

BAANTJER

DeKok
and the Mask
of Death

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

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Inspector DeKok, of Amsterdam's venerable police station on Warmoes Street, ambled leisurely over the wide pavement of the Damrak. Every once in a while he would squint at the generous sun that, despite the dire forecasts of a depression over the North Sea, refused to hide behind the gray clouds. For days it had been shining brightly in a clear, blue sky.

DeKok enjoyed himself. His attitude had the characteristics of a human barometer: when it was cold and rainy his face looked stormy, but it brightened immediately with the slightest indication of warmer weather. A smile would form, his heart rejoiced, and his old, dilapidated hat would tilt carelessly to one side of his gray-haired head.

He stopped on the corner of Old Bridge Alley. For just a moment he entertained the thought of leaving crime fighting behind and continuing his walk in the bright sunshine, out of the narrow streets of the quarter, toward the Amstel River, and along its banks to the green meadows, where peaceful cows grazed among white, innocent sheep.

He grinned ruefully at himself and hastily crossed the Damrak to the other side, completely ignoring an ap-

proaching streetcar. Then he relaxed his pace and strolled past the Skipper's Exchange until he turned onto Warmoes Street.

Standing in front of the station house, DeKok contemplated the worn bluestone steps hollowed out over the years by the footsteps of cops and sinners. The steps felt like a barrier, a barrier that filled him with an unreasonable fear that cooled the bright sunlight and sent a shivering chill of dread through his bones. It was as if a strange inner voice whispered to him, urging him to forego his life for a day and take a leap into the future. Shrugging off the inexplicable fear, DeKok climbed the steps and pushed open the door.

When he reached the large detective room on the second floor, Vledder – his partner, friend, and apprentice – looked at him searchingly.

'What's the matter? You look frightened.'

'What do you mean?'

'You look pale, as if you've seen a ghost.'

DeKok threw his hat in the direction of the peg. As usual, he missed but did not bother to retrieve it from the floor. He pulled off his raincoat and folded it over the back of his chair.

'Do you believe in omens?'

'Good omens or bad omens?' mocked Vledder.

DeKok shook his head in disapproval.

'You shouldn't dismiss them,' he said earnestly. 'Omens are unfathomable portents, harbingers of things to come... usually something bad, or shocking.' He stared off into the distance. 'A few minutes ago, I experienced an omen, a premonition,' he continued. 'I was standing in front of

the station house and was suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling that I should not enter the building. It was as if the bluestone steps spoke to me about a warning of an approaching disaster.'

Vledder grinned.

'Nonsense. Stones don't speak.' He tilted his head to one side. 'I think you have a slight summer flu. It's going around at the moment. And you know, feverish people have the strangest hallucinations sometimes.'

'I don't have the flu and I'm not feverish,' DeKok responded brusquely. 'You may forget my omen, if you like.' He felt the chill in his bones. 'But you're the one who asked why I was so pale when I came in.'

Vledder smiled.

'An omen.'

'Exactly.'

Vledder leaned closer.

'Early this morning, the *commissaris* stopped by and asked for you.'

'Why?'

'He wants to speak with you.'

'What about?'

Vledder waved vaguely.

'There's a rumor going around that you will be put in charge of a special antipickpocket detail.'

DeKok looked disgusted.

'Me... an antipickpocket detail?'

Vledder nodded.

'Next week starts Operation Sail Amsterdam. Large crowds are expected to attend to see the sailing ships enter the port. And, of course, they'll hang around visiting

the ships and so on. All the hotels are already booked to capacity. It's an ideal event for the international pickpocket guild. And it will give *you* the opportunity to look at some old scows.'

DeKok looked up, irritation on his weathered face.

'What's the matter with you? Didn't you sleep well? Why are you so negative? First you mock my omen and now you degrade the glory of centuries of shipping to... to a bunch of old scows.'

Vledder looked innocent.

'Aren't they old scows?'

DeKok closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

'Sail Amsterdam is a wonderful display. As an ex-Urker, I'm very attached to those old sailing ships. My grandfather fished with his graceful smack on what was still the Zuyder Zee. No noisy engines of hundreds of horsepower, just sails. Trusting in God and the wind. I'm determined to spend a lot of time studying the spectacle on the IJ. I missed the last Sail Amsterdam altogether because we were tangled up with that case on the inheritance of that psychiatrist. But this time I will not miss it. So the commissaris can find someone else for his antipickpocket detail.'

'You're taking leave?'

DeKok nodded emphatically.

'Exactly. I certainly have enough leave on the books. I'm going to enjoy myself. I'm going to see the *Amerigo Vespucci* from Italy, the *Kruzenshtern* from Germany, the *Libertad* from Argentina, the *Danish Georg Stage*, and the *American Eagle*... you know, it's still a Coast Guard cutter on active service.' A melancholy smile curled his

lips. ‘Magnificent examples of shipbuilding as it used to be. Graceful beauties, every last one of them... living memories of a time gone by: the time of romance, exploration, heroic feats of seamanship, shanties.’

Vledder looked lost.

‘What exactly are shanties?’

DeKok spread both arms wide in an expression of delight.

‘Seafaring songs! During their heavy and sometimes monotonous work aboard the windjammers, seamen sang their shanties, like “Rolling Home” and “What Shall We Do with a Drunken Sailor?”’

Vledder listened to the enthusiastic tone.

‘You were born too late,’ Vledder replied.

DeKok laughed in agreement.

There was a sudden knock on the door. The detective nearest the door called out, ‘Enter.’

The door opened slowly. A young man stood in the doorway. The man turned to the detective nearest the door and asked a question. The detective pointed at Vledder and DeKok. The young man nodded his thanks and turned to approach the two desks in the back of the room.

DeKok estimated the visitor to be in his late twenties. He was rather tall and spare. His pale face had a receding chin. He wore a dark brown tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows and light gray creaseless trousers. The sleeves of the jacket were too short for his long arms. He approached hesitantly with a shy smile. A few feet from DeKok’s desk he stopped and looked from DeKok to Vledder and back again.

‘She’s gone,’ he said. There was an apologetic, confused tone to his voice.

‘She’s gone,’ he repeated in the same tone of voice.

DeKok eyed him carefully. He looked at the friendly gray eyes, the low forehead, and the disorderly, heavy mop of brown hair. The young man looked so clumsy and inept that the old inspector was touched. He beckoned him closer and asked him to sit in the chair next to his desk.

‘Who’s gone?’ he asked winningly.

‘Rosie.’

‘Rosie?’ repeated DeKok.

The young man nodded.

‘That’s what I call her. Rosie. Actually her name is Rosalind, Rosalind Evertsoord. She’s nobility.’ He gestured timidly. ‘Impoverished nobility.’

‘And who are you?’

The young man bolted upright. He made a stiff bow.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, contrite. ‘That was inexcusable. I should have introduced myself at once. My name is Richard Netherwood.’ He resumed his seat. ‘And you are Inspector DeKok.’

‘With a kay-oh-kay,’ added DeKok.

Richard smiled.

‘I was told you would say that.’

DeKok gave him a questioning look.

‘Who told you that?’

‘Friends of mine. They advised that I should contact you.’

‘In connection with Rosie?’

‘Yes. I first went to the police station in Sloterveer. But they wouldn’t listen to me. Not really, I mean.’

‘But Slotermeer is all the way in Amsterdam-West. Why would you go there?’

Richard Netherwood seemed unsure of himself.

‘That... that’s where the case was to be handled.’

‘Why?’

‘It happened in Slotervaart Hospital, and that area is covered by the police station in Slotermeer.’

DeKok rubbed his face with a flat hand.

‘Very well, what happened at Slotervaart Hospital?’

‘That’s where Rosie disappeared.’

‘Just like that?’

The young man moved in his chair.

‘You’re right,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I’m starting this a bit chaotically. You must excuse me. I’m a bit upset, confused by all this. I will try to be more coherent.’

DeKok gave him an encouraging nod.

‘What is your relationship with Rosie?’

‘She’s my girlfriend. We’ve had a relationship for years. I live on Church Street, close to the Amstel. Rosie lives outside the city in Purmerend. We usually get together on weekends. And we always take our vacations together.’

Richard reached into an inside pocket, produced a photograph, and handed it to DeKok.

‘This is her.’

The gray sleuth looked at the laughing face of a young woman with short, blond hair. Her smile and the dimples in her cheeks gave the face a pleasant aura. DeKok wondered what such a pretty girl saw in this tall, gawky young man. But he wisely kept the thought to himself. He took another look at the picture and was just about to return it when Richard put his hand up.

‘You keep it. For your investigation. You’ll probably need it.’

DeKok handed the picture to Vledder, who placed it on his desk.

‘How did Rosie wind up in Slotervaart Hospital?’

‘She was referred by her house doctor, Dr. Aken, in Purmerend.’

‘Was she ill?’

Richard shrugged.

‘Rosie is never sick. She’s very athletic. Plays a lot of basketball, she’s very good. She plays with teams that represent our country. But the last few days she felt a bit under the weather. She was lethargic, listless. She coughed a little. That’s what she told me over the phone. We call each other every day. At my urging, she went to see her doctor.’

DeKok gave him a puzzled look.

‘And the doctor referred her to the hospital here in Amsterdam?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why not a hospital in Purmerend?’

The young man shrugged again.

‘I don’t know. Frankly, I never thought about it.’

‘To which department was she referred?’

‘Neurology.’

DeKok gestured.

‘And what else?’

Richard Netherwood did not answer at once. He stared into the distance for several seconds. It was as if he was trying to visualize the hospital.

‘Rosie,’ he said hoarsely, ‘reported with her referral to the desk.’

‘When was that?’

‘Day before yesterday, Wednesday, eleven o’clock in the morning.’

‘You were with her?’

Richard nodded.

‘She wanted me to come with her. She drove her own car from Purmerend to Amsterdam. A Citroën “Ugly Duckling,” garishly painted. She honked her horn in front of my house and I got in. From there we drove to the hospital. We were both a bit depressed.’

DeKok again smiled encouragingly.

‘I can understand that. Please go on.’

Netherwood licked dry lips.

‘There is a big parking lot next to the hospital. That’s where she parked. We stepped out of the car and looked up. I immediately had a bad feeling about the building. It was so big, so cold and sterile, so impersonal that it scared me. I even thought about stopping Rosie from going in. But I realized how idiotic my fear really was.’

DeKok’s face became serious.

‘Although the immediate reason may be nebulous, fear is never idiotic.’

Richard gave him a grateful look.

‘Yes, I felt the fear. It was very real. I was literally shaking in my boots. The entire distance to the entrance I clamped Rosie’s arm under mine. I was afraid to lose her.’ He sighed deeply. ‘Inside, I had to let her go. She walked by herself to the front desk. Somebody told her to wait a moment.’

‘A moment?’

‘A few minutes, I think. Then a nurse came. She called out Rosie’s name and took her away.’

‘And you remained in the lobby?’

Richard made an apologetic gesture.

‘I didn’t think it would take long, fifteen minutes or half an hour at most. But after an hour, I was still waiting.’ He grinned, embarrassed. ‘I’m not the kind of person who immediately makes a nuisance of himself. It’s just not in me. So I calmly kept waiting. But for some unknown reason, I became more and more worried. Finally, I couldn’t force myself to sit in that chair any longer. I left the lobby and started to pace the corridor. I had just gathered enough courage to ask some questions when the same nurse came up to me and asked me to follow her. I thought she would take me to Rosie or to a doctor, a specialist who would tell me about her condition... if there was anything wrong. But she took me to some kind of consultation room, where another nurse took some of my blood.’

DeKok looked at his visitor in disbelief.

‘What?’ he asked. ‘They took some of your blood?’

Richard nodded.

‘And you allowed that?’

Richard shrugged with one shoulder.

‘I, eh, I thought,’ he said reluctantly, ‘that it had something to do with Rosie’s medical examination. That they wanted to know if I had something... a disease, or something like that.’

DeKok took a deep breath.

‘You allowed a blood sample to be taken.’ It sounded like an accusation.

Richard nodded.

‘When it was done, the nurse who had picked me up in the corridor said that that was all and I could leave. I

told her that I wasn't leaving yet. That I was waiting for Ms. Evertsoord. She looked at me as if surprised, a bit absentmindedly, and said, "Miss Evertsoord?" and I said, "Yes, that's the lady you came to get from the lobby about an hour ago." She looked me straight in the face, shook her head, and denied she had picked up any woman in the lobby.'

'And that was the same nurse?'

'Absolutely.'

DeKok smiled and leaned closer.

'You were out of your normal routine,' he said in a friendly, calming tone of voice. 'Because of the long wait you were a bit stressed. I can imagine -'

Richard interrupted him abruptly.

'There's no mistake,' he said, loud and determined. 'That face, the somewhat plump figure of the nurse, I'll never forget that.' He pointed at his forehead. 'It's etched in my brain.' Red spots appeared on his cheeks and he snorted contemptuously. 'She just walked away from me.'

'Who?'

Richard gesticulated agitatedly.

'That nurse! She walked down the corridor. I followed her and took her by the arm. "Where is Rosie?" I screamed at her. "What have you done with her!?" The nurse became angry. She pushed my hand from her arm and she said in that snotty voice that I shouldn't bother her. Then she went through a door and was gone. I was stunned. I felt as if somebody had just hit me on the head with a baseball bat.'

He paused to take a deep breath.

'When I had myself more or less under control,' he continued, 'I went back to the lobby and walked over to

the man behind the desk. As politely as possible I told him that I had arrived with Rosie that morning. He asked me her name and I gave it to him. “She had a referral from Dr. Aken, in Purmerend,” I said.’

‘Was it the same man who was there when Rosie checked in?’

‘Yes. He looked at some papers and said that she wasn’t on his list and if she wasn’t on his list, she could not have checked in with him.’

Richard clapped his hands over his eyes. His body shook. Sweat beaded on his forehead. It took a while before he could continue. DeKok waited patiently.

‘For a moment I thought I’d gone crazy,’ said Richard. ‘I stood there a long time in front of the desk. The man ignored me, acted as if I wasn’t there. Numbed into a sort of dull panic, I left the hospital. It felt as if my brain was rattling around in my skull. Outside, I suddenly remembered Rosie’s car. As fast as I could, I ran across the parking lot.’

DeKok looked at him.

‘And?’ he asked tensely.

Richard’s head sank to his chest.

‘Her car was gone.’

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