

original Dutch title 'De Waterdief'

This story is also embedded in the trilogy 'Phossil's case'.

THE WATER THIEF



FNX

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PROLOGUE

AS I WRITE THIS DOWN,
I HEAR THE CRIES
OF THE BETRAYED WRETCHES
RISING AGAIN FROM THE VALLEY.
THE BLOOD FROM THEIR
DECAPITATED BODIES
GAVE THE STREAM THE SAME
RUSTY BROWN APPEARANCE.
THIS FLOW OF WORDS
CONFIRMS THE CONSTANT.
I FINALLY DARE TO WRITE.
I HAVE SEEN ENOUGH.

Aloysius had lured me back to the stream. He was lying flat in the monastery moat, the only place where there was still enough water. The aquatic plants lay in strange shapes, changing colours on the dried-out shore. The water's surface had even taken on the same rust-brown hue as the monastery wall, making it difficult to distinguish the waterline.

With closed eyes, Aloysius floated in the middle of the modest pool. Head tilted back, arms resting beside his body. His genitals rested undisturbed on his stomach, just below the blood-brown surface, hidden in the pubic hair that oddly extended up to his imposing head.

Aloysius had the boldness of someone older. His appearance only aided him in this. He spoke freely, resolutely, and people listened to him. The lack of seriousness in the gaze of my audience spoke volumes, more than I had ever managed to convey through my copied words.

Although the brothers always told us that we were of the same age, the evidence to the contrary was ubiquitous. Looking back, it had simply been a matter of time. If I had known what would eventually come, I would never have given in to that paralyzing concern about the faint protuberance on my temples. I would never have shaved the down from my face to encourage non-existent beard growth with a smooth chin. The youthful impatience had cost me a gaping cut just below the jawbone. I couldn't see the scar myself, but Aloysius had impressed upon me its size and severity multiple times during the healing process. Instead of gaining time and ground, I had suffered irreparable loss, and the duel between us seemed forever lost.

It was as if Aloysius was always ahead of me, as if he had already been everywhere. Even after my return from the city.

"You're growing up, Christophe! ... Finally!"

And with that, everything was said mockingly, and he surrendered himself confidently to the water.

It was yet another hot summer day. We had sought refuge from the heat outside the abbey walls. Halfway through the heatwave, the warmth had infiltrated the buildings and conquered the otherwise cool monastery air.

"Just stay lying down, Christophe! If you struggle, you'll go under. How many times must I tell you?"

It was stronger than myself. With my hands too big, I panicked and reached for the yellow water lilies again, hoping their stems were strong enough to pull me to the shore. The last lilies had to pay the price as my body landed uncomfortably on the muddy bank. My feet found little grip on the slippery bed, and with a half turn, I painfully crashed into the plundered flower bed.

I saw Aloysius blissfully floating on the shimmering water. It remained a mystery to me why he could do it while I couldn't. Apparently, people were cut from different wood.

"Have you met any women in the city?"

Of course, the city visit had brought me in contact with women, but I refused to share that secret with him. I acted as if I hadn't heard his question and looked expectantly at the tiny folded parchment boat

floating teasingly on the overgrown water surface, gradually becoming soaked. I had no idea where Aloysius kept getting the expensive material, but each time he had a different stolen sheet ready.

"Did you know that women are mostly made of water?"

Aloysius referred to Albertus Magnus, a well-established author among apprentice scribes because he was edifying and accessible enough to be introduced to young minds. That illustrious passage about women's succulent nature was a recurring element in the education. I suspect it was used as a distinct antidote to the many lewd but illusory drawings and stories that were circulating. They all captured the imagination, including those of Magnus.

It was somewhat like with the elephant or the griffin, of which reliable eyewitnesses were equally scarce. The many stories undermined each other's credibility, especially due to fabulous contradictions. But even then, little could resist our youthful curiosity, which became the glue between the few incompatible fragments and images of the elusive female being.

Each of us puzzled over our own mysterious image of women. Each a colourful collection of eccentric, exaggerated inventions, but all driven by the same impulse that skilfully covered the habit for the other.

Erasmus Feriori had deliberately chosen this passage. He was our mentor and master copyist, determined to make rigid copyists out of us. Devoted to the written word and fully in service of eternity, no matter how penetrating and earth-shattering the passing content might be for our minds.

He made us rewrite the text repeatedly in case of absent-mindedness or sloppiness. We struggled through the passage with stiffened knuckles, but above all subdued by a panic of contracting a fatal infection. The suppurating writing hand of the late Joris remained fresh in the class's memory. The writer's cramp had slowly squeezed the pus from his frail hand, making the ink too watery. The letters had smeared again, and he would have had to start over if he hadn't feverishly fallen from his writing bench and quenched the mentor with his final penance. For a long time, Joris' quill had lain on his writing bench, just as pallid as his blood-poor skin, as a warning to assail our memory. Even unwritten words flirted with eternity, eventually disappearing together with our inferior sheets from the scriptorium to serve some higher purpose elsewhere.

Aloysius tried to get me to talk again. Like a seasoned inquisitor, he relentlessly squeezed every swimming lesson out of me. If he noticed a weakness, he pushed on it until it hurt.

"There are even women whose lower halves consist of fish tails. Did you know that?" he said.

I saw tail fins light up and disappear in the reflection of the sunlight beside me.

"Erasmus says that women are devilish beings. They make you weak and sick. So sick that you'll want them back forever. Before you know it, you can't live without them."

It wasn't a question anymore. It was a statement. He described exactly what I was going through. One of my many puzzle pieces fit. Since our farewell, Lot had indeed not let go of me.

He secretly watched me over his chest hair. Maybe I had somehow betrayed myself. I tried to focus my thoughts on the water as much as possible, but the skill to master it seemed further away than ever, and it left me feeling disheartened.

"No," I lied, deliberately submerging my head underwater to block the subject once and for all. I kept my eyes closed, afraid of enchanting creatures, but Aloysius mercilessly grabbed my legs again. I was once again laid on the grill of rust-coloured water plants. He patiently waited for a confession. By now, the boat had sunk.

The tolling of the bells called us back to the familiar life beyond the wall. The same water had indicated through the water clock that it was time. Odiel rang the bell high in the water tower. The water clock was located on the floor below. It was a miracle that the mountain water continued to flow uninterruptedly from the hills even during the long period of drought.

Odiel had been left at the monastery gate as the sole heir to a large piece of land and a farmhouse when he reached adulthood. He was unknowingly rich. His head was full of rocks. Otherwise, he would never have grown such a sturdy build. His presence was tolerated because it brought in more than he could ever imagine. For months, his behavior remained restless and dangerously unpredictable until he discovered the water clock. The constant flow of water brought him peace. Nowhere else did he find a more regular course of events than in the seclusion of the round water tower room. He could stare at the clear water stream for hours. It was evident that he took over the ungrateful task of being the tide watcher. The change of office was a blessing for the monastery.

The procession to the chapel proceeded calmly and in serene silence. Physical exertions were gradually reduced to make way for spiritual exercise. The slow pace of the procession usually worked in our fa-

avour, especially when climbing the stairs to the choir stalls. Unfortunately, the quiet Clemens had been overcome by the prolonged heat those days, otherwise, we would have had even more respite.

The building deserved more attention, but the routine had numbed us. Our gazes remained inward, in the same silent order, from the same assigned seat in the choir. Only after a death, the empty space was filled, and the last ones in the procession moved up. It wouldn't be long now. And this time, almost everyone would benefit, given Clemens' advanced age.

The whole hour passed patiently on the imposed flow of words from psalms and prayers. We sat across from them. Abbot Rogge, despite his small stature, initiated the high melodic lines, while the eldest members joined in with an overwhelming bass sound, almost unanimously, and elevated the prayer to another level movingly quickly. Each time, the choir moments surprisingly created a satisfying harmonic feeling, with everyone balanced and finely tuned to each other. Even my exceptionally high tones provided a natural counterbalance to the whole. Each tide died with the same sounds behind the rows of columns, swirling echoes in the recesses of the church nave. In that miraculous harmony, I found compensating comfort for the impatient urgency of each prayer moment. The initial rebellion

ebbed away, and I let myself be carried away by the seemingly timeless continuum of words and sounds, making the erratic revolt seem like a negligible whim.

Everything that had begun in the early spring of that same year. The big news had already seeped into everyone's consciousness, transmitted in roughly cut pieces, dammed by numerous imposed silences, and consumed in digestible portions over several days. Abbot Rogge told it without any introduction. He didn't even wait for me to be comfortably seated. Erasmo listened in and pushed me upright again after the brief announcement, so I wondered why I was allowed to sit in the first place, and I left the room completely overwhelmed.

"You can go to Troyes. For a modelling assignment. Nice, isn't it?" Rogge usually ended his sentences with a questioning 'isn't it,' which could rise very high. As compensation for his small stature, we joked among ourselves.

"They need your face. Bizarre, but that's how it is."

I immediately thought of my scar, but he looked me straight in the eyes. That man was shrinking with the years.

Rogge sat on the other side of a robust table-furniture. He easily rested on his elbows while his folded hands rubbed his goatee.

Brother Felipe will go with you. He has enough travel experience. In my eyes, perhaps a bit too much, but he knows the city like no other. And he is dispensable."

Felipe was a short-breathed monk who had more understanding of horses than of people. Unfortunately, in the monastery, he dealt only with donkeys. He was of Spanish origin and had difficulty speaking. At least, it seemed that way because his words sounded different. Understandable but different.

I understood that it was an extraordinary commission. My face was to serve as the young Christ in a scene of Saint Christopher. Rogge initially suggested that the whole idea was his, but a mysterious letter was entrusted to Felipe. There was also urgency once again because the painter in question was passing through.

To avoid too much commotion surrounding the journey, we departed within a week. There was already too much murmuring. The trip silently elicited envy and suspicion. There were certainly greater minds or names within the walls that were better suited for such a task. For less, they had invoked heretical revenge goddesses from beneath the bell-tolling guise of prayer and introspection to turn the tide in their favour.

I had no explanation for this special assignment. The only satisfying answer I could come up with was that I had been abandoned at the monastery's doorstep long ago. The brothers had called me Christophe because - as I was repeatedly told - as a foundling, I held a wooden cross in my hands. The toy had been given to me more as a talisman, and it had clearly opened the right doors in time. I would even bet my full-grown beard on the fact that there was also a well-filled purse between my legs, but I had found no evidence of that. Until then, the identity of the woman who had left me at the entrance had been as inconsequential as the need to know the authors of the many fragmented manuscripts on my writing desk. The assignment had only stirred my head and raised questions about people outside these monastery walls who were aware of my existence.

Not even a day later, someone had slipped a weathered but neatly folded piece of parchment under my plate. Someone had written EXPOSITUS on it. It was unmistakably meant for me, as the refectory followed the same regime as the chapel, and parchment was not a material to be handled lightly. This couldn't be a coincidence. I immediately thought of a note that had been left with me at the monastery gate years ago. First, I looked at Aloysius, but he had eyes only for a steaming soup bowl that had just been served to him. The days were so hot that any liquid was a blessing, no matter how hot it was served.

The other diners had apparently not noticed anything yet, so I didn't hesitate and, in one motion of dodging a dripping soup spoon, I tucked the precious item into my sleeve without unfolding it. Odiel was generous and clumsy at the same time. Where the parchment had been, three wide-open, fatted eyes stared at the old beams above our sweaty heads. How fragile life could be. Did my mother think the same when she left me on the doorstep in a moment of despair? I must admit that the meal couldn't be finished quickly enough.

Although it was forbidden territory, after the meal, I immediately headed towards the scriptorium to secure the uncertain existence of that half-decayed manuscript, to put it in the weighty words of Erasmus. Who knew how long I could keep it with me? It was entirely expected that I would eventually have to return the original. To anyone. Or, worse yet, that in my excited enthusiasm, I might lose it or leave it to the prying eyes that would forever consume the ink. There were enough parchment scraps there to copy the probably written piece of vellum. I wanted to secure my first personal possession as quickly as possible.

I left Aloysius behind after the meal and stayed inside. He had already left with the others. Odiel was the only one who might have noticed my hesitation, but he was too occupied with devouring the

leftover food. Particularly, he could find generous portions among the toothless and visually impaired poor.

The scriptorium provided surprisingly more cooling than expected. As usual, I took the top book from our stack, which rose back to the master copyist's lectern after every writing session, and I took a seat a little further at my writing desk. I relied on the routine to keep my nerves under control. In my fervor, I even momentarily forgot about Diederik, who startled because he heard someone nearby. Apparently, he did not appreciate my presence, as he briskly walked towards the exit, clearly showing his displeasure. He probably saw a fellow soldier as an intrusion into his privilege. Our gazes met just before he disappeared in the doorway. I was quite confident that he wouldn't go snitch, as making a fuss would only undermine his own privilege.

I grabbed a loose sheet from a stack found on each row of benches and laid the piece of parchment in front of me. It was only written on one side. The letters danced separately and haphazardly on three invisible lines. Clearly, an untrained hand had put an unusual effort into each letter. At this nervous moment, I refused to let the meaning of the words enter my mind. The content should not taint the copying work. Another motto from the great Erasmus.

I tried to mimic the handwriting as closely as possible to how it was written there. I focused on the small page layout and analyzed the tiny construction of letters in their distinct careless pen strokes. I paid attention to the unsteady script that revealed the hesitant writing impulse of the author. The spreading ink dots indicated uncertainty and tension, bearing witness to an inexperienced hand. I even copied the few crossings out.

Erasmus would be proud, although he would never get to see this. This was mine. My first possession. My only possession. This was the first time I had copied a text on my own initiative. And indeed, the words were from a woman who probably wanted nothing to do with me.

I really didn't want to know what was written because, honestly, I was too afraid of the truth. My mind was brimming with possibilities, and I wanted to keep it that way. Yet, I also realized that ignorance could never bring solace, especially now that the question had been raised and postponement was just a vain comfort.

Without dwelling further on the content, I folded both sheets and discreetly hid them in the cuffs of my sleeves. It felt strange to become so attached to them in such a short time. Apparently, someone else also believed that I needed this special document, as I was about to immerse myself completely in the great unknown outside world.

To suppress his impatience for departure, during those first sunny days of what would become the driest spring of my life, Aloysius had suggested reenacting the innocent scene from the painting. Aloysius was going to ferry me across the ditch, but halfway through, he dropped me. He supposedly lacked the strength only granted to saints. He didn't know I couldn't swim. Therefore, he wanted to make it right his way and promised to teach me, even if it took longer than a scorching summer.

"How else can you let yourself be ferried across the river with peace of mind?" he joked, probably laughing more at the found weak spot.

A rooster mistakenly crowed towards the evening.

Part I