called these troops to help them suppress the revolt in their town. Almost at the same moment as the shouting weavers emerged out of the side streets to the city hall, arrived therefore also the White Hoods, the militia of Ghent, in arms and armour, reinforced with many men-at-arms of the count. The White Hoods formed an impressive, trained, formidable force. The weavers would have no chance in submitting these regular troops, so they continued to shout their slogans, but they dispersed without daring to confront the White Hoods, who were led by some of the aldermen-captains of the city.

The aldermen discussed the matter somewhat later, in March, but since no great harm had been done, they only condemned the weavers to pay a reasonable fine on the permission to practice the trade of weaving, and to teach apprentices.

When the judgement fell, Raes van Lake ran to James van Artevelde.

'James,' he began, panting like an ox in the evening, 'you have to save us! This time we are in trouble!'

'Save you from what?' James asked.

'The weavers have to pay a new tax on their craft. The aldermen are going to appoint a man to supervise the collection of that tax. The tax supervisor may well be a Sleepstaf or that terrible Wouter Zoetaert, who says he is a weaver but he has done nothing else in his life but collect taxes in cities all over Flanders, a real bloodsucker. These men may be candidates. The Sleepstafs and Zoetaerts shall find all sorts of excuses to extort from us twice the amounts fixed by the aldermen. They'll estimate everything higher than the city really demands, and augment their private fortune with the difference. You are in high regard among the aldermen. If you agree to collect the taxes of the weavers, you will be accepted. We'll exert all our influence to have you assigned!'

'Fine, fine,' James replied, still dubious about the affair, 'and then every weaver in town will hate me, and one evening I shall feel a long, neat dagger blade sticking in my spine and wonder what happens to me. No, Raes, no, thank you!'

‘You have to do this, James, or we’ll bleed to death! The weavers won’t hate you, on the contrary! We’ll grumble and threaten, of course, but that will only be make believe! The weavers will know you’ll be honest about it, and you’ll find the opportunity to help one or other artisan who is hard pressed. We’ll spread the word you’re on our side, but the aldermen won’t hear about that. No, please, do not refuse us this!’

‘All right then,’ James sighed, a little proud also about his reputation. ‘You’ll have to help a lot, Raes!’

‘We’ll do that, of course,’ Raes promised. ‘We are going to set up a committee constituted of the controllers of our guild to help and advise you. We arranged that already. The whole matter will remain a secret. We’ll meet in secret! You can bring the toughest decisions to our committee, and we’ll find ways to solve the issue. If a weaver cannot pay, and if we know him as a decent person, we’ll constitute funds for him. Sure, we’ll help you!’

Raes van Lake and James van Artevelde spoke till late in the night to work out solutions and actions.

The next day, James van Artevelde proposed his good services to the aldermen, who sighed with relief. Most of the aldermen too, did not want to grant the collection of taxes to Zoetaert or Sleepstaf. James van Artevelde was chosen rather rapidly as special tax collector to the weavers’ guild. He collected the taxes in 1326.

After one year, the taxes having come in regularly without troubles, everybody in town, the aldermen included, forgot about the affair. Less and less taxes were collected by general consent, and in September of 1333 the collection of the taxes on the weavers stopped completely.

The Rebellion resumes

For the first time then, English influence began to weigh on Flanders. On the first of May of 1326, by the Ordinance of Kenilworth, the staple of English wool at Bruges had been abolished. A number of towns of England, Wales and Ireland were designated for the English merchants to expose their bales and sell them.

By 1332, however, certain merchants obliged all English merchants in the Low Countries to bring their wool to Bruges, where they extorted high prices. Duke John of Brabant complained to the king of England, and the abuse was brought to an end.

In November of 1325, the king of France ordered his bishops to call the interdict on the cities and castellanies that participated in the revolt of the peasants in Flanders, and he forbade all trade between those parts of Flanders and France. These two measures came on hard for Bruges, so that after new talks, the city released the count in early December of 1325. Of course, the count was forced to swear on the relics of the Holy Blood, the main relics of Bruges, not to seek revenge on the rebels and on the town.

In that same month of November, Walter Ratgeer, fighting against troops of the count in the *Vier Ambachten* and in the *Waasland*, was killed in a skirmish.

The first place Louis de Nevers sought refuge in after his imprisonment of Bruges, was in his good and faithful city of Ghent. Only Ghent had remained loyal to him. He resided in his castle, in the *Gravensteen*, ordered grandiose feasts which enraptured the people of Ghent,

and conferred with the aldermen that had remained faithful to his cause. From out of Ghent he called King Charles IV for support.

The French king first had the bishop of Senlis, who was also the bishop of the territory of Flanders, to confirm the interdict on Flanders. The interdict was repeated in the cathedral of Tournai.

The more moderate factions among the people of Bruges and of the rebels proposed therefore to negotiate once more, hoping for a new, enduring peace.

In February of 1326, these discussions took place near Saint-Omer, at Arques. The final negotiations took place in March, but Nicholas Zannekin had no part in them. A peace agreement was indeed reached between the representatives of the rebels, the city of Bruges and representatives of the count, which a *poorter* of Ieper, John van Belle, took to Paris to present to the king.

The Peace of Arques proposed a retribution sum of two hundred thousand pounds to be paid by Ieper, Bruges, Kortrijk and the *Brugse Vrije* to the French king, the continuance of the payments of four hundred thousand pounds resulting from the arrears on the Treaty of Athis, the destruction of the fortifications of Bruges and Ieper, and the unhindered return to Flanders of all the Flemish *Leliaert* nobles who had fled the county. In exchange for these conditions, the interdict would be recalled, and the trade with France would resume.

That same spring, many in Flanders believed that a large army of France would soon wage a total war in the county, but King Charles fought over Guyenne with the king of England and had a great need for his troops in that region. The rebellion in Flanders was allowed to last. Three new leaders waged campaigns for the rebels in Flanders: John vander Bruggen in Broekburg, John de Valerie in Hondshoote, and James Peyt in Saint-Winoksbergen. James Peyt became famous with actions directed against the clergy, but he was murdered in the summer of 1327 by some of his co-revolutionaries. The revolt generalised in the countryside of Flanders.

The troops of the count won a few successes, capturing Geraardsbergen and Biervliet, and Ghent and Oudenaarde signed a treaty of mutual military support in the war.

The Peace of Arques was a shame, agreed by delegates of Flanders who wanted peace and freedom of trade with France at any price. The peasant rebels who fought for their lives had not participated in the negotiations. The majority of the inhabitants of the county categorically refused to accept and execute this second Treaty of Iniquity. Count Louis de Nevers had by then gathered sufficient common sense to understand that fact. Therefore, in February of 1327, he travelled to Bruges to negotiate more reasonable terms. The negotiations failed anew. The rebellion in Flanders worsened, became more radical, and the fortifications of the cities were not destroyed but strengthened.

In late 1326, King Edward II of England, deserted by his troops and under pressure of his wife, Isabella, who was the sister of King Charles IV of France, relinquished the throne to his son. Edward III was crowned king of England on the first of February of 1327, only fourteen years old. His regent for England would be Roger Mortimer earl of March, his mother's lover.

In April of 1327, Pope John XXII renewed the interdict on Flanders, which only added to the hatred of Flanders against its count and king.

In June of 1327, a delegation from the aldermen of Bruges sailed to England to seek the support of King Edward II, but Edward also had a war on his hands, fighting against Scotland, so he could not embark in Flanders.

In January of 1328, King Charles IV the Fair of France died, to be succeeded upon by Philip VI of Valois, first as Regent and six months later, as king. Philip of Valois was named Regent by the previous king until the queen gave birth to the successor. The queen, however, gave birth to a girl. The peers of France decided that the crown of France could not go to girl and also not to a descendant in the female line of the royal family, so Philip of Valois, thirty-one years old, was crowned king of France by his peers. He was anointed at Rheims on the twenty-ninth May of 1328.

Count Louis of Nevers, present at the enthronisation ceremony in Rheims, complained to the new king the royal herald had called him count of Flanders and Nevers, whereas he was only count of Flanders in name, expelled from his rightful lands by the people of Bruges and Ieper. The king swore on the Holy Oil by which he had been consecrated as king, that he would reinstitute Louis as the rightful count. Louis of Nevers could thus convince the king to intervene with arms in Flanders. Much later, King Philip VI would feel trapped and deceived for having spoken out so rapidly in favour of Louis of Nevers.

King Philip had already presented in March of 1328 his issues with the rebels of Flanders to arbitration. The king then had sent Andrew of Florence, the treasurer of Rheims, Robert Bertrand, the marshal of France, and the knight Thomas de Marfontaine to talk with delegates of Bruges and Ieper. The meeting was to be held at Thérouanne. For Flanders came Count Louis, John Count of Namur and two aldermen of Ghent. The rebels, however, did not show up.

The anarchy in Flanders worsened throughout 1328.

The people of Bruges appointed their own aldermen. William de Deken became Mayor, head of the city. The guilds chose new deans. Troops of Bruges captured towns in the far neighbourhood, and executed many lords and *Leliaerts* in that region.

On the eleventh of May in 1328, King Edward III sent his knight John de Chidrick to Bruges to state his claims to the French throne. William de Deken received him. William de Deken had by then already made several visits to England, to Edward's court. He may have offered Edward the lordship of the county of Flanders, but to no avail. Still, Edward sought allies. He had despatched several envoys to negotiate an alliance with John, duke of Brabant, with Reginald Count of Guelders and Thierry, Count of Loon. These negotiations took until Christmas, but all talks proved futile that year.

The peasant rebels also appealed to King Edward. Yet, Edward, too young, was not to intervene. One of the results of these failings were that William, Count of Hainault, father-in-law of Edward III but also brother-in-law to Philip VI, could join without remorse the royal army of France. How much the leading families of the continent were intertwined, could be seen in this William, Count of Hainault. Edward III of England and Lewis the Bavarian, the German Emperor, were the sons-in-law of Count William; the king of France was his brother-in-law. His other daughter, Joanna, was countess of Jülich or Juliers.

King Philip VI assembled a French army, drawing it to Flanders, entering the country by an unusual road, leading past the small town of Cassel, also called Mont-Cassel, as the town was built on a high hill in the plains. The army of King Philip VI of Valois arrived there on the

twentieth of August of 1328, to find the Flemish rebel army led by Nicholas Zannekin inside the town and safely on the hill in a position that seemed very hard to conquer. The various rebel troops of Flanders had assembled and formed an army as impressive as the French royal battles.

Chapter 3. Cassel. 1328

The third Generation

In 1328, the original Pharaïldis group was still led by the men of the expedition to Zele, by Gillis Vresele, Wouter de Smet, Raes van Lake, John Denout and Arnout de Hert, with James van Artevelde. Juris Vresele had died.

Gillis Vresele and James van Artevelde belonged already to the second generation of the Pharaïldis families. That second group was formed by Gillis and James, and by Pieter Denout and John de Hert. In his turn, Pieter Denout was held in confidence by the band of youngsters who formed the third generation. The links between the generations were guaranteed in this way.

The young men of the third generation were John de Smet, Raes van Lake the Younger and William van Lake. These were about eighteen years old in 1328, still in their difficult years of revolt against the world, during which they were bound to seek and choose their own values and opinions. The youngsters were more radical in their choices, and more easily excited by the issues of their times. Still, despite the upheavals in Flanders, they lived in relative peace protected by the walls and the sheer mass of Ghent.

Ghent was industrious, grew rich in an unpretentious, even self-effacing way, because many *poorters* still remembered keenly the bad years of ten years ago. The Gentenaars were exceedingly engaged in growing rich and in hoarding surplus, for the leading families remembered how short of cash and supplies they had been in the past. Due to the revolt in Flanders, grain and vegetables as well as peat to warm the hearths in winter came hardly from the countryside anymore, though some always trickled in. Ghent was fed by its two rivers, the Leie and the Scheldt, and victuals were brought in by boat from the north of France. Fish also came by boat, from Sluis and Antwerp. The cloth of Ghent could still be transported to the south and to the north, to the north via Antwerp or via the *Lieve Canal* to Damme and Sluis, where merchants from Bruges sold it to the world. New markets for cloth had been opened to the east, to Brabant and the German regions.

John de Smet was the son of the blacksmith-turned-goldsmith Wouter de Smet. He had worked already since many years in his father's two workshops, in the forge of the Saint Veerle Square near the *Gravensteen*, the Count's Castle, and in the goldsmith's shop in the *Veldstraat*. The young John de Smet had been born with a very rare, exquisite talent. If his father Wouter had dreamt of becoming a goldsmith, discovering a dexterity for such fine work that had been revealed late, John proved very early on, barely twelve years old, to be nothing less than a genius with gold and silver and precious stones. He was an artist much more than an artisan, a sculptor of metal. He showed a particular instinct for what could be done with gold plate, gold foil, gold thread, and silver. He could hammer, push, draw on those metals at any thinness to just before the tearing or breaking point. His metal never burst open, his threads never broke, however thin they were drawn. He produced wonderful pieces in the noble metals. He had served his apprenticeship to a goldsmith in Bruges for four years. John could also work with copper and tin, but his talents would be wasted on the less valuable metals, so his father gave him bar after bar of silver and gold, and John began to make the finest, splendid objects for his father. He established the reputation of the de Smets as being the best goldsmiths of Ghent and Flanders.

John de Smet had strong arms and large, square hands, but he could hold – nobody realised how – the tiniest threads of gold or silver and hammer these small pieces as decoration on the curved surfaces of a chalice or an abbot's cross. Nobody in Ghent was capable anymore of teaching John de Smet how to assemble his masterpieces, not even his father. Wouter took his son to the abbeys of Ghent, to the *Bijloke*, to Saint Peter's, to the *Fremineuren*, to the *Groene Briel* and to the *Baudeloo* abbey, as well as to the main churches of the town, to show him the work of other masters. The abbots and priests were proud to show their finest possessions of cult objects, and John had the added talent of keenly remembering the decoration of those objects even after having seen them only once. He also took sketches of intricate details. John copied the vases and dishes, the chalices and the crucifixes, the reliquaries, and then he began producing his own forms and decorations.

When John had become fifteen, Wouter de Smet had shown to his son John everything there was in Ghent of fine jewels and artful pieces in precious metal. Wouter asked Gerolf Vresele, the son of Juris Vresele, a monk of the abbey of the *Fremineuren*, where in the world yet finer cult objects were to be found. Gerolf had travelled wide and far. He had visited many abbeys outside Ghent, and outside Flanders, and seen many fine works of art.

Gerolf now saw with awe and astonishment what marvellous objects John could make. The monk had to sit down the first time he held the marvellous and precious cult objects in his hands. Gerolf recognised a great artisan who could work magnificently for the glory of God. He had seen artists like John at work only far away in the valley of the River Meuse. The most beautiful objects he had encountered were kept in the treasury of a small priory hidden in the black forests of the Ardennes, at Oignies, south of the town of Namur. The workshop of that priory did not nearly produce anymore art as great as that of John de Smet, but the priory held most splendid works made a century earlier by a man called Hugo, who had been the brother of the first prior. The reliquaries of Hugo of Oignies were the richest and most complex Gerolf Vresele remembered having seen, so he spoke of the priory to the de Smet men, and filled the mind of young John with a longing to set eyes on those objects. John had to beg for months before Wouter allowed Gerolf Vresele and his son to take the road for Oignies near the Meuse. They went on a pilgrimage of their own, with staff and knapsack, leaving a mother weeping in the *Veldstraat* of Ghent.

Gerolf Vresele and John de Smet stayed away from Ghent for six months, so long that Wouter de Smet's ears went almost deaf from the constant wailing of his wife, Lijsbetten, reproaching her husband of having sent their son to perdition and certain death. Lijsbetten saw in her dreams her son being devoured by the wolves, the wild boars and the bears of the Ardennes! Luckily, John and Gerolf returned to the *Veldstraat*. They had much to tell and had travelled to more places than just Oignies. John had seen skills in metalworking all along the Meuse, up to Liège and Maastricht. John had learned to work on enamels too, bringing with them formulas for powders to place wonderful hues on metals, and novel techniques for enamelling. John began to produce finer objects than ever before in the new techniques of metal-working he had learnt and stolen in the workshops of the Meuse region, his head filled with images and stories of the wild but impressive landscapes of the county of Namur and of the archbishopric of Liège.

What John de Smet forged was so beautiful, that many people of Ghent came to admire his work. The first attentive spectators he attracted were the people from the Pharaïldis families. Gerolf Vresele came with his nieces, Agneete, wife of James van Artevelde, and the younger Marie Vresele, a daughter of Gillis.

Marie Vresele felt at ease near John de Smet. She liked sitting next to him while he worked, while he brought his metals to incandescence and then plied and placed them red-hot on his forms. She also liked him to explain what he was doing and why. She seemed fascinated by John's power over matter. For two years now, Marie Vresele and John de Smet became inseparable, not just in the workshop of his father.

John's mother Lijsbetten was the niece of Marie's grandmother Mergriet, so they were far cousins. In that year of 1328, John de Smet and Marie Vresele started, at first hesitantly, to sit closer together than cousins normally would. Marie sat often on the same chair as John to look more closely at how he worked, and more often than maybe allowed by good measure, Marie then found herself sitting on John's lap, John's arms around her. They kissed frantically, fondled each other passionately, until Lijsbetten surprised them, shrieked the entire house to alarm, and tore them apart. There followed tears, shrieks of pain and slaps, protests, weeping, but after a week of howling and crying on Marie's side and gloomy, angry, sulking looks from John, the two parents allowed the two back in each other's company. It was taken for granted Marie and John would marry. They would marry when they were ready and willing to do so, but Lijsbetten and Mergriet suspected the marriage would have to be concluded in a hurry when the belly of Marie expanded. The Mutaert women kept a close look on Marie's physiognomy. That was no issue, for Marie could always find a safe haven with her mother, Avezoete.

John de Smet's two year older sister was called Veerle, named as Lijsbetten's and Wouter's firstborn, the name given after the square they lived then in, and after Saint Pharaïdis. Veerle was a tall young woman of twenty with a lean but voluptuously full body. She wore her auburn hair usually tightened together in a bun behind her head, for her face was fine, small on a rather long neck, and Veerle took pride in her profile. She was otherwise a quiet, phlegmatic girl, not particularly a great beauty but striking nevertheless, and the subject of admiring looks coming from the unexpected side of William van Lake, the younger son of Raes van Lake the Elder. Veerle de Smet was three years older than William van Lake, so Veerle considered the attentions William vowed to her rather as the simple annoyance of flies buzzing around her hair in the summer, until she got used to the constant gallantry of the handsome boy and could no longer live without him.

William van Lake was a great reader of books, which he found in the libraries of the abbeys, and which he sought eagerly. Veerle found William's erudition more interesting than boring. William filled her mind with magnificent stories of knights and princesses, of quests and battles, tales of love and of the pain of lovers who could not sit together because one of the two was married to a wicked husband or spouse. Veerle did not want to be stung by such sufferings of love, so she let herself be kissed and hugged and held by William. William was inordinately proud to have finally conquered a grown-up woman with generous forms. He was not for silly girls. William was after the real thing.

William's friends were stunned to open mouths when they could not but notice that their sweet and shy William had succeeded brilliantly in his invasion of the stern fortress called Veerle de Smet, the more so because the young woman was a head taller than William, quite older in years and a lot more mature than the romantic William seemed to be. William thought the best of Veerle. Once the fortress invested, he didn't let her go and held to her as to his own life.

It was William who not only filled Veerle's brain with heroic stories but also the minds of his companions, John and Raes. He read to them the poems of the Flemish writer James van Maerlant, and spoke in the most excited terms of the grandeur of Flanders. He read them strophes from Maerlant's lyrical novel of the deeds of Achilles at Troy, of the conquests of Alexander the Great, and of the knight Lancelot, of the quest of the Holy Grail by the Arthurian knights.

Another admirer coveted Veerle de Smet, one Sander Soysone, a bulky youth, a butcher's apprentice from the *Drabstraat*, who lived almost at the *Turrepoort*. Soysone was a huge boy, practically a giant. He rolled muscles like bundles of ropes on his arms and shoulders, but he was not very bright of mind. Sander had sighed for Veerle a long time before William van Lake had laid his velvet eyes on her and seduced her by his honeyed tales.

Sander Soysone fulminated against William, professing to his friends he would teach the van Lake boy stealing other men's darlings. William did not lend much attention to the boasting and menaces of Sander, till the day he was walking arm in arm with Veerle near the Saint-Michael's Bridge, not far from the guild hall of the butchers, which he had better avoided, for there, Sander stepped squarely in his path. William's luck held, for John de Smet and Marie Vresele strolled two paces behind him and Veerle. Sander began by standing in the way of William, his fists like fore-hammers in his hips, legs spread firmly, insulting William. Sander closed in on William, and pushed at his breast with his fists. John de Smet ran next to William, drew Veerle to Marie, but the two youths, though not skinny lads either, did not frighten away the bullying butcher.

A fight ensued, which sent the two girls to the side, shouting and pulling their hands to their face. John de Smet instantly received a nasty punch to the eye which sent him sprawling on the ground, and William had to cope with a heavy blow of a fist in his belly. William bent over, and as he had to keep his hands on his belly, he kicked Sander viciously in the crotch. John, who had sprung on his feet like a jack-out-of-the-box, brought his two fists together on Sander's bull-neck. Any grown man would have been felled by such a blow, but Sander continued to charge at William, heard first. He pushed John de Smet out of the way. Sander ran straight to William, white foam of anger around his bare teeth. Sander Soysone never reached William van Lake, however, for hands tore him suddenly aside.

Pieter Denout had seen the fight of the young men, remarked who was fighting, and then he had intervened rapidly. Pieter had muscles like the thickest ropes. Pieter Denout drummed several hard beats of fists on the butcher. Sander had not expected those blows from a third man. He fell to the ground, but Pieter Denout withheld John and William from doing more harm to the helpless butcher. Sander stood up after a while, looking with murderous eyes filled red with hatred at William van Lake, but Pieter held his fists in front of his face. Sander hesitated attacking a grown-up.

The three boys stood panting around Pieter Denout, who said to Sander, 'you had better look for another girl, Sander Soysone. These ones are spoken for. There are plenty more nice girls in Ghent. I want no more trouble from you, or I'll complain to your parents and to the aldermen of the Law. Now, off you go, and don't bother these anymore. Not once!' Sander made terrible eyes at Pieter, John and William. For a moment, William hoped Sander would charge again, but he slunk off.

From that day, Sander left William and Veerle alone. He courted another girl from the *Drabstraat*, but the Soysone family held a grudge against the van Lakes, the Denouts and the de Smets. The Soysones had hoped to enter the wealthier family of the de Smets, of which

they knew it was associated to even more powerful families. The Soyssones were frustrated and felt humiliated in their honour.

When Gillis Vresele heard of the incident, he said to his friends of the Pharaïldis group, ‘we should have a piece of paper to write down the names of the families with which we had issues in the past. I am not being able to remember them all. The Sleepstafs, the Stocmans, de Gruterer, the Mayhuuses, and now the Soyssones, must hate us. We had better learn to brace us for more trouble from these!’

‘What else could we do,’ Pieter Denout wondered. ‘We must defend our own. Isn’t that our holy duty? A good thing I was at the Saint Michael’s Bridge that day. Strange, also, isn’t it? When our sons seem to be in trouble, one of us is in the neighbourhood as by chance. Should we really believe in chance after so many times? Aren’t we been giving a sign we should stick together and look out for our boys and girls, the members of our respective families and not just our very own? Would Saint Pharaïldis be giving us a sign, finding grace in our forming a group bearing her name?’

The others looked at Pieter with incredulous eyes, but they did not deny Pieter’s assessment.

The last of the three young men of the third generation of the Pharaïldis families, was William’s older brother, Raes van Lake the Younger. When Raes saw his brother William stroll with Veerle along the Leie, followed by the other couple of John de Smet and Marie Vresele, he felt excluded, abandoned, and a little jealous of their happiness.

That feeling lasted only until the marriage of a van Vaernewijc boy to which he had been invited, a feast in the countryside. He had danced with a girl of the van Lens family on the feast. Mechtild van Lens, two years younger than he, was a daughter of a family who were friends of the van Artevelde. Mechtild flirted outrageously with Raes van Lake, because he pleased her, was funny and intelligent, no fool, and looking an absolute honest, fine youth. When Mechtild drew very close to Raes at the ball and encouraged him, Raes was hopelessly lost and happy to be so. He found out where Mechtild lived in Ghent.

A few weeks later, John de Smet and William van Lake strolling with their sweethearts on the quays of the Leie, were followed by the couple of Raes and Mechtild. John and William had not remarked Raes the Younger coming with them, and even less Mechtild joining Raes. John de Smet whispered something to William, and then the other looked astonished over their shoulder to the new couple, giggled, but continued their way. A little farther on the walk, Raes and Mechtild walked arm in arm next to John, William, Marie and Veerle.

Marie Vresele, Veerle de Smet and Mechtild van Lens soon formed a select gossiping trio of young women as could only exist in the larger city of Ghent. How could William, John and Raes have resisted this powerful machine of concerted seduction? What one girl did not know in the art of loving and tightening relations, the others instructed her. Marie, Veerle and Mechtild became a power in the third generation of the families to be reckoned with.

The Armies gather

The aldermen, the landowner *poorters*, the city militia they controlled, and a strong contingent of knights, at some moments led by the count of Flanders or members of his family, held the people of Ghent firmly in their grip. When the news that the French king and the count of Flanders had assembled a strong army of knights and men-at-arms, an army that seemed larger than the one that had invaded Flanders in 1302, reached Ghent in mid-July of 1328, feelings among the population were very mixed. The issue was hotly debated in Ghent.

The king of France had strong advocates among the landowners, the *Leliaerts* of the city. The count of Flanders could appeal on loyal supporters among the knights of the countryside, the lords of the castellanies he appointed and who therefore depended entirely from him for their status and livelihood. Since the king arrived to help the count, the Flemish knights, who were not necessarily all *Leliaerts*, would ride now with the king and the Count in the same army. The count remained on and off in Ghent and Oudenaarde, rallying his supporters to hold eastern Flanders for him and to form a force that confronted Bruges, the town that had declared openly for the rebels and against the count.

The guildsmen of Ghent had much sympathy for the rebels. The artisans called the rebels true patriots, who were guarding the independence and freedom of Flanders from the corruption and exploitation of the vested nobility. The largest part of the population of Ghent considered the cause of the rebels captains and of the militia of Bruges, Ieper and Kortrijk favourably. The guilds were not entirely organised yet, however, and the pressure from the aldermen was strong, so the guilds did not form armed bands in support of the rebels.

The count, the aldermen and the *Leliaerts* of Ghent forced the people of the town into militia that were aimed at countering Bruges and the rebels. The militia of Ghent were to retain the Flemish people of the regions of the Waasland, of the towns of Dendermonde and Aalst, of the north-eastern regions of Flanders, from joining the rebels. Ghent was to threaten Bruges. Strong troops also gathered in the fortified town of Biervliet to control from the north the westernmost countryside of the *Brugse Vrije*, the countryside between Bruges and Ghent.

Rumours buzzed in Ghent. One of those rumours had been proven right: the count of Hainault, Holland and Zeeland, and even the king of Bohemia would join the army of Philip of Valois. Hundreds of knights and lords had assembled forces against the Flemish rebels. The peasant troops of Flanders might be attacked from the south and from the east.

End July of 1328, in midsummer, the troops of Nicholas Zannekin and Winnoc le Fièrè gathered in the town of Mont-Cassel, one of the southernmost, walled and strongly defended cities of Flanders. These troops consisted mostly of farmers from the castellanies of Veurne, Saint Winoksbergen, Belle or Bailleul, Broekburg and Cassel.

The militia of Ieper and Kortrijk assembled behind the River Leie to the north and west of the town of Lille, called Rijssel by the Flemish, although French was spoken in that town. The militia of Bruges and of the countryside of Bruges, of the *Brugse Vrije*, took positions near Tournai. These troops were led by Zeger Janssone and Lambert Bonin. The Flemish leaders prepared for troop movements from various sides.

By mid-August, Wouter de Smet could be seen hurrying desperately to the house of Raes van Lake in the *Brabantstraat*. His son John was missing. He had asked friends of his son whether they had seen his boy, and the young men had lowered their heads and whispered that John

might have left Ghent to join the rebels at Cassel. Wouter had paled, swallowed his pride and felt hurt because his son had told nothing about his intentions. Maybe John had decided on a whim to leave Ghent. Wouter hoped Raes van Lake and Raes's wife would tell him where his son was, and if the van Lake sons, John's best friends, accompanied John.

Wouter found Raes van Lake the Elder in his hall, tearing the last hairs out of his scalp, his wife in tears sitting in front of him. William and Raes the Younger, the van Lake sons, had equally disappeared. Raes the Elder and Wouter would have to console themselves. Raes the Elder could tell Wouter a contingent of young men of Ghent had assembled on the *Bijloke* Field in secret and, despite the prohibitions of the aldermen, they had taken arms out of the stocks of the guilds and marched south to join the army of Zannekin.

Wouter de Smet sank on a chair next to Raes van Lake. It was true then, their sons had gone to war without warning their fathers and mothers. Wouter despaired. How could a boy so highly talented, possessing such rare gifts, put his life in danger for a cause that only very marginally touched the city of Ghent? Why had the boy not confided in his father? Why had the boys told nothing to the girls they loved?

Raes and Wouter fathomed the depths of the souls of their sons, but they had to accept the boys had hidden their strongest feelings deep inside their hearts. That was the heaviest blow for Wouter and Raes! They would of course have withheld their sons from running to Cassel, imprisoned them in their rooms. The boys had avoided that by eloping. Raes and Wouter felt hurt in their pride and in their fatherly affections. They might have cursed their sons now, but they could do nothing of the sort. Their fatherly feelings loomed stronger than their hurt.

On the Road to Cassel

At that moment, John de Smet, William and Raes van Lake were marching south at a good pace in a group of about twenty more young Gentenaars, singing and laughing, and waving to the passers-by. They were on their way to one more Flemish victory, to a victory like Flanders had won so many. Their victory would throw the Battle of the Golden Spurs of 1302 into the shadow. They were sure to win. Nobody could defeat the men of Flanders! The young men of Flanders would once more prove that no foreign army could subdue their county. If they had to die, they would die as heroes.

The friends walked on fine leather shoes and in light clothes for the sun shone bright and warm. They wore coats of mail and simple pot helmets. They had old steel breastplates in the linen sacks on their backs. The three of them had also received a *goedendag* each, a spike with a heavy iron cylinder at the end fastened on a five-foot sturdy wooden shaft. They had never trained with such a weapon, and in truth, except for the long knife at their belt, they had also never possessed a weapon. They had never been members of the armed militia of the guilds. They were no crossbowmen and no archers. They had not learned to parry a sword, not learned how to avoid the mace of a knight on horseback, but they worked the pike in their mind and imagined how to crack skulls with the iron club under the steel point of their weapon. William, Raes and John had never drawn blood on any man, except in the one street brawl they had fought to guard the honour of their girlfriends. They felt light at heart, though, for they would fight fiercely for the honour of Flanders, the way their forefathers had done in the Groeninge Field of Kortrijk in 1302 and in the battles and skirmishes that followed that great confrontation with the king of France.

They walked for about a week, losing their group of other Gentenaars on the way during a particularly rainy day. They wandered through the countryside asking for the road south, to Cassel, to the assembly town. They came across guildsmen, artisans, of Bruges beyond Kortrijk, to whom they joined eagerly, and marched on in a large contingent of young volunteers. They had by then travelled from Ghent southwards over Waregem to Kortrijk. Now, joining a larger group, they marched to Poperinge and Steenvoorde, where they took the road west to Cassel. Their feet hurt; they suffered from several blisters on their toes and on the weaker parts of their soft feet, but they did not abandon the march. They passed plundered villages, villages not devastated by the enemy but by this loose army of Flanders. They saw burning castles, taken by the rebels, and their first corpses lying outside the gates of the fortresses. They got sick for the first time when they saw crows eating from the naked bodies and when they smelled the stink of the rotting flesh. Their enthusiasm for the army did not wane, however. They marched on, past the dead, pitiful bodies lying broken and disregarded near the road. Nobody buried the corpses.

John, William and Raes found little to eat in Flanders' land, but they had brought pieces of fried chicken in their sacks from home, salted fish and dried beef, and bread and cheese they had plentiful. Water they found in the wells of farms. A few farmers shouted at them when they let down the buckets in the stone wells, but most were sympathetic to the boys and helped them find more to eat. They could pay. One evening, their group stole a lamb and a small pig, slaughtered the animals and roasted them. They ate well that time, warm food, and the pig was succulent.

They slept in barns or in the open. William was the most far-seeing of the three. He had bought a small tent in the market of Ghent, just a small contraption of oiled cloth and four poles of three feet long. William and Raes wore two poles each, William wore the cloth, plied together. The tent was barely high enough for the three of them, but it kept them dry at nights. They bathed in the rivers.

They did not fear the rain. They had each a cloak of oiled cloth and hoods. It was summer, and very hot in August. After a shower, the sun dried them in a few hours. They were a lot better off than most of the lads who marched southwards with them. They were envied for their cloaks and tent. They arrived at the hill town of Cassel in the middle of August of 1328, on the seventeenth of that month.

Thousands of Flemish peasants and militiamen from the towns of Flanders had gathered at Cassel.

Cassel was built on a rather steep hill. It was a walled town, and the walls stood high, so that only the tower of the church of Our Lady could be distinguished from far. The town was a fortress, a good place to defend for an army. Not without irony, this town was the capital of Robert of Cassel, who was the lord of the castellany. Robert was a forceful enemy of the rebels, now.

Raes, William and John walked into town. The streets were filled with armed men, and many men slept in the streets. Hundreds of small tents, similar to the one William and Raes had brought with them, were set up at the foot of the imposing walls. When William, Raes and John looked down from the walls over the pastures and fields, they saw hundreds of small fires on the slopes of the hills, and as many columns of smoke rise to the sky. While they were looking out over the landscape that unfolded to their eager eyes, a boy who apparently lived in the town, pointed out the villages around Cassel.

To the north-east the boy indicated Winnezele, Waton and further on the large city of Poperinge. East of Cassel lay Terdeghem and Steenvoorde, from where they had walked. To the south lay Saint-Mary-Cappel, Hondegem and Hazebrouck. To the south-west the boy indicated them Oxelaere, Bavinchove, Ebbinghem and farther on was the road to Saint-Omer and Arques, where the ignominious treaty had been concluded. More to the west lay Zuytpeene and Wemaers-Cappel, Ochtezele and Noordpeene, Rubrouck, Volckerinckhove in the wide plains. To the north-west were Arneke, Zermezele, and Bollezele with Eckelsbrugge. Finally, to the north stood Zegercappel, Hardifort and Oudezele and beyond those lay larger Wormhout and Herzele. The boy knew all those villages, for he went to work, to harvest with his father in many of them, summer after summer. He told he had heard the French army was on the way and would arrive soon from the west, not the south. 'Many of the villages here are named after chapels,' the boy declared, 'hence the word of *Cappel* in the names.'

Inside Cassel, they talked to a man from Bruges who seemed to be in some command, a captain maybe. They proposed their names, but only their christening names. They lied about where they came from, saying they were men from Waregem. They were told to go to the gate of Steenvoorde and find a captain Boudin the Bald there, a captain from Veurne who was short of men and who would take them in his company. They received a small shield from the armourer, but no other weapons. Their *goedendag* was deemed sufficient weaponry. William stole three pairs of greaves from a cart near the market square.

John, William and Raes sauntered slowly from the church of Cassel to the Steenvoorde Gate. They looked the fortified *bourg* over. They had plenty of time, no French army was in sight. They found captain Boudin, who grunted when he asked the youth whether they had already trained in the art of fighting and had received only a shy, negative shake of heads. Boudin asked the boys what they had done so far. They answered they were journeymen working in the countryside, for they thought the rebel army was mostly composed of such people. Boudin took their hands in his rough palms, let them drop contemptuously, and shook his head. He did not believe one second he had journeymen before him. He saw instantly the young men had come from a city and were rich boys, not used to hard work in the countryside. Boudin sighed, showed an open space between other tents and told them he would train them some in the next days.

John, William and Raes placed their tent and waited. They kept silent.

They soon drew the attention of their neighbours. To their right stood tent in which slept Pieter Carstien and Gillis Brakkel from the village of Wulpen in the castellany of Veurne. They were men of around thirty, farmers of some wealth, for they owned their own farm and quite some land. To their left stood Coppin Maes from Westvleteren of the same castellany, also a farmer. To them, who seemed to be intelligent men of some standing, William and Raes confessed they came from Ghent but didn't want to be known as such in fear of reprisals against their families. Pieter, Gillis and Coppin understood the reason. They told more men from Ghent had come, and mostly not in groups but individually. They proposed to form a team, which John, William and Raes accepted gladly. Most of the men of Boudin originated from the castellany of Veurne. The youth of Ghent would not fight in a battalion of Gentenaars, and that suited them fine.

During the next few days, the young men remained in the tent camp of the rebels at Cassel. They slept outside the crenelated walls. Food was scarce, but with the help of the men of

Veurne they could eat without starving. Water was a major issue, for as Cassel lurched on a hill, wells were few and they dried up when the about fifteen thousand Flemish men of the rebel army drank. Moreover, the weather was dry and very hot. Water was fetched from the countryside, but that stopped when the French army arrived.

The French army had assembled at Arras on the first of August. It moved north nine days later, to arrive at the town of Warneton, north of Cassel, at the abbey of Waasten, which they destroyed. The abbess of Waasten and the nuns suffered a terrible fate. The French army then slowly marched southwards to Cassel, surrounding the town in a wide arch. The entire army of King Philip VI of Valois stood in front of Cassel on the twentieth of August.

The king put up his camp at Hardifort, a village just north of Cassel and there, he deployed the Oriflamme, the scarlet war banner of France.

On the hills of Cassel, Captain Boudin van Veurne taught the men of his group the rudiments of fighting. His men had come with all sorts of weapons, *goedendags*, swords, axes, a mace. The *goedendags* were old weapons, a shaft of wood with an iron point and a heavier cylinder of iron right under the spike. A few men wore *plançons*, a French name for a *goedendag* with a dozen long spikes on the iron weight at the end. Other men had only pikes, lances of thick wood with a steel or iron point.

Boudin was a stocky man of over fifty with a sunburnt face. He had fought in many battles, he boasted. He must have been a military man, but he refused to talk about his past.

He taught how to parry swords with a pike or a *goedendag*, how to turn the sword and hit the adversary with the heavy club, how to work the pike to surprise an opponent. Boudin showed how to put a *goedendag* in the earth and held firmly to receive a charge of knights on destriers, how to thrust with the spike and how to wield the club. He also taught them to fight with a sword, a weapon he preferred, and with an axe and poleaxe.

‘There are always weapons laying around on a battlefield,’ Boudin said. ‘You can have your pick of what seems more lethal at the moment, and you change weapons when needed.’

Boudin also taught how to avoid sword thrusts from knights on horse, and always to aim at the horse first with a pike, preferably where the horse had no plate or mail.

‘You are not in heavy armour, like the knights,’ Boudin explained, ‘so you have to take advantage of your agility! Dance around the knights or the men-at-arms, my boys, you’ll notice how clumsy they are. Never confront them head-on! Be devious! This is war, not a tournament. You are no knights, so you don’t have to fight like knights. No need to be chivalrous, either. Be nasty! Never handle a knight alone. Fight with two or three. One of you lures the knight on, the others attack from the sides. Fear the slashes of the swords, fear even more the backslashes, again! For a knight on horse, always take on the horse first. Duck for the knight! When a knight falls from a horse, he is defeated. He’ll lose precious time in getting up, and you can exploit that with your *goedendag*. Knights on foot are far more dangerous!’

The men exercised the same movements for days until they knew the thrusts and parries by heart. When they protested at the boredom of it all, Boudin confronted them with a sword and always managed to beat them, pike or no pike in their hands. He placed the tip of his sword at their throats, and then taught them how to crawl as rapid as the wind out of the tight spot. Finally, Boudin taught them how to fight bare-handed. The wrestling exercises were better fun for all the men, but Boudin taught them to be vicious and wicked instead of good-hearted and slow.

‘Hands, fists, legs, elbows, feet, arms, are weapons too if you know how to use them,’ Boudin bellowed. ‘A battle is no place for milksops! You fight dirty or you die!’ Boudin showed them the nasty tricks of street-brawlers.

One day, a large banner was uncoiled on one of the highest towers of Cassel. The inhabitants of the walled town were enthusiastic sympathizers of the rebel cause. The banner was huge and when it unfolded in the wind on the hill, John read what was written beneath the crude, red cockerel.

‘When this cockerel will sing,
The found king will enter.’

The Flemish rebels called Philip of Valois the “found king”, because he had not expected ever to be anointed king. The cockerel painted on cloth could of course never sing, so Philip would never enter Cassel. The defences of the town looked impressive, indeed, the rebel army strong. The army of Flanders took courage.

When the boys did not train with Boudin van Veurne, they walked and surveyed their environment. They had brought a few coins in silver and gold each, which they kept in a purse hanging from their leather belts. Raes van Lake the Younger got thirsty on a late afternoon in the town. Raes drew his friends to an inn, the first he found, to have a tankard of ale or beer, or wine, whatever was available. The inn was crowded with shouting and singing Flemings, many of them quite drunk, and all quite older than John, William and Raes.

The boys found wooden stools at a small, round table in a corner near a wall and asked for a beer.

The owner of the inn watched the boys and asked whether they had money to show. The boys nodded yes and placed a few coins on the table, pieces of silver. The owner’s eyes narrowed. He said nothing, but went to the back of the inn. A moment later, two girls with dirty robes and aprons and dirtier pale hair emerged from behind. They came to sit on the table, bowing so low that they gave the boys a fine view of their ample, almost bared chest. William and Raes blushed scarlet, John coughed, and the girls laughed. They tickled William under the chin, drew at the ears of Raes and placed a finger in the open shirt of John. One of the girls went to sit on John’s lap and she fondled him. The beers were brought by the innkeeper, also tankards for the girls, and William paid. The girls continued caressing John and Raes. John and Raes pushed the hands away, but the wenches probed more insistently elsewhere, and began to talk about rooms above the inn.

John de Smet gained his wits sooner than William and Raes. He suddenly realised he could not go upstairs with the wenches when he might be killed in a few days! He remembered what he had promised to Marie Vresele. He finished his beer in one long drink and stood, almost ordering William and Raes to follow him to outside the inn. The girls clung to them, but the three young *Gentenaars* succeeded in getting out of the door of the inn, the girls’ curses in their ears as well as the laughs of the men in the inn. The boys rapidly ran outside, into the streets of the town. For a long time, they said nothing, their throats as thirsty after the beer as when they had entered the inn. Then, Raes the Younger smiled shyly, looked at his brother and at John, and Raes burst out in laughter. He bent double. No, they would not cheat on their sweethearts of Ghent! They were glad, for they had escaped narrowly the snares of the devil’s temptations. They would not have to blush when they told the monk Gerolf Vresele of their adventures, and also not to their darlings.

They walked to the square in front of the church of Cassel, entered the church, whispered a prayer and lit a candle, and then they went to the embattlements of the walls to have one more look at the enormous French army that had gathered in the direction of Hardifort. They saw the numerous tents, smoke whirling to the sky from out of the campfires of the French, and the hordes of horses and chariots placed to the sides. The sun reflected on polished steel. The sight sobered their minds.

King Philip VI of Valois had gathered at Cassel two thousand five hundred knights on destriers and about twelve thousand men-at-arms and crossbowmen. The Flemish rebel army counted about as many men in and around Cassel, about fifteen thousand men.

The Fathers of Ghent

When John de Smet, William and Raes van Lake were already two days on their way to the south, their fathers Wouter de Smet and Raes van Lake the Elder sat in the van Lake hall in the Brabantstraat, looking at each other and at Raes's wife Zwane Bentijn, stricken with despair. What should they do?

'There is bound to be a battle,' Wouter de Smet began. 'The only possible outcome of a rebellion such as the farmers and Bruges wage, is a battle. There will be no negotiations with armies standing in front of each other. The king will want to annihilate the farmers. If he doesn't, he'll risk farmers all over France to revolt. The French knights will grant no mercy to villeins they deem infinitely inferior to themselves. Our sons will get killed. They have never learnt to wield a weapon. They are so naïve! How can they survive against iron-clad knights on war horses? Poor children! What should we do?'

'There is only one thing we can do,' Raes the Elder replied. 'We have to fetch them, find them, speak to them, and if necessary beat them with a club on the head, but fetch them! What they are doing is suicidal. They knew we would never have allowed them to go to the war. We have to fetch them and bring them back, willingly or not. This is a matter of life and death. We have not worked to see our sons killed in this stupid conflict in which we have no part.'

Wouter de Smet's looked up, he stretched his neck, hope gleaming in his eyes.

'Yes,' he said, 'yes!'

He punched his fist on the table so that Raes's wife, Zwane, blinked from fear and apprehension.

'We have to bring them back. If you are willing, Raes, we'll go to Cassel. Our sons don't know how to fight, but we have fought in the Golden Spurs. I have not forgotten how to fight. If you are willing, together, we'll go to Cassel!'

'We go tomorrow,' Raes decided. 'Prepare for the journey. I'll have two horses. We need food, and swords. *Goedendags* will be too obvious for two travelling merchants. I have a small tent in the attic. Tomorrow at dawn, we leave. You come to my house, here, and at dawn we leave together.'

The two men discussed their desperate plan, how they would march, and then Wouter hurried home to give some hope to his wife Lijsbetten, who would by now have cried her eyes out of their sockets.

That same evening, however, Raes van Lake received a visit of Gillis Vresele, who had met Wouter de Smet in his smithy. He knew what had happened. John Denout and Arnout de Hert

entered with him. But for James van Artevelde who was out of town and Wouter, the Pharaïldis group convened in the *Brabantstraat*.

‘Wouter de Smet told me you are going to fetch your sons,’ Gillis Vresele began. ‘I have decided I should accompany you. John and Pieter Denout will come too. Still, I want you to hear Arnout, for we have another, a better proposal for you than riding on our horses. Listen to this!’

Arnout de Hert scraped his throat. Everybody looked at him, but he was not used to be in the centre of attention.

‘The idea is as follows,’ Arnout explained. ‘I believe we can reach Cassel more safely and more quickly by sailing over the water. I propose to take you by boat up the Leie until close to Cassel. My son John and I, we can sail and steer from early dawn until late in the evening for days, so we can be faster in Cassel than the boys. We have some time to catch up. We bring the boat as close as we can near Cassel, to the south of the town, and John and I wait for you to return. It will be a lot safer on the river than on the roads, particularly on our return trip. The region will be swarming with armed men from France, there will be bandit troops on the roads. With Gillis and the two Denouts, you will be five men for Cassel. It should be easier to bring the youngsters back, by force if necessary. It should also be easier that way to defend yourselves, and we can hide weapons in the boat. I have a false bottom in the boat I’m thinking of.’

Arnout was admitting he was used to some form of contraband, but nobody cared for that.

Raes van Lake remained silent for a while. A lump developed in his gullet. He looked at his friends.

‘Why would you risk your lives?’ he asked softly. ‘It is not your sons who will be at Cassel!’ ‘We were together at Zele, weren’t we?’ Gillis whispered back. ‘We are a family, we of the Pharaïldis. How many times are our families linked by marriage and by interest? Your distress is our distress. Our cause is righteous. Saint Pharaïldis and God will protect us.’

Zwane Bentijn grabbed Raes the Elder’s arm. She too could not utter a word of gratitude, so moved to tears was she, but she nodded at Raes to accept.

Raes van Lake shook the hands of his friends.

He said, ‘I am indeed very grateful, then. Your proposal is a much better one than Wouter and I had. I accept gladly. When can we sail?’

‘Not tomorrow, alas,’ Arnout told. ‘The boat I want comes in port tomorrow on the *Lieve Canal*, but we need to unload it at *Tussen Bruggen*. We can sail at dawn, the day after tomorrow.’

‘That will do,’ Raes agreed. ‘I’ll go to Wouter this evening and tell him to be ready a day later. Where do we meet?’

‘That had better not be at *Tussen Bruggen*,’ Arnout said in a conspiring tone. ‘Better you came at dawn to the *Lieve Canal*, past the *Betsgravenbrug*. It is a lot quieter, there. You’ll see me in the boat. You have to bring weapons and tents with you. On the water, we can sleep in the boat, but you’ll need to walk a stretch and sleep near Cassel. I have oiled cloths to keep us out of the rain on the water.’

‘I can arrange for the weapons,’ Gillis promised. ‘I can bring two crossbows with bolts, two *goedendags*, four swords, daggers, three shields, and torches. I need somebody to come to my house and help me fetch the stuff.’

‘Bring it to my warehouse, tomorrow any time,’ Arnout replied. ‘Bring it by cart. I’ll put the weapons in the boat tomorrow evening. We also need food and money.’

‘I’ll have money, enough to keep us going for a few months,’ Raes promised. ‘We need some food, but we can buy the rest on our trip. Would it help if I also brought a few bales of cloth, pretending we are drapers selling cloth and taking in grain from the villages near Cassel?’

‘Yes, fine!’ Arnout replied. ‘Don’t bring too many bales. We don’t want to look too wealthy. Don’t take your finest cloth! Bring rough, low quality cloth, if you have that. We may have to throw the bales overboard on our return to Ghent. With the three boys, we’ll be ten people on my boat! The boat I am thinking of is not a large one. It has a rather flat bottom. I know the Leie up to Aire in French-speaking territory, but we may have to sail north on smaller rivers, rivers I haven’t ever sailed or pushed me on. I’ll have to ask my way up to Cassel, but one thing I know already: the Leie does not flow to Cassel! The Leie flows south of that town. I seem to remember having heard Cassel is beautiful because it lays on a steep hill in the plains. Water does not flow upwards. You’ll have to continue some distance on foot.’

‘We’ll find food. Bread and cheese will have to do, but our wives will add other delicacies. We have wine,’ John Denout smiled.

The men discussed how they would organise. A little later, each went his way home. Raes van Lake hurried to Wouter de Smet, to explain him the change of plans.

Two days later at dawn, the men of the Pharaïldis group assembled at the *Betsgravenbrug* and found Arnout and John de Hert in their boat. Arnout had taken a larger boat this time, a *pleite*. He could sail this boat, even against side winds, and otherwise he could hire horses on the way to tow it, though that would not be possible on all stretches of the river. They were still loading Raes van Lake’s bales and the weapons, which they hid under half-rotten planks. The seven men arrived one after the other and went on board. But for Arnout and John de Hert, they hid under a low roof of cloth so that nobody in Ghent could see them. Arnout steered the boat out of the *Lieve Canal*, up the Leie.

Arnout de Hert navigated up the Leie from *Tussen Bruggen* in Ghent to Kortrijk. He sailed then over Menen and Komen, until he reached lands where French was spoken, near Armentières. They had an uneventful voyage, during which Arnout and John held the helm all the time from very early in the morning till late in the evening. They sailed fast, unrelenting. Arnout reached Merville, a small village, where he went on land to talk to other shippers. John had never been in these territories, but Arnout had. He knew Cassel lay somewhere north of Merville. He was tempted to remain on the Leie, his usual domain, to sail to Saint-Venant, maybe as far as Aire-on-the-Leie, the farthest village he had ever travelled. He had been at Aire only once, and knew not where Cassel lay from Aire.

The French-speaking shippers told him he should try to sail into the Bourre River at Merville, and sail north to Hazebrouck. It was only five or six miles, walking from Hazebrouck to Cassel, and Arnout might even not get more north than that village. The issue was, the shippers said, that the waterway there was narrow. Many men-at-arms rode these days on the banks of the Bourre, so the trip might be dangerous, the bales of cloth in the boat an easy target for plunderers. The army of France was advancing, and armies on the march stole everything they could lay their hands on, even simple pots and pans. The shippers looked with suspicions at Arnout, but they recognised a fellow-shipper when they saw one, and what Arnout was going to do at Cassel or Hazebrouck was no business of theirs.

Arnout directed his boat up the Bourre at Merville, and indeed, that river became smaller and smaller, the banks tightened around the water. Arnout did not know where the river would narrow to let only his boat pass. He feared being grounded. He sailed cautiously, very slowly from village to village, asking the names as he passed: Le Préavin, La Caudescure.

Armed riders appeared on the banks and followed the boat with their eyes. The men looked at his load of cloth and at the men who sat with Arnout in the ship. Arnout remarked the suspicions in the men's eyes, and the greed. He placed the crossbows near him, in full view of the riders, and he cranked the bows and armed them with bolts.

At La-Motte-au-Bois, a collection of but a few low, miserable, thatched hovels, Arnout heard he was very close to Hazebrouck and to Cassel, only a half-hour's walk from Hazebrouck. A farmer's son showed him the outline of the houses of the village in the far. Arnout decided to stop his boat here. He did not want to get too close to Hazebrouck, where French men-at-arms and knights might have assembled in large numbers, and where he would attract too much attention. A few men could hide more easily and in more places than a boat on a river. He asked his friends to continue on foot from there.

The men agreed Arnout and John de Hert would stay for thirty days at La-Motte-au-Bois, but Arnout told he would not stay all the time in this one place. He preferred to return to Merville, a larger village he knew better, where other shippers held their boats. He told he would be every Saturday and Sunday at La Motte, at a point sheltered by trees and more out of view than on the rest of the river. He could pick the men up as far north as La Motte on those two days. The rest of the time, he would hold his ship on the Leie at Merville, near the point where the Bourre flowed into the Leie.

Wouter de Smet, Raes van Lake, Gillis Vresele and John and Pieter Denout took a sack, placed all their swords in that one pack, stole a spade and made that protrude from the sack to induce the idea they wore farming tools, and then they continued on foot to Hazebrouck and to Cassel. They wore no weapons on their belts, but their long knives. They reckoned they would get pikes or *goedendags* on the way to Cassel. They wanted to show no weapons until they had reached the Flemings, so that they could tell French riders or French men-at-arms they were farmers on the way to their work in the fields. This was harvest time. They knew the subterfuge was very weak, but at least from a distance they might confuse men-at-arms or riders. They would have to avoid French groups of armed men.

Raes van Lake the Elder led his companions, Wouter de Smet, Gillis Vresele, John and Pieter Denout out of La Motte. They walked northwards, following the course of the Bourre. They kept the Bourre on their left side, walking along the right bank of the river.

They walked away from the boat on the nineteenth of August, after having arrived in the afternoon of the previous day. They had waited till dawn of the next day. A few horse riders passed in the far, and now also, while they advanced cautiously, a large contingent of riders seemed to block their way to Hazebrouck. The men of Ghent stayed away from the open paths. They painstakingly followed the ever narrowing river, hiding along the overgrowth of its banks. High bushes and small trees, many willows grew on the banks. They could distinctly see Hazebrouck to their left, but they suppressed their eager to run straight for that larger village. Raes told his men he would not even try to enter that small town. They wore mail shirts under their tunics, but they had put their helmets, simple bascinets, in a sack worn by Pieter Denout. Gillis Vresele had their last food. John Denout wore the weapons, but every hour or so the men changed who would wear which sack.

They saw more and more riders along the roads. They had no idea whether the Flemish army or the French had invested Hazebrouck. As it happened, at that moment the front guard of the French had already occupied Hazebrouck, arriving from the northwest, so by skirting around Hazebrouck, they had avoided a great peril. They shrank from all armed men on horseback. Raes van Lake arrived at a village that was even smaller than La-Motte-au-Bois, a few

cottages called together by the name of Borre. A sympathising farmer told them Cassel lay only two miles northwest. He said the fastest way to reach Cassel was to walk to Breearde, from there to Hondegem and then straight north to Saint-Mary-Cappel. They could not miss, for they would see Cassel and its high *Wouwenberg* clearly from Breearde on.

‘Good heavens,’ Raes van Lake remarked, ‘there are as many villages between us and Cassel as between Ghent and Bruges.’

That was not true, for very many villages lay everywhere in Flanders, but Raes was nervous and irritated, for villages also meant possible concentrations of men-at-arms, and he was thwarted in his wish to reach his sons as quickly as possible.

‘The farmers here seem to be on the side of the rebels,’ Gillis noticed. ‘They do not receive us as enemies, though they understand we want to join the Flemish army.’

The group led by Raes van Lake advanced very slowly. They lost much time by avoiding the roads, hiding in the woods and sometimes walking long distances in circles to follow the tree lines. They had to wade through a small river and walked all wet to Breearde, drying only in the warm sunrays during the few moments they walked in open fields. They did not stop at Breearde, but followed the road to Hondegem, a somewhat larger village, as they could distinguish. They arrived there in the afternoon, and saw Cassel on its hill, its church tower of Our Lady high against the horizon. The men noticed that between Hondegem and Cassel lay only pastures and open fields, in completely open terrain, so that they could not hide anymore among trees. They would not have much cover to hide along the roads from Hondegem to Saint-Mary-Cappel. They decided therefore to remain low in a wood of Hondegem, eat, and wait for the next morning.

The Pharaïldis group of Ghent woke at dawn and wanted to walk on, but tens of heavily armed men rode between them and the next village. Bannered groups of ten to twenty men scouted the environs. The Gentenaars were blocked. Among the riders were knights in shining plate armour on heavy destriers. Other riders rode in mail only. Lightly armoured riders sped on swifter horses, came and went, reported and passed, and seemed to patrol in the area. Raes van Lake and Gillis Vresele could still not make out whether the men were Flemish or French. They did not dare to find out. Pieter Denout pointed out another village, lying at some distance to their right, to the northeast, so they decided to wait for the night and run in the dark to those cottages, which were covered by a few more trees than in the rest of the landscape. From there, they would have to make a run for Saint-Mary-Cappel or straight for the *Wouwenberg* and Cassel. They dozed off in the wood, hiding in the high bushes. They dared not light a fire. They ate their last bread.

All day long, riders came and went, scouting in the environs. In the evening, even more men-at-arms rode at gallop in the fields and on the roads. Some of the troops rode south to Hazebrouck, and among these Gillis Vresele thought he distinguished the *fleur-de-lys* of France, the stylised lily flower symbol, in the banners. The army of France lay somewhere in the neighbourhood.

‘The French should advance from the south,’ Raes van Lake muttered. ‘These Frenchmen ride in from the north. They may have placed their army to the north to cut off the retreat of the Flemish rebels.’

‘Or they came from the west and they turned around Cassel,’ Gillis remarked. ‘The French army must have arrived in great numbers, for so many scouts as we see here cannot be merely scouts. This is part of their army, but not their main force. Where is the French army?’

‘A battle cannot have taken place,’ John Denout stated. ‘The men rode too swiftly. I saw no chariots, no wounded men. We have arrived in time for a battle, but the armies must be

positioning. Maybe we only saw a front guard so far, and the French army is close, yet still on its way. If that is so, and the French invest Cassel from the south, we should move quickly or we will have soon thousands of French men-at arms between us and Cassel.'

'We should indeed,' Raes van Lake confirmed.

He was lying in the grass and watching out for more riders.

He panted, 'we must get to those cottages, all right, even if that may become very dangerous. Even a small village such as this will attract men-at-arms. The army will scavenge, plunder and rape. We must run quickly to that lonely farm closest to us, there, almost hidden among trees. We must then wait till dawn and see what happens tomorrow. Damn! We came so far so quickly. We are losing precious time, now!'

At nightfall, the five men ran in the direction of the cottages they had seen during the day. They did not run in the middle of the night, but at dusk they used the last sombre light of the day to keep directions. They slid as close to the ground as they could, and ran to the buildings of the farm and to its small wood. Twice they had to throw themselves to the damp, brown earth, and then they ran through a field of grain, destroying some of the crop, because a group of men on horseback rode near them on paths to Hondegem.

When they reached a low barn, dogs barked and a female voice cried out in Flemish, 'who is there? Show yourselves or I release my dogs on you!'

Raes van Lake thought it better to answer than to run on.

He stood not far from the woman, so he cried back, 'good folk, woman! We mean no harm! We are only passing your farm. We would like to spend the night in a barn. We will not harm anyone!'

Something in Raes's voice must have sounded right, for the woman came nearer. In the dark, Raes could not see her face, but she was a middle-aged, stout person, probably the wife of a farmer.

She noticed several shadows moving along the wall of the barn, so she stepped backwards and sideways, but asked, 'how many are you? Who are you? Are you men who fight for Flanders or for France?'

'For Flanders!'

'Come near so I can see you more clearly,' the woman ordered.

'We are fathers of sons who have left their homes of Flanders to come to fight here,' Raes explained. 'We are looking for our sons. They will be at Cassel with the rebels. How can we get there?'

'The French army has arrived. Can't you see that?' the woman replied scornfully. 'The French surround Cassel, but most of their troops have gathered to the north. It is dangerous here. Riders have also arrived at my farm today, twice this day. So far, the men-at-arms have not plundered us. Anyway, we are too poor and I was not much to the liking of the French Seigneur,' she chided, and laughed hoarsely, but Raes van Lake heard pain and fear in her voice.

'Where are we? How is this place called?' Raes asked and went up to the woman.

'Hazewind, Hare's Wind,' the woman replied. 'I can hide you in a barn that lays half in ruins. The riders of today despised entering that barn. They stole most of my food but left us unharmed. If you want to reach Cassel, you will have to run for it. In half an hour you can get there. Maybe at dawn, for in the night you will break the bones of your legs. Follow me. I'll show you a place to sleep.'

The woman led the men to a barn that lay half caved in. She told the five to go upstairs and draw the ladder after them. The second floor had been used some time ago to store hay. She promised to bring milk and bread in the morning.

Pieter Denout wondered, ‘can we trust that woman? What if she betrays us to the French?’
‘I don’t know how far we can trust her,’ Raes said.
He hesitated for a moment, adding, ‘I think we can trust her. We’ll have to trust her. We need rest. She seems to be on our side. Nevertheless, what might happen when men-at-arms arrive here, I have no idea. We pass the rest of the night here. Tomorrow we run for Cassel!’

At dawn of the next morning, the farmer’s woman called them from below, earlier than the men had wanted. She stood with milk, bread and cheese in the barn. The men pushed the ladder down and came to her, ate and drank.

‘Why do you help us?’ Raes wondered.

‘My brothers are with the Flemish army in Cassel,’ the woman replied after some silence.
‘The people here, also in Hazebrouck, have suffered the same way as the Flemish up north. Flemish or French, we want to be left alone. It is hard enough to till the land, sow and harvest. We don’t need the nobles on our backs. The nobles tax us, squeeze us until we work only to feed them and not our own families. They are a disgrace. But of course, men understand not such considerations. I have children. I know what it is to love a child. You didn’t seem to me to be lying when you said you were looking for your boys.’

Suddenly, they heard shouts from the far. The five men and the woman ran to the direction of the shouts, but they ducked into the grass, behind a grain field. They watched an awesome spectacle.

Raes van Lake lay on the ground near the farmer’s woman. Fires in high orange flames rose out of the village of Saint-Mary-Cappel. Men-at-arms on horseback surrounded the houses. They rode with torches in their hands. Two knights in steel armour ordered to set fire to the thatched roofs. Raes saw them command and point. The men-at-arms hurled torches to the roofs. Farther away, roofs already crackled from the flames that were eating at the straw and reed. Thick, black smoke whirled to the sky. Raes and the woman heard timbers shattering, rafters collapsing in the farms and houses. The morning breeze was light but blew from the northwest, sending dark fumes in their direction. Raes smelled the burning wood. Women shrieked, men staggered from the fires, flames leaped from roof to roof, babies cried and dogs barked. Farther away, more villages burned. The French army was burning down the villages around Cassel!

A few farmers and their families fled the village in the direction southward to Hondegem. The fugitives ran and stumbled on the road. The women wept and sobbed. Raes van Lake and his companions saw how horse riders pursued them. The fugitives were being slaughtered by swords and axes. Heads flew, spines were split. A few women, the younger ones, were not killed. The riders drew these into the grain fields. The men dismounted and disappeared with the women in the field.

‘Ripe for harvesting,’ the woman whispered, ‘the grain and the women. The grain they shall burn, the women they shall rape and leave lying in the field to be burnt too.’

‘You should run, flee,’ Raes whispered to her. ‘Your farm may be next.’

‘Whereto should I run?’ the woman cried and began to weep.

‘East, east! To the first larger wood you can find. Hide in the ferns for a few days. Take cloths to hide from the rain. Keep down, cover yourself with leaves, and wait. Don’t move. Don’t make a fire. Avoid the paths, even the smallest.’

‘I have two young children in the farm. My husband died with a fever two months ago.’

Raes van Lake sighed.

H said, ‘take your children with you. Explain to them they have to be quiet. I’m sorry, we have no food anymore, we have nothing to give to you. We cannot take you with us. If you

want to survive, take my advice and run and hide! A few days will probably prove sufficient. Five days at most.'

The woman nodded. After a while, she returned to her farm, oblivious of the group of men and of Raes.

In the far, Raes still saw the men-at-arms and the knights burn what could be burned, slaughter what could be slaughtered, rape who could be raped and kill who could be killed. He thought how fine it was to live in a town among people who were more civilised than these crude, vicious men. Ghent was really a community of people who had sought a better, more Christian life than these warriors could offer, and who had learned by forming militias and by building walls to protect themselves from this unruly world.

A little later, Raes, Gillis, Wouter, John and Pieter stood together at the barn. The woman had vanished, fled with her family.

'What should we do now?' John asked.

'We can wait for the night and then try to get into Cassel. Or we can run for it now, in daylight,' Raes replied.

'If we wait yet longer, the entire French army may stand in our way,' Gillis objected.

'If we go now, the French riders will remark us,' Pieter Denout feared. 'They will kill us!'

'Raes and I know French,' Gillis mentioned. 'We speak French well. We can form a group as if we are French men-at-arms. We simply walk on, as if we are fearing nothing. If riders stop us, we tell them we have helped set fire to Saint-Mary-Cappel and are on our way to Terdeghem. We are men-at-arms of Robert of Cassel, or from the lord of Nieppe. The woman explained to me yesterday the largest wood beyond La Motte was the Forest of Nieppe. I don't know of any lord of Nieppe, but we might just get away with it.'

'What if we don't get away with it?' Pieter Denout asked.

'Then we fight! We should put our breastplates and helmets on so that we look like men-at-arms, and show our swords.'

'We must get as soon as possible to Cassel,' Gillis urged. 'We must expect more Frenchmen in this area. We must go!'

The group of five *Gentenaars* put on their helmets, and took their swords and breastplates. They then marched rapidly from out of the farm. They did not run. They dared not look sideways. They looked straight forward, stepping through the grain fields. They hoped riders would not spot them soon. They advanced at first to the northeast, then westward, to Cassel. They were challenged three times from the far by armed riders who hesitated to drive their horses into the high grain. Three times Gillis shouted in his best French they were men from the troops of Robert of Cassel, setting fire to hovels and farms. The riders each time turned. They had more urgent things to do than to check on other groups.

The Pharaïldis men were left alone, and with some hilarity they noticed how rapidly they neared Cassel. The danger grew the nearer to Cassel they came, for no French men-at-arms would have come so close to the ranks of the Flemish, but they were not challenged anymore. They did not know how right they were calling themselves fighters of Robert of Cassel. It were Robert of Cassel's men who set flames to Robert's own villages around Cassel, tempting the rebel army to come down their hill and fight in the plains. The lord of Nieppe also was Robert of Cassel.

The Battle

King Philip VI of Valois had ordered his army to assemble as of June 1328. Messengers had been sent to his feudal lords, as well as to his allies, urging them to bring the number of men-at-arms to which they were obliged by charters and treaties. The message sent was the *arrière-ban*, the feudal order to serve the king. The dukes, counts and lesser lords of the royal domains who owed the king feudal duties competed among themselves to please the king with large contingents, to be able to ride with him, priding in his attention. Among his allies, William I count of Hainault, Holland, Zeeland and Friesland had promised many knights on horseback, as did the kings of Bohemia and of Navarre and the crown prince of Austria.

The army was complete by the first of August, gathering at Arras in northern France. The count of Flanders and the count of Namur moved their troops to Lille, to menace the eastern territories of Flanders.

By the ninth of August, the French troops had marched north to arrive at the abbey of Waasten near Warneton by the seventeenth. By the tenth, the king was at Ecoeu, and by twenty August, the French army finally came in sight of Cassel.

It was a proud and wealthy army, in which many powerful nobles of France rode in magnificent attire, with large flags and tens of banners in their groups. An impressive number of horses of all sorts, fine coursers and heavier destriers, grazed in enclosed fields and a little farther stood an enormous camp of chariots. Scouting groups of men-at-arms on horseback were sent in all directions.

King Philip VI set up his tent camp, his headquarter, at the village of Hardifort, just north of Cassel. Around his tents stood the marvellously coloured tents of his allied kings and of his dukes. Troops rode all around Mont Cassel. The smaller tents of the men-at-arms filled the plains beneath the fortified town.

The rebels looked in awe at the splendour and might of the French army. They saw an army of knights, men trained for war, for killing, an army of noblemen, of wealthy lords.

As soon as his royal tent was dressed, which lasted only a short while after the king had arrived because his chariots had been sent in advance, Philip of Valois dismissed the chatter of his courtiers. He wanted to be alone. He had to rest. He threw off his armour, which he had worn till this moment for good measure, and changed into a lighter robe. His tent emptied of voices, he asked a chair to be brought to the entrance, and Philip sat, facing due south. He looked straight into the sun. Philip sat, a thirty-five year young king, energetic, intelligent, beardless, long curled light-brown hair falling along his cheeks, a sharp face that began to soften from the sumptuous life of banquets and feasts he led at the court, dressed in blue silk embroidered with the golden *fleur-de-lys*.

His eyes faced the sun, which did not bother him very much, for he only looked up at Mont Cassel when a heat cloud passed before the ball of fire. He realised instantly the sun would be an issue for the attacking Frenchmen. His army would have the sun in the eyes. His crossbowmen would not be able to aim correctly, his horses and knights would be blinded while at gallop, whereas the Flemings would see distinctly well. A French attack should therefore be launched not earlier than the afternoon!

Philip looked at the enormous surfaces of shadows move over the plains. When a dark shadow reached him, he looked up and studied the hill. When the sun hit him brightly again,

Philip averted his eyes to the ground and considered. He was no fool. He was very well aware his position was not to his advantage. He had no need of his counsellors to tell him that.

Philip had become king by flattering and cajoling his cousin, the former King Charles IV, into trusting and even liking him. Philip was count of Valois, of Maine and Anjou, the grandson of Saint Louis. His mother was a daughter of the ruling house of Naples. He had succeeded by words in eliminating closer pretendants to the throne, the pretendants in the female line, by sheer cunning and well-placed phrases, instilling the courtiers of France with the idea that the old Frankish habits at the Capetian line of kings – Philip mentioned the term of ‘laws’ – to anoint as king only a man from the male line. He pushed thus out of his way the newly born daughter of the former queen. He negotiated with Jeanne de Navarra, the daughter of his other cousin, the former King Louis X le Hutin. He passed over the son of Isabel, the sister of King Charles IV.

That son of Isabel was the most serious pretendant, King Edward III, the king of England. Edward was still a boy of sixteen, no threat, but his mother remained at that time under the influence of her lover, Roger Mortimer. Isabel ruled over England instead of her son, for she and her lover had forced her husband, King Edward II, to abdicate in 1327, two years ago. Edward II had been a particularly foolish ruler, totally inept at reigning, and he had been a notorious lover of men. How had such a man spurned a son? Was Edward III the true son of his father? The contrary was impossible to prove! Queen Isabel had a lover, who was the true ruler of England, Roger Mortimer earl of March. Roger Mortimer had imprisoned King Edward II, deposed him as king, and replaced her husband by her son, Edward III. The boy was only fourteen at the time. Edward II had been released, travelled to Ireland, and a year later, he had died of natural causes, of grief, according to Mortimer and the queen. King Philip did at first not doubt Isabel and Mortimer had killed the English king. Regicide! Isabel had gone as far as she could! Her soul would surely burn in hell.

The former Edward II had not died in September of 1327, however, the funeral had been a sham, but his son, Edward III had only learned the truth a few months later. He kept the truth a secret. He also did not know where his father had escaped to! Edward II had left for Italy over Avignon, so that the popes had a leverage over the king, for Edward III had officially held to the version of the death of his father. Edward II died in Italy, and that only in the autumn of 1341, but Philip of Valois did not know that hideous truth.

Had he, Philip of Valois, done the right thing to push aside the daughter of the king and the first cousin of the king to become the anointed of France? Had he done the right thing in the eyes of God? Were not kings designated by inheritance and by God? Had he usurped the throne against the will of God? Had he thus forfeited his eternal soul? Or had God destined him, Philip, to be king after all?

Philip looked again at Mont Cassel. He saw a formidable army on the hill! He cursed the count of Flanders, who had caught him in the inebriation of the anointment at Reims into promising he would raise an army and subdue the rebellion in Flanders. He should have promised nothing! True, Flanders was rich, and Philip, as his predecessors, wanted Flanders to himself. Of course he wanted the gold of Flanders! ‘How powerful is this land of Flanders,’ Philip reflected, ‘that it can muster an army, even an army of peasants, that is as numerous as my own, the army of the king of France! How insolent are these Flemish, even only the common folk, that they believe they can challenge me?’

The men that sat on Mont Cassel were peasants, of course, for the knights of Flanders rode in Philip's army, and peasants had not been bred for fighting, but fight they could! How many times already had these lowly Flemings defeated armies of the king of France? Too many times! Strong, skilful, handy with a pike, intelligent men sat there, and in defence they were stubborn, held their place, and when destriers ran on pikes, not much skill was necessary to crack the skull of a falling knight.

'Should I storm the hill, take Cassel by storm?' Philip asked himself aloud.

Philip had been trained as a knight. He had enjoyed great fame in tournaments. He was not the king who drank wine and ate formidably all day and pursued women! He could win a fight, and he remembered he won more often than not by waiting until his opponent opened his weakest side to him, lost attention by fatigue or boredom. His courtiers urged him to launch the attack on the hill tomorrow.

It could be done! First I advance the crossbowmen, harass the Flemings until some chaos sets in under the walls, then send in a few groups of men-at-arms against one wing, then against the other, to make the Flemish doubt and hesitate, tempt them into moving down the hill with their ranks, tempt them to run fast downhill, then begin the deadly gallop with my most armoured knights and break the enemy lines. That is how it could be done, and that is what the dukes and counts of France propose, but what if the Flemings just stay there, do not move at all? How can I apply my largest destructive power, the charge of the knights on horseback? The horses cannot charge at a fast gallop up those hills! What then should I do?

Philip's intuition was that the French army, barely larger than that of the Flemings, would not be able to dislodge the rebels from that damned hill, and then he would run with his head not against the walls of Cassel, but against the steel defence wall of the hardy Flemish warriors, the enemy army led by a farmer. He could not lose from a mere farmer! He had to win!

Philip did not underestimate farmers. No, better wait for a mistake of that man, that Nicholas Zannekin! Better wait until the Flemings ran by their own initiative down into the plains. In the plains of the valley, he could win. When the Flemish army moved, only then could he throw his knights against their ranks and crush them. He had to wait, and let the Flemings take some form of initiative. He should wait patiently and let the Flemish attack. There was not much honour in the waiting, but even less in being defeated. After a victory, nobody would dare to remember which side had attacked first! Maybe the Flemings would move away, back to Flanders. That would be the best outcome, for then he could pour his army into the country and punish the villages and towns one after the other.

'Give them at least the chance to escape, Philip,' he said.

Zannekin must sooner or later move from that hill, Philip thought, for the farmer's leadership would be challenged if he didn't, whereas nobody would dare to challenge the legitimacy of the king of France!

Philip was thirsty. The sun burned indeed. He asked for water. When a servant brought a cup on a silver platter, Philip had a splendid idea.

He should show the Flemings he had all the time in the world! He should not show he was eager to start a battle at Mont Cassel. No, he should not give battle tomorrow, when the Flemings expected it most, despite the loud and hard voices of his marshals that still rang in his ears, practically ordering him to launch the attack tomorrow. No, no, he, Philip, was the king of France. He could do what he wanted, and if it was his desire to wait and wait and linger patiently here, he could do so.

Philip called his steward and told him to organise a great banquet tomorrow for him and his dukes and counts and the other kings, and also to provide a fine feast for the men in the army. The steward showed no surprise. The man grinned, even.

‘Well, well,’ Philip of Valois noticed with some pleasure, ‘at least one man in my army has understood what I want to do!’

‘We do not have to hurry in setting up our camps,’ he told the steward. ‘Take your time!’

The French needed three days to organise their camp. Meanwhile, the French war leaders tempted the Flemish rebels to abandon their strong position and to come down from their hill. The French were at a disadvantage in the plains, for to attack the Flemish troops they would have to run and ride uphill. The hill was steep. The charges of the knights on horseback would be spent before they could rush into the enemy. Crossbowmen would also have it difficult to let loose their bolts upwards, and their bolts would not go as far uphill as they flew on flat ground. On the other hand, the enemy, the rebels, could fire their bolts from the crenellations on top of the walls of the town, from farther away, in a high arc, and well protected. The knights would not be able to charge uphill with force and knights on foot would be exhausted from the climb by the weight of their armour and weapons, so that they could not smash and surprise the rebel ranks. It was impossible to bring siege towers and siege catapults to near the walls.

Nicholas Zannekin had sent an embassy to King Philip as soon as the French army arrived, to fix a date and hour of battle. The messengers of Zannekin had not been allowed even to enter the king’s tent. Courtiers in splendid dresses told the Flemings that lowly villeins did not decide on battles. The moment of battle would be decided by kings and noblemen, not by lowly country people. Villeins could only be crushed!

The two armies therefore remained gauging each other for two days, standing in front of each other without moving, the Flemish snugly under the walls of Cassel and in the city. The French sent crossbowmen from Genoa and the Languedoc to harass the Flemish warriors, tempting them to come down from their strong position, but the Flemish answered the bolts and beat the crossbowmen off in skirmish after skirmish. Insults shouted and bottoms ostentatiously bared, as well as obscene signs made, did not perturb Nicholas Zannekin and Winnoc le Fièrè, the rebel leaders, to rush down. The rebels stayed where they were.

The twenty-second of August, Robert of Cassel, the uncle of the count of Flanders and lord of the castellany of Cassel, arrived with a large group of men-at-arms from his reprisal raids against bands of farmers who had attacked and destroyed the castles of the lords of the Flemish lands. When Robert entered the royal tent, a large set of high tents in blue-coloured silk decorated outside and inside with the *fleur-de-lys* symbols, Philip VI sat at a table with some of his advisors and courtiers. He drank wine with the dukes of Burgundy, Bourbon and Brittany, with Messire de Ligny and Messire de Beaussy.

The king was irritated because the Flemish refused to give up their strong defensive position, but he was also giving orders for a new banquet he organised for the evening. He needed more than insults to induce the rebels to come to him. Philip was also cross at Robert of Cassel, who was Flemish and thus somehow connected to the rebels, though no one else but Robert fought the rebels so viciously.

The king ordered Robert of Cassel to set fire to the villages around the town, so that the Flemish rebels, most of whom were farmers, would be enticed to march into the plains, where he could destroy them with charges of his knights.

Robert of Cassel knew better than to protest. He said not a word, and rode off. He preferred to keep his lands, his castellany, even if he would be only the lord of ashes. He did realise the humiliation of having to burn down his own villages. He led his troops to put to the torch the peaceful villages of Wemaers-Cappel, Bavinchove, Oxelaere, Terdeghem and Saint-Mary-Cappel, the villages around and nearest to Cassel, as well as a few boroughs, smaller villages constituted of isolated farms. He put the grain fields to fire, as well as the pastures on which the grass stood high and dry. He scoured the countryside with his men, making sure no Flemish warriors still infiltrated the plains west, south and east of Cassel.

At the end of that third day, on twenty-two August, the French nobles feasted their future, inevitable victory with a great banquet, after which they slept well and late until the beginning of the afternoon of the twenty-third, the eve of Saint Bartholomew's day.

In the evening and night of twenty-two August, the Flemings remained in their ranks on Mont Cassel, clenching their fists and grinding their teeth at the devastation of what was as holy to them as the crucifixes on the altars of their churches: the not yet harvested grain in the fields, the hay in the pastures, their hovels and farms, the cattle and the barns. They saw well how pitiless Robert of Cassel's riders massacred the inhabitants of his castellany. The men of Flanders, mostly farmers, stood only more determined as ever on their hill, sad but calm, for they were given one more proof of the disdain of the family of their count, of their lords, for what they valued more than their lives.

Nicholas Zannekin noticed that day how the army of King Philip had split in two wings. The right wing of the French, to the left in front of the Flemings, was positioned at Hardifort, where Zannekin knew the camp of the king had been set up. That wing would be led by the king and his dukes. A left wing of the enemy, to the right for the Flemings, held the allies of France, the troops of Hainault, Holland, Zeeland and the feared Frisian riders, as well as the men sent by the king of Bohemia.

Zannekin and Winnoc le Fièrè therefore separated their troops in three parts. The central part they took under their leadership, directed against the right wing of the French, at the troops led by the king. Here they placed the bitterest men from the castellanies of Veurne and of western Flanders, who had suffered most from the lords of the countryside, with the men from the castellany of Cassel.

To their right, aimed at the left wing of Hainault and Bohemia, they positioned the urban militia of Ieper and Kortrijk. Zannekin had asked for archers from Bruges, but these men had not yet arrived. A third part, consisting of a motley assembly of lesser trained troops, the Flemish leaders held in reserve. John de Smet, William and Raes van Lake stood with many other young men, mainly men from the castellany of Veurne, in this third group.

While the French noblemen feasted in the evening of twenty-two August, and while also wine and rich food were being distributed to the French ranks, the Flemish army stood and waited in the scorching sun on the dry hill. Very little water could be delivered, and as food the men had only what they had been able to hoard the first day they had been ordered to form ranks under the walls of Cassel. The sunrays hammered relentlessly on the heads or on the helmets, boiling brains. They suffered from thirst. Zannekin and le Fièrè would not be able to hold their troops for many days on in this position. Their nagging question was who would lose nerves first, the Flemish in running downhill, or the French in attacking uphill. Zannekin and

le Fièrè liked their defensive position, for they knew the Flemish army was strong in defence, as proven by numerous previous battles, but the heat and the lack of water could defeat them. For now, the armies waited and gauged each other.

John, William and Raes sat in the burning sunrays on the northern slope of Mont Cassel. The sun bit in their necks. The youth of Ghent were not used to this sun. They were city-boys! Captain Boudin grinned, for he had always suspected these boys did not come from the countryside. He had heard them talk and he had recognised the manner of speaking of the centre of Ghent, of the Kuipe. He didn't care where his men originated from, as long as they could hold a *goedendag* firmly, showed some dexterity in hitting with the club, and swung a sword the right way. The three *Gentenaars* showed promise. Boudin had found swords for his men, and even a few shields. William had received a shield, an old, battered surface. John and Raes had already stolen shields. Boudin did not want to know from where they had taken the arms. He was rather satisfied with the three young men from Ghent. They were strong, adroit and intelligent. They found food and drink when his other men didn't. He needed boys who could decide for themselves and had a good view of any situation. Boudin placed them with the best of his men in the midst of the group of Veurne he trusted most. Carstien, Brakkel and Maes with the three *Gentenaars* would have to form the heart of his group, advance in a triangle behind him, and he hoped they would follow him to hell. He had trained them for this wedge-like formation. He did not doubt that, once thrown into a melee, few of his boys would survive the first clash, but the six he had assembled around him had the best chances to live. What he didn't know, however, was how they would react to first blood, first blood on enemies and on themselves. They had shown the most cunning and sharpest intuition good for survival, quick reactions and quick minds. Boudin thought the environment of Ghent, where men competed much, had the effect of creating survivors.

Boudin had arranged for a place under the walls to be used for the natural needs of his men. He did not want that in the ranks. He had hoarded food and water, not nearly enough, but his men had more than the men of other captains to his left and right. The smaller Raes came with a chicken on the first day, disappeared on the second and came back with pieces of lamb. Neither Raes nor Boudin had commented.

Boudin flew no banner, for he had none. The contrast between the rebel army and the gaudy army that waited in front of them in the far was great. Hundreds of banners and flags displaying a myriad of bright colours had been deployed in the plains. The French soldiers wore *jupons* in red, blue and yellow over their mails, displaying the colours and badges of their lords, whereas the Flemings were dressed in country brown. The French had placed large tents behind their ranks, also very colourful, tents made of striped cloth dyed in all possible, bright hues. Innumerable smoke columns betrayed the place of as many campfires. The French ate hot food, stew, broth, and they must have ale as much as they could drink. That food had been scavenged from the ravaged countryside, Boudin knew. The Flemings had only bread, dried fish, and cheese. Slivers of dried meat were a luxury. The ale had been drunk the first day, now they had only brackish, foul-smelling water to drink. A few men had become dizzy from the beating sunrays, and others suffered from bowels turning to water. Boudin could see these men regularly run to the walls of the city. He did not smile when he thought of the sick. In a couple of days longer on this dried-out hill, many of the rebel fighters would become so sick and so weak they would not be able to stand upright, let alone run

fiercely to the French ranks. He cursed. Did Nicholas Zannekin really know how the army felt? Better to fight than to be terraced by the sun and the lack of water!

In the evening of the twenty-second of August, the extent of the carnage in the villages around Cassel became obvious. The flames could be seen far, then, and the billowing smoke hung as dark, monstrous ghosts over the countryside. The villages had been depleted of men and women and children, the farms abandoned. Animals had been slaughtered. Boudin and his men cursed the French for the sins of the devastation. Their mood was low. The men talked less, conversations ran as dry as their throats. The men just sat, stared to the flames, and kept their silence. Beneath them, the sounds of the cheers of the French could be heard high up on the hill. Boudin hated the youngsters to be brooding over the horrors of the war long before the battle started. He wanted Zannekin to order action!

During the night the men slept where they stood, rolled up in a woollen cloak for those who had brought one, face turned to the flames in the plains below. Luckily, the nights were warm and the sun had warmed up the ground during the day.

Nothing moved the next morning, the morning of the twenty-third. Groups of enemy men-at-arms on horseback could still be seen galloping in between the abandoned villages, behind the enemy ranks, but everything that could be set to flames in the vicinity had been burned to the ground by then, pillaged and ravaged. No order came from Zannekin to attack downhill. The sun began to burn once more. Numerous birds, also many black crows, circled above the armies. No clouds offered spurious relief of shadow to the ranks.

In the middle of the Flemish army, along the thousands of men lying down or crouching at dawn, one man stood up and looked at the French. Nicholas Zannekin, a stocky man dressed in the brown, coarse tunic of the common farmer, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, ruddy-faced, wrinkled face burnt red by the sun, small-eyed, stood in front of his small tent. He too watched that morning the smouldering fires. He looked at the last flames and the smoke that rose from the countryside of Cassel. He was a well-to-do farmer of Lampernisse, no knight, no lord but a fishmonger and later farmer who had known success at farming, a moderately wealthy land-owner now, and he had as much cunning as any lord in the camp before his eyes, down at Hardifort. He was a Flemish farmer, and the destruction of the country and of the fields he loved but for which the nobles did not seem to care, hurt him particularly and filled him with horror. He hated not being considered the equal of the lords down there, the knights with their gaudy banners and shining *jupons*. He liked knowing them lower on the ground than he. He smiled, for he harboured some hope.

Winnoc le Fièrè had told to Zannekin the second day, ‘the French must attack uphill sooner or later. They are arrogant. They lose face in waiting down there, scared of a peasant army. The longer they wait, the more the war costs them, and the nobles will begin to grumble.’

That was true, Zannekin thought, and he felt some satisfaction in the fear of the French to attack. Yes, in defence the Flemish were almost unbeatable. The French must also know that much, he surmised, as they had learned from previous battles against the Flemings. But could he, Nicholas Zannekin, wait longer under the walls of Cassel?

Zannekin, as any other diligent farmer would have done, had sent informers into the French army. These men were his eyes and ears. One of those spies, a man disguised as a fishmonger, had roamed wide among the French warriors. He had succeeded this morning in reaching the Flemish ranks.

The French had feasted richly last night, the man told. They felt arrogant and sure to win. They now slept late and they would continue sleeping, and then would stand with weary heads. They would start eating again in the early afternoon, when the sun began to lower. They would once more eat much and sleep again. If ever the Flemings wanted to launch the attack down Mont Cassel, a good moment could be at the beginning of the afternoon to mid-afternoon. The battle could then be finished by the evening, at a good hour also to flee if the Flemish were defeated. Defeat was an outcome Zannekin would not want to consider. If the Flemings attacked, they won!

Zannekin had come to a decision. He should show patience and hold to a defensive position, let the French come, but matters were not as simple and straightforward as most thought! The French sat cosy in the plains, whereas his men were suffering from the heat and the thirst. He would give the French what they wanted, today. He would order the attack at Vespers, when the farmers in the fields of Flanders stopped working for a moment to whisper a prayer. Their prayer would be the attack. God would support the cause of the farmers! Zannekin had to order the attack, for he knew well he could no longer hold out on the hill. He would lose too many men to hunger, thirst and sickness if he stayed here. He would order his men to run down. At least, he would have the sun in his back and the French would have the sun in their eyes.

Zannekin turned to Winnoc le Fièrè who had remained inside the tent. Zannekin wanted to attack with all his men in one overwhelming wave, and in total silence. He wanted to surprise the French. He did not want shouts and war-cries to be heard from the hills of Cassel. He told Winnoc le Fièrè the attack should be launched on this day, but he asked Winnoc to tell nobody. The French should not spot any change in the Flemings' attitudes. Several Catholic masses were being held in the Flemish ranks on the hill. Zannekin too prayed, for he would pour his men like a bucket of water over the plains, in the silence of doom. It would be a strange attack, one the French did not suspect. And then the crying and the killing could begin, and God blessed them all in death, Flemish and French alike. Such would be Zannekin's Vesper prayers.

All was quiet in the French army. Oblivious of what might be happening higher up, the French men-at-arms proceeded with their everyday duties. They did not expect a Flemish attack today. Nobody in the French army expected the Flemish to attack. Had these not been paralysed with fear at the sight of the most splendid French army? The king would order the attack, not the Flemings!

Nicholas Zannekin and Winnoc le Fièrè sent trusted men of their staff to warn the group leaders to run downhill at Vesper Hour for a general attack. Vespers would be called by the priest who stood next to Zannekin. A crucifix signed with trembling hands and a silent prayer would do, for the Flemish onslaught against the French army would start immediately, massively and swiftly. The messengers had to order total silence in the rebel ranks, even for prayers, and so when Zannekin's priest made the sign of the cross, held up the crucifix to the sky, and blessed the Flemish army, a wave like a stormy whirlwind makes in a barley field moved among the rebel army under Cassel.

The Flemish warriors who sat stood up and ran downhill. The men who already ran, followed their banner or their leader. Silence was difficult to keep, for courage needs loud voice and

hatred had to be vented, but the orders were clear and strict. The Flemish men ran, weapons in hand, without a word, and formed their ranks. The silence could be interpreted as a miracle for troops so undisciplined, but the silence was kept out of respect for Nicholas Zannekin. Zannekin and Winnoc le Fièrè accompanied their men of western Flanders and of Cassel, striking at the central French camp, aiming for the tents of the king.

The militia of Ieper and Kortrijk charged to the right, directed against the wing of the French allied troops. The Flemish rebel leaders remarked few men-at-arms on guard. They saw no sudden movement rippling through the adversary tent camp, indicating their charge had not been noticed. Most of the Frenchmen ate in or around their tents, many slept from the previous night's feasting. No orderly ranks and blocks of warriors had been formed. The Flemish could crush the unaware enemy!

Nicholas Zannekin's luck held longer than he had dared to hope. His entire army ran to almost into the tents of the Frenchmen before he could discern panicked reactions from the enemy. A story told much later recalled that a young knight of France called Renaud le Noir was the first French warrior to have noticed the oncoming men-at-arms.

Renaud supposed new reinforcements for his army had been brought, so he shouted, 'friends, do not run so fast, make less noise! Why do you run so fast? Do not disturb our men during their pause of rest!'

Renaud was the first French knight to be killed that day. A javelin pierced through his breast. He did not even realise his mistake and was very surprised at the wood that suddenly protruded from his chest.

At the last moment, when they reached the French camp, the Flemish sounded their trumpets and drums and they shouted their war cries. Flanders! Zannekin! Ieper! Kortrijk! They had already started to kill by then. The Flemings ran as a mad, wild horde into the dispersed men of the opposing army. They ran with their goedendags, pikes and lances staked horizontally. In a few moments they killed every Frenchman who stood in their way.

The French troops were utterly surprised, unorganised, and even unwilling to grasp the reality that was happening everywhere around them. Their crossbowmen had no time to turn their ratchets and place a bolt on their bow. The Frenchmen wore no heavy armour, no steel breastplates. Many had left their shields and weapons inside the tents. Only a few had continued wearing their chain-mail in the hot weather. These men grabbed the first weapons they would lay their hands on when they saw Flemish warriors run past them, whether that weapon was their favourite or not. Still the Flemish advanced. They overwhelmed the first French defences.

Zannekin and le Fièrè shouted to form dense ranks, for each man to stand directly next to another, and to attack in wedges cutting inexorably through the French ranks, but in those first moments, the Flemish rebels simply ran through and deep inside the French enemy like a man draws his fingers through the hair of his beloved, with as much ease, and the Flemish killed and maimed before awareness of the attack sank into their opponents' mind. Nobody had expected a Flemish attack so soon, without previous negotiations, without warning.

One of the most famous knights to be killed early was the duke of Lorraine. He had been walking on foot among his men, musing about the nice weather. He had been overrun by tens of Flemish warriors. He wore no armour but a light leather jerkin. He fought with his sword only a little while. The long, iron point of a *goedendag* opened his belly, another sliced his throat. A coarse groaning welled up in his mouth with the blood from his gullet, and he fell

while the Flemish ran past him. He too died before he could realise his troops were being decimated in front of their tents.

The fighting lasted, one French men-at-arms to several Flemish warriors in the first ranks. The more the rebels advanced, though, now stepping calmly on and not charging anymore, the harder the battle was fought, for the French men-at-arms and knights grouped together with every second. The knights shouted commands for forming closed ranks and for organising resistance. They fought on foot with lances and pikes, with battle-axes and morningstars nervously grabbed in their tents. As more and more French ran also forward from the rear, the battle was being waged ferociously and almost at a standstill. Hundreds of bodies lay between the feet of the Flemish, the dead not being their own. They shouted cries of victory and killed with their *goedendags* and swords. They continued the awesome slaughtering of enemies. They forced the French backwards.

Nicholas Zannekin took the time to look at what was happening on his right side. He saw harsh fighting there. The Flemish lines were working their *goedendags* against the king's left wing quite more closely to the hill than where Zannekin stood. The Flemish had not succeeded so well in surprising and disorganising the men from Hainault. A fierce battle was being fought between Zannekin's right wing and the French army's left wing. Knights on horseback charged heavily into the Flemish ranks at the extreme end. The Flemish seemed to crumble at that point. Zannekin feared most what was fully being played out by the French allies to his right: dense, concerted charges of many armoured knights on armoured destriers, crushing all resistance of warriors on foot and not well enough poised to stop such attacks by lines of pikes. The terrain here, in the wide valley and plains, was extremely well suited for that kind of assault.

The swelling noise of the battle, the din of clashing steel, the hacking of axes and swords on shields, as well as the war cries expelled from thousands of throats, awakened King Philip of Valois. He wiped at his eyes with his fingers, noticed a certain heaviness in his brain from yesterday's wine, but he ran out of his tent, asking what was the matter. The dukes of Burgundy and of Brittany came to stand next to the king.

'What is happening?' the king cried, 'what is all that noise about?'

Philip only saw a large commotion of running warriors in front of him, of swords and axes being wielded, of men still groping for their shields and lances. His warriors ran away from him, forward, towards the melee.

'It seems to me the battle has begun, Sire,' the duke of Brittany dared.

Philip looked at the duke open-mouthed. Had the Flemish attacked so soon? Were there to be no negotiations, no second chance for a treaty without a fight?

At that moment, the lord of Noyon, a friend of the king, came running to Philip. The lord's jupon was besmeared with blood, and Philip also saw blood on his friend's face.

Noyon knelt before the king, shouting, 'Sire, the Flemish have attacked us, surprised us, and overwhelmed us!'

Philip recognised the dismay and fear in the eyes of the men who stood around him. Panic showed on the faces. The king was dressed only in a leather jerkin over a light mail shirt, a silk jupon with his badge thrown over this, a velvet cap on his hair, but he grabbed a sword and an axe, opened his arms and shouted, 'qui m'aime me suive!', or 'who loves me is to follow me!'

The king called for his horse. He urged his barons to action. The king might have fled, and then the battle would have been lost very soon for the French. Philip was a tournament knight, however. He did not flee! Not yet!

A few moments later, moments which lasted an eternity for the King, he had formed a small group of knights. The king sat on his horse without a helmet, and his destrier had not been armoured. To his right stood the Messire Michel de Ligny, a gallant and excellent fighter, and the Messire de Beaussy. Messire Jehan de Chepoy arrived to this group also. To his left, the king smiled at Craillant de Usages, and at the Messire de Bousay. He would not forget these to have been among his first faithful knights. The squire of the king, the Borgne de Sens, had found the king's helmet and lance. He too was ready to follow his lord. In front of the king already stood Jehan de Beaumont, holding the king's badge, and Monseigneur Milles de Noyens unfolded the Oriflamme.

The Oriflamme was the sacred war banner of France, used in the French army only when battle was given against foreign troops. The banner was kept hidden and protected in the Abbey of Saint Denis near Paris. It unfolded to a long, red flag ending in two longer, triangular splits. A golden sun and bright rays and stars were embroidered on the red cloth, probably representing the light of God. The *fleur-de-lys* of France and the axe of Saint Denis adorned the banner. Green silk bordered the red cloth.

The king gathered more riders around him. Henri de Champagne rode to in complete, shining armour on a formidable war destrier, and also Bouchard de Montmorency and Louis, count of Savoy, arrived with a group of knights.

The king brought his battle-axe to the sky with outstretched arm and shouted, 'Montjoie Saint Denis,' the battle-cry of France, and he spurred his horse forward. The entire group advanced into a canter. The canter was symbolic, for in a few seconds the king reached the battle. He was surprised at how close to his tents the Flemish warriors had already brought the actual battle.

Nicholas Zannekin saw the Oriflamme deploying its brilliant colours in the sunny afternoon, not twenty paces from where he fought. The Flemish peasants were engaged with fury and thirst for revenge in their hearts. Injustice done to them had forged their energy. They hammered down with their spiked clubs, swung their axes, stabbed with their *goedendags* at the French men-at-arms that pressed against them.

The French stood in a dense pack in front of Zannekin, but still the Flemish crashed into the French. The on-running Flemings had pushed the French ranks together like the folds of a pair of bellows. Only the first rank of the two armies could fight now, but the Flemish rebels were already turning around the flanks of the French on Zannekin's right, overpowering their enemies. Zannekin heard not many commands being shouted among the French troops.

In the melee in front of him, the fighting became frantic. The ranks had been packed together so that there was barely the space in the first rows to wield a sword or an axe. Sweaty bodies in steel pushed shield to shield against other bodies. The men cursed and shouted war cries for courage, but much of their effort was spent simply in pushing against each other. The *goedendag* had here a definite advantage. One could stab with it through the throng of men, in bellies and legs, even from out of the deeper ranks. The Flemish advanced.

Nicholas Zannekin threw his shield in the face of a bearded Frenchman who stood without the protection of a shield. The Flemish warriors used axes to draw shields away. When the man staggered, leaning against the man behind him, Zannekin pierced with his pike the man's

chain mail. The French warrior's eyes opened in surprise, Zannekin pushed his iron deeper, then he drew his *goedendag* back, and hit the falling Frenchman with the heavy iron club beneath the spike of his weapon on the man's head. He stepped forward while the Frenchman continued to fall, jumping instantly over the body of his slain opponent.

Around Zannekin, the Flemish warriors were killing more Frenchmen, still exploiting their surprise. Zannekin and his companions from the region of Veurne cried victory, for they saw the French men-at-arms recede, step back without really offering resistance. The French fell back to the royal tents. The enemy had been thrown into confusion. The knights, and no doubt also the king, shouted to them to stand and fight, but the French men-at-arms continued to step back.

Zannekin fought, killed, and Winnoc le Fièrè fought and grinned next to Zannekin. Winnoc fought with shield and sword. When he noticed that Zannekin looked at him, he pointed his sword to the left, to something he had noticed a little while ago. Zannekin followed the movement of the sword with his eyes, looking at what was happening on the road to Saint-Omer. The road leading to the west was filling with fleeing enemy men-at-arms! The French warriors were fleeing from the battlefield! Victory was at hand!

Zannekin's heart expanded, he laughed at Winnoc le Fièrè, who stood grinning like a wild animal, blood-drenched, blood dripping from his sword, shouting, 'victory, victory! Victory is ours!'

Winnoc the wild entered the French lines with renewed power, a tremendous force that could not be withstood, a group of Flemish men-at-arms wedging into the French ranks in front of him. He left dead and maimed bodies in his wake.

The battle in front of the royal camp of King Philip was fought fiercely for a long time. The French resisted more doggedly with time, defending every step of ground with hatred and arrogance, with the courage of despair and envious anger, hearing their king shouting courage. Their group leaders formed better and denser ranks. They sent men with javelins and lances forward. Men-at-arms in mail and with breastplates on their chests, greaves for their shins, and helmets on their heads, wearing large iron shields and weapons, axes and maces, stepped forward, drawing lightly-armed men to the back. They fought fiercely with the Flemish for every inch of terrain. They felt the eyes of their king on their back.

The battle became more even, now, and Flemish men fell as plentiful as French warriors. More knights on horseback, more heavily armoured riders, assembled around the king, and some of these rode to Zannekin's right to stop the Flemish from attacking the French ranks. The Flemish fought bravely on. The dead bodies in the first line piled up, but still the Flemish gained ground. When would the French lines crumble, their warriors give in and flee? This battle, in which man slaughtered man, in which one Flemish fell for every Frenchman killed, lasted for hours. Zannekin and Winnoc felt that in only a little more time still, they would have pierced the French lines. They would soon ply onto the back of the French ranks, and the real killing could start.

Then, the battle took another turn. Two new developments shattered Zannekin's confidence.

Suddenly, a large group of heavily armed riders, knights on horseback wearing couched lanced in front, crashed unstopably into the Flemish ranks left of Zannekin, trampling with their impetuous destriers over several lines of Flemish warriors. Behind the knights rode men-at-arms, wearing also full, shining armour of breastplates, helmets, greaves, steel shoes, wielding terrifying battle-axes, maces and morningstars. These troops rode in from the

southwest. They clashed onto the Flemish backs totally unexpectedly, gaining on the Flemish in their own game. They wreaked instant havoc in the side of the rebels.

The Flemish had not given much attention to these troops. Because these new formations of knights rode in from behind, they rode with the sun in their backs – an advantage the rebels too had exploited not so long ago, - and, most significantly, they rode with the black, rampant and armed lion of Flanders on their banners. The attackers were led by Robert of Cassel, uncle of Louis de Nevers count of Flanders, the count of Flanders' warriors in the army of the king. They stabbed and hacked in on the Flemish peasants they despised.

Robert of Cassel had been plundering and patrolling south as far as the Leie, when he had been notified of the on-going battle. He had rallied to him all the French and the count's troops roaming in the countryside south and west of Cassel. He had forced them into one powerful, well-organised mallet that now hit the rebel flanks at their most vulnerable place, the weaker left line, where the rebels did not stand in one phalanx to confront him, and where nobody expected an attack. The war horses trampled over the Flemish fighters, the knights pierced men through and through, and the remaining opposers were smashed with axes and maces, skulls broken, chests caved in, throats cut. Zannekin watched in horror, despair and bitterness the proud banner of Flanders advance, held high, into his ranks. He cried to face the new danger, to regroup, to form lines of *goedendags* to the left, when a second wave leapt over his mass of warriors.

The battle at the left wing of the French army had been doggedly, unevenly fought for the Flemish. The militia of Ieper and Kortrijk had enjoyed a few first moments of surprise, but the alert had been given in that French-allied battle while they still ran downhill. At first, few well-armed men confronted them, but then, over the hours, the battle had been stubbornly disputed with great bloodshed.

The knights of Hainault and of the Low Lands to the north of Flanders had remained on guard in full armour that morning. The allies of France had not participated in banquets as had done France! Their warriors were fresh, they stood on guard on all sides, they stood in full armour and with their weapons in hand, their horses grazed yet ready and in armour. Hainault had remained vigilant and cautious. They had been surprised by the sudden attack, but they had been able to form tight ranks while the rebels still rolled down Mont Cassel.

When the Flemish rebels ran into the troops of Hainault, the first lines of the French allied troops were pushed a few steps back, but the lines did not break. The ranks of the allies did not crumble, and no panic set in as in the central French wing. The lines absorbed the shock, bowed back, but held in good discipline. The struggle that developed was fighting of man to man. The militia and mercenaries from the French allies were far better trained and better armoured than the Flemish rebels. The warriors of the count of Hainault, the Bohemian men-at-arms and the mercenaries of the prince of Austria slaughtered the Flemish peasant militia rather easily after a while. The count of Hainault sent groups of crossbowmen to the sides of his battle to send bolts from very short distance into the massed Flemish packs. The rebels lost many men, and they lost heart. They did not advance anymore. Their rows of warriors were rapidly being thinned in a terrifying massacre. The Flemish did not rapidly abandon their ground, however. Victory was still in their reach. They fought for hours against their enemies. Dead bodies littered the field. The moaning of the wounded rumbled in the Flemish right wing, the French allies suffered loss of many men too, but neither side gave in.

The count of Hainault threw all his men, also his reserves, in the battle. After a dogged struggle, he remarked how his front mass held the Flemish in place. Those troops did not

waver under the steady rebel pressure. He was losing men, but not as fast as the Flemish were, and he surmised the Flemish would break. He launched and re-launched his knights on horseback in shattering charges on the sides of the Flemish rows. Slowly, inexorably, the Flemish warriors plied into the central mass of the rebels, so that a thick rectangle of Flemish warriors formed, which Hainault could assault from all sides. That manoeuvre left many Flemish troops standing in the middle of the block on the battle field, not participating in the fighting. Hainault had won the advantage!

The count of Hainault saw as first signs of his impending victory, how a few groups of Flemings fled eastward, towards the road to Steenvoorde and Poperinge. He sent a large contingent of men-at-arms on horseback to slaughter these fleeing men and to make prisoners of the one who seemed to wear somewhat gaudier tunics, hoping to win modest ransoms. He did not hope to discover knights among these men, knights who might have brought him wealthier prize-money, for the lords of Flanders fought with the king, but he was greedy for the little he could get. He freed the direction to the east to encourage more Flemings to run off and to leave the block. He then wondered how to set to use his remaining troops.

Hainault and his co-leaders had noticed the distress of the king on the French right wing. They now sent a large number of warriors on foot from Holland to attack the right flanks of the Flemings, coming to the aid of the central French army. The men from Holland fell with great ferocity, shouting their terrible war cries, on to the troops of Zannekin on the Flemish left wing.

The fresh troops from the French allies broke into Zannekin's right side, threw his flank together, so that his mass condensed at that end too, forcing many of his warriors to the centre and unable to participate in the battle. With less men to fight, the French could place relatively more warriors to each rebel Fleming. The troops of Zannekin were being crushed onto a heap. Men stumbled against and upon one another, arms got tangled and swings of *goedendags* clashed among the Flemings. The French warriors stood and fought relentlessly with new-found hope and ardour. They then formed wedges of men-at-arms that penetrated the Flemish lines deep.

For the first time that day, not long before evening fell, Zannekin's lines were forced to step back, back to Mont Cassel. Many Flemings were slaughtered in this movement. On his left side, Zannekin's men were being increasingly ravaged by the fierce assaults of Robert of Cassel's invincible knights. On Zannekin's right side, the battle was waged on foot, but there also the Flemish were losing spirit and they were forced back into the central mass. Zannekin needed more men to contain the troops of Robert of Cassel and to overwhelm the count of Hainault's men who harassed his right side. He must have realised then, too, that the battle was lost on his right wing, and that soon the entire French allies' left wing would fall upon him.

Nicholas Zannekin fought with the last hope of despair. He called his trumpeter to sound the attack of the reserves, the third part of his army, which still stood on the hill of Mont Cassel. He also sent two messengers to these last Flemings, to order their attack.

The young men who had been waiting anxiously on the hills of Cassel in the rebel reserves, heard the orders to march to the carnage beneath them. They did not protest the commands.

They had increasingly waited in silence, for they had witnessed clearly the obstinacy of the killing in the plains. They saw hundreds of corpses lying on the ground. They saw the clouds of dust that hung over the killing grounds. They had heard the shouts, the war cries, the din of the battle, and the shrieks of pain of the dying men. They also clearly saw that not only the Flemings did not advance anymore, but were increasingly being thrown backwards. The original attack had faltered!

The seasoned farmers that fought in the broad valley of the Peene River near Hardifort had no time to think about the horror of the battle. They found themselves rapidly blood-hardened. They fought in a frenzy of defence and attack, of killing and maiming, of revenge and hatred. A belly opened and entrails sprung out, an arm was chopped off, a skull opened, a leg shattered, cuts of swords were delivered on chests or spines. These were the normal results of their task in the hell of Cassel. The butchery of two armies hacking at each other with weapons of steel was the natural environment the Flemish peasants and the knights of France, Flanders and other counties had created today, and which they currently were used to live in and to die in.

For the young men on the hill, however, the horror unfolded before their eyes in all its violence and ugliness. Many of the youth had to run to the walls of the town to empty their bowels, a few vomited what they had eaten where they stood, others merely grinned and shook uncontrollably, and a youth fell unconscious. He was slapped in the face by a captain-leader, who found no words of consolation when the youth opened his eyes. The nerves of the young men were strained to the breaking point.

When the sign of the attack was given, it came almost as a relief. They could run now, shouting and hitting their *goedendags*, swords, and axes on their shields. The charge downwards and the shouts relaxed their tension, expunged their fears and carried them forward in the crazy mood of vengeance needed for inconsiderate killing.

Captain Boudin the Bald of Veurne ran down the hill of Mont Cassel in the first ranks. To his right yelled John de Smet and William and Raes van Lake, though Boudin still only knew their names, not their family names. To his left ran the youth from the *Veurne Ambacht*, the castellany of Veurne, Pieter Carstien, Gillis Brakkel and Coppin Maes. The latter stumbled halfway in a hole in the grass, so that Boudin had grabbed the young man by the collar of his tunic and urged him on. They ran on nerves turned to water, with long strides, gesticulating with their weapons, and always shouting, shouting of the impending kill, forcing their brains into a trance of death.

Boudin's men reached the chaos of the battle in a nick of time, unchallenged by French divisions. The fresh troops were divided in two parts by commanders yelling the orders to split. One half of the new men was sent to the right flank of the rebel army, one half to the left. Boudin's group ran to the left, attacking the other Flemings of Robert of Cassel. The slaughtering there raged terribly, for fully armoured knights struck large gaps in the rebel troops. The Flemish knights of Robert fought on horseback, seated on powerful armoured horses who had been trained to trample men to death under their iron hooves, fierce animals that bit and snared at who attacked their master. Each knight had at least two or three Flemish peasants swarming around him now, but the knights defended themselves with extraordinary might, power, skill, dexterity, wielding the most frightful weapons such as maces, long broadswords, morningstars, morningstars on chains, and battle-axes. They had dropped their lances a long time ago, for too cumbersome in close combat.

John de Smet ran so hard he bumped against the steel plates hanging from the side of a horse. He expected to have his skull broken by the knight above him, but William van Lake ran to him in such a rage, that William, while running, stabbed his *goedendag* under the breastplate of the knight at a place of hinges, straight through the rider's chain mail, deep in the warrior's side. The knight howled of pain, but still, almost supporting his body on the *goedendag*'s spike, he swung an enormous axe at William. Raes van Lake halted that axe with his shield. The axe cleaved half the iron, but Raes pushed at the same time his *goedendag* in the hind quarter of the war horse, in the parts of the animal where it was not protected by plate. The stallion pranced high from the pain. The knight was thrown up in the saddle, drawing with him William's *goedendag*. For a few moments, William stood on the battlefield with no weapon in his hands. He took his short sword at his belt, and in his turn stabbed at the belly of the destrier. The horse fell sideways, towards the youth. The knight staggered, trembled, then slid out of the saddle, very slowly, towards the van Lake boys. While the steel warrior fell, John and Raes stabbed their *goedendags* in the throat of the knight. The man roared with pain just for one moment, then blood welled up in his mouth, his eyes widened, and he died in the gurgle of the dead-throng.

William shouted a cry of victory, but already a group of enemy men-at-arms attacked them, crying vengeance for the killing of their lord. A group of five hardened warriors fell on Boudin's men.

William van Lake parried a sword thrust as Boudin had taught him, thanking his captain with a late grin, and he kicked the oncoming bearded, dark warrior on the shins. The man wore greaves, but he was surprised by the street-fighter kick, receded, hesitated for a wink of the eyes, enough for William to push the *goedendag* he had picked up, into the man's belly. The *goedendag* hit steel plate, but William was a very strong young man, so his opponent lost his balance and staggered backwards. William was standing on the right foot, so he struck his shield in the man's neck, placed another foot forward, and leaned down on his *goedendag* somewhat lower, now piercing mail and flesh. The eyes of William's enemy widened. The eyeballs remarked how young his enemy was, then he sighed and abandoned his spirit to his fate. William did not push on. He withdrew his *goedendag* from the wounded man's body, blood spitting from under the fine armour to all sides. William kicked his enemy's sword aside, then he swung his weapon to his left, where his brother Raes had it hard to parry the threatening blows of a mace flung by another helmeted man-at-arms of the French army. The iron club of the *goedendag* caught the enemy warrior in the side. The man tripped over a dead body, opened his shield to support his fall, so that Raes van Lake could stab his *goedendag* in the man's gullet. The warrior fell, but Raes van Lake stood like a ghost warrior painted in red by sticky blood next to his brother. William feared his brother had been severely wounded, but Raes grinned, took another step forward, wielding *goedendag* and shield against another enemy. William understood in a glance the blood on Raes was not the boy's own. He parried another blow of a sword with his weapon.

The battle raged terribly around Nicholas Zannekin and Winnoc le Fièvre, who were almost exhausted. Evening fell, but the battle continued. The Flemish rebel leaders had it not in their minds to abandon, to flee and to cede the field to the king. Had they done that, they would have saved much distress in Flanders, but no Fleming abandoned a battle! The French knights despised the peasants they were crushing, for the king had made it known villeins should not wage war against their God-given lords and should be smashed. The killing continued therefore in all its horror on both sides.

Around Nicholas Zannekin, the Flemish fought covered in blood. Zannekin could not but notice how steadily on different men fought at his side, as friends and faces recognised disappeared in the French ranks and did not come out again. Zannekin and le Fièrè fought in despair. They acknowledged the massacre on their right was almost finished. The remaining Flemish troops of the rebels on that side fled to the east in large numbers, some to the north. Large groups of French allied warriors, many of them knights on horseback, did not fight anymore. They stood, leaning on their weapons, panting, resting a while, waiting for orders to the next attack. That attack, Zannekin and le Fièrè expected, would come soon, directed straight at the mass of their fighting troops in the centre.

‘We have to reorganise,’ Winnoc shouted, parrying a sword thrust and swinging his goedendag. ‘Our right part has been routed. Soon, the Hainault men shall attack us from the east in large numbers. We must regroup!’

‘We must form the circle,’ Zannekin cried back. ‘We make a circle, as we discussed the eve of the battle. Only a mass of spikes can save us from an assault by the knights of Hainault. We must go back until almost on the hill, and form a circle there! I’ll give the signal!’

The signal to form a crown around the banner of the rebels, around the leader Zannekin, had been explained to the captains. Zannekin ordered his trumpeter, who still fought on his side, to sound the ordered retreat. Then, Zannekin, the trumpeter and the standard bearer with Winnoc le Fièrè, slowly receded, back to Mont Cassel. The retreat was remarked by the rebel captains. The entire rebel army gave way in an orderly retreat. The men disengaged duels and stepped back. Nicholas Zannekin had been wounded in the leg. He did not move quickly enough. Frenchmen approached swiftly and a tall man-at-arms spliced his spine with a battle-axe. Zannekin was instantly killed. Winnoc le Fièrè shouted the men to continue retreating.

The French knights and warriors sighed with relief, for they thought the Flemish fled in disarray to the fortified town. Winnoc le Fièrè stopped the feigned retreat only a little farther, however. His men assembled around him and the standard, which was now his. The captains forced the men of Flanders into a large crown. The Flemish rebels planted *goedendags* in the earth all around the circle as if they put up bean stalks. The men knelt against the pikes, holding the points obliquely but firm, to stop the war horses from riding over them. Were the Flemings not the strongest in defence? Attacks by knights on horse stopped for a while. The French army hesitated. The crown that had been formed still held a considerable army inside, the Flemish were masters of defence, they would not yield. The crown seemed impossible to charge into. The rage on the French side was immense, though.

Boudin the Bald of Veurne stood with his young men inside the circle, in the third rank of eight. Pieter Carstien was not with him. Boudin had seen a knight hack off Pieter’s head with a mighty blow of a long, sharp sword. The body had remained standing for a few eternity-lasting moments, then it had toppled to the ground. Boudin had taken his revenge and killed the knight after a dogged duel, but he could not bring Pieter back to life. He looked around him, checking on how his remaining boys had fared.

John had received a nasty cut on his leg. Blood streamed along the boy’s striped stockings, but the bone did not seem touched. John had been able to run back with his friends. William, unhurt, was winding long slips of white linen around John’s leg.

The youngster called Raes had fought very well, Boudin asserted. Raes stood next to Boudin, now, eyeing at what the enemy was doing.

‘This one does not fight eyes closed,’ Boudin thought, ‘the boy anticipates. He has the stamina and presence of mind of a leader.’

Coppin Maes was wounded too, at his left arm. Coppin's arm was useless now, but the man still grasped a *goedendag* with his right hand, swearing and cursing he wanted revenge.

Boudin let the boy shout, but he drew the *goedendag* out of Coppin's hands.

'A *goedendag* needs two hands, boy! Take my sword. Try holding the shield with your left arm, even if it hurts. Try that at least a little!'

Boudin presented his sword to Coppin, who had the courage to render the captain a smile of thanks.

Gillis Brakkel stood also next to Boudin. He leaned with one arm on Raes, in a comrade's gesture. Gillis too had fought very well. The two born warriors had recognised friends-in-arms, skilful killers both, so they had crept closer together. They had fought as one, and would fight on as a great menace to the Frenchmen that dare come near them, together with Boudin.

A strange silence hung over the battlefield while the rebels formed their new defence. Far below Mont Cassel, the French troops also reorganised in silence for the final assault. They assembled the knights. These would have to break the defence circle. The French smelled victory. Their war cries of 'Montjoie Saint Denis' intensified.

King Philip VI of Valois had fought with his knights, his barons, against the Flemish rebels. Never had he thought an army of peasants to be so hard to defeat. Of course, the king only fought as a token. In fact, he had stood most of the time in a group of knights that fought for him. This group was the king. He encouraged his knights. He did enter a melee once himself, not too far inside the Flemish ranks, but at that moment he thought his help could add to the victory of the battle. The mace he now held in his hands was red with blood, Flemish blood.

Philip had seen the count of Bar being led off the battlefield, severely wounded at the head. The count of Boulogne had fought close by the king, but he had received a stab of a *goedendag* in his thigh. Then, an axe had bitten into his breastplate, crashing the plate into his ribs. The count had been transported back to the tents by his men. Henri de Champagne too had been badly hurt, and it was reported to the king the count of Hainault, who had fought so heroically in the king's left wing, had been knocked clear from his destrier. The count had remained lying on the ground a few moments, eyes closed, but he had regained conscience, asked for another horse, and the count was back on horseback and fighting as courageously as ever before. King Philip sent the Sire de Bousay to his left wing to congratulate William of Hainault with his victory, and ask him at the same time to send more warriors to the central wing, to the king's men, where the fighting was the worst.

King Philip cursed, for he would have wanted to defeat the first wing of the Flemish in front of him, and then having been in a comfortable position to offer help and rescue to Hainault. The opposite had happened. Hainault would remind him of that development the rest of his life! The king had to admit the Flemish warriors in front of him were probably larger in number and the very best, hardened men, the best fighters the rebels could muster. Philip continued to shout 'Montjoie Saint Denis', his throat becoming hoarser with the minute. He encouraged his knights to the attack.

The battle had lasted for hours, darkness seemed to set in, and still the Flemish rebels did not waver. King Philip saw the spiked crown being formed by his enemies. He had to throw his most powerful knights against the fortified position. The king surmised many would be killed

before an opening could be forced into the circle. Could he devise a ruse to open that circle? While the troops separated a few steps from each other, the French preparing to give the assault to the Flemish, Philip was thinking. He told Michel de Ligne to hold the two armies further apart. He would give orders soon. The dukes of Brittany and of Burgundy joined with him. The men conferred.

The Flemish rebels endured the enemy's assaults in the crown and waited for further French assaults. The knights rallied from everywhere around the rebels. After a short while, the general attack was sounded in the king's army, and the knights launched a formidable charge against the Flemish, aimed at breaching the human fortress. The large destriers and their iron men galloped at high speed on the spikes of the *goedendags*. The sound of the wounded and killed horses then rose to the sky. Horses impaled themselves on the pikes, horses fell and broke legs, horses pranced, were pierced in the breast, and threw off their riders. Many destriers fell amidst the Flemish defenders, crushing some warriors. Where a stallion fell, a knight fell, and both got killed in the shortest of time, but after these other riders broke into the circle, reached deeper, and breaches developed. The knights who succeeded in riding into the second and third lines of Flemish warriors were stopped there, however, and though the ferocious knights killed many Flemings, they too were overcome and massacred rapidly. The Flemish commanders shouted to form and close the ring after the French intruders. This tactic proved very successful, but on both sides many warriors were killed piteously. One attack after the one was launched in this way, and each time repelled.

John de Smet, William and Raes van Lake the Younger fought deep in the Flemish crown with Boudin van Veurne, Gillis Brakkel and Coppin Maes. Twice they had to confront a terrible knight in steel armour fighting them with maces. The *Gentenaars* developed a way of trapping knights of their own, in a deadly tactic. Raes van Lake, the man who showed the most courage and daring, attracted the knight to him. When the knight already called victory and swung his mace to crash Raes's skull, John de Smet attacked the destrier from the right and William van Lake from the left. The knight saw two *goedendags* strike deeply into his horse, halting it. The animal would turn, crazed by the pain, slide sideways, fall, and then the death toll sounded also for the knight. While he fell, Raes van Lake sprang on him and pushed his *goedendag* through the long slit of the warrior's helmet, reaching the brain of the unfortunate knight. Twice this stratagem had worked well. Nevertheless, John de Smet got a glancing swing of a mace on his helmet, which swept the bascinet high and drew flesh from his face. John bled profusely and stood only half conscious for a while. He lost much blood, which dizzied him. The flow of blood seemed impossible to stop at first, until William once more bound him with the last white, linen strips he had in his pockets. The *Gentenaars* stood their ground, ready to handle new surges of knights. Boudin van Veurne also had been wounded, and Gillis Brakkel had been transpierced to death by a short lance. His mail chains had been struck and given way. Gillis was drawn to the centre of the crown, where he died a few moments later. John, William and Raes knew nothing of his fate.

King Philip VI of Valois saw more of his barons and knights being brought to the tent camp in the rear. The dukes of Burgundy and of Brittany were wounded. So was Louis, count of Savoy, valorous warriors all, and the king's dear Michel de Ligne was equally transported to

the doctors. Jehan de Chepoy had suffered a nasty wound, but returned from the battle at the Flemish circle with optimistic news: the Flemings were being decimated and should surrender soon.

Philip of Valois wondered sceptically how true that message might be, for from where he stood, he saw the best knights of France die against the Flemings, around and in the giant rebel crown.

The king ordered his troops, the men who had been fighting between Cassel and the Flemish circle, back to him. He ordered the same for a large number of troops that fought to the west and the east of the Flemings. Philip had discussed this manoeuvre with his staff, with the Sire de Bousay, with Jehan de Beaumont and Count William of Hainault. Robert of Cassel fought on against his rebel compatriots on the north side. Philip did not call him to his staff.

‘How ferociously and bravely do these Flemings fight,’ King Philip sighed. ‘With the Flemings on my side, all the Flemings, the knights and the militia of Flanders, I could double my power. With Flanders’ wealth at my disposal, I could triple my power. I would be invincible and I could defeat any army of the continent. I must continue what my predecessors started. Flanders must return to the crown of France! These men must learn to fight for me, their ultimate ruler! How can I make this happen?’

While he was thus wishing for a grander future, the king’s army finished the manoeuvre. The king withdrew a large number of his troops to Hardifort, away from the Flemish ring.

In the ranks of the rebels who stood to the north, the battle raged on. Men-at-arms on foot pressed the rebels hard. Crossbowmen on that side began to shoot their bolts into the Flemish lines.

Winnoc le Fièrè was killed in that battle. He received a thrust of a sword in his belly and a battle-axe cracked his helmet, spilling part of his brain in a pool of blood on the fertile soil of Cassel.

Several Flemish captains, weary of the lasting ravages, the senseless massacre of men, remarked suddenly how large parts of the French men-at-arms on foot and almost all the French knights were being withdrawn from the battlefield. These troops retreated slowly northward. The rebels on the other side saw the sloping hills of Mont Cassel open to them. The desperate Flemings, exhausted from the relentless attacks, gained hope, and shouted, ‘up the hill, up to Cassel! We must form a new defence up on the hill!’

They had no supreme leaders anymore to contradict them.

The groups of Flemish fighters who stood closest to the hill ran as quickly as they could uphill, their backs to the French. Men ran uphill unthinkingly in a disorganised mass. At first the slope was long and low, but farther up the slopes were steep. The Flemings had a long way to retreat! The largest part of the peasant warriors in the circle, thousands of warriors, ran uphill, in what resembled a rout. They chose to forget that their lines opposing the French army to the north, was still holding the French with desperation. These rebels could not retreat, for they would immediately have been slain by the French warriors from the back. Their lines thinned however, as more and more Flemings ran away from a certain death to what seemed to be new hope, the safe haven of an impregnable position up the hills. The retreat turned into an uncoordinated chaos of fleeing men.

That was the moment Philip VI and his staff had been waiting for. The barons around Philip knew how easy it was to strafe a routed army compared to disciplined troops that held their ranks. While the Flemings ran in dispersed order, the king released once more his knights to intercept the disorganised Flemings and to penetrate into the opened circle.

A terrible onslaught followed. The French and their allied knights on horseback cut through the retreating Flemings like so many knives through butter. While the Flemings ran in panic, the knights pursued them and found it easy to slice unprotected spines, to hack at the heads of men who had their backs to them, to smash skulls from behind. The rebels lost all sense of forming organised ranks of defence. The Flemish warriors now fell as frightened individuals, and individually they were overrun, trampled upon under the hooves of wild destriers, and killed by the dozens. Victory was now totally, obviously to the French. In the falling darkness, the king would win the Battle of Cassel! The Flemish rout could not be undone. There was also nobody of the leaders left in the Flemish army to propose defeat and surrender, and so stop the now useless killing. The French gave no quarter. Had the king not unfolded the Oriflamme, which denied surrender to the enemy?

The only Flemish line that resisted a while longer, was formed by the ranks that had faced north and west in the now breached defence circle. These men of Flanders held out against renewed attacks of French men-at-arms on foot, eager for revenge. The Flemish could not but notice they stood one to five in the line, and they had French warriors in front of them and in their backs. They faced certain death, but still they did not run. They held their place and fought on.

In the second rank of that line fought John de Smet, William and Raes van Lake. They fought with *goedendag* and shield. They had seen Boudin, their captain, fall, and Coppin Maes too had been killed only moments ago, pierced by a javelin and then killed by an axe in the chest. The two brothers and John fought on, side by side, now skilled, almost fully experienced and hardened warriors, oblivious of the horror of severed members, heads, and dead bodies falling to their left and right. They fought against overwhelming odds.

Raes van Lake the Younger looked at his brother and at John de Smet, sadness openly showing in his eyes. The three young men were by then convinced they would die soon, never see their sweethearts again, but they still stood amidst heavy fighting as a small integer group that fought and retreated very, very slowly to Mont Cassel in one block.

John de Smet was twice wounded.

Raes van Lake had received a long slice of a sword on his chest. Blood seeped out of the long cut that had clipped the chains of his mail, so that the lower part of his mail shirt hung only at the sides, exposing his bloodied lower chest and belly.

William van Lake still wielded his *goedendag* with both his hands, but he felt his courage to resist slip from his arms and mind.

Three French men-at-arms saw easy prey before them. They homed in on the weakened *Gentenaars*. Two of the French warriors flung their swords forward. The third man heaved an axe to cleave William's helmet.

The three Flemish boys stood on dead bodies of comrades killed before their eyes, fractions of moments ago.

Suddenly, something of a whirlwind of violence ripped through the men that fought the pitiful group of John, William and Raes. The three young Flemish men stood still in a melee in which there was no line anymore, only a chaos of men struggling against other men, sometimes one man not really knowing whether he had foe or friend in front of him.

The whirlwind of violent fighting reached John, William and Raes. The throng of pressing enemy warriors to their left opened as if the stalks of a corn field were pushed aside by a strong breeze or a wild animal speeding through the field. Enemy warriors were thrown aside, one man fell, blood erupting from his head, another's legs were smashed under him.

Three new warriors breached the French lines, who were now also thin at this point to the west.

The new warriors swung their weapons with fresh energy and eyes filled with rage. The Frenchmen recognised berserk, revenging men, so they stepped aside, avoiding death, and they sought easier targets. John, William and Raes still held their weapons, but the points dropped to the ground, for their arms and muscles were totally spent, exhausted.

Two warriors sprang to the youth from Ghent. They were no French men-at-arms! They wore no shining mail and plates, no silvery breastplates, no colourful jupons. Their armour, their simple pot helmets were rusted and old and dented, and their weapons seemed to have the stains of another age on them.

Raes van Lake the Elder forcefully swung a spiked *goedendag*, a *plançon à picots* in a whirling circle around him. He swung with such power that no French warrior could have remained standing in the space he created. He wore no shield, but needed no shield.

Behind him, and old, enormous *goedendag* in his hands, a small shield wound with leather thongs on his left arm, stepped the strong blacksmith Wouter de Smet.

A little farther, Gillis Vresele fought with a shield and a sword, and John and Pieter Denout followed, hitting left and right with more *goedendags*. They too wore shields.

The boys, John, William and Raes the Younger looked with disbelief at their fathers. They were too astonished to move.

'We have to go from here. Follow me!' Raes van Lake the Elder cried.

William and Raes the Younger could walk, though the young Raes needed a few moments to push himself back on his feet.

John de Smet could walk, but would not go far unaided, and he could certainly not run.

Wouter de Smet picked his son up from where he stood. Wouter took his son on his shoulder as if he heaved a sack of charcoal on his back. John hung over Wouter's shoulders from left to right, Wouter holding John's left arm and the boy's right leg with his left arm. He kept the *goedendag* in his right hand.

Raes van Lake the Elder was in command, here.

He pointed his *plançon*, 'to the south, boys! We must run around Mont Cassel! We go back the same way we came! That is the safest route for now.'

Raes the Elder resolutely stepped in that direction, fighting off French warriors. The boys, William and Raes, followed. They ran, protected on both sides by the Pharaïldis men. Also Wouter de Smet, his son on his shoulders, taking long but heavy strides, ran in the middle. The men fought their way through the French warriors who packed together to oppose them.

Another development helped in their escape.

To the north, near Cassel, the Flemish fleeing men finally realised that if they did not regroup they would be massacred by the knights on horseback before they reached the gates of the city. A small group of men who gathered their wits formed a new circle uphill, and that circle grew by the moment, so that once more a strongly defended crown of Flemish warriors confronted the French knights.

The French barons remembered what had happened not so long ago, in the plains, to their friends who had charged into the defence circle. They feared the pikes that had again be

planted, point outside. They called for reinforcements from their men-at-arms on foot to breach the new defensive position. More and more French warriors therefore disengaged from the battle against the last, now totally crumbling line of Flemish resistance lower down. These Flemings, anyway, could do nothing else but flee to the east, where they would be crushed before they reached Steenvoorde.

Raes van Lake remarked how fewer and fewer French warriors remained to the south, so he pressed his group on.

Two remarkable events still happened to the group of fleeing *Gentenaars*.

Pieter Denout, realising their group could only be stopped by knights on horseback, had groped for a long lance that had fallen in the grass. While he ran with his cumbersome weapon, he also drew three jupons from the bodies of French men-at-arms who lay dead in the fields. He gave one to his father, one to Gillis Vresele, and he drew one over his own nondescript, brown tunic.

‘The jupons over our tunics may confuse French men-at-arms who would wish to chase us,’ he explained.

He might have been right with that ruse, but at least one brave French knight rushed in on the group a little later. The man rode very fast. Pieter Denout remained very calm, almost nonchalant in face of the danger. He waved the others away, took a shield from the ground, a large shield, almost as large as a pavise of a crossbowman. He planted his long lance firmly into the ground, a few moments before the armoured rider would crash into the group of *Gentenaars*. The rider continued to come on with the same high speed, but Pieter did not step out of the way. He lowered his lance a little more obliquely and aimed it at the last moment so that it transpierced the long neck of the destrier just above the powerful breast of the animal, and protruded three feet on the other side of the animal’s head. Pieter left the lance how it was. He threw the shield in the side of the destrier, receiving a powerful blow of a battle-axe on it, and he rolled far from horse and rider.

The stallion pranced from the pain, tried to whinny pitifully but couldn’t, and then slid sideways. The wooden lance broke in four pieces which were swung wide and high. The horse had been stopped so brusquely in its gallop, that the rider flew out of the saddle over the head of the animal, breaking yet another piece of the lance. The knight fell ten feet farther. He was flung to the ground in a terrible din of crashing metal. Gillis Vresele stood not far. He hacked at the throat of the knight and killed him.

‘Come on,’ Raes the Elder urged reproachfully, as if the youngsters had been playing a game. The men ran on.

‘Had I not seen that feat with my own eyes,’ Gillis Vresele later told, ‘I would not have believed it from Pieter. The presence of mind, the determination and coolness of mind demonstrated by our friend was something extraordinary to witness. Pieter rolled on, stood, patted the dust from his tunic, grabbed the knight’s axe, and continued to follow Raes the Elder as if nothing had happened!’

The more the group of *Gentenaars* ran south and then turned to the *Wouwenberg*, around Cassel, the less French riders did they meet. These were indeed, maybe, confused by the badged jupons some of the fleeing *Gentenaars* wore.

The last event, was more dramatic. Just when the men thought they had escaped, for darkness fell completely, a lone Genoese crossbowman must have spotted the men and found it sufficiently suspicious they advanced fast southward, to try a shot. Two bolts flew wide and high around the fleeing men. A third quarrel flew past Gillis Vresele’s ear and planted itself in

William van Lake's shoulder. The boy was thrown to the ground by the impact. The bolt was spent, so it did not go very deep, but it was dangerous enough to take a life.

Gillis was as first at the boy. He wrung the bolt out of William's shoulder, pressed his hands on the wound to stop the bleeding, pushed torn pieces of cloth from his shirt down, and then he too swung William on his back.

The men could not run anymore after this incident. William opened his eyes a little later and began to scream on Gillis's back. Pieter Denout came to walk behind Gillis, telling William to shut up. William was wounded, but he would live. Pieter pressed on the pieces of linen over William's wound, and spoke words of courage to the boy. William protested then. He only wanted to walk on his own feet again.

Night had fallen very dark when the eight men walked north of Oxelaere in ashes, over burnt-out grain fields, past Sainte-Marie-Cappel, back to Hazewind. They skirted the abandoned villages. Total silence hung around them. Around midnight, they turned to Brearde and continued south over Borre to La-Motte-au-Bois. They stopped between Brearde and Borre, hid in a wood.

There, in the night, they saw the town of Cassel burning. The French had put fire to the town. High flames spewed from the four towers of the fortified city. King Philip VI of Valois had taken vengeance on the mockery of the flag with the cockerel and the words of the 'found king'. Later, the men of Ghent also heard that the people of Cassel had been massacred, the women raped, the town pillaged, and even the children not spared.

Wouter de Smet made a small fire, took a spike of a *goedendag*, cleaned it as well as he could, blew into the fire until the point of the weapon glowed red, and then he cauterised the wounds of William van Lake and of John de Smet. William, held down by his friends, fainted. John did not faint but screamed like a pig that was being slaughtered. The others grinned at the young men.

'That should learn them to go to war!' Raes the Elder said. 'Their girlfriends will not like the scars, but their kisses will ease the pain!'

Before dawn of the twenty-fourth of August, dawn of Saint Bartholomew's Day, the *Gentenaars* took advantage of the very first light to press on to La Motte, past Hazebrouck. They arrived painstakingly, having had to avoid patrols of riding men-at-arms. French groups of riders were ferreting out the villages of the environs, looking for Flemish warriors hiding in barns and woods. The *Gentenaars* reached La Motte unseen, after which they murmured an act of contrition. They had nothing to eat, but nobody complained.

It was then the middle of the week, so they would have to wait a few days more for the boat of the de Herts, or proceed on further south on foot to Merville. They decided to stay at La Motte, a little south of that village, and they hid in the small wood where Arnout and John de Hert would look for them. Gillis, who spoke excellent French, dared to enter the village and he bought bread, milk and cheese.

It was there, at La Motte, that Gillis Vresele and Raes van Lake told the boys how they had arrived at the critical moment in the Battle of Cassel.

The Pharaïldis men had arrived on the southern hills of Cassel to be harassed several times by cavalry of the French royal army. The *Gentenaars* had lost much time fighting off the riders.

They had to escape by fleeing farther south, then they had to trace back to nearer the town. The Flemings of Cassel told them the battle was to be waged north, so most of the rebel army had moved to there. Gillis Vresele led his group around the town. The *Gentenaars* found the army of the rebels in full battle between Cassel and Hardifort, the reserves still waiting downhill.

‘What do we do now?’ Gillis Vresele had wondered, more to himself than to his comrades. ‘John, William and Raes the Younger may be anywhere among the thousands of men fighting under our eyes, but where may they be? If we go down there, now, we too shall have to fight, and we’ll not be able to look for our young friends. We did not come here to fight for Zannekin! Damn! We are too late!’

‘Get down,’ Raes the Elder cried. He had remarked French riders had seen their group and prepared to ride uphill.

The men knelt and then huddled together on the ground.

‘Gillis is right,’ Raes the Elder agreed. ‘We have no business down there. We came to recuperate our boys. How could we find them in that battle? We are not even sure they are in the battle! We must stay here and watch what happens. If any of us see the boys, we can run down and help them get out of that mess, hoping they let us take them back.’

The five men had waited and waited anxiously, crawling ever farther downward as the day drew to an end, trying to spot the three youngsters, but still they did not discover where John, William and Raes the Younger might be. When the reserves were drawn into the fighting, the reserves being for the Pharaïldis men just another part of the rebel army, they followed the attack with their eyes, but saw no figure that might have been familiar to them. They had by then also reached the base of the hill. They knelt in the plains. They hid behind a heap of brown earth churned up by galloping horses. There, they had been surprised by the sudden rout of the Flemings.

When the rebels fled back to Cassel, the five *Gentenaars* stood amidst the fleeing, exhausted Flemish warriors running past them. Close behind the Flemings rode the French avenging knights and their men-at-arms on horseback. These pursued the Flemings. The *Gentenaars* thus became anyhow involved, gobbled up by the spreading skirmishes.

When the gross of the Flemings disengaged from the battle and fled, the *Gentenaars* obtained a more open view of the battle and they looked out from the western side of the plains of Cassel. They did not find the boys they sought among the fleeing men, until Gillis Vresele looked intently at the last lines that fought on the north-western flank. The ranks had been much thinned to the last line of Flemish warriors who covered the retreat to Cassel.

Gillis Vresele suddenly thought he recognised the profile of the boy he knew best, John de Smet. He pointed into that direction, and Wouter de Smet clearly recognised his son, and next to him the van Lake sons. In the last minutes of the battle, the Pharaïldis men had run downward with beating hearts toward those Flemish ranks. The battered last group of Flemish then rapidly retreated also to uphill Cassel. The Pharaïldis men had found the boys, joined them, and defended them when they were about to be killed.

The youngsters repented and became very silent and very humble when they heard near La Motte what their fathers and the friends of their families had done to find them and save them from a certain death. They felt no pride, the more so since they had participated merely in what they now saw as a useless effort in a lost battle. The efforts of the farmers of the Flemish countryside and of the militia of the Flemish towns, except Ghent, had been in vain. How

much pain and suffering had been wasted? What had it all been good for? The boys did not doubt the armies of count and king would impose a harsh repression now on Flanders. They were imbibed with bitterness and everlasting scepticism as to the good intentions of the count of Flanders. The common people of Flanders stood alone, had to fight for their own values, and should distrust always both the landowner *Leliaerts* of Flanders, and of Ghent, as much as the knights, the count and the king. The rebellion and the resistance had led to nothing but to this realisation.

The Pharaïldis men nodded sadly and wisely, for they had known since always one could count on nobody but oneself, one's family and friends, but they did not try to console the boys. Their experience would have to mark the boy's' lives.

‘Let this be a lesson to you, boys,’ Raes van Lake the Elder said as sermon. ‘We only fight when our families and our own lives are directly involved and at risk. Ghent chose not to participate in this campaign, not on the side of the Flemish peasants, not on the side of the count. Well, at least generally. You’ll tell me that happened mainly because our town was held in the grip of the *Leliaerts*, but that explanation is only half true! We, landowners and traders and *poorters* and men of the guilds of Ghent, we were not involved in what happened in the countryside west of us. Our lands, our eastern territories of Flanders, were not touched by the injustice that was committed to the regions of Veurne, Bruges, Ieper and Kortrijk. We had too much to lose and little to win in this war! We live from the transport of goods over the Leie and the Scheldt, and from the industry of cloth weaving, dyeing and fulling. Those activities were not really hurt by the devastations of the county. We surely should not have intervened to assist in the destruction of our own lands! We fight only for our own families, boys, and then we are strong enough to fight on our own. What are Bruges, wealthy though she is from trade, Ieper and Kortrijk, to us? Why, the population living in those towns added together, is less than the population of Ghent! We have not fought this time, but are we not a sleeping giant better not awakened? That is our strength and our guarantee for peace. No need to fight the wars of others!’

The men remained hidden for two more days, until Saturday came. Gillis and Raes then stood on the lookout for the boat of the de Herts. Would the boat come? Had the de Herts been attacked by armed bands of the king? The men remained alert, for French men-at-arms on horseback still roamed the country. The *Gentenaars* did not dare to light another fire at night. They got hungry. They did not risk anew entering one of the nearby villages in search of food. Around noon of Saturday, however, the boat of Arnout and John de Hert indeed sailed very cautiously up the Bourre, and from the boat the de Herts waved enthusiastically at Gillis and Raes, indicating how glad they were to have found them.

The de Herts steered the boat to the side of the small river. They dropped the sail and embraced their friends. The younger men John, William and Raes, plus John and Pieter Denout, were pushed under the tarpaulins of the ship. Arnout and John de Hert had seen many large group of French riders patrol around the River Leie and higher up, so they told it was better not to attract attention on their boat carrying so many people capable of continuing the war.

When knights were remarked on the banks of the Bourre, Gillis Vresele and Raes the Elder shuffled around on board of the boat, mimicking repairing fishing nets and baskets, while Arnout and John de Hert steered and tugged at the sail. The boat sailed as much as possible in the middle of the river. When the riders shouted something, the shippers pretended not to hear anything. They cheered and nodded but stayed clear of inspection.

Around that time, the clouds darkened and consolidated, filled the sky ominously. First, a fine drizzle of rain began to fall, then the rain pelted down like in a storm. The wind blew suddenly more fiercely and whirled, and thunder and lightning then added to the curtains of water that poured down on the men. The *Gentenaars* welcomed this kind of weather, for less men-at-arms would be riding out, patrolling along the river. The *Gentenaars* hid under the oiled cloth and Arnout and John de Hert sailed and steered on, the only men in view on the water. Arnout would have stopped in the pouring rain; now he continued his sailing. The west wind added force to their square sail. Arnout leaned with all his might on the helm, cheering. This was his element.

When the boat arrived at Merville, Arnout de Hert made the vessel wait until he could steer past the river harbour in the very last light of the day. He threw the anchor in the middle of the Leie past Merville, when he could see no three feet in front of him. He remained awake and stood on guard throughout the night. He sailed on in the very first light of dawn.

In the afternoon of that next day, Arnout de Hert fell down from sheer exhaustion. His son steered the boat on, until they arrived deep in Flemish territory. Arnout then awoke from his heavy sleep, noticed his son had done well, and he steered on until the first houses of Ghent appeared. A few times men on horseback riding on the banks shouted to them to sail to the border, but Arnout and John nodded, smiled, cheered even, and sailed on quite safe in the middle of the Leie.

‘I don’t want our children in a hospital,’ Raes van Lake grumbled. ‘I don’t want to attract attention on our boys in Ghent. I have a fine doctor. I want the boys in my own house. Take us to the *Ketelgracht*, Arnout, this evening. We’ll disembark there at the *Braembrug*, in the darkness. We’ll go on foot from there to my house. John de Smet can stay with us, with my boys, until he is better.’

Gillis Vresele agreed, and when Raes and Gillis decided something, that decision was considered an order. Nobody protested.

‘If your house becomes a temporary hospital,’ Gillis smiled, ‘you can do your business from out of mine. We should not attract the stares of your business partners on the recovering youth.’

‘Agreed,’ Raes van Lake accepted with evident pleasure and relief.

‘My house will soon be filled with wailing and weeping and commanding womenfolk, for weeks,’ he added smiling.

‘Boys,’ Raes the Elder said, ‘we have scolded you, but that was nothing compared to what your mothers will do to you. I suggest you show some patience and act as if you are weak, feeble, and in need of a lot of tenderness!’

That advice was something true Flemish young men understood, so the men did as Gillis and Raes proposed. The Pharaïldis men disembarked the youth at the *Braembrug*, supported them until they arrived at Raes the Elder’s house, and then they went home to reassure their wives. Arnout and John de Hert already sailed at their ease back up the *Ketelgracht*, back to the Leie, homebound for the *Lieve Canal*.

Chapter 4. Diplomacy. From end 1328 to 1337

After Cassel

More than three thousand dead were listed for the Flemish rebel army that was defeated at Cassel, but the number of dead must have been much higher, perhaps as high as five thousand men killed. The chroniclers who wrote for the French side mentioned that all Flemish warriors had been killed, all fifteen thousand, but that was not according to the truth. Many escaped north and east, back into Flemish territory. The French army did not pursue the fleeing men longer than one day after the battle, and most Flemings had fled far by then, making good use of the night. Cassel suffered the most, its population was massacred. How many French and French allied warriors died remains unknown, but their dead also must have counted in the thousands.

After the Battle of Mont-Cassel, after the terrible defeat of the Flemish army, one town of Flanders after the other surrendered to the king, to the count and to the *Leliaerts*. Veurne, Nieuwpoort, Dunkirk, Poperinge, Ieper, among other opened their gates. Everywhere in Flanders, supporters of the revolutionary cause were arrested and executed. The possessions of the rebels were confiscated on behalf of count and king. The authority of the lords of the castellanies was restored. King Philip would have ordered for the countryside to be entirely ravaged, but Robert of Cassel and the Abbot of the Ter Duinen Abbey pleaded for his grace, and he relented. The king's wrath would not devastate the county of Flanders more than necessary. His wrath fell on the cities who had supported the rebels. The cities, of course, were rich, the countryside not so.

End September, King Philip handed over the authority of Flanders to Count Louis. The interdict and the excommunication of Flanders was ended by Pope John XXII in mid-October.

The repression in Flanders began in earnest under its count. The lords of the castellanies and the petty nobles of the countryside were restored to power. They sought revenge on the rebels that had destroyed their castles. The rebel villages were burnt down. Hundreds of known supporters and leaders of the rebellion were executed in the Flemish towns and villages, among them Lambert Bonin. The power in the land returned to the noblemen and to the feudal institution of count and king. The repression cost thousands of victims in Flanders. The property of the people who had fought at Cassel were confiscated. Two thirds of the goods had to be given to the king, one third to the count. The winter of 1328 to 1329 was not only a very cold one, but also very cruel.

In the cities of Flanders, the repression was directed mainly against the craftsmen, very many of which were executed or banned, the guilds deprived of their deans and offices. The towns lost some of their freedom charters.

In Bruges, the main leader of the revolt, Mayor William de Deken, fled to Calais, only to be arrested there when he tried to embark on a ship bound for England. He was dragged to Paris and executed in the most horrible way in December of 1328. The *poorters* were obliged to meet the count halfway between Bruges and the count's castle of Male. They had to humiliate themselves and kneel before the count.

That same month, the French king ordered the fortifications of Bruges to be torn down by Easter of 1329. Weapons were forbidden and had to be surrendered, the guilds were placed

under men assigned by the crown instead of under chosen deans, and the freedoms and privileges of the town were abolished.

At Ypres, the storm-bell of the city, the symbol of the independence of the *poorters*, was broken by the count's men. Many men were executed.

In Ghent also, the men who had sought to participate in the rebellion, or who had shown sympathy for the cause of Zannekin, were pitilessly tracked and killed, about six hundred men in all.

In February of 1329, Zeger Janssone, who had escaped to Zeeland, tried to provoke a new rebellion in Flanders. His uprising of a few hundred men did not succeed. Zeger Janssone was caught and executed. He was the last living Flemish peasant leader.

The rebels of Flanders had mainly fought against the heavy taxes and the retribution money they had to pay according to the treaties with the French king. The sums claimed became even larger now, astronomically high. Bruges alone, had to pay immediately one hundred thousand pounds. The aldermen in the rebel cities were appointed by the count and the counsellors of the count supervised the finances of the city. The money was extorted with efficiency. Flanders sighed under the total power of the count who collected the money, and the king of France controlled the count.

From long before 1328, in Ghent, the aldermen were of the same names chosen from the same families every two to three years. The aldermen increasingly feared the influence of the weavers' guild, a guild that became wealthier with the year. Since the fullers worked in envy of the weavers who paid them, and never paid them enough, the *Leliaert* families who monopolised the alderman functions, sought the support of the fullers against the weavers who might contest their power. The dean of the fullers, the dean of the Lesser Guilds and even the dean of the landowners received a stipend from the town, but not so the dean of the weavers. This situation lasted on after the Battle of Cassel.

John de Smet, William and Raes van Lake were installed in the van Lake house in the *Brabantstraat*. Zwane Bentijn wept when she saw the state her boys were in, wounded and dirty and half starved, but she organised her house as a leader of armies in her turn.

Raes van Lake the Elder had to pass command of his house to his wife.

The boys could not be brought to a hospital, for Zwane feared the aldermen more than the wounds of her sons, and in that she was right. William and Raes the Younger protested when their mother ordered them to bed and bath. They tried to explain to their mother they could walk on their feet, though feebly. Zwane brought her finger up and pushed with that one finger her sons to bed. She installed the beds in Raes the Elder's hall. She found a third bed and smothered the protests of John de Smet too. That boy should not put one step before the other, she told, wounded twice as he was, the poor boy.

It did not take long for Lijsbetten Mutaert, John de Smet's mother to come to the aid of Zwane Bentijn. Lijsbetten ran into the van Lake hall without knocking, and Zwane found she had done well with that. A few moments later also Lijsbetten's aunt, Mergriet Mutaert, sailed in, and still later the sisters Selie and Marie Scivaels of the Denout and the de Hert families. With their arrival, his house beleaguered by women, Raes the Elder had to escape to the Vresele house, where he met Wouter de Smet, John and Pieter Denout, and also Arnout and John de Hert. James van Artevelde, who had been abroad until recently, arrived there too, having heard from the women to where the boat of the de Herts had taken the Pharaïldis men.

It was James who urged the most to not spread a word about the young boys having fought at Cassel.

Raes van Lake the Elder did not return to his home till the middle of the night. He had seen Marie Vresele run out of the Vresele house like a fury, weeping and crying, calling on Veerle de Smet and Mechtild van Lens for moral support, and he supposed Beatrise van Vaerneuwijc would also want to hear what had happened to her friends, so Raes the Elder stayed with his friends, drinking beer and wine and gaining courage to confront the women. Raes did not like the wailing and howling of the women in his household. He smiled, and told his friends over a tankard of beer he did not want to be the one to endure what his sons would be enduring the next days in the hands of the women.

Zwane Bentijn called the house doctor of the van Lakes, as well as Gerolf Vresele, the monk, and a priest of the van Arteveldes for religious support.

Calling on the priest was not really necessary, for John, William and Raes shrieked they sat not on the point of passing to the other world. Nevertheless, they had to submit to a litany of prayers, to the Holy Oil, which the boys endured patiently because at least it saved them for a while from the grips of the women, and it soothed their mothers.

The monk had even less to do than the priest, but Gerolf was more than interested to hear what had happened at Cassel. He told the boys they had done well, which scandalised the mothers but soothed the boys. Gerolf let out enthusiastic cries when the boys told of the charge down the hill of Cassel. It was good for the boys to speak out loud what they had done, and to talk about the horrors they had seen. That quietened even more the mothers to silence and hushing for the rest of the evening.

The doctor examined the wounds of the patients, but he declared the future lay in the hands of God, referring thereby back to the priest. The wounds had been cleansed and cauterised, the bodies washed and refreshed, the stomachs filled. The boys had lost sufficient blood for him not to have to draw some more, so the doctor declared he had better look after the women than after the boys, and prepare some calming potions for the women too. The doctor of the van Lakes was a very wise healer!

Zwane Bentijn and the Mutaert women remained of course in shock, but the doctor told to the boys that state would last only a day or so. The boys should rest a few days, and then they could return to their business. The doctor would return every few days.

Zwane Bentijn did not allow John de Smet out of her house, to his own home. She told the boy was too frail. The de Smet family practically lived in the van Lake house during the convalescence of the boys.

The neighbours of the Van Lakes might have wondered what the commotion of the women in the van Lake house was about. In the next days, women came and went, but nobody ever suspected warriors of Cassel laid comfortably gaining strength in beds inside.

John de Smet, William and Raes van Lake did suffer from violent nightmares in the nights following their return. They dreamed they were still fighting on Cassel's hills. John dreamed about the sword that had threatened to slice his belly, Raes saw a huge man wielding a battle-axe over him, and William shrieked and tried to avoid a prancing horse from crushing his chest. It was good to see each other from their beds. When the women were not in the hall, during those rare moments, they began talking about the horrors of the battle.

John de Smet dared to bring up the right question: what had their flight to the rebels of Flanders served for? The three boys exchanged arguments on that issue, and they concluded

they were glad with the frightening experience. They ignored for the time being they might have been killed. They were glad to have helped the Flemish army for a rightful cause. They also swore never again to fight in a war that was not their own. They had seen the ugliness of the battle, and understood how in vain their intervention had been.

‘No,’ they said, ‘battles and war are no good solutions to solve the issues of justice and freedom. Negotiations, steady moral pressure, threats and retreats and moving an army about should prove more successful in the end, in obtaining what one wanted. One might lose a battle and with the battle the cause! A battle was too much like a coin tossed, the coin could fall either way. Had this or that tiny change happened in the course of the battle, the Flemish might have won. A battle was not an intelligent means to solve one’s problems. One had to be clever and use cunning, rather than fight to the death. The images of so many men being slaughtered and dying, of being crushed or having members hacked off, hunted the minds of the boys. They were no cowards, so much they had proven. They could defend their families when necessary, but should they be fools? One fought only when all other means had been exhausted. The horrid experience of Cassel had taught the boys a serious lesson. They became thereafter much more reflective, poised men, better friends also, for now they were comrades in arms, which created stronger bonds between them. They cherished far more their sweethearts.

The Pharaïldis boys also had more faith and respect in their fathers than ever before. Their fathers might be tranquil men pursuing their businesses; they were no cowards, and had proven they could be awe-inspiring warriors when they needed to be. The Pharaïldis boys wanted to become like their fathers, now. The Battle of Cassel had turned them into adults.

King Philip and King Edward

King Philip VI of Valois had settled affairs in Flanders by the Battle of Cassel in 1328 and by the repression of 1329. The count of Flanders was securely back in power in the cities and in the countryside, and the count proved his loyalty to the king.

Philip VI’s worst worries only began after that time, but his main issue was with England, or rather with its king, Edward III.

The matter of his right of succession to the throne of France continued to haunt Philip VI. Did he have intuition of further trouble? He wanted to be very sure of his position, all contestation quietened.

For the coronation of Philip of Valois on the twenty-ninth of May 1328, King Edward III had sent to France Adam de Orleton, bishop of Worcester, and Roger de Northburgh, bishop of Coventry, to protest and to demand satisfaction. Edward was closer in line for the succession to the throne of France than Philip of Valois! Nobody in France, however, had chosen to take notice of the English bishops.

Further negotiations held in France between ambassadors of Edward III and Philip VI ended at Vincennes in the beginning of May of 1330, without tangible results.

King Philip VI summoned King Edward III of England to Amiens in the year after Cassel to pay homage to him as king of France for Edward’s Duchy of Guyenne and for the county of Ponthieu at the mouth of the Somme. Edward complied.

Scarcely two years later, in March of 1331, still unsatisfied over the matter, Philip forced Edward to sign a paper by which the king of England promised loyalty to the Valois. Had Edward refused these homages, Philip VI had certainly taken away the feudal right of Edward on these fiefs, which Edward held in feudal submission to the king.

Philip VI then summoned Edward to justify himself before the parliament of Paris at the end of July.

Edward sought support in the Low Countries. He sent delegates to Flanders. William Fitzwaryn, Hugh Elys and John de Hildesle were to forge alliances with Flanders, Brabant, Guelders, Hainault and Jülich, but the talks led to little. The only positive result of Edward's diplomatic efforts was the proposition of marriage between Count Reginald of Guelders and Edward's sister Eleanor. Reginald had been a widower since May 1329. Edward agreed with the marriage, which was celebrated at Nijmegen in May of 1332.

Edward III was also summoned a second time to appear in Paris, which he refused. In the autumn of 1331, Edward met secretly with Philip VI at Pont-Sainte-Maxence in France to discuss peace, as well as these feudal matters. The two kings held to their respective viewpoints.

At that time, England was a far less powerful state than France. About twenty million people lived in France, only about four million in England. Paris was a city of over one hundred twenty thousand people, four times more than London. In the north of England, the Scots regularly raided the English kingdom, so that Edward III had to wage a fierce war on his northern borders. Philip VI feared no English interventions in France.

The English armies could not even win from the Scots. To the French king, the English seemed weak for they could not even defeat the Scots.

Two lineages fought for the rule over Scotland, the houses of Balliol and Bruce. The Bruces were in power at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and strongly inclined against the English. King Edward II had lost an important battle in 1314, the Battle of Bannockburn, against the House of Bruce, the kings of Scotland. Ever since that defeat, the image of the English armies and also of Edward III was poor. In 1328, King Edward III had signed a treaty with the Scots at Northampton, bringing an end to over thirty years of strife between England and Scotland, but the treaty left angry and unsatisfied men on both sides.

In 1332, Edward Balliol, son of the other Scottish King John Balliol, invaded Scotland and defeated the Bruce loyalists, so that he, Edward Balliol, was crowned king of Scotland. A little later, Balliol was ambushed and defeated by Archibald Douglas fighting for the Bruce, so that Edward Balliol had to flee to England, to beg for the support of King Edward III. David, son of Robert Bruce, was married to Joan, sister of Edward III, but that did not augment Edward's sympathy for the Bruces.

King Edward III's poor image in war lasted until the Battle of Halidon Hill near Berwick in mid-July of 1333. During that battle, the Scottish troops under Sir Archibald Douglas were defeated while they tried to relieve the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed.

The town of Berwick was under siege by Balliol's army. In the beginning of May 1333, King Edward III arrived there also with an army. Archibald Douglas, the war hero of the Bruces, tried first to draw the English away from Berwick, but these movements failed. Edward III remained with his army on Halidon Hill, a small hill north-west of Berwick. When the Scottish army finally arrived at Berwick, King Edward divided his army in three parts, one led by himself, one by Balliol and the other by his Marshal, the Earl of Norfolk.

The Scots attacked uphill in muddy terrain. The English used for the first time on Halidon hill massed groups of archers to break the advance of the Scots. Thousands of Scottish warriors were killed by arrows while they climbed the hill. Flights of longbow arrows sent on to the

packed Scottish warriors by English and Welsh archers won the battle. The Scottish attack lost momentum and failed. The Scots were routed. A little later, Berwick surrendered to Edward Balliol and King Edward III.

Edward Balliol was installed as king of the Scots. Edward III recognised Edward Balliol as king and vassal by the Treaty of Roxburgh on twenty-three November of 1328.

The other pretender to the Scottish throne, the young King David II of the House of Bruce, fled to France for safety, on invitation of King Philip VI. David II arrived in France in Mid-May of 1334. He was very graciously received by King Philip VI, who spited his rival, Edward III, with the presence of the Scottish throne pretender. The arrival of the ten year old David II of Scotland in France displeased the English king. The relations between Edward III and Philip VI envenomed over the Scottish matter. Philip declared openly that in the future, any negotiation between France and England had to take into account the interests of the king of the Scots. This infuriated Edward III.

Flanders' neighbouring counties

The counties of the Low Countries and France were in those years almost constantly at arms against each other over one or other issue. Frontiers were not well established, so that one county always contested the possession of this or that village, town or region on its border.

In the winter and spring of 1332, an alliance directed against John, duke of Brabant formed under the instigation of King Philip of Valois. The king worked in secret, without direct participation in the intrigues and actions. The alliance had been forged out of envy for prosperous Brabant.

The conspirators were Edward, count of Bar, Reginald count of Guelders, the bishop of Liège and the archbishop of Köln, Reginald lord of Valkenburg, John, count of Namur, as well as the count of Eu, who was at that time the constable of France. William, count of Hainault, refused to have anything to do with the others. John of Hainault, however, joined the alliance against Brabant. The troops of these nobles ravaged and plundered lands of Brabant while the army of the duke positioned itself, entrenched, near the monastery of Heylisse.

When the rains poured down in May, no battle could be given, but the plundering continued, even while the count of Hainault tried to mediate between the belligerents. Still, a truce was signed on eleven May, and two days later, the foreign armies evacuated from Brabant.

Negotiations between the duke of Brabant, the king of France and the conspirators took place at Compiègne in June.

Philip of Valois had in particular tried to avoid an alliance between his two most powerful neighbours of Brabant and Hainault in the marriage of the heir of Brabant to count William's daughter Isabella. John of Brabant, the heir, was now betrothed to King Philip's daughter Marie. Much money was involved in the various settlements of Brabant with the conspirators, and between France and Brabant. Duke John of Brabant promised two hundred men-at-arms in liege homage to King Philip. King Philip had reached his aim, forming an alliance with Brabant. During the negotiations of June, the disputes between the parties were settled.

William, the heir of Hainault, was to marry Johanna of Brabant. The long disputes seemed to be finally settled in July of 1332. The resentment of the duke of Brabant toward the king of France remained palpable, however.

Brabant continued to be harassed.

A particular place in the duchy was the town of Mechelen. Mechelen was a large, fine town in the middle of Brabant, situated between Brussels and Antwerp, with a population and aldermen much in favour of the duke, but it belonged to the bishop of Liège. Mechelen was surrounded by territory of Brabant, so the duke considered the town more or less his. In 1333, the count of Flanders bought the city of Mechelen from the bishop of Liège, probably in a bout of spite against Brabant. There had been other frictions between Flanders and Brabant. The sale happened in the autumn of the year, but the citizens of Mechelen resented the sale and also the duke of Brabant hated it, since it strengthened the grip of Flanders over Mechelen and the very centre of his duchy. The *poorters* of Mechelen resisted the delegates of the count of Flanders. Count Louis de Nevers then defied the duke with his troops.

The count of Guelders conspired with Flanders, for Reginald had been wedded in first marriage to Sophia Berthout, the daughter of the wealthiest family of Mechelen, who had possessed many property titles in the town. These rights had passed to Sophia's daughter, Margaret, for whom Reginald of Guelders exercised guardianship. Count Reginald was always in need of money, so he was willing to sell the rights of the properties in Mechelen to the count of Flanders. William, count of Jülich was also interested in the sale transaction, because his son Gerard was betrothed to Margaret.

On the thirtieth of November 1334, the counts of the alliance against Brabant gathered at the town of Le Quesnoy to plan their assaults. The allies blocked Brabant in January of 1335 and they assailed the duchy from every quarter. Merchandise was seized and the inhabitants of Mechelen who supported the duke arrested. Flanders attacked with armed forces led by Henry of Flanders, count of Lodi. The Flemings, marching on Brussels, fell into an ambush far from their base territories. They were attacked in the rear, defeated, and routed.

Pope John XXII intervened. He intervened, because he wanted to launch a crusade into Palestine, whereas he could hardly begin such an enterprise while the countries around France warred against each other.

The pope notified the bishop of Liège, Adolph de la Marck he disapproved of the sale of Mechelen. A truce was agreed upon, a conference organised at Cambrai. Many talks were held at Cambrai, which continued in August at Amiens. The belligerents settled their disputes in the Treaty of Amiens. Mechelen was returned to the chapter of Saint Lambert in Liège and the relations between Brabant and its neighbours were defined in other clauses.

Duke John now drew closer to William of Hainault. Count William, in his turn, remained on good terms with the count of Flanders. Talks resumed in this triangle of relations.

In April of 1366, a new settlement concerning Mechelen was concluded between Brabant and Flanders. Each would hold half of the town from the other, in fee. Each party had to protect the territory and the subjects of the other. Count William, Count Louis and Duke John arrived at a treaty of alliance. They agreed to work for the peace and welfare of each other's lands and inhabitants.

In that same year of 1336, Count William of Hainault remained on strained terms with King Philip VI, his brother-in-law, who had so little appreciated and rewarded William's services at the Battle of Cassel in 1328 and during the negotiations of Compiègne in 1332. William had claimed the rights on several border territories, but obtained satisfaction in nothing! Also Emperor Lewis the Bavarian liked little the claims France had made on some of these

territories. William of Hainault became a proponent of a coalition directed against King Philip VI, and the ambassadors of England who cleverly tried to curb these resentments to their profit, in particular John Thrandeston, were received with open arms and a smile at William's court.

A Weavers' Revolt

William van Artevelde was the elder brother of James. He was a proud, lively, energetic, hot-tempered man who was liked by the women of the county and also quite popular with the men, mainly with the weavers of Ghent. William managed the disparate lands of the Artevelde estates at Baasrode, where the Scheldt meandered much and had left very fertile but also very wet land. He worked much at drying the Artevelde lands along the Scheldt, finding a particular satisfaction in gaining ground on the river. In having been a little too eager to gain new land, he had offended a man called Diederic van Lede.

William had bought vast stretches of marshlands from the van Lede family and in no time turned these polders into very valuable farmlands. When Diederic had understood what William had done, instantly multiplying the value of the land by a factor of ten, he considered William a thief. Diederic scolded William a first time from the far, behind William's back, arguing William had deceived the family in understating the value of that land and then turned it with a minimum of costs, by installing dikes, into greasy pastures. William had laughed the words of the man away.

In the summer of 1334, in July, William van Artevelde walked slowly, and in a quite happy mood, on the fair of Sleydinge, a village just north of Ghent, admiring the young girls and tasting some of the excellent pies on the Flemish *kermis*. When he tried to flirt with a particularly pretty girl, Diederic van Lede emerged from behind a tent and began once more to insult William. William served Diederic some shouts back, but he wanted to show the girl he was a gentleman, so at first he remained very polite. After a few words, however, William thought it justified to show his sword to Diederic, so that the man disappeared as rapidly as he had come. William imperturbably continued his way, smiling to the girl. A little later, he received a thump on the head from a piece of wood and while he went down, he saw it was Diederic who had traitorously hit him. Bystanders protected William from more harm. Diederic could escape. William fell to the ground for a few moments, but he awoke with only a few bumps on his head and an irrevocable wish to take revenge on the man who had destroyed his prestige with the girls of Sleydinge.

A few days later, William van Artevelde walked with two of his kinsmen in the centre of Ghent, in the *Veldstraat*, when his eye caught Diederic van Lede on the other side of the street. The blood jerked to William's brain. He ran to Diederic, threatening to kill the man. Diederic was armed and he drew his sword, but he preferred once more the escape, merely swaying the weapon as if he were using a flail in a field of flax. Diederic darted immediately away into side alleys, followed by William and his two friends.

A fight ensued, in which William and his two kinsmen, who were weavers, disarmed Diederic. The man managed again to escape, he was a real artist at that, wriggling his lean body like an oiled eel from out of the arms that held him.

Diederic van Lede fled to the bailiff in the *Gravensteen*, accusing William van Artevelde of wanting to kill him, but he found a sergeant of the bailiff nearby, before he reached the castle.

The sergeant of the bailiff, Wouter Zoetaert, saw William van Artevelde and his two companions running towards him and Diederic. William had given his sword to one of his friends, so that Diederic would not be able to accuse him. The three men had only one sword. Sergeant Zoetaert tried to disarm William's friend. He shouted he would imprison William in the *Gravensteen*. William van Artevelde protested vehemently, finding the instant judgement of the sergeant disgraceful. The sergeant called on his *knapen*, on his militiamen. A dispute ensued, during which William van Artevelde explained what had happened at Sleydinge, but the explanation was ignored by Zoetaert, who disliked the Artevelde family.

The disturbance attracted other men, among them a few more weavers. One man among these was a well-known *poorter* of Ghent, a knight, called Volker uten Rosen, who intervened to help William. Volker pleaded with the sergeant to drop the matter, no harm done, and he proposed to imprison rather the man who had assaulted William at Sleydinge. The sergeant wanted to hear no reason, however. The dispute between Volker uten Rosen and the sergeant then developed into a brawl, so that the sergeant received a fist of Volker in his face. More men assembled, men of the bailiff, and weavers. Also two aldermen arrived at the sight of the crowd. They told the sergeant, William, Volker and the friends of William to go to the prison, to the *Sastelet*. The Artevelde group was imprisoned. There, the aldermen spoke out a judgement against William and the men who had run to assist him.

A little later, however, a large crowd of armed men, mostly weavers, gathered near the hall of the aldermen. That hall was situated in the *Hoogpoort*. It was a large steen with two salient towers at each side of the façade. Its large gate allowed carts to ride directly inside. There was no flight of stairs to the gate.

The crowd threatened the aldermen, shouting the most basic rights of *poorters* of Ghent to defend themselves had been violated. The crowd risked to become violent and threatened to assault the aldermen, so the aldermen changed their judgment and set the imprisoned men free. The riot grew, the weavers ran in the streets brandishing their arms. James van Artevelde and his brother William talked to the weavers and calmed down the excited men. They showed how all the friends and guildsmen who had first been judged by the aldermen had been set free.

The next day, however, on the twenty-first of July, a new riot broke loose with the weavers. Two people of the parish of *Oudenberg* went to the hall of the aldermen to complain they had been ordained to pay taxes they had paid already quite some time ago. One of them demanded the abolition of those taxes. A crowd once more gathered and threatened the aldermen if the taxes were not abolished. The crowd dispersed again only after the dean and known weavers intervened.

The bailiff of Ghent, William of Bederwaene, heard of the riots. He wrote a letter to the count, accusing Volker uten Rosen of being an adversary of the count, mentioning the man had already contested the election of the aldermen last year. The bailiff asked the count to return to Ghent in August to help organise the elections of the new aldermen, as the aldermen of Ghent were changed every year in August. The count did return from Bapaume and had his say in the election of the aldermen for the next year. As new aldermen of the Law were chosen men such as Maes van Vaernewijc, James Rijnvisch and John Borluut. As aldermen of the Estate were chosen Boudin de Grutere, Gerolf Bette, John van Vaernewijc, Pieter de Molenaere, and Gelnoot van Lens. These names were connected one way or the other to the Arteveldes and the Pharaïldis men.

Later still, William van Artevelde and his friends had to stand to trial for having provoked the riots. William van Artevelde was condemned to a pilgrimage to Saint James of Compostela and exiled for three years. James van der Pale the Younger and Lievin de Crijsschere had to go on pilgrimage to Saint Thomas of Canterbury and they were exiled for ten years for having refused to hand over their arms to Wouter Zoetaert. Thierry de Maech, who had supported the weavers, was condemned to a pilgrimage to Saint Andrew in Scotland, and he was exiled from the town for three years. John Colinszoone was exiled for three years on the Island of Cyprus, also for having assisted the weavers, and for having grabbed one of the aldermen by the throat. Volker uten Rosen had to travel to Avignon and he was exiled for a year. William van der Piele lost his rights as a *poorter*, while in the same judgment John Breebaert and Giles van Contersvoorde were acquitted. Breebaert and Contersvoorde were fullers, considered less dangerous than the weavers of Ghent, and maybe therefore acquitted by the aldermen. The convicted men were without exception influential, wealthy, well-known *poorters* and weavers of Ghent.

The incident showed how nervous the weavers of Ghent had become, and how increasingly they were ready to take up arms to defend their colleagues and their rights.

In the year 1333, Count Louis of Nevers tried once again to limit the power of the aldermen of Ghent. The aldermen had assumed the prerogatives of the bailiffs of the count not only in Ghent itself but also in the lands around the city, as far as the *Waasland* and the *Vier Ambachten* in the north of Flanders. The count was now the loyal and appreciated ally of the French king, so the aldermen of Ghent could not turn to the king as a counterweight for the ambitions of the count.

Since Count Louis had an issue with the aldermen of Ghent, he cautiously approached the deans of the guilds for support. The guilds wanted an end to the corruption of the families from which the aldermen were chosen. They wanted the aldermen to become publicly accountable for their management of the city.

In August of 1335, the Bailiff of Ghent demanded of the aldermen to present the accounts of the city to him. At almost the same time, the count refused the aldermen to levy a new tax on the weavers. The aldermen brought the matter in arbitration to their bishop, to the bishop of Tournai. The count, in his turn, presented his long list of grieves against the aldermen of Ghent. The count complained that the aldermen of the Estate of Ghent gave judgment in affairs that fell under the jurisdiction of the count. The aldermen of the Law levied taxes without the consent of the count. The Count complained about the fact that the city held their captains and deans in function, although the Treaty of Arques forbade this explicitly. Other points were mentioned by which the aldermen of Ghent had assumed rights that were of the jurisdiction of the count.

In the ensuing negotiations, held by the bishop of Tournai at the abbey of Eeckhout near Bruges, the discussions ran high and bitter. Ghent had delegated John van Utenhove, Henry and Everard de Grutere, Thomas and William van Vaernewijc at the end of October of 1335. The bishop mostly followed the reasoning of the count, but the men of Ghent refused the outcome. A new conference was then continued in Tournai in the beginning of 1336. Ghent sent this time John van Utenhove again, and Henry Masch, William Everdey, Gilbert de Grutere, Everard Mont, Pieter de Molenaere, John de Ponterave and Pieter Zoetaert. The count refused to give in on most points.

The aldermen and representatives of the count of Flanders then agreed on the payment by the aldermen of Ghent of the sum of thirty thousand pounds to the count, for the right to levy taxes whenever the aldermen wanted in the next fifteen years. The accounts were not made public. The guildsmen knew who would have to pay for the thirty thousand pounds!

Childbirth

Agneete Vresele had given three beautiful children to James van Artevelde: a daughter called Nele came first, easily, a girl as fair and fine as a nightingale in spring, James's darling, followed by another daughter James called Margaret. Margaret was also a nice girl with delicate traits, at five as intelligent and quick of tongue as a child much older. James had asked Agneete whether she wanted to stop having children then. Agneete had asked him angrily whether he thought she could only spawn daughters, after which James had hastily stopped arguing. James had feared for Agneete's health, though her childbirths had went without complications. Agneete had placed her two fingers on James's lips, hushing him, and had drawn him passionately, flirtingly, into her bed. A boy was born thereafter, the boy Agneete had wished dearly, for a boy would perpetrate the name of Artevelde, and Agneete knew well how important that was for a well-known family of Ghent. They called that boy John, after Agneete's grandfather.

Agneete was pregnant again, her last she promised James, though how she was going to realise that, she had no clue, for she liked having James in her bed and playing with him at night. From the lay of the child in her womb, flat and tight against her, Agneete suspected she would have a second boy, and that thought filled her with joy. She would call the child James the Younger, after his father.

Agneete's childbirths had been easy to her, so far. She had been a little sick during her pregnancies, but not much. For her fourth child, she felt violently sick, and often. She had to vomit painfully, lost weight where she should have gained. She didn't tell anything to James or to her family, but one morning she found blood among her vomit. She also bled during this pregnancy, so that she took to wearing cloths between her legs at times. She feared for a while she might lose the baby, but she took faith. She did not want a doctor near her, but she did whisper a few words to the midwife who had helped her to deliver her three older children. The woman, a stout and wise midwife who had brought more children into the world than any doctor in Ghent, told her to pray to Saint Veerle and to have faith in her own body. The midwife told her what to eat and what to avoid in her food. Agneete had relaxed, and the bleeding had stopped.

When the time came for the baby to be born, Agneete's pains increased terribly. She had to remain in bed all day, and the midwife came to the Artevelde house four times a day to check on Agneete. The midwife prepared strong broths of chicken and the best vegetables to give Agneete the strength to face the ordeal. She urged Agneete to continue eating as much as she could. Agneete complied with difficulty. She did not want James around her. The Pharaïldis women, the Mutaerts and the Scivaels, visited her often, though, and these told James how Agneete suffered. Avezoete Wulslager also came often, and Avezoete was such a sweet talker she reconciled Agneete with James so that he was allowed back into his bedroom, if only to say hello and place a kiss on her feverish forehead.

When Agneete's water broke, the midwife ordered everybody out of the bedroom, except Veerle de Smet and Kerstin de Hert. These two were still young, seventeen and sixteen, but the midwife did not want criticising elderly women around her and she knew the girls formed part of the larger Artevelde family. Agneete also liked to have the girls with her. Veerle and Kerstin were quite skilful in the matters of women, despite their age. They were tough girls, not afraid of a scream and a little blood, girls who held their feet firmly on the ground and who did not panic easily.

James van Artevelde and Gillis Vresele heard Agneete scream and scream in the afternoon. Gillis would dearly have wanted to console his friend and joke away the tension in the van Artevelde house, but in such matters all men are clumsy. Gillis could only think of drowning James's apprehensions in wine and brandy, at least a thing he was good at.

Late in the evening, the midwife sent Veerle de Smet into the van Artevelde hall with a newly born baby enveloped in white linen, the fine boy who was to be called James the Younger. James the Elder remarked the child was somewhat smaller than his other children, but the baby would grow quickly. James's brother William said James was talking nonsense for the boy was obviously in good health, cried with full lungs, screaming as high for milk as his brother and sisters had. The bay was handed over to a wet-nurse.

The midwife did not return soon to the hall to receive congratulations for yet one more fine delivery. Veerle de Smet was called back into the bedroom. A little later, the house was in uproar. Veerle and Kerstin ran one after the other to the kitchen and the washing room with blood-soaked linen in their hands. New, clean, white linen was brought to the bedroom and many pails of hot water. When the door opened, James and his family heard Agneete moaning, kicking with her feet against the wood of the bed, and cry out in pain. The midwife worked on Agneete half through the night. The doctor was called in and remained with the midwife in the room. The doctor's assistant, still a young man, ran off to get medicines in the middle of the night.

Early in the morning, the midwife and the doctor asked for a priest. Gerolf Vresele sat still in the hall then, as well as a priest of the van Artevelde family, a man who lived on the other side of the *Kalanderberg*, near a brewery he owned. Gerolf and the priest were allowed in Agneete's room.

Later in the morning, the midwife and the priest had to announce they had been able to save the child and the soul of Agneete, but not Agneete's life. The birth of the child had broken the entrails of Agneete, the midwife explained to James. She expressed her sorry. The baby had not been well positioned in Agneete's womb, had been difficult to turn and come, Agneete had to push so hard she had bled and the bleeding had continued. Neither the midwife nor the doctor had been able to stop the bleeding. Agneete had become weaker and weaker, had fought, then, rather suddenly, she had given up fighting and passed away slowly, abandoning her soul to God.

James van Artevelde was crushed with sadness and regrets. He sank in a chair. By then, his friends and family had heard something was amiss, so they all gathered in his hall in the morning. They sat and stood around James, men and women, the Vreseles, the de Hert, the Denouts, the de Smets and the van Lakes, together with the van Artevelde family. Next to James stood his brother William, behind him stood his other brothers Francis and John the Elder, with his son John the Younger, the priest. James's children had been brought to the Vresele house, in the care of Avezoete Wulslager, of the Mutaert and the Scivaels mothers.

James van Artevelde was a courageous man, but the women did not want him to do anything to arrange Agneete's funeral. Avezoete Wulslager took charge of the van Artevelde household for a few days. The first thing she ordered was to send Veerle de Smet and Kerstin de Hert home, for the girls were utterly exhausted but had remained in the house, standing in shock and blaming themselves for having seen Agneete give up hope and fight without they having been able to hold her among the living. Then, Avezoete sent everybody else home who was not absolutely of any use in the house, but her husband Gillis. The Vreseles organised the funeral of Gillis's sister.

Two days later, a black carriage drawn by two black horses stopped at the van Artevelde home. The *Kalanderberg* was filled with people, coming to greet Agneete a last time. James van Artevelde stepped out of his house. The *Kalanderberg* became totally silent. The male members of James's family followed him, and then also the Pharaïldis men, his best friends. The carriage rolled a little forward, and then the coffin with the lifeless body of Agneete was placed by four men dressed in black tunics on the death carriage. The women who were close to the Arteveldes came also out of the house then, and went to stand behind the men. The women also held the children of Agneete by the hand, or held them. The midwife came out too, holding the last baby in her arms. The priest of Saint John's Church arrived with his acolytes, six young men, dressed in purple and white gowns. One acolyte held a wooden staff with a golden crucifix on top. The priest blessed the coffin, turned, and the procession of priest, carriage and the mourning family set in motion in silence to Saint John's. The priest sang psalms along the way, reading from a breviary.

While the procession advanced slowly, James van Artevelde walked behind the carriage with bowed head and two hands crossed in prayer. He was not whispering prayers, however. He reflected on the periods of living of a man. First, man was young and without worries, careless even. Then, a man married and lived the happiest time of his life, revelling in the softness of a woman and in the knowledge of being truly loved by another being. The man grew in strength and in wealth by those times. Afterwards, a normal man should have a period of maturing, of becoming wise and caring for the community as much as for his own family. Youthful love would wane and turn into warm friendship. James had been on the point of that period, he thought. A period should come where man might acquire fame, respect and the esteem of his community, and then, lastly, he would grow old and wise. These were the five periods of a man's life, James surmised, but what would happen when this ascendance on the ladder of life was stopped abruptly? Had his life been stopped brusquely and would the coming phases now be passed in bitterness and in seeking revenge against the forces of life? What would become of him? The life he had contemplated and planned lay destroyed with the lifeless corpse in the coffin that advanced in front of him. What remained in that corpse? No soul, flesh that would soon rot away, and bones that would not remind him of his beloved. How strange life was, and how simply and rapidly a man's plans could be destroyed!

The priest and the crucifix led the mourning group to Saint John's. The priest was the only one to pray loudly. The coffin was taken from the carriage and brought into the nave of the enormous church, which was filled with people who wanted to bring a last homage to Agneete Vresele. The priests and the acolytes sang a religious ceremony, the mass of the dead. The priest spoke of Agneete as if she were still living, drawing tears on the women.

Then, the men who had brought the coffin into the church wanted to take it up to bring it to the cemetery, but the Pharaïldis men pushed them aside, saying they would hold the coffin.

Gillis Vresele, Raes van Lake, Arnout de Hert and John Denout took the coffin through the nave, down the steps in front of the church and into the cemetery of Saint John's. They brought the coffin to the hole prepared by the gravediggers into the holy ground next to the church. There, after long blessings of the priests and of Gerolf Vresele, Agneete Vresele's coffin was lowered into the ground of Ghent's Saint John cemetery.

James van Artevelde had invited the men and women who had attended the ceremony of Agneete into his house, where he would offer a dinner. The invited people ate and drank at first in silence, then their conversations became more animated. Thus, life always won over death, James van Artevelde remarked. At one time, he too would be buried and be forgotten so quickly, he mused. The men who drew most attention to their stories were the priests and the monk, Gerolf Vresele. When the funeral dinner was over, when everybody had returned to his or her homes, James van Artevelde remained alone, sitting in his large, empty hall.

A Monk's Tale

In the days of the mourning period after the burial of Agneete Vresele, the women of the Pharaïldis families gathered in the evening to say prayers to the memory of the poor woman who had died in childbirth. The meetings were held in the Vresele house on the *Kalanderberg*. Although the lady of the house was still Mergriet Mutaert, she was in her seventies and had since long allowed Avezoete Wulslager, her daughter-in-law, to take charge. Mergriet and Avezoete got along well together. Mergriet never grumbled or criticised, but Avezoete asked for Mergriet's advice almost always. This evening, once more, Mergriet and Avezoete sat at the head of the long table in the dim light of two silver chandeliers. Avezoete had asked Mergriet to sit at her side, because Mergriet read many books, which she borrowed from the libraries of the abbeys of Ghent, and Avezoete knew she would need some erudition around her.

Next to them sat Marie Vresele, who had been married for two years now to John de Smet, the goldsmith. Marie had already given birth to two children, to a charming daughter called Heyla, and to a boy Wouter the Younger, called after his grandfather. At the table also sat Lijsbetten Mutaert, Mergriet's cousin, with pious Zwane Bentijn, the wife of Raes van Lake. She had brought her daughter-in-law Veerle de Smet, a daughter of Lijsbetten, who had married William van Lake right after William's adventure of Cassel. Their marriage had been consecrated in 1329, not after William had to promise to Veerle never to run off alone again without explaining what he was going to do. The Ghent women held a tight household! Veerle had a daughter of five, Alise, and Alise sat next to her mother. Another girl of a mere four years old sat next to Alise. This was Avezoete van Lake, the daughter of Raes van Lake the Younger and Mechtild van Lens. Raes and Mechtild had also married after Cassel. Mechtild sat next to her daughter. Selie Scivaels and Marie Scivaels were present, as well as Kerstin de Hert, who had married the fuller Pieter Denout two years after Cassel. She had brought her twin girls of five, Wivine and Quintine, the joy of their parents. Of the de Hert family had also come Nete de Hert, sister of John the shipper, and Beatrise van Vaernewijc, John's wife. She had brought her son Clais with her, a boy of four years old. The children, all approximately of the same age, went to play after a short while in a corner of the hall, held their own conversation, but they had to be scolded regularly for making too much noise. Avezoete brought them wooden toys.

A priest was necessary to lead the prayers, to read a few psalms of grace after and between the series of Hail Marys and Our Fathers, which the women cited with loud voices and equal tone. On this evening, the women had invited no parish priest. They had the Franciscan monk Gerolf Vresele to assist, lead their prayers, and entertain them. They had asked for Gerolf because he would tell the women about his travels and about the wonders of the world beyond Flanders. Praying was a duty, but hearing Gerolf talk about the people he had met in foreign countries was a sheer pleasure, especially after they had all drunk a few small glasses of Gillis Vresele's excellent new white wine from the Rhineland. The women and Gerolf only drank their wine after the hour or so of devote prayers, but that moment was dearly expected.

The women droned their prayers, then they sighed with relief, gave a few moments of thought in pious silence to Agneete, and then Mergriet nodded and Avezoete called in the bottles of wine and the sweet cakes. A maid served and lingered, for she too liked to hear what Gerolf would say.

Before Gerolf could start talking, or probably to urge Gerolf in a certain direction of inviting comments, Marie Vresele had noticed something new in her father's hall and wanted to refer to that, something that had been bought recently by her mother or grandmother.

'You have a new precious object, I see,' Marie declared. 'Is that a Closed Garden?'

Marie pointed at a large box of three feet high, two feet wide, open cover in front, which hung next to the hearth. It featured a figure of the Virgin Mary, holding the infant Jesus, placed among various miniature objects. The box was filled with dried plants, roses, and objects sculpted in wood, painted in garish colours. The Virgin was a small but very fine sculpture in wood, elaborately dressed in white lace on red silk.

'Yes, it is a *Hortus Conclusus* indeed,' Mergriet Mutaert agreed. 'It shows the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus in her garden. You can see the walls of the garden all around the box, holding the cedar tree, the source of life, the olive tree, the fountain, and the rose bushes. The objects are nicely assembled, don't you think? I visited a friend of mine in the *Begijnhof Ter Hoye*! I hadn't seen her for years, since she too had become a widow and went to live in the beguines' quarter. We met on the Friday Market and I promised to visit her. We went to see the other women, well, some of them, and one of these women made these enchanted Closed Gardens. I found this one particularly beautiful, so I bought it. It is rather large, but Avezoete liked it too, we had nothing of the sort in our house, so we placed it on the wall, next to the fire. It is a consolation to me, you know, to look at it while I am thinking of my beloved deceased husband Juris, and I often pray to the Virgin, here, so that I might join him. Do you like it?'

'I do, I do,' Marie added rapidly. 'How is the *Ter Hoye Begijnhof* nowadays?'

'Fine, fine, thriving and well! More and more women of our standing go there to live together. It lies between the *Hooipoort*, the Hay gate, and the *Vijfwindgatenpoort*, the Gate of the five Wind Holes, built against the walls of Ghent. It is a nice quarter, a world on its own, of course. If Avezoete had not been so very sweet with me, I would have gone to live there too! It is being called the Small Beguinage now, for it is much smaller than the *Groot Begijnhof*, the *Sente Lisbetten Begijnhof* near the *Gravensteen* and the *Hof ter Walle*, but the air feels better on the *Groene Hooie* of the Small Beguinage! I mean, the neighbourhood of Ter Walle is really poor! I would not dare stroll in those streets in the evening! In the *Sente Lisbetten Begijnhof*, all sorts of women come to live, but rather more the poorer women, so I prefer the *Ter Hoye* one.'

‘Where does our habit to make Closed Garden boxes originate from, Uncle Gerolf?’ Marie continued, and the women knew Gerolf would now start talking and never stop.

‘The *Hortus Conclusus* originated in the Canticle of Canticles, in the Song of Songs of Solomon. The bible said, ‘a garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a garden enclosed and a fountain sealed.’ The Song of Songs is an allegory of the mystic marriage of Christ with his Church, and that is also why the Virgin Mary is depicted in the closed garden. It is the symbol of all nuns, and I suppose also of the beguines, who are married to God. The *Hortus Conclusus* is a very mystical symbol!’

‘I sense some disapproval in your voice, Uncle Gerolf,’ Marie exclaimed, a little surprised.

‘Not really, no, no,’ Gerolf shook his head.

He hesitated, then he continued, ‘well, you know, I am a little confused about the thought of women living together in an enclosed quarter such as in a *Begijnhof*. I find it a very pious life, of course. But women should enter a convent, such as men enter an abbey, and become nuns. I am the last man to object to women seeking a life of chastity and prayers, but I also remain a little in doubt about women who do not fully take on Holy Orders to live together. It seems to me there is nothing holier than to marry, have and raise children, and care for a household. That also is a pious task! Women do reign in men from adventures and force men to form a family of a finer life. Beguines are no nuns. They do not take Holy Vows. They can return to the worldly life whenever they wish to, and get married. They do not renounce their property and they can have servants if they want to. They determine their own order of living, so for me they are more a lay community than a religious order, even though many people think otherwise.’

‘A life of prayers, dedicated to simple tasks, to humble work in a hospital, a chaste life, protected in the safety of a *Begijnhof*, is not a bad life for the women who can find no satisfactory husbands, me seems, Uncle Gerolf,’ Marie insisted.

‘You are right, you are right,’ Gerolf sighed, ‘but the *begijnhoven* are also hearths of all kinds of strange conceptions about the Faith. Ghent is a peaceful town, a devote town. We have not suffered, God be praised, from the excesses that can be heard in other communities of women. The danger of heresy is real, however!’

‘How is that? You frighten us, Reverend Gerolf! Please explain how a poor beguine could be a danger!’ Avezoete Wulslager exclaimed.

‘You may have heard of the Brethren of the Free Spirit,’ Gerolf Vresele explained. ‘This movement has been declared heretic by Pope Clement V about twenty years ago, but the movement lives on and thrives, even. The Brethren of the Free Spirit were founded a long time ago by a man called Amaury de Bene, and he has been forced to recant his views. Many of his followers have been burnt at the stake in Paris. The beguines seem to have taken up some if not all of the ideas of the Free Spirit! The sisters believe that God is immanent in everything, but Catholic Faith states that God is only transcendent, and not present in the creation. The Brethren also believe that man and woman can have a direct experience of God, the Holy Spirit then joining with the soul, so that man or woman can achieve an intimate union with God. Do not the beguines and the nuns declare they are married to God? The mystical union with God during one’s lifetime is considered a kind of eternal life in this world, a form of the Resurrection onto a second state of the spirit, in which they think they are one with God. Such a belief leads easily to the rejection of the other beliefs of our Faith, such as of the sacraments, as the Cathars did.’

Gerolf sighed again, drank, paused, and continued.

‘I have a peasant’s simple scepticism for mystical thoughts, sisters. We, *Gentenaars*, are a simple people. We pray and love God, but we don’t feel us like gods! Many of the thoughts of the Free Spirit have been clamoured and enthusiastically embraced by the beguines. The

beguine Marguerite Porete was burnt at the stake for such thoughts, also about twenty years ago. I read her text of the ‘Mirror of the Simple Souls’, and I found that book not a text to be given in everyone’s hands. Marguerite Porete wrote about her simple soul seeking to be united with God, a common theme among beguines and mystics. Other such writings exist, such as those of the beguine Mechtild of Magdeburg, who lived much earlier than Porete, or of Master Eckhart, a German monk. Master Eckhart was put to trial in the year before Cassel. Mystic women such as Hildegard von Bingen, who study the world and stayed well within the world, I appreciate very much, but the most extreme mystics are not far from heresy. They dare to go where nobody before them has gone, and without the knowledge of where they should stop. I rather believe women should seek a fine, open union with their worldly husbands in our common world first.

Other beliefs of the beguines, in the line of the concepts of the Free Spirit, are equally dangerous. Especially we, the Franciscans, have shown restraint to the excesses of mysticism. One must have a strong character and a great presence of mind not to get lost in weird imagination.’

‘Isn’t that all old, finished and over with, Gerolf? Marguerite Porete died a long time ago,’ Mergriet protested.

‘You may think this is all old stuff, all over nowadays, and maybe it is in Ghent, but not elsewhere! Only a few months ago died a woman of Brussels, who although not even a nun, was worshipped by the people and even by the Duchess of Brabant. Her name was Heilwige Bloemardine, the daughter of a merchant from Brussels, William Bloemaert.’

‘I heard the name,’ Mergriet Mutaert whispered.

‘Heilwige received extraordinary recognition in Brussels. The chair on which Heilwige sat while she instructed her disciples was of silver. After her death the chair was given to the Duchess of Brabant and believed to have miraculous powers! Heilwige distributed pamphlets on the ideas of the Brethren of the Free Spirit in Brussels, and she wrote a book on the subject, too. Heilwige wrote that melting together with God was possible! Audacity and arrogance! She also read excerpts from the ‘Mirror of the Simple Souls’ to the people. The priest John of Ruysbroeck attacked and refuted her pamphlets. I know of all this, because John of Ruysbroeck is a friend of mine. He is a mystic too, about forty I would say, but he lives in austerity, hidden from the world since 1317. He does not proclaim his views on Christianity. He did write against the Free Spirit, defending the one and true Catholic faith. He may become yet one of our greatest writers, for he is a wonderful poet, and one of our best theologians, if only he broke his seclusion. Another mystic woman who lived a long time ago in the Duchy of Brabant was Hadewijch. My friend, John of Ruysbroeck, liked her texts very much, but I have not been able to get hold of her works of poetry and mysticism.’

‘I find this very strange,’ Mergriet Mutaert the Wise grumbled. ‘When women have ideas and tell about them, they are dismissed as heretics almost instantly. When men, scholars, speculate about the Trinity and apply their so-called rational logic to the faith, then they are called theologians or philosophers, and they are readily talked about by everyone. I heard from the *Grootjuffer*, the leader of the *Ter Hoye Begijnhof*, that Pope Clement V accused the beguines of spreading heresy in 1311, and that the beguines were more or less forbidden by the Council of Vienne in 1312, but that the sentence was transformed by Pope John XXII in 1321 to allow the beguines to continue living as they chose. The popes don’t like the beguines.’

‘True, true, true,’ Gerolf the monk granted, somewhat discomfited by this insistent objection from the women. ‘As I said, I believe the quarters of the beguines can be centres of fine religious thought, of much charity and good, pious work. As a man of Ghent, however, I have

a natural suspicion for the wanderings of the mind that become pure speculations about the other world, of which we know nothing, especially when those speculations lack rationality and are only created by feelings, by emotions.’

‘Women are always a problem,’ Gillis Vresele interjected, standing with one leg in the door of his hall and his head perched towards what the women had been saying. The women shouted him back to the other room.

Gillis hastily retreated, but not before asking, ‘is there a male equivalent of the beguines?’ This also was very badly welcomed by the women.

‘There exists indeed a male equivalent of the beguines,’ Gerolf Vresele resumed, ‘as dangerous as the beguines, but luckily less well known. They are called the Beghards. They are laymen, unbound by vows. The Beghards form communities, cloisters, in which they do not keep their private property, unlike the beguines, but put their money together and also eat together in halls, like true monks. They were usually poor guildsmen, men who had broken with the world and been broken by the world, and who therefore chose to leave it. The popes also do not like the Beghard communities, for heresy was not far from them either! Currently, they are a declining movement, which did not really thrive in our county.’

Gerolf and the women drank, grateful to leave the subject for a while, and proud to have pushed the good monk somewhat into a corner.

‘Our wool comes from England,’ Pieter Denout’s wife stated. ‘You have also been to England, reverend Gerolf. How do the English think about theology and philosophy?’

‘Ha-ha,’ Gerolf smiled, ‘that is an interesting question! The English are very much like us! They are people that stay firmly with their feet on the ground’

He paused and drank still. He emptied his glass. The women hung at his lips.

‘The English are a great people,’ Gerolf began. ‘They are very intelligent, quite ruthless, though more often than not a very honest people, fine merchants, very respectful for their traditions, and very practical-minded. Many English scholars have studied at Paris and the ideas of philosophy studied by them are, I suppose, almost the same as those studied in France, Germany, Bohemia, and in our own countries, but the English scholars add the touch of their character. I travelled to a town north-west of London called Oxford, where the English have a university as fine as any other in the world. I met scholars there, as well versed in all domains of philosophy as the scholars from universities such as Paris, Montpellier or Bologna.

When I travel I use the Franciscan monasteries, of course, and in Oxford my fellow-Franciscans introduced me to a fellow-monk who had studied at the university of the town but had never completed his master’s degree. Nevertheless, he had a brilliant mind. He was in his thirties when I met him. His name was William of Ockham, and he was the most original thinker I ever met, one of the sharpest scholars of our time. He was a theologian, commenting on the works of Peter Lombard. Explaining all would lead me too far, I would have to give you lectures in philosophy. His commentaries were not well received in the Church, I heard later. They were condemned by a synod of bishops and he was called to Avignon, where he discussed, again rather controversially, on the poverty of the apostles. If you could see the splendour and wealth of Avignon, you would not wonder why talking about the poverty of Jesus’s apostles is dangerous there! We, Franciscans, of course vow to poverty! William had to flee from Avignon with other Franciscans, including Michael of Cesena, our Franciscan Minister General, early in the year of the Battle of Cassel. Michael of Cesena taught theology at the University of Bologna. In June of that year the pope excommunicated William and Michael for leaving Avignon without his permission.

The two Franciscans fled to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Louis IV, to Bavaria, where they must still be now. I should visit them one of these days.

Michael and William argued in Avignon that the apostles held no property, not as individual persons, and not in common. The fact that Christ and his apostles possessed no earthly goods was sound Catholic doctrine according to a Papal bull of 1322, but the controversy continued. Cesena was deposed of the Franciscan leadership in the year after Cassel.’

Gerolf Vresele smiled, ‘mark, Pope John XXII was declared to be deposed too, by the Emperor!’

Gerolf scraped his throat, and he continued.

‘When I spoke to William of Ockham, he worked on many themes, too many to explain this evening, some very difficult. He worked on the universals, you know, on what we would call generalisations on the individual things, as also did Pierre Abélard and many others. He told me the generalisations were merely the names of concepts, which existed only in our mind. Plato believed the concepts really existed, in the other world. I never met a more logical man than Ockham! He said nothing should be proposed in philosophy without a definite reason, unless it was self-sufficient or known by experience or proved in the Holy Scriptures. He believed human reason could not prove the immortality of the soul, and also no the existence or the unity of God. He believed these could be known only by the Revelation. With that, he did away with discussion of generations of theologians! He was writing a treatise in which he taught one should always seek to explain something in terms of the fewest possible causes, variables or factors.’

‘What other men have studied and written on philosophy?’ Beatrise van Vaernewijc asked.

‘The greatest scholar, I would say, was the Italian Thomas Aquinas. I would add also the Franciscan monk John Duns Scotus. Thomas Aquinas was a Dominican, who taught in Paris, Köln, Naples and in other places. They both emphasised reason and argumentation as the basis of all thinking, rejecting Platonism.

The Blessed John Duns Scotus also worked in Oxford, and also on the sentences of Peter Lombard. He taught in Paris, and later at the Franciscan school of Köln, where he died at the end of 1308. Scholars of Köln told me about him. Scotus apparently considered the universals as real, so he was opposed to William of Ockham. He also defended the Immaculate Conception of Mary, a laudable view.’

‘You talk about English and French theologians. Are there no Flemish theologians and philosophers? Are theoretical discussions so far from our mind?’

‘Of course not,’ Gerolf exclaimed. ‘We had Henry of Ghent, who we might say followed on Thomas Aquinas. Henry died in Paris a few years before the change of the century. He was born near our town, hence his name. He lectured on philosophy and theology here, in Ghent. Later, he moved to the University of Paris. He fought a lot over the obligation to confess to one’s parish priest at least once a year. He was a Platonist, our Henry, like Duns Scotus, defending Plato’s ideas as real, poised against the Aristotelians, against the rational views. He distinguished sharply between the knowledge of the real objects and the inspiration by which we know of the existence of God.’

Gerolf paused.

‘Siger of Brabant lived at about the same time as Thomas Aquinas. He worked at the University of Paris. Siger was even elected as rector of that university, so brilliant was his mind, but as he too taught Aristotle rather than Plato, and in its original form, without referring to Christian beliefs, he had to leave Paris and moved to Liège. Like so many

philosophers, Siger was accused of teaching that one thing could be true through reason and the opposite through faith, which I surmise is clearly contradictory, so I cannot believe he truly taught that principle. Bernier de Nivelles, a canon of Liège, taught the same principle, and got in trouble too.

You see, the issue all philosophers are confronted with is to reconcile reason and faith. That is why practically all the philosophers I can think of have at one point or other in their life had issues with the clergy, the bishops and ultimately with the popes. It can be dangerous to reason about matters of Faith, proclaiming contradictions between Faith and reason. Siger had to flee, together with another philosopher, Boetius of Dacia, and both died in Italy. He too seems to have been a staunch believer in the ideas of the Greek philosopher of ancient times, Aristotle, in Aristotle's arguments in their purest form, and that has been condemned by the Church, which thinks much closer to Plato. A strange thing too, I must confess, is why so ancient philosophers as Plato and Aristotle still exert so great an influence in our days. Of course, they may merely have been the first to state powerful concepts, but I wonder why we have not had one philosopher in our own times sufficiently powerful of mind to present and prove newer theories. Are we not civilised enough? Maybe Ockham is such a man, but I do not know of his last writings. Maybe I should again seek him out!

Mergriet Mutaert sighed, 'you must tell us another time about the universals and the other theories discovered by reason, Gerolf. It is getting awfully late. The women have to walk home and the children are falling asleep. Maybe another time. At least we know what kind of books we might read if these controversies interest us. What I find interesting is to hear how some men discuss over such theories while other men slay each other over political matters. Men are such contradictory persons! I shall never understand men!' 'Amen,' Gerolf laughed.

A Proposal

About a year after the death and burial of his beloved Agneete Vresele, after a year of mourning and of gloomy celibacy, James van Artevelde mixed again among the people. He broke through the cosy circle of his best friends and their wives. He had passed the year in feverish work, by reckless gambling on the success of risky business ventures. That was the only way for him to forget the happiness he had enjoyed with Agneete. His friends of the Pharaïldis group had drawn their eyebrows high at some of his wildest, complex schemes. They had looked at each other then, thought James crazed, but they had felt compassion for his pain and sorrow over Agneete, so they had stuck their heads and deep purses together and backed his plans with funds and advice. By sheer energy, ruthless negotiations and endless bartering, James's projects had succeeded, so that in that one year alone he almost doubled his fortune, and the amounts his friends had provided him with augmented very profitably. James's successes had not remained unnoticed. His name became famous in Ghent, he was courted by the landowners and *poorters* of Ghent, who wanted no better now than to hand him over high sums provided he brought the interest they knew he could win. He was also courted by the abbots of the abbeys of Ghent and by the priests of the churches, to which he donated large sums. James was also buying his soul's rest.

In the autumn of 1336, one year only after the death of Agneete Vresele, James van Artevelde accepted an invitation from the abbot of Saint Bavo's Abbey, the abbey of the *Sint Baefstede* quarter of the city, to a feast given in honour of the opening of a new building added to the abbey. James had been one of the generous donors to the abbey. He had been invited to a

feast, to a solemn dinner, no doubt speckled with boring speeches by notables, staged in the great hall of the abbey. James thought he could not refuse the offer. Moreover, there were always interesting people present at such feasts, with whom he could talk and hear about what happened in the world.

James sat at a long table to which about fifty *poorters* of Ghent had been conveyed, plus about the same number of monks and priests of the abbeys and churches of Ghent. The abbot of Saint Bavo had placed him opposite the main sacristan or sexton of the abbey, a man appropriately called de Coster. This de Coster, however, besides his duties as main administrator and controller of the abbey, was also a landowner and a knight, who could call himself by the title of Ser. The man proved to be a very humble, even effaced, but very agreeable person. To James's left sat a woman, who introduced herself as the sexton's daughter, Catherine. To his right sat the main priest of James's own parish church, the priest of Saint John's. James mainly chatted with the de Coster girl.

A girl Catherine still was, for she was young, twenty-two years of age, almost twenty-three, but still unmarried. She was a lot younger than Agneete had been when she died, and she was half the age of James, who was going on forty-two. James was amused and interested in hearing the opinion of the young people of Ghent. He was keen to hear how the new generation of Ghent judged the business and the politics of the town. Catherine astonished James by the maturity of her strongly proposed opinions. Catherine could also chat about non-consequential matters.

'You have been married, Mer van Artevelde,' she stated. 'How many children do you have?' she asked innocently in her warm, compassionate voice.

Catherine de Coster sat tall, stiff and straight next to James, as if her back had been nailed to her chair. She was tall indeed, but maybe that was also because her light auburn hair had been elaborately woven upwards with tiny threads and bound together behind her head, emphasising a high forehead. Her hair was thin and fine, James noticed, but it stood ample, thick, without rebellious curls. James smiled and reflected her perfect handled hair reflected her personality. Her eyes were of a strange, deep green, speckled with brown. She had a short, straight nose with tiny nostrils, a small mouth of full, very red lips, and an intelligent face overall, in which eyes flashed with presence and cunning. Her looks became hard when she said something sharp that surprised James. James would be surprised many times by Catherine de Coster, that evening.

'I have been blessed with four fine children,' James replied politely, 'two daughters and two sons. My wife died a year ago after the birth of my last son. My children live in my house. I have servants for them, but the wife of my best friend cares much for them, offers them motherly love. Maybe I should say other women care for them too, the wives of more friends, for my children always seem to be somewhere else than I expect them to be. Often, I find notes on the table of my hall telling me who of my friends has taken them in. My children are rarely where I expect them to be, and I am afraid they are very much spoiled. Still, for the moment I grant them the love and affection rather than the whip!'

'Who then are your friends, Mer van Artevelde, if I may ask?' Catherine dared.

'Oh, of friends I have many,' James smiled. 'Gillis Vresele and Pieter Denout, Wouter de Smet, the van Lakes and John de Hert among them.'

'Traders, weavers, fullers, goldsmiths and shippers, an odd combination,' Catherine exclaimed.

'Do you happen to know them?' James wondered, suddenly alert. He had rather thought few people knew his friends.

‘I do,’ Catherine smiled back, blinking her eyes at him. ‘Your group of friends is rather famous in Ghent, Mer van Artevelde, as are your connections to the van Vaernewijcs and the van Lenses! But then, who would not pride in your friendship?’

‘You seem quite aware of the relations between the families of Ghent,’ James temporised. Catherine laughed, a small, pearling laughter, ‘that is one thing girls of Ghent talk about when they are together, you know. Who is who, who is related to whom, who is friend of whom, and what happened to the good families of Ghent. Gossip is the name, Mer van Artevelde, gossip! The genealogy of the *poorters* of Ghent is what a well-educated girl should know to be of any significance in a conversation!’

‘I suppose, indeed,’ James said. ‘May I ask whether you are married, engaged or promised?’ Catherine blushed and laughed again, ‘good lord no, Mer van Artevelde. You may ask, but I am not, not married, engaged or promised, that is. Not yet, at any case.’

A silence fell. James drank his wine, and then the abbot of Saint Bavo’s stood from his chair, scraped his throat and pronounced a short speech, which was warmly applauded.

James van Artevelde thought it polite to resume the conversation with his neighbour.

‘May I ask what interests you most in life, Jonkver Catherine?’

‘I read a lot and I study with monks of Saint Bavo and of the *Fremineuren*. I discuss matters of religion with the elder brother of your friend Gillis Vresele, with the monk called Gerolf Vresele. He is not often in Ghent though, but he tells me of his travels and of what he learned. He also discusses ideas of philosophy and theology with me, writes me letters to explain subjects. He sometimes calls me his Heloise, but I tell him then he is advancing on a very dangerous path. I am afraid I tease him much!’

‘Yes, I imagine,’ James answered, understanding where Catherine had gotten her information concerning the Arteveldes and their friends. Just how much did she know?

‘What else do you read except philosophy?’ he asked, diverging from the subject.

‘Like every girl I like poetry and romances, Mer Artevelde, what did you expect?’

‘In some ways you don’t seem like a woman who prefers poetry and romances, Jonkver Catherine,’ James asserted. ‘I see you reading and enjoying Aristotle and Plato, Cicero even, and Pliny. I wonder, where do you get your books?’

‘I loan my books from the libraries in the abbeys. I also meet Mergriet Mutaert often. She seeks about the same books as I. We exchange them, of sorts. I read, but I also study. I study logic and accounting. I hold accounts for my father.’

‘Well, well! You did seem a very rational person to me, indeed, Jonkver Catherine!’

‘Why, Mer van Artevelde, do you think then women to be usually irrational beings given over to emotions only and to unexpected fits?’

James reddened and tried to save himself out of the corner he had run into.

He whispered several times, shaking his head, ‘of course not, no, no, of course not.’

He rapidly changed subjects.

‘I won lands near Zele and Zelzate, and more to the north along the Scheldt. I heard a Ser de Coster owned lands nor far from mine. Would that be your father?’

‘Yes, it might,’ Catherine nodded, thinking less well of James after his rapid retreat. ‘We do own lands there, an estate and a manor. Our family originated from Kortrijk. We still also own some lands and farms there. Your name indicates your origins, is it not?’

‘True! Our family comes from Ertvelde, but we came to Ghent many generations ago. We have been *poorters* of Ghent as long as we can remember.’

‘Of course,’ Catherine smiled, her mouth thin and stern, ‘as we are, Mer van Artevelde, as we are.’

They were again interrupted for a series of speeches, given from the dais of the hall. When the speeches had been applauded, James talked much to his neighbour on the right side, who engaged him in a long discourse on the relations between the city and the count, and then, remembering he was a priest, on the relations between common man and the devil.

When the dinner was over, James van Artevelde turned his attention back to Catherine de Coster, but before he could utter a few courteous words of goodbye, Catherine hurriedly addressed him.

‘Mer van Artevelde, could I please have a further word with you? I have something to propose to you. Where could we meet and talk? I could arrange for us to talk in my father’s office, here in Saint Bavo’s, or I am quite willing to come to your house.’

Catherine looked at James with expectant eyes, not shy at all, now.

James was surprised. Would a young girl of her age come alone, unaccompanied to the house of a man living on his own? Did she not fear for her reputation, or was he, James, being old-fashioned?

‘Why not,’ he thought, ‘I am not going to do her any harm. She does seem to like leading people along. Should rather I be afraid of her than she of me? Well I never, this woman is extraordinary. She actually amuses me!’

‘Fine! Sure!’ James answered. ‘We will be more at ease in my hall. I will not be in Ghent for three days as from tomorrow, however. I have to travel to Bruges. In four days from today I’ll be back, on Wednesday. Why don’t you come at noon on Wednesday and have lunch with me? My house is on the *Kalanderberg*.’

‘I know where your house is, and I accept your invitation gladly. Till Wednesday at noon, then.’

Before James could say anything more, ask her what she wanted of him, Catherine de Coster turned to her neighbour on her left side and seemed to have forgotten about James.

‘Oh well,’ James thought, ‘she must want something trifling of me. I can wait. I am not going to show her I am curious!’

James took his leave with the guests of the abbot, and went home on foot in the darkness of Ghent, wondering what young Catherine might want to talk to him about. He suspected she was more occupied with her father’s business than the man himself. Did she need money? Would she want to borrow Florins from him?

The following Wednesday, a little after noon, Catherine de Coster knocked at James van Artevelde’s door.

James opened for her, a little anxiously, but with a broad smile on his face. He welcomed Jonkver de Coster, and remarked she too was a little nervous.

‘Yes, she has come to borrow money,’ James thought.

How would he avoid her? What business proposal had she devised?

James invited Catherine to the table with a long gesture of his arm. The plates and glasses had been set for two only. James helped Catherine out of her long, brown cloak, discovering she was splendidly dressed in a very fine woollen green robe with an orange silk lining, a rather deep, alluring curve in front of her chest. James noticed the whiteness of her impeccable skin, the nice bearing of her breasts. Catherine took the chair James proposed to her.

James and Catherine sat in front of one another at different sides of the breadth of the table. James called his maidservants to bring in the plates with food, and they engaged quite

agreeably in eating the various little dishes James had asked for from his cook. James noticed how well educated Catherine was. The morsels of little birds had been cut in the kitchen. They were served with light spinach, a novelty of his cook. Catherine used her fork to pick up the tiniest pieces, used only two delicate fingers to help with the lightest leaves of vegetables. They drank sweet white wine, on which she complimented him.

James could not but remark how lovely she was. The bright light in his hall, a peculiarity he had transformed the house for, suited her better than the light from the candelabras in the abbey hall.

‘She is a little of the scholarly type, a little thin over the bones,’ James said to himself, ‘but she has a nice figure.’

Catherine’s chest was not voluptuous but well rounded, her waist tiny, her hips maybe a little too broad for her chest, but she stroke a fine, distinguished figure indeed.

When they had eaten and finished chatting, Catherine’s cheeks a little flushed from the wine, James thought the time had come to ask her about the purpose of their meeting. He had expected she had come to talk to him about the ailing businesses of her father, but she surprised him more.

‘Yes,’ Catherine began hesitatingly. ‘Why did I ask to see you? Well, I have a proposal to make to you, a proposal that is dear to me.’

Catherine de Coster sighed, seemed to gather courage, avoided James’s eyes, and continued, ‘you are a widower, Mer van Artevelde, you have a house and children to care for, and I heard you travel often. I know, I know, your friends and their families help you with that, and you have fine friends, but wouldn’t it be nice if you saw your children well cared for in your own house and your matters of household cared for continually, well cared for by somebody you can totally trust? Wouldn’t it be nice to come home to a house that is not cold and lonely in winter? Would it not be nice to come home to a comforting, even loving place? I think, though I may be wrong, you are not engaged yet in any new relation. I think your heart and mind are still free since your wife deceased. I am almost twenty-three years old. I am not too bad-looking, if I may say so. I am industrious and I can be a warm, loving woman. I care for my father’s business, we are doing well and are thriving. Our lands are well managed. We have no debts, our fortune is increasing due to our efforts. I know how to manage estates, lands, and how to hold counts of business ventures. The fact is, Mer van Artevelde, I am not a girl who would throw herself tempestuously into any man’s arms. I am looking for a man who is not foolish or violent, looking for a sensible, gentle, rational man to marry with. I might give children to such a man, might he desire so, God willing, and I have much affection to give, I assure you. Might it not be fine if we married, so to speak? Would you be willing to envisage marrying a girl like me, unless you are rebuked by my presence, of course?’

James van Artevelde did his best to hide his surprise, which turned to utter shock. He desperately tried to keep his mouth from falling open, his eyes from bulging out of their sockets. His throat went very dry. He avoided Catherine’s eyes.

The woman was actually proposing to marry him! She was proposing marriage as if it were a business proposal! What about feelings, about love, or physical desire? Should those not come before marriage? Of course not, said another voice in his head, don’t be silly! Most marriages are business proposals. This girl is only proposing what her father would not dare to think of. But was it not for him, James van Artevelde, to yearn for a pretty face, to desire his arms around a waist, his hand on a warm, palpating breast?

‘Come on, James,’ he convinced himself, ‘haven’t you already argued to yourself that this romance part of your life was over and done with, lying in the grave with Agneete? You will

never really deceive the memory of Agneete with this cold fish. You are not a foolish young man anymore. You are not going to fall in love again, you are beyond that! You have become too sensible, too rational. Isn't it a rational decision you have been waiting for?'

James hesitated, kept his silence still, saw the imploring glance of Catherine, eyes he found it hard to resist to. The proposal made sense! Catherine de Coster was a fine woman, intelligent, gentle, well-educated, a noble woman, a woman of substance. She would be a fine wife. He could be proud walking next to her. The arguments she had presented, too, made sense.

James was not an impulsive man, at least not most of the times, but now he answered in a strange turn of his mind, 'your proposal seems a pleasing one, Jonkver Catherine. It is worth considering. In fact, I already have considered it. Maybe we should learn to know each other just a little better. After all, we only spoke twice together so far! We have to do this the proper way, the way all good *poorters* of Ghent do. If I come to your father, asking him to talk and walk with you in view of a marriage, would you and he agree to that request?'

'Of course, we would,' Catherine answered, her look suddenly smiling and delighted, eyes bright, visibly relieved.

'Of course,' James van Artevelde repeated.

He stood up from his chair and kissed her hand.

Three months later, the wedding of James van Artevelde and Jonkver Catherine de Coster was sealed in Saint John's Church. The feast was magnificent. Catherine took charge of the Artevelde complex of houses and barns in the *Kalanderberg*.

The Failing Diplomacy

Meanwhile, the antagonism between King Edward III and King Philip had continued. Pope Benedict XII tried to reconcile the two kings, but he soon had to acknowledge that a true peace seemed far off. In 1332, the pope had asked the two kings to plan a crusade together, but in March 1336 the pope had to announce that due to the increasing opposition between England and France, there could be no crusade soon.

A French fleet had been assembled at Marseille for the crusade. This fleet began a pirating campaign against English vessels in the North Sea Channel. Rumours spread Philip VI would send an army to Scotland. The English Parliament voted new taxes, enabling Edward III to levy an army to fight in France.

At the end of 1336 no open war had been declared yet between England and France. The first real hostilities, but for the capture of English merchantmen in the Channel, happened in Flanders.

Count Louis de Nevers of Flanders, still very grateful and loyal to Philip VI of Valois, had heard of the increasing hostility between the two kings. In the autumn of 1336, eager ever to please Philip VI, Louis de Nevers arrested the English merchants present in Flanders.

This was an extremely foolish act, for the counter-measure came quickly. In October of 1336, the Flemish merchants were seized in England, and the exportation of English wool to Flanders was forbidden. The prohibition was complete for Flanders. No wool could even be brought to Flanders through intermediaries.

King Edward III's attention had already been drawn to the wool trade. He needed money, much money, to wage his planned incursions into France. In that same year of 1336 he had obtained loans on every sack of wool sold, and he had tried to grant the monopoly of the export of wool to a consortium of wealthy English traders in return for the selling of sacks of wool for himself. These last schemes turned out as failures, but Edward III held an eye to the potential of English wool.

In December of 1336, the export of corn and other foodstuffs was forbidden from England to Flanders and in April of 1337 also the export of ox hides, skins of all sorts, and cheese. Flemish merchants were being kept prisoner in England, their property confiscated. King Edward III also began negotiation with King Alfonso XI of Castille, to prevent food and other merchandise to be brought to Flanders. The Scots persisted in treating with the Flemish towns, but the English mercilessly attacked their ships.

In the spring of 1337, Edward III sent a large delegation of knights to the Hainault, to Guelders and Juliers. Edward III launched an important effort of seduction in the Low Countries, trying to win the various counties to his cause. He sent John de Thrandeston with Henry de Burghersh, bishop of Lincoln, William de Montague, earl of Salisbury, and William de Clinton, earl of Huntingdon, to negotiate alliances. His men were also empowered to treat with the count of Flanders and with the Flemish cities, as well as with the duke of Brabant, with William of Hainault, William margrave of Jülich, Reginald count of Guelders and many other petty nobles.

Most of the meetings were held at Valenciennes from the end of April of 1337 on. Jeanne, the countess of Hainault and sister to Philip of Valois, weighed on these talks.

Jeanne and her noblemen tried to reconcile Philip of Valois with Robert of Artois, who had fled to England and who constantly advised Edward III to war on France.

Robert of Artois was King Philip's brother-in-law. He had been a faithful companion to Philip, but he had tried in 1330 to take possession illegally of the Artois region. To that effect, he had forged documents and may even have poisoned his aunt who had inherited the region. He had been found out and burdened with shame and scandal banished from France, also accused of witchcraft. In France, he was now called 'the Sorcerer'.

Jeanne's efforts were in vain. Finally, the lords signed a treaty in which they pledged to defend together their territories against the aggression of King Philip. They promised to fight together and levy an army of a thousand men-at-arms at the expense of King Edward.

Edward's ambassadors sprinkled lavishly large sums of money on the allies. The counts of Hainault, Holland, Zeeland, Guelders and the margrave of Jülich committed formally to support the king of England in a war with King Philip. Philip of Valois thus became surrounded by a large band of hostile neighbours.

Brabant and Flanders remained, despite issues, loyal to the king, but Flanders was being squeezed to death because of its seeming loyalty.

The aim of the embassy was to buy allies. The envoys paid sixty thousand pounds to the duke of Brabant for the support of the duchy. Duke John did not hesitate to draw his advantage from the embargo on English wool on Flanders. He pressed the English delegates to transfer the wool staple to a town of Brabant, such as to Antwerp, which was developing into a better harbour and open metropolis than Bruges. Edward III might bring the staple to Antwerp, under the condition the English merchants were free to travel and trade in Brabant and provided no wool would be sent to Flanders.

Brabant, Hainault, Guelders, and Jülich seemed to move together at the expense of France and Flanders, and they moved into the warm, loving, caring arms of England.

The delegates also met success in Guelders. Guelders had been created in the first half of the eleventh century, when the two German Emperors Henry II and Henry III had given lands to two Flemish brothers established at Wassenberg. With time, Guelders comprised the regions of Roermond, Venloo, Gelderland or Guelders – whence its name – and the county of Hoorn. Adjoined to Guelders were lands in the territories between the streams the Rhine, Maas and Waal. They were a motley collection of lands, very diverse in character. Guelders became a vocal and very natural ally of England.

On twenty-four May of the same year 1337, King Philip of France officially confiscated Aquitaine, which was Guyenne and Gascony, from King Edward.

Guyenne was an enormous part of France, extending from just south of Nantes, only a little under the beautiful Loire River, to the Pyrenees. In the east, the towns as far inland as Poitiers, Limoges and Cahors formed part of Guyenne, with large territories around the Dordogne and the Lot rivers, the lower Garonne and Tarn. Guyenne did not include the Mediterranean ports nevertheless, nor the cities of Carcassonne, Narbonne and Montpellier. Guyenne was rich in everything, its income exceeding the income of England. It included Gascony, also a rich wine country. Flanders imported most of its wine from Gascony via the port of Bordeaux, in exchange for its cloth.

Edward III retaliated by claiming once more the title of the rightful king of France, a claim that particularly angered Philip VI, for it held great truth. On the seventh of October, King Edward asked Philip of Valois formally to surrender the crown. He named John, duke of Brabant, William, margrave of Jülich, Reginald, count of Guelders and William, count of Hainault, as his proctors with full powers to look after his rights in France.

Edward extended his negotiations to Alfonso, king of Castille, the count of Geneva, and with the Marshal of the king of Sicily, as well as with Lewis, the Elector of Brandenburg and son of Emperor Lewis the Bavarian. In June of 1337, Edward's ambassadors were at the court of Lewis the Bavarian, at Frankfurt. Lewis promised to appoint Edward as his Vicar-General, leader of his armies, in the Low Countries. In July, Lewis promised two thousand men-at-arms to Edward, who would pay for their upkeep.

From Frankfurt, the English ambassadors travelled to Holland, binding also there noblemen to their cause.

In September, Edward was already called the Vicar-General of the Emperor.

Edward III also prepared for war in earnest. In that year 1337 already, he wanted to send an expedition under the command of the earl of Northampton to scourge the county of Flanders, but the campaign proved too expensive for him. He had not been able to gather sufficient funds.

In March, the wool embargo of England was reinforced, and Flemish weavers were invited to make cloth of any length and quality in England.

In April of 1337, the towns of Flanders, Brabant and Hainault signed a treaty whereby they bound themselves only to make war by common consent. They chose a council of arbitration to settle their disputes. King Philip's ears grew longer. He smelled an alliance in the making,

an alliance of the northern counties directed against him and in favour of England. He surmised Duke John III of Brabant might be more sympathetic to the English than to France.

King Edward tightened his grip on Flanders. In May of 1337 he forbade the use of foreign cloth in England.

The count of Flanders refused to think about Ghent, always his most loyal ally, but Ghent was slowly starving. He did nothing to alleviate the suffering. Also the aldermen of the town thought they could not do much, for the orders came from count and king.

If the count of Flanders and the king of France did nothing to diminish the misery of Ghent, King Edward III of England sought support on the mainland from Flanders, Brabant and Hainault for his policy. He instantly saw an opportunity to win new alliances.

In March of 1337, Edward sent ambassadors to Flanders. His men were the bishop of Lincoln, the earl of Salisbury and the earl of Huntingdon, sufficiently important men to please any duke or count. The ambassadors visited Bruges, which suffered less from the embargo on wool. Then they arrived in Ghent, where they were warmly welcomed, even by some of the *Leliaerts*.

The Knight-Banneret of Ghent, a staunch supporter of Count Louis of Flanders, received the English delegates in his magnificent steen. This man of old Flemish nobility, Sohier de Kortrijkzaan, organised meetings and banquets with the aldermen of Ghent and with the English noblemen, but little more than assurances of sympathy could be exchanged. The English ambassadors left the city for Hainault. In Brabant, they would discuss transferring the English wool staple from Dordrecht to Antwerp, the port of Brabant.

Not long after this visit, the count held a Flemish Parliament in Bruges. Sohier de Kortrijkzaan was arrested when he arrived in Bruges, on orders of the count who had obeyed to a messenger from King Philip VI of France. Sohier was accused of treason and imprisoned in a cell of the count's prison of Rupelmonde. Sohier was not just any knight of Flanders. His forefathers had accompanied William of Normandy to Hastings, Robert the Fries to Jerusalem and King Baldwin to Constantinople! The arrest was regarded as a terrible insult to Flanders. Sohier's arrest not only angered the guilds of Ghent, which had hoped for some leniency after the discussions between Sohier and the English delegates. It also angered many of the wealthier *poorter* families of Ghent, who understood they were no longer immune from imprisonment and torture by the count, however loyal to the count they had proven to be in the past, and however much they had declared themselves to be *Leliaerts*, loyal to the *fleur-de-lys* of the king of France.

King Philip VI heard of the growing unrest in Flanders. He therefore sent Count Louis on a tour of the main towns of Flanders, urging the town governments to remain loyal to their king. King Philip also gave in on a few minor points of discord. He remitted two years of tribute plus half of the tribute of 1337, and he allowed ancient debts from as early as 1310 to be left unpaid. Flanders received the monopoly of French wool, however inadequate that was to the weavers of Ghent because of too low quality and quantity. Bruges was allowed gradually to raise new fortifications of its walls.

Edward also continued to appeal to John, duke of Brabant that summer, through John de Thrandeston and other agents. The duke was engaged in a dispute over the county of Loon with the bishop of Liège, who was in his turn supported by King Philip. Edward III secured Brabant as an ally by promising that the English wool staple would be established in Brabant.

He also allowed Brabant merchants into England to purchase wool. Edward bestowed considerable funds on the duke of Brabant.

In November of 1337, an armed convoy of English wool transporting ships bound for Dordrecht, where the English wool staple still was, landed at Cadzand, a low island in the estuary of the Scheldt. They defeated armed forces of the count of Flanders there, led by the count's illegal brother Guy. Guy of Flanders was taken a prisoner by the English.

King Philip VI continued to present a smiling and comforting face to Bruges, probably because Bruges controlled the important ports of Damme and Sluis, which could be used in the future for invasions by English troops, probably also because Bruges seemed wealthier and politically more powerful than Ghent. Ghent had in the past remained more loyal to the count than the other Flemish cities, so maybe Philip thought it was not necessary to flatter and cajole Ghent. The people of Ghent, however, poor and rich, common and noble, grumbled.

The result of the embargo on raw wool from England proved soon more catastrophic for Ghent than for any other town of Flanders. A little wool could be imported from France, but not much, and not nearly of the quality needed for the expensive cloth Ghent produced. In a few weeks, all wool left in the warehouses of the city was transformed into cloth and sold. Weavers and fullers were out of work. Two months later, the unemployed, two thirds of the population, the poorer weaver families and the even poorer fullers, ran out of money. When the weavers and the fullers ran out of money, all the others ran out of money. Ghent began to starve.

When poverty augments in a city, lawfulness increases. Desperate, poor men of Ghent began to steal and take what they needed from the wealthy. In order to avoid upheavals in Ghent, the aldermen organised a permanent city militia of forty-eight members of the guilds and twenty-six other men-at-arms. These were placed under the leadership of John van Wiendeke, who was then dean of the fullers, and under the receivers James Deynoot and Claes de Keyzer. From the third of February 1337 on, sixty police guards, known as the *scerewetters*, chosen from the guilds, began to guard the aldermen, and thirty more men were posted under the command of a captain.

The situation in Ghent was so desperate, that in June of 1337 the aldermen of Ghent despatched two of their colleagues, John Speliaert and Everdey de Grutere with three other influential men Tonis Bette, Lievin Bevelant and Pieter Zoetaert to France, to bring the dire state of Flanders to the king of France.

Philip of Valois was not to be moved by the misery in the town of Ghent!

A delegation of *Gentenaars* to the count of Flanders equally met with little or no success. In August, Philip did make some concessions. He cancelled the eighty thousand pounds Paris the Flemish cities still owed him from the previous years under the Treaty of Arques. He cancelled other due payments, and granted to Flanders the monopoly of all wool grown in France. In order to stem the growing anger of the cities, the alliance between the king and the count was strengthened by mutual promises of support. The count of Flanders also helped Scottish ships in their actions against England.

King Philip sought to detach the dukes and counts of the Low Countries from Edward's influence, but he did not succeed well in his efforts. The only true allies of Philip remained the count of Flanders, the bishop of Liège and John, King of Bohemia, as well as the aldermen of the town of Tournai.

Tournai was a town over which King Philip of Valois had consolidated his rights ever since 1330. From 1334 on, Tournai was considered a direct possession of the monarchy of France. Tournai's importance was in that it stood in a key position for France toward Flanders and the Low Countries. Brabant, Hainault, Guelders, Jülich, Namur and Flanders were in those times regularly involved in skirmishes, legal actions and negotiations over villages, towns, regions and rights along their borders. The dukes and counts of the lands also avoided therefore alliances among themselves and with the king of France.

James van Artevelde

Arnout de Hert the shipmaster called a meeting of the Pharaïldis men. They met in the great hall of Raes van Lake the Elder. Raes welcomed his friends with a grim face, a sign he was not going to have a gathering as pleasurable as the habitual ones. This time, no business ventures would be discussed, no prospect of fine profits expected. Raes and Arnout had conferred. They wanted to exchange views about the attitudes of the king and the count and about how the aldermen of the town were assessing the appalling situation, what they planned to do to alleviate the painful economic downturn for Ghent.

‘Nothing they are planning to do, nothing, nothing!’ Raes van Lake exclaimed, outraged. ‘Why should the aldermen try something to keep us from starving? King Philip is obsessed with the claims of the king of England. He would like so much to put his hands on rich Guyenne, his wine territory. He also would like to annex Flanders, wealthy Flanders, to his own lands. If Flanders starves for now, all the better. When things change, he can call himself the great saviour! It will be easier for him to accuse Count Louis of mismanaging his feudal fief, which we know to be very true.

Count Louis is twice stupid. He wished to please the king of France, but we know, as all the fools in the world know, that when you lie down on your back, showing your unprotected belly with your arms and legs up, like a puppy, the only reward you get is a kick in the balls. If you are looking for respect, you have to show your teeth and bite! The king spits on the count. Also, Count Louis has ruined his own fief by arresting the English merchants and believing Edward wouldn't retaliate. Of course, Louis doesn't care for the moment of what happens to Flanders, for he demands the same level of taxes as before, and he cares not where we get the money from. So, our reserves are dwindling. The count is too stupid to understand that if his situation lasts, only a few months more, we shall not be able anymore to pay him, however hard he presses us.

And the aldermen? Most of them are landowners and traders. Their money comes from their reserves and from their land, less so from trade. A little less trade won't hurt them much. I heard they are discussing the situation and seeking for solutions, but since they are linked to the count and to the king to get elected, if not they personally then other men from their families, they hesitate about actions. They have been hesitating now since almost an entire year. Their personal funds diminish, yes, but they don't eat less and they walk in the same fancy clothes. Their robes and cloaks come from Paris and Italy, but what do they care? They talk with their hands in the air and shout, ‘this is not our fault! We know you are starving, poor *Gentenaars*, but we, the aldermen, are not the cause of the disputes of the count and the king. Can we provide you with a piece of dry bread and stale cheese? We pray to God the conflict between the two kings does not last. We pay for masses and prayers of our clergy!’

‘We can get some of the lesser quality wools in from northern England,’ John Denout added. ‘Those wools do not have to pass through the staple, but they are of such low quality our cloth buyers shall refuse the cloth made from these wools. Our cloth will not be better than the cloth produced in any other town of Flanders, France and Italy. King Philip VI of France has promised recently to send the entire export of French wools exclusively to Flanders, but those wools are far too small in number of bales for the production of Ghent, and the quality is even lower than the wool from northern England.’

The crux of the matter is,’ Gillis Vresele proposed sternly, ‘who can do anything? What should change?’

‘The situation in Ghent is getting catastrophic,’ Arnout de Hert interjected. He was too excited to stop listening. ‘I and the other shippers, we have no wool to transport from Damme, Sluis or even Antwerp. We transport no more cloth. We still transport grain, beer, wine, vegetables, meat and fish, but in quantities that are much lower, as much as one third lower than before. In all, we lost two thirds or more from our business. I have thought of bringing my boats on the waterways of Brabant or Hainault, but the shippers from those lands alone are allowed to navigate on the rivers of Brabant and Hainault. I must smuggle to survive, a very dangerous way of working, for I might get caught and be thrown in prison, which would condemn my family to misery.’

‘You complain about your waning transport business?’ Raes van Lake yelled, banging his fist on the table. ‘What is happening is far worse for me! I can survive until the next spring on my funds, then my family starves. I can get no wool in for weaving, so I have no cloth to sell. The same is happening with John Denout, here. No wool, no fulling. No cloth, no felting. He turns his fingers in powerlessness and curbs under the justified chidings of his wife, as I do. It is our duty to bring in money to feed our family. We are thousands of weavers, fullers, spinners, carders, shearers, traders, brokers, hostellers, you name it, without work. We are all ruined. If this goes on a couple of months more, we shall have to leave Flanders and go to live in another country. I and John Denout, we have thought of sailing to England. We have just enough money left to buy a few houses and barns in Kent or in Norfolk, start weaving there, and fulling, and selling cloth from out of England. We could do that! We have enough reserves left. How many more weavers and fullers of Ghent could move to England? I think I could count them on the fingers of my one hand! The others will starve and die!’

‘No cloth, no wealth,’ Wouter de Smet sighed. ‘Nobody buys jewels anymore these days. I have thought of going back to my smithy with my son. There is still some work around the *Gravensteen* for a blacksmith, but no work anymore for a silversmith or a goldsmith. I don’t dare to tell my son! He loves being a goldsmith and hates the work of the blacksmith, but if necessary, within a month or two, that’s what I’ll have to do!’

‘The same with me,’ James van Artevelde told, shaking his head. ‘Like Arnout stated, I still bring victuals to Ghent, but one third less. I perceive only desolation around me. Ghent is reduced to stark poverty. Have you noticed the number of beggars has practically tripled in the last months? One finds them in every street, nowadays, at every corner, and they fight for a place on the cobbles! Starvation has set in at more houses than you would believe. I hate living in a heartless place of such misery!’

‘I restate my question,’ Gillis Vresele insisted. ‘My father would not have remained passive when in danger of not being able to care for his family anymore. The question is: who can do what?’

‘If the king and the count and the aldermen do not move,’ Raes van Lake speculated, ‘then the guilds will have to decide for action.’

‘The guilds do not have much power these days. They are not well organised. They too hesitate. They argue in disputes among each other. They have no leader to unite them.’

‘Can we provide them with a leader?’ Wouter de Smet wondered.

‘Any of us has enough strength and prestige to lead the guilds, and as a group we can wield a lot of power’ John Denout proposed.

‘All right. Suppose we succeed in leading the people of Ghent, then we’ll have the aldermen against us. That cannot be done!’

‘We might lure the aldermen on our side,’ James van Artevelde mentioned. ‘I happen to know that some of the better families of aldermen, the van Vaerneuwijc among them, are concerned and ask the same questions as we.’

‘And then what?’ Wouter de Smet asked. ‘What can be done when king and count work together to antagonise the king of England? Are you considering a new war against France and the count? Have you forgotten about the Battle of Cassel?’

‘Cassel was a battle of peasants and peasant leaders, plus a few militia of cities. The cities of Flanders all have the same issue as we in Ghent. An army of the united cities of Flanders cannot be defeated by France. Moreover, do you know how a shipper sails against the wind? We have learned we can always steer to the right and then to the left and yet advance against the wind. We need somebody sufficiently smart and cunning to sail this way, avoiding war,’ Arnout de Hert grumbled.

‘How could we steer to right and left?’ James van Artevelde wondered. ‘The two kings are opposed completely, in all matters of state. Taking one side means war with the other.’

‘Then we don’t take sides! We declare we don’t take sides, but we won’t tolerate English merchants to be persecuted in Flanders. We grant free trade to the English, but we declare us neutral in the conflict between the kings. If one of the kings doesn’t accept our neutrality, then we go to war. We make it very clear we are willing to go to war over that one issue of the wool embargo. Neither France nor England is powerful enough to hold us from guarding our statement. And if France threatens to attack, we threaten to declare us the ally of England, and vice versa. That shall deter them!’ Gillis Vresele threw in.

‘It might work,’ James van Artevelde concluded. ‘If it does not work, we shall have war, but we either starve or go to war or have to try this third way of remaining neutral in the conflict with the kings. The last alternative is the only positive one. People die in our streets of misery, poverty and hunger. We must act! How do we proceed?’

‘We start a campaign of rumours, explaining we have found a solution to save Flanders. We call the people together and explain what our policy ought to be. We must think about how to organise Ghent.’ Gillis proposed.

‘Who shall be our leader?’ Arnout asked. ‘Who among us has the most prestige and is most likely bound to be listened to by the people? Who may gain the support of the aldermen families?’

The Pharaïldis men looked at James van Artevelde.

Author's Notes

'The City – Rebellion' is a work of fiction within the lines of history. I tried as much as possible to remain within what historians know as fact of Ghent in the fourteenth century, filling with fiction the gaps about which we know nothing. The Vresele, de Smet, Denout, van Lake and de Hert families are pure fiction.

James van Artevelde was married a first time to a lady of whom the historians have not yet discovered the name. I let him be married to a Vresele daughter, a fictional character.

The members of the families de Grutere, Soyssone, Sleepstaf and Stocman mentioned in this book are fictitious, but the families did exist in Ghent in the fourteenth century, and were antagonistic to the van Arteveldes.

The van Lede family existed in Ghent at the time of the book, and the incident with William van Artevelde in Sleydinge and Ghent happened more or less as narrated, but the archives do not mention the name of the man who insulted William, so the name Diederic van Lede is a fiction.

In the fourteenth century, Flanders was a county, its titular head a count who owned feudal duties to the king of France. The county was organised into castellanies, called in Flemish or Dutch '*kasselrijen*'. The castellanies were subdivided in 'crafts', the literal translation for the Flemish and Dutch word of '*ambachten*', though 'crafts', or shires, existed that had no real castellany between them and the count. At the head of the castellanies and of the 'crafts' were noblemen, knights, who ruled over their domain in feudal duty to the count.

During Jacob van Artevelde's times (1337-1345 but also later), the three main cities of Flanders controlled each a 'quarter'. Bruges controlled the Brugse Vrije, the largest territory, as well as three ambachten in the west, with from north to south respectively: the Veurne Ambacht, The Saint-Winoksbergen Ambacht (Bergues in French) and the Broekburg Ambacht. The quarter of Ieper consisted of three castellanies, respectively Ieper itself, Belle and Cassel. The quarter of Ghent was the largest, holding from north to south the following castellanies: the Vier Ambachten or Four Crafts, The Land van Waas, the Land van Dendermonde, Oudburg, The Land van Aalst, Oudenaarde, Kortrijk. The quarter of Lille held Lille as a castellany and the castellany of Douai. Tournai (Doornik in Dutch) formed a separate castellany and quarter.

I doubt there has ever been a theft of a treasure in the Saint Liudger abbey of Zele, the theft mentioned in the novel is fictional, but the abbey exists.

Saint John's church and parish still exist, but they are currently called of Saint Baafs. The old church was transformed to the Gothic style in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Emperor Charles V (1500-1558), who was born in Ghent, suppressed a revolt in Gent in 1539, after which he terminated and secularised the ancient abbey of Saint Bavo. He allowed the monks of Saint Baafs to use the church of Saint John as theirs. Ghent became a bishopric in 1559 and Saint Baafs a cathedral.

The geography of Flanders and Zeeland was very different in the fourteenth century from what it is now. Large sea-bays entered into the land, allowing towns such as Sluis and Damme to be harbours with access to the sea. Currently, these towns lay far inland. The same was true

for the bay that entered deep inside Flemish Zeeland near Axel. The land called Walcheren in Zeeland was still an island in those times.

The pattern of streets of Ghent in the fourteenth century has been retained much to the present day, and so have even the names of the streets. The Friday Market is still called as such, as well as the Fish Market, the Corn Market, the Reep, the Kalanderberg, the Veldstraat, and so on. This means one can very much use a contemporary map of Ghent and locate the streets mentioned in the text.

The earliest map of the streets of Ghent is a map of 1534. I used a map of 1559, drawn by Jacob van Deventer.

Hereafter follows a list of streets of the novel, according to my own (and therefore maybe not very correct) situation on the current map of Ghent.

Name in the fourteenth century	Current name
Betsgravenbrug	Bridge from the Lievestraat over the Lieve Canal
Bijloke klooster	Bijloke convent
Boomgaardenstraat	Lange Boomgaardstraat
Baudeloo abdij	Disappeared, Baudelohof and Baudelostraat
Brabantdam	Brabantdam, eastern part
Brabantstraat	Brabantdam, western part
Braembrug	In the Brabantdam, covering van de Schelde
Donkersteeg	Donkersteeg
Drabstraat	Drabstraat
Fremineuren abdij	Disappeared, between the Ajuinlei and the Veldstraat
Geeraard de Duivel Steen	Geeraard de Duivel Steen
Graanstapel	On the Graslei
Gravensteen	Gravensteen
Groene Briel abdij	Disappeared, Saint Lucas Hospital site
Groene Hooie	Beguinaage of Ghent between the former Hooipoort and the Vijfwindgatenpoort, now the Klein Begijnhof in the Lange Violettestraat
Hoofdbrug	Bridge in the Burgstraat over the canal
Hoogpoort	Hoogpoort
Hooipoort	Disappeared, eastern gate on the Brabantdam
Houtlei	Disappeared, filled up, currently the Oude Houtlei straat
Kalanderberg	Kalanderberg
Kammerstraat	Kammerstraat
Kattestraat	Emile Braun Plein
Ketelgracht	Ketelvaart
Koestraat	Koestraat
Koornmarkt	Koornmarkt
Korte Munt	Korte Munt
Kouter	Currently the space between the Kouter and the Ketelvaart
Lange Munt	Lange Munt
Leie	Leie
Lieve Kanaal	Lieve Kanaal
Minnebrug	Disappeared as bridge, between the Burgstraat and the Drabstraat, bridge over de filled Houtlei, currently the Oude Houtlei, just behind the Veebrug

Nederschelde straat	Limburgstraat
Onderbergen	Onderbergen
Oudburg	Oudburg
Paddenhoek	Paddenhoek
Posternepoort	Gate and bridge disappeared, over the filled-up Houtlei, currently at the crossing of the Oude Houtlei and the Posternestraat
Reep	Reep
Schelde	Schelde
Schepenhuis	Town hall of Ghent
's Gravenbrug	Bridge over the Leie from the Vismarkt to the Sint Veerleplein
Sint Baafs abdij	Disappeared, in ruins, Voorhoutkaai
Sint Jacobskerk	Sint Jacobskerk
Sint Jans kerk	Sint Baafs kathedraal
Sint Michielsbrug	Brug in Sint Michielsstraat
Sint Michielsstraat	Sint Michielsstraat
Sint Michielskerk	Sint Michielskerk
Sint Niklaaskerk	Sint Niklaaskerk
Sint Pietersabdij	Sint Pietersabdij, Sint Pietersplein
Sint Veerle Plein	Sint Veerle Plein
Turrepoort	Gate and bridge disappeared, over the filled-up Houtlei, currently at the crossing of the Oude Houtlei and the Hoogstraat
Tussen Bruggen	Graslei
Veebrug	Vleeshuisbrug
Veemarkt	Vlasmarkt
Veldstraat	Veldstraat
Vijfwindgatenpoort	Disappeared, south-eastern gate
Vismarkt	Groentenmarkt
Voldersstraat	Voldersstraat
Vrijdagmarkt	Vrijdagmarkt
Waalpoort	Bridge in the Kortedagsteeg over the Ketelvaart
Wevers kapel	Weverskapel in the Kortedagsteeg
Winkelstraat	Approximately the Seminariestraat
Zandpoort	Gate and bridge disappeared, over the filled-up Houtlei, currently at the crossing of the Oude Houtlei and the Zandpoortstraat
Zuivelsteeg	Zuivelsteeg towards the Zuivelbrug and Oudburg

A fine, accurate map of Ghent in the fourteenth century can be found in the books of David Nicholas ('The van Arteveldes of Ghent' Cornell University Press, 1988, and 'The Metamorphosis of a Medieval City: Ghent in the Age of the Arteveldes, 1302-1390' University of Nebraska Press, 1987.)

One does not have to study hundreds of books for a story like this one, but one has to discover the right books. I am no historian, so I used existing studies of historians and went back to the chronicles of the fourteenth century when I deemed it necessary.

I particularly appreciated the books of David Nicholas mentioned above, plus:

- ‘Europe in the High Middle Ages’ of William Chester Jordan (Penguin, 2002),
- ‘The Hundred Years War’ of Desmond Seward (Robinson, 2003),
- ‘A Distant Mirror’ of Barbara W. Tuchman (Random House Publishing Group, 1978),
- ‘James and Philip van Artevelde’ of William James Ashley (MacMillan 1883),
- ‘Vlaanderen en het zevenjarig beleid van Jacob van Artevelde’ of Paul Rogghé (Manteau),
- ‘Jacques d’Artevelde’ by M. Kervijn de Lettenhove (Imprimerie van Dosselaere, 1863),
- ‘Histoire de Belgique’ of Henri Pirenne (Maurice Lamertin, éditeur, 1929’ in two books especially: ‘T1 Des origines au commencement du XIViè^me siècle’ and ‘T2 Du commencement du XIViè^me siècle à la mort de Charles le Téméraire’),
- ‘Jacob van Artevelde’ of Hans van Werveke (Kruseman, 1963),
- the ‘Cartulaire historique et généalogique des Artevelde’ by Napoleon Depauw (Havez, 1920),
- ‘The Low Countries and the Hundred Years’ War’ by Henry S. Lucas (University of Michigan Publications, 1929),
- ‘The perfect King. The Life of Edward III Father of the English Nation’ by Ian Mortimer (Vintage Books, 2008),
- ‘Philippe VI 1328-1350’ by Ivan Gobry (Pygmalion-Flammarion, 2011)
- ‘Et post in Flandriam? De Zwarte Dood in het graafschap Vlaanderen (1349-1350): een kritische benadering van het bestaande onderzoek en enkele nieuwe pistes’ van Jan Vandeburie (masterproef Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2009)
- ‘Repertorium van de Vlaamse adel (ca. 1350 – c. 1500) of Frederik Buylaert (Academia Press Ghent, 2011).

and several other texts.

Many more interesting books date from the nineteenth century, such as:

- Hendrik Conscience’s novel ‘Jacob van Artevelde’ (Drukkerij J.-E. Bushmann, 1843),
- the ‘Chroniques de Froissart’ edited by J.A. Buchon (J. Carez, 1824),
- ‘Histoire des Comtes de Flandre T2’ van Edward Le Glay (Van Ackere, Lille, 1843)
- ‘Jacob van Artevelde’ of Frans de Potter (J. Nys, 1865),
- the ‘Memorieboek der stad Ghent van ’t jaar 1301 tot 1793, deel 1’ of Andreas van Heule (C. Annoot-Braeckman, Ghent, 1854),
- ‘Recherches historiques sur les costumes civils et militaires des gildes et corporations de métiers, drapeaux, armes, blasons, etc.’ of Félix de Vigne (E. Ghyselinck, 1847),
- ‘Goede Dinsdag, 13 januari 1349’ van J. Vuylsteke (Handelingen van de Geschiedkundige en Oudheidkundige Kring van Gent, 1, 1895)
- ‘La formation territoriale des principautés belges au moyen âge, tomes 1 et 2’ of Léon Vanderkindere (Lamertin, Brussels, 1902)
- ‘Le siècle des Arteveldes’ of Léon Vanderkindere (A.N. Lebègue, Brussels, 1879).
- ‘Histoire des Ducs de Bourgogne’ of M. de Barante (Société typographique belge Adolphe Wahlen et cie., Brussels, 1839).

as well as many other texts, among which the articles of P.A. Lenz and of David Nicholas. These are but a few of the thousands of pages of documentation I gathered about the Arteveldes and their epoch.