

Ye Gode Boke of Knightly Conduct

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or,

How Sir Diederic made certain
his squire became a true knight

As remembered and written by Arnout, with the
help of Father Onno of the priory of Saint Ethelbert

C.D. Perch

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For my mum, Mahani Suryatenggara, and my brother, Rob.

Simon and Ari, Maud, Bea, Tamara, Enrico, Bram and Netteke, thank you for being there and supporting me when I needed it the most.

Special thanks go to Sarah de Waard. Without her I would never have thought to take up writing fiction. My *Gode Boke* would never have been as good as it is now without her talent as an editor.

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Foreword

*Oh, to be a knight! A knight who is of a true and noble sort; one who lives up to the lessons of old that teach you to become a member of this most honourable position. A man can become a knight true and fair by living his life by the rules and morals set down by his peers. The lessons will shape a youth and mould him into the finest knight. Only the truest of these brave and blessed men shall be permitted to pass on the knowledge and experience of what it truly and verily means to be a knight. For it is this select group of men that encompasses all things considered true and noble and so forms the pinnacle, no verily and for certain, is the epitome of *The Knight*.*

The knight who, in his role as protector of the weak and defender of the realm, has a heavy cross – in the form of a bow, dagger or sword – to bear. Legends, poems and songs speak of his prowess, his piety and bravery in the face of evil, the way he will swoon the hearts of fair ladies.

There is, or was, for we do not know whether or not he is still among the living of this world, one man who incorporates all virtues of a true knight. The lessons he has taught his squire justify his legendary status and prove his ability to transform the youth of men into the crème de la crème of the knightly world.

The following stories are a record of the famed and honourable Sir Dienderic of the House of Mal a la Tête, son to Wilhelm of the House of Mal a la Tête, Duke of the duchy of Grand Migraine, Bearer of the ominous sword Pluckaduck, member of the Order of the Great Golden Goose, Flag

bearer for His Imperial Highness, blah blah blah, put upon husband and terribly tired father to his sons, and his virtuous and piteous wife, Kriemhilde of the House of Mal a la Tête, born of the House of Nibelung, Duchess of the duchy of Grand Migraine, member of the Order of the Sacred Secret Recipe of the Divine Almond Cookie, Lady in waiting to Her Majesty and most devoted wife to Wilhelm of Mal a la Tête and most put upon mother to her sons.

Noble and worthy knight of the Holy Crusade, Sir Diederic is third in line to inherit his father's place. His fate is unknown as he was captured and taken by a flying earthworm with great big teeth during the magnificent tournament that was held by Sir Frederik of Ulsus Ventriculi.

Not yet mentioned is that Sir Diederic was very masculine, known for the ever-present scruff, and was the potential spouse to the fair Lady Ada up to the point that the evil worm flew off with the knight in one of its mighty claws.

These lessons are true and worthy of following as the Good Lord has willed them to be remembered by Arnout, knight and member of the Grand Order of the Brooding Dragon. Verified and written down by the venerable Father Onno of the Priory of Saint Ethelbert, with input from various trustworthy people who knew the knight personally.

The following tales are to enlighten the vulnerable young men and lead them into manhood and proper nobility; if not worldly nobility, then one of the soul and the heart, not to mention being able to effortlessly kick behinds and saving one's hide by diplomacy while they are at it.

May the Good Lord bless all who shall follow the sound advice in this humble chronicle. That the Good Lord also blesses Father Onno, Sir Arnout and most of all, that He may bless Sir Diederic, wherever he may be.

On the Basics One Born of Noble Blood Needs to Know

‘Achoo!’

The loud sneeze cut through the sound of the rain splishing and splotching, falling from the heavens in veritable bucket loads. The sneeze was followed by a wet sniff, accompanied by a grouchy grumble. It had been raining since before dawn and the two men on horseback were feeling decidedly cold, wet and miserable. Not to mention that the older of the two seemed to be in a steadily worsening mood. The horses were also a pitiful sight to behold and seemed to be holding a contest of who could look the worst in hopes of getting some extra snacks in appreciation of their hard work once they would stop and were taken care of.

‘This is not right; for Heaven’s sake, why is it raining since yesterday?’ the younger of the two riders muttered angrily. He refused to admit he was sulking. The older man looked at his squire through the rain that kept falling down relentlessly. The buckets had evidently been replaced by bathtubs, without a doubt the kind that could fit more than one person at a time.

‘Oh? What exactly did you expect to happen then, Arnout?’ the knight inquired. ‘After all, this country is known for its wetness. That means wetness in all its forms – including rain.’

The squire slumped and refused to look at the knight. Just when it seemed like the knight would not get an answer the lad spoke up.

‘The weather should have been beautiful; neither too hot nor too cold, with birds singing in honour of the Good Lord and serenading the marvel of His Creation. A pleasant breeze should be lightly ruffling the leaves of the trees.’ Arnout glared and frowned before sneezing once more and tried not to give in to the urge to wipe his nose on one of his sleeves. ‘You know what I will do, master? I am going to sing myself, like everyone does in all the stories I heard back home. The troubadour would sing about heroes like Arthur and Gawain. That’s what we are supposed to be doing during this trip! We should sing about our travels and adventures.’ Arnout commenced to sing a ballad, sounding more like a choking duck wheezing from pneumonia than actually singing about the adventures he and his master were certain to have.

The knight reached over and slapped his squire on the back of his head. ‘You know the drill, start with your generation. Now!’

‘What was that for ... ah, it was the ballad, right?’ the squire groaned as he tentatively felt the back of his head for any damage. He counted himself lucky. His master was not wearing his armour; if he had been wearing his gauntlet, the slap would certainly have sent him to La-la-land.

‘Arnout,’ the knight said, his voice sounding like silk over steel despite the rain splashing all around, ‘you know the drill. Siblings. Now!’

Arnout sighed, sat up a little straighter and started to drone in a monotonous, somewhat nasal tone of voice. ‘Johanna Maria Brechwalda, my younger sister, Arnout Michaël, that’s me, Arnulf Roderick, my older brother, and Floris Maximilian, who is my oldest brother.’

‘Parents!’ the knight barked.

‘My mother, Reinildis of Encephalitis Maior; my father Maximilian of Meningitis.’

‘Grandparents!’ the knight snapped.

‘My maternal grandparents are Bernulf of Encephalitis and Aedelbertha of Encephalomalacia; my paternal grandparents are Alexander of Meningitis and Helena of Hemicrania,’ Arnout droned on obediently through his sniffles, trying to prevent his voice from failing.

‘Good. Now what is it you might possibly inherit from them?’ the knight queried as his mood seemed to lighten a little.

‘A massive ache in the head, I suppose,’ Arnout grumbled, trying to avoid another swipe from his master for his insolence. He was not quite successful but at least he didn’t get hit too hard.

‘Let’s start easy then,’ the knight said wearily as he shifted in his saddle. ‘What have your parents set aside for your sister’s trousseau, seeing as I cannot imagine someone with her temper spending her life in a convent as a humble, obedient little nun.’

Arnout blinked. The last thing he had been thinking about was his sister, least of all seeing her married off to some poor fellow. The height of a trousseau was definitely something that he had never thought of as something he needed to know. Knowing your family tree was one thing, but this was something a bit more than droning the names of your ancestors.

‘Yes, lad, I want to hear what you know about the trousseau. You should know; the trousseau consists of the estate, moneys and/or goods your dear parents have set aside to aid your sister in her marriage. The things she and her children – if the Good Lord is in a wicked mood and chooses to bestow them upon her – can fall back on if her husband passes away or goes missing in action during a war or something like that. The things you won’t inherit unless she dies and your parents decide to split it amongst the then still living children.’

‘To be honest, master, I don’t exactly know the extent of her trousseau,’ Arnout said hesitantly. ‘All I know is that my oldest brother is supposed to inherit the title and everything that goes with that. My second brother is meant for the Church as far as I understand, and I am to be a knight if the Good Lord allows so I can amass my own honour, fame and influence, and hopefully be awarded a little land of my own with a nice little castle and the means to provide for myself and my liege-lord. Or I could be given the hand of a lovely maiden in marriage. About sisters I don’t know anything aside from the fact that they are most definitely not lovely maidens who should be rescued or married. My sister is more of an annoying pain in the behind, and I don’t understand her at all. According to my father this is one thing that is not likely to change at all. He says that he doesn’t understand my mother half the time either.’

Sir Diederic, scion of a House whose parents knew how to instil this knowledge into their offspring, sighed deeply.

‘Arnout,’ Diederic said, speaking slowly and clearly, something his squire was known to react to in alarm, ‘this is the sort of thing you should have learned before becoming my squire. This is what will influence your life, youngster. Family, both the ones born within wedlock and the ones outside; acquaintances, potential spouses, influence and power – everything depends on knowing these things. How else will you know if you can lay claim to a kingdom? Or know what you can gain by pledging allegiance to whatever sovereign desires that from you? Family trees, estates; honestly, that you should not know this is ridiculous! I would not be surprised that next you will probably tell me that you have no idea who your illegitimately begotten relatives are.’

Arnout startled and nearly fell from his beloved Penelope. ‘Illegitimate offspring?’ he squeaked, both horrified and affronted. ‘Master, you cannot seriously tell me that anyone in my family has sired ... any ... Aaachoo!’ Arnout glared at his master as he angrily wiped his nose.

Diederic looked condescendingly at his squire. ‘Yes Arnout, illegitimate offspring. Every noble House worth its name has at least one in each generation. It’s something one brags about. Not to mention the fact that you can always place one of your illegitimate children in high places where one who is burdened with a title is not able to go. Well, provided they don’t act like the spawn of Satan of course, but most of the time they do hold important positions where we are not allowed to do so.’

‘Do you mean that even the noble House of Mal a la Tête has at least one ...’

Diederic smiled as he replied, ‘You are likely to meet one of the more notorious bastards of our family during our journey to the Holy Land. But don’t worry; he’s a long way away yet.’

Arnout hesitated, not daring to ask further. He would most definitely prefer that the subject was dropped completely and that they would talk about a safer topic. Talking politics made his skin crawl.

‘As soon as we find a nice, warm tavern I will tell you why it is so important that you know your lineage and your relatives, be they legit or not.’ Diederick swiped at a lock of soaked stray hair that had managed to get into his eye. ‘Do not fret, squire mine. You are not the only one who had to learn this lesson. Let me tell you about how I made a fool of myself when I was introduced at the Imperial Court because I ... I will tell you what happened to me as soon as we have made ourselves comfortable.’

† † †

It had been amazing. Diederick’s eyes had fairly bulged out at all the sights and sounds, not to mention his own excitement. This was the biggest adventure he would have in his entire life! As was customary, Diederick, youngest scion of the great and noble House of Mal a la Tête, was to be presented at the court of the Emperor at the ripe old age of twelve. ‘t Was the way the youngster, the Emperor and his court would be able to get to know each other better.

Being presented to the Emperor was nothing he had been able to imagine. Having learned that His Imperial Highness was a close friend and sword-brother to his father, having saved each other’s lives during more than one battle, had made a lasting impression on Diederick. He had constantly been on his best behaviour, minding his manners, and had even managed to befriend three brothers whose family name he hadn’t caught. He also found that some of the ladies at court seemed to look at him as if he were some sort of potential titbit to be consumed when he had matured, which was rather disturbing. All in all, Diederick was having his greatest adventure and everything went about as well as it could have gone.

Diederick had thought that the actual introduction to the Emperor – the Empress had not been able to attend due to obligations concerning her youngest son – with the entire pack of scavengers, better known under the term courtiers, looking on was one of the awe-inspiring, momentous events in his life. He had been wrong. The banquet the Emperor had given in honour of meeting the youngest sons of the noble Houses of his Empire would count as a pinnacle of young

Diederich's introduction. The banquet was an elegant solution to throw young, impressionable noble scions into survival of the fittest at the top of the food chain.

'Do not fall asleep!' Wilhelm, Duke of Grand Migraine, poked his son unobtrusively in the ribs with his elbow. 'It will not do to have you nod off and fall face-first in your plate and squash your gingerbread. It is very good and very expensive, not in the least because they are gilded with gold, so eat them instead, hm?'

Diederich looked up blearily and nodded. 'I apologise, father. I will.' He obediently took a bite of his piece of gingerbread. He was not prepared for the taste of the expensive spices and the sweetness of the sugar to explode in his mouth, like fire bursting from the mouth of the great dragon. It distracted Diederich from what was happening around him, for it was not comparable to anything he'd ever had at the banquets his parents would hold. Gingerbread with gold leaf was far too expensive for his parents to serve, not to mention the fact that it would be quite the disaster to outdo the Emperor with such things as a sweet during a banquet. No, Diederich's parents served sambocade cheesecake or a very scrumptious raisin pudding.

Diederich slowly came back to his senses and decided that it was best to listen to the conversation that was taking place between a somewhat pompous and portly nobleman – Diederich remembered his father telling him that he was the Count of Something-or-Other – and the lady sitting next to him.

'... daughter would be quite a decent match for my mother's sister's youngest son's cousin by marriage. She is still rather young, but that would give him enough opportunity to father at least three legitimate sons who can carry on the family name and honour. After all, an old and noble family as his should not go extinct, not to mention the fact that it is a great opportunity for a political alliance against those dreadful heathens that live beyond his lands. It would leave us at least fairly safe from invasions.' The nobleman took a delicate sip of his wine to moisten the vocal chords as the lady nodded regally.

Wilhelm nudged Diederich to get his attention. 'That is Konrad, Count of Cirrhosis, born to the House of Haemochromatosis,' he

whispered so as to give his son a clue on who he was eavesdropping on. ‘Watch out for him; he is known to look too deeply in his cups. He is childless and it is a well-known secret that his wife is having a serious liaison with his first cousin from his mother’s side, the Prince Bishop Aelric of Cardiomyopathy.’

Diederich looked at his father and blinked in surprise before nodding his understanding. Turning back his attention to the couple seated opposite him, he noticed that the lady had her reply ready for Count Konrad.

‘You are right in saying that the man does need to be married and do his duty where his House is concerned. But do you really think Helena would be a good match? She is very young, not to mention the fact that her parents would have to put up quite a trousseau, an especially hard task with all those boys they have. They are also entitled to a fair inheritance ...’ the woman went on as Diederich looked in dismay at his father, who wore an unfathomable expression on his face.

‘That woman is Lady Gudrun, Konrad’s fifth cousin thrice removed. She is of the House of Atherosclerosis and is more closely related to the Prince Bishop of Cardiomyopathy from her mother’s side of the family. As you will notice, my son, their bloodlines are quite muddled and this could cause interesting and serious problems concerning who inherits what if something were to happen to either of them. Not to mention the problems it causes with family illnesses.’

Diederich looked askance at his father and swallowed nervously, his interest in the gingerbread forgotten.

‘Watch, listen and learn, oh youngest fruit of my loins, if you want to survive at our level of society. The Helena whom Lady Gudrun just mentioned is in all likelihood your mother’s brother’s wife’s second niece twice removed from the noble and honourable House of Edda, and the noble Lord mentioned is without a doubt Engelbert of the House of Pancreatitis. He is a good man, but getting on in age. Knowing your beloved mother’s relatives, Helena’s hand will not be given in marriage to him.’ He whispered the last comment with a somewhat disgusted sneer. Diederich chose to interpret that as Engelbert being ancient and his assets clearly found lacking. Those were the most valid

reasons why he would not be allowed to lay a hand on his distant cousin. Diederic then realised a rather disturbing possibility: were the Count of Cirrhosis and the Lady Gudrun in some way related to him? It could not be from his mother's side, obviously, seeing as the House of Nibelung had a profoundly different origin than the Houses of Haemochromatosis and Atherosclerosis. That left a possible, slim though it may be, blood tie stemming from his father's House, the Mal a la Têtes. It didn't look like it from the way his father behaved but it did merit some closer thought. Not too much though, for while the idea of being related to them was disturbing, the attempt at recounting his ancestors was daunting and nerve-wrecking.

Diederic tried not to give in to the sudden urge to hide behind his father's chair. Deciding to take his time studying another piece of the truly exquisite gingerbread in an effort to calm his nerves, he found himself once more being prodded by a sharp elbow. He looked up, straight into the very interested faces of the lady and the nobleman.

'Dear boy.' The lady looked at him, assessing him with her sharp eyes. 'I hear you are Wilhelm's youngest, come to be introduced to the Emperor and this magnificent court.'

'Yes, my lady,' he muttered as he tried to hide deeper in his chair. 'It is a grand honour to be presented and meet so many whom I have only heard mentioned in the home of my beloved parents.' Diederic's stomach flopped as he had a sinking suspicion of the direction the conversation was going to take.

'You look like a healthy young lad, good prospects, and, if you are anything like your parents, a sharp mind,' the nobleman thought out loud as the lady nodded at every word. 'Are you betrothed? You are most definitely of an age that it is considered in our circles. If not, we will be honoured to start negotiations with your father for a proper wife of high standing and noble blood; a fine young girl hailing from a good family from the highest echelons of this court.' The man looked expectantly at Diederic and then at Wilhelm.

'You have proven that you are a man and capable at doing your duty to family and ancestors,' the lady continued the waterfall of questions. 'It won't do at all if you cannot perform in the marriage bed.'

‘My lady,’ Diederick shrieked, ‘please do not concern yourself with my prowess in the marriage chamber or whatever one does there!’ In his mortification and youthful distress, Diederick could not stop himself any longer and blurted out in the silence that had followed his shriek, ‘I am as far as I know not betrothed to anyone and, to be quite honest, I do not think that it is something to be talked about outside the family. No, I do not wish to have a marriage bartered with Helena; she is my distant cousin for Goodness’ sake! Nor will I be matched to Berthilda, another distant cousin from my father’s side, nor to the Lady Maria or whomever you suggest! I am probably related to most of the ladies you are likely to want to match me with. For all I know you wish me to marry the good Count who sits next to you – and that is a thought that is a nightmare on more levels than the Church preaches about Hell to any and all who think such things – not to mention the fact that he is already married and I am in all likelihood related in some way to him as we- ...’

Duke Wilhelm clapped a large hand over his son’s mouth and all that could be heard was a distressed sound as the nobleman across from them was choking on a piece of gingerbread. Within moments the Count had stopped flailing and his upper body sagged neatly into the lap of the lady, his eyes still bulging from the sockets, his face turning a nasty shade of bluish purple. A screech from the lady with the lapful tore through the banquet hall and pandemonium broke loose.

‘You’ve really done it now, my son.’ Wilhelm took Diederick by the shoulders. ‘Come with me; we will have to talk with the Emperor and see how we can salvage your reputation.’

† † †

‘Oh dear Mother of God,’ Arnout rasped as he involuntarily leant away from Sir Diederick, ‘master, you’ve killed the Count of Cirrhosis without even laying a finger on him.’

‘Indeed I have,’ the knight replied, ignoring Arnout’s action as he handed his squire a hot drink. ‘Knowledge is power, especially in our situation, where it concerns bloodlines. It is vital to know things like

family trees, their strengths and weaknesses, if you want to use or misuse the knowledge or feign lack thereof to suit your purpose.'

'Bu- but, master, that is a terrifying prospect!' Arnout spluttered as he was forced to take a sip. 'Come to think of it, how is it that you are still alive? People are being executed for less!'

The knight smiled. 'I was very, very fortunate.'

† † †

'Wilhelm, young Diederic.' Emperor Michaël gave the son of his friend a warm smile as he bade them into his personal rooms and signalled that they should make themselves comfortable. He did not stand on decorum in his private chambers. 'How do you fare, young Diederic? That was quite a spectacle you managed to pull off at the banquet.'

Diederic blinked, looked at the Emperor, then at his father, moving as if in a dream state. He looked once more at the Emperor, who was waiting patiently for the lad to answer.

'You are not angered with me, Your Imperial Highness?' he asked the Emperor softly, his voice shaking as he tried not to burst into tears.

'No.' The Emperor smiled at Diederic as if he were talking to his own youngest son. The son of Wilhelm looked confusedly at him. 'I cannot say that I am. Frankly, you have done Me, in My position as Emperor, a great service in a way I would never have thought of Myself.'

'S-service?'

'Yes, my dear boy.' Michaël nodded as he patted the lad fondly on his head. 'That man was a most irritating, arrogant adversary and severe pain in the Imperial Behind and your loyalty and service to your Emperor has saved Me from having to make some very painful decisions. Besides, you are not the one who made him eat all the gingerbread.' Michaël's eyes twinkled as he gave the lad one final assurance. 'Consider yourself in this case a tool to deliver Divine Justice. Now sit and rest, young one, and let your father and Me talk some business.'

Diederic smiled hesitantly at the Emperor and looked at his father, who looked rather pleased for reasons Diederic could not quite fathom. All he could do was sit, take sips from a mug filled with ale and watch

as his father and the Emperor talked about the consequences of the unexpected demise of the Count.

Diederich's father, as was his wont, came straight to the point. 'How do you want to play this, Michaël? Nip it all in the bud, seeing as you are Emperor, all the key players are still here attending court and your command rules us all?'

'No, this is a grand opportunity, as you well know, my dear friend.' The Emperor's eyes twinkled at Diederich's father, who grinned broadly. 'I will sit back and watch the spectacle.'

'You know where my loyalty lays, Michaël.' Wilhelm smiled and toasted the Emperor, who smiled back at him. Then Wilhelm looked at Diederich, who felt miserable and didn't dare to interrupt. 'What can we do for my son? I would not put it past any of them to shift full blame on him and act accordingly.'

'Young Diederich shall be placed under the protection of the Imperial Family and any attempt at his person, be it physically or mentally, will have dire consequences for the perpetrators.' The Emperor turned his head and smiled fondly at the lad before looking back at Wilhelm. 'It might be a sound idea to find him a teacher. I would have no problem keeping the dear lad at court but in all likelihood that would spoil his potential for eternity and I most definitely won't let a good young lad go and end up in a bad way.'

'I thank you for your kindness towards my son, Your Imperial Highness.' Wilhelm gave Michaël a half-bow in thanks. 'My beloved son would indeed need a mentor who can teach him to keep his head, and keep him far away from trouble while he is at it.'

'I know the perfect man for the job as well.' Michaël gave his friend and sword-brother a wicked smile. 'I shall send summons to the third of our little band of brothers. What say you, oh Wilhelm?'

And so it happened that Diederich, youngest scion of the great and noble House of Mal a la Tête, managed to be instrumental in starting a war, become favoured of the Imperial Family and gained a mentor on his first adventure.

† † †

‘Master,’ Arnout stammered incredulously through his coughs, ‘you are at the root of the War of the Biliary Tree, one of the nastiest feuds I have heard of; a feud that you claim has been approved of by the Emperor himself, who is protecting you? And that all started because of a discussion about whether or not you had a betrothed at twelve and the Count choking on a piece of gingerbread?’

‘You do not have to repeat everything I told you. I was there.’ Sir Diederic rolled his eyes and took his time as he ladled some frumenty into a bowl before handing it over to Arnout. ‘Have you ever considered in all seriousness why it is that we are headed for the Holy Land?’

The lad tentatively tried a spoonful before he snuggled back into the pile of pillows, contemplating his answer. ‘I suppose that it would be to honour the Lord, and freeing the Holy Land from infidels would be an important reason to travel to that place. I know of people who go to these places as a pilgrim to walk the lands the Lord and the saints walked in days of old.’

‘Go on. What might be other reasons to go?’ the knight asked patiently.

‘Erm, let’s see. People could go because the Pope has granted a great indulgence to anyone who would go to Jerusalem, and a greater one when you go fighting in name of the true faith.’

‘There are indeed people who will consider either one as a primary reason to go.’ The knight nodded in approval. ‘Now, why would people like me go to the Holy Land?’ He smiled at Arnout. ‘Remember to keep in mind what I have just told you.’

The squire nearly choked on another spoonful, his eyes widening as he realised what exactly his master was implying. Could it truly be that mundane?

‘Um, master. Do you mean to tell me that you plan to go to the Holy Land primarily to get away from the people at court who cannot stop messing with your private life and try to pull you into their political schemes? Or perhaps His Imperial Highness suggested you could stay away a bit longer?’ Arnout replied hoarsely, trying to be clearly audible.

‘Of course I do and yes, His Imperial Highness has.’ The knight laughed softly. ‘All your other reasons do have their merit and it is always nice to have all your sins struck away by one of the Church’s indulgences. Getting away and not having my life lived and decided for me by my dearly beloved parents most certainly is the most important reason as far as I am concerned. This rings true for a lot of other sons of noble Houses, I daresay.’ Sir Diederic looked fondly at his squire. ‘Live and learn, young Arnout. It will be soon enough that your parents will feel the distinct urge to involve themselves more thoroughly into your personal life and exploits.’

Arnout considered Sir Diederic’s words while carefully eating his frumenty, taking care not to spill any on the blankets. He imagined being in his brother Floris Maximilian’s place and cringed. He clearly remembered the fight his brother had had with his parents when they had decided that he should marry the daughter of one of their best friends – and had found out she was as far from the looks on the painting and her described disposition as Rome was from the Isles across the sea. Arnout supposed that his master did indeed have a valid point, both where knowing your place in the family and that family’s politics as the reason why noble sons needed to get away as far as possible from overbearing kin were concerned. At that moment something Arnout had puzzled over for a long time fell in place. He added that information to what his master had just told him and turned a distinct shade of pale.

‘So that’s why Floris Maximilian went to join one of the Imperial Princes’ entourage when he was supposed to be headed for Jerusalem ... And rest assured, master, I will work harder at learning my bloodlines and whatever they could implicate – and those of other families as well in case I have to deal with them later on in life,’ he muttered astonished before sneezing.

‘Good lad. Now you understand why your brother left his potential inheritance behind.’ Sir Diederic nodded and gave Arnout an approving look. ‘Wouldn’t you when your wife to be was the nightmare of the Emperor’s court? It’s the reason why most of the sane members of the court went with the Imperial Heir when he announced to go

crusading. Remember Arnout, marriages belong to the realm of politics; love is something else entirely.’

Arnout considered himself fortunate. With a little luck he could be safe from most of that nightmare as long as he had Sir Diederick as his master. He dared to dream that he could be fortunate enough to find himself a sweet girl on his own, without his parents messing around in his life. But, just in case, he would try to keep his master’s teachings in mind.

‘There is something else,’ the knight said after the lad had finished his meal. ‘Another reason why we are going to the Holy Land.’ The knight smiled at his squire, who could hardly keep his eyes open.

‘Really, master? Whatever can it be, if not for running from whatever it is that our parents have planned for us?’ Arnout mumbled as he rubbed his eyes in an effort to stay awake.

‘Oh yes, really,’ the knight affirmed, nodding his head. ‘We are going to the Holy Land so you can have many great and wonderful adventures and learn things no one will ever learn by staying home.’ He stroked Arnout’s forehead, gauging the temperature while disguising it in a fond gesture.

‘Truly? We can go adventuring while we travel?’ Arnout’s reply sounded more like a hopeful soft squeak, followed by a bout of wet coughing. A wince and a grimace were the answer from the knight as he slapped his squire on the back to loosen the mucus that was lodged in the lad’s lungs. The knight then placed a hot mustard pleyster on his squire’s chest.

‘We can. That does mean that you have to get better so we can get on with our travelling. I can’t have my squire too sick to be able to go out adventuring with me, now can I?’

On Dreams, Demons and the Necessity of the Education of Procreation

Arnout sighed as he stared into the darkness of his room. It was the third night in a row that he didn't dare go to sleep. His fever had broken a few nights earlier; now he couldn't sleep for a more troubling reason. Each night the dreams would come and leave him in a state of arousal and he was terrified at the possibility of losing his soul to the evil temptations. The demons were after him. Melusine and other evil succubae were sent by the Devil to get his immortal soul – not to mention his virginity. Arnout was at his wits' end. The only person he could go to at the moment was his master Diederick. The squire twisted in his bed.

'How am I ever going to broach this subject?' the boy muttered somewhat forlornly to himself. 'I can hardly go to him and say "Good morning master, could you help me ban the succubae that are sucking my virginity from me in their efforts to send me to hell – and I am bloody well enjoying myself while being terrified at the same time?" That's just not the way to do this.' Closing his eyes, Arnout forced himself to try and get some dreamless sleep.

Morning came and Arnout stumbled out of bed to care for the horses and the morning meal after his morning ablutions. With a sigh a very frustrated Arnout went about his duties.

'Master, I um, err,' Arnout stumbled after breakfast, 'I – ah – really need your advice.'

Sir Diederic looked up questioningly. ‘What do you have on your mind, squire mine? You know you can ask me anything and I will do my best to give you an honest answer.’

Arnout looked at his feet and started fidgeting. ‘Well, it’s like this ... No, it is more like um, err ...’

Sir Diederic watched as Arnout became more flustered. ‘Go on, you can do it, tell me.’

Arnout swallowed and didn’t dare look up into his master’s face. He took a deep breath and tried once more to explain his predicament. ‘I have been having nightmares of succubae every night and I am scared to go to Hell but boy am I enjoying the torture. Can you help me, please, master? I am so tired I cannot perform my duties. And I really don’t want to die and lose my soul and virtue and everything!’

Diederic gazed at his squire. Arnout hadn’t even breathed while talking. The knight translated the string of words the squire had uttered. Hm, nightmares, demons, enjoying going to hell, losing his virt- ... AH! He bit back a laugh. Laughing aloud would hurt the lad and Arnout would probably interpret it all the wrong way if Diederic laughed himself silly. He had to help his squire with sage advice. Sir Diederic appropriately schooled his face to a thoughtful mien. He wouldn’t say it to Arnout but even Ritsaart, Diederic’s trusty destrier who was standing outside listening to what his human was up to, seemed to grin widely after hearing what the squire had said.

‘Ritsaart, you should hold your whinny to yourself. You cannot fathom the trials and tribulations of those who are not gelded as you are.’ If looks could kill, Sir Diederic would have been dead the moment his horse laid eyes on him. Or worse; Ritsaart would have gelded his master with one snap of those strong teeth. With an indignant air the horse whinnied, snorted derisively and trotted away. ‘The silly beast,’ Diederic muttered fondly before turning his mind and attention back to his squire.

Sir Diederic looked at Arnout, who was standing miserably in front of him, and wondered for a moment why the lad’s parents had never talked about this sort of thing to him. Ah well, the duty had fallen to him. ‘Well, young Arnout, let me tell you a story about how valiant,