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THE
DEVIL
AND THE
DARK
WATER

STUART TURTON

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ARENT HAYES HOWLED IN pain as a rock slammed into his massive back.

Another whistled by his ear; a third striking his knee, causing him to stumble, bringing jeers from the pitiless mob, who were already searching the ground for more missiles to throw. Hundreds of them were being held back by the city watch, their spittle-flecked lips shouting insults, their eyes black with malice.

‘Take shelter for pity’s sake,’ implored Sammy Pips over the din, his manacles flashing in the sunlight as he staggered across the dusty ground. ‘It’s me they want.’

Arent was twice the height and half again the width of most men in Batavia, including Pips. Although not a prisoner himself, he’d placed his large body between the crowd and his much smaller friend, offering them only a sliver of target to aim at.

The bear and the sparrow they’d been nicknamed before Sammy’s fall. Never before had it appeared so true.

Pips was being taken from the dungeons to the harbour, where a ship waited to transport him to Amsterdam. Four musketeers were escorting them, but they were keeping their distance, wary of becoming targets themselves.

'You pay me to protect you,' snarled Arent, wiping the dusty sweat from his eyes as he tried to gauge the distance to safety. 'I'll do it until I can't any more.'

The harbour lay behind a huge set of gates at the far end of Batavia's central boulevard. Once those gates closed behind them, they'd be beyond the crowd's reach. Unfortunately, they were at the tail end of a long procession moving slowly in the heat. The gates seemed no closer now than when they'd left the humid dampness of the dungeon at midday.

A rock thudded into the ground at Arent's feet, spraying his boots with dried dirt. Another ricocheted off Sammy's chains. Traders were selling them out of sacks and making good coin doing it.

'Damn Batavia,' snarled Arent. 'Bastards can't abide an empty pocket.'

On a normal day, these people would be buying from the bakers, tailors, cordwainers, binders and candlemakers lining the boulevard. They'd be smiling and laughing, grumbling about the infernal heat, but manacle a man, offer him up to torment, and even the meekest soul surrendered itself to the devil.

'It's my blood they want,' argued Sammy, trying to push Arent away. 'Get yourself to safety, I'm begging you.'

Arent looked down at his terrified friend, whose hands were pressing ineffectually against his chest. His dark curls were plastered to his forehead, those high cheekbones swollen purple with the beatings he'd received while imprisoned. His brown eyes – usually wry – were wide and desperate.

Even maltreated, he was a handsome sod.

By contrast, Arent's scalp was shorn, his nose punched flat. Somebody had bitten a chunk out of his right ear in a fight,

and a clumsy flogging a few years back had left him with a long scar across his chin and neck.

‘We’ll be safe once we reach the docks,’ said Arent stubbornly, having to raise his voice as cheers erupted ahead of them.

The procession was being led by Governor General Jan Haan, who was stiff-backed on a white stallion, a breastplate fastened above his doublet, a sword clattering at his waist.

Thirteen years ago, he’d purchased the village that had stood here on behalf of the United East India Company. No sooner had the natives signed the contract than he’d put a torch to it, using its ashes to plot out the roads, canals and buildings of the city that would take its place.

Batavia was now the Company’s most profitable outpost and Jan Haan had been called back to Amsterdam to join the Company’s ruling body, the enigmatic Gentlemen 17.

As his stallion trotted along the boulevard, the crowd wept and cheered, stretching their fingertips towards him, trying to touch his legs. Flowers were thrown on the ground, blessings bestowed.

He ignored it all, keeping his chin up and eyes forward. Beak-nosed and bald-headed, he put Arent in mind of a hawk perched atop a horse.

Four panting slaves struggled to keep pace with him. They were carrying a gilded palanquin with the governor general’s wife and daughter inside, a red-faced lady’s maid scurrying alongside it, fanning herself in the heat.

Behind them, four bow-legged musketeers gripped the corners of a heavy box containing *The Folly*. Sweat dripped from their foreheads and coated their hands, making it difficult to hold. They slipped frequently, fear flashing across their

faces. They knew the punishment should the governor general's prize be damaged.

Trailing them were a disorderly cluster of courtiers and flatterers, high-ranking clerks and family favourites; their years of scheming rewarded by the opportunity to spend an uncomfortable afternoon watching the governor general leave Batavia.

Distracted by his observations, Arent allowed a gap to form between himself and his charge. A stone whistled by, hitting Sammy on the cheek, bringing a trickle of blood and jeers from the crowd.

Losing his temper, Arent scooped up the stone and hurled it back at the thrower, catching him on the shoulder and sending him spinning to the ground. The crowd howled in outrage, surging into the watchmen, who struggled to hold them back.

'Good throw,' murmured Sammy appreciatively, ducking his head as more stones rained down around them.

Arent was limping by the time they reached the docks, his huge body aching. Sammy was bruised, but mostly untouched. Even so, he let out a cry of relief as the gates swung open ahead of them.

On the other side was a warren of crates and coiled ropes, piled-high casks and chickens squawking in wicker baskets. Pigs and cows stared at them mournfully, as bellowing stevedores loaded cargo into rowboats bobbing at the water's edge, ready to be transported to the seven Indiaman galleons anchored in the glistening harbour. Sails furled and masts bare, they resembled dead beetles with their legs in the air, but each would soon teem with over three hundred passengers and crew.

People rattled their coin purses at the ferries rowing back and forth, pushing forward when the name of their ship was

called. Children played hide and seek among the boxes, or else clutched their mothers' skirts, while fathers glared at the sky, trying to shame a cloud out of that fierce blue expanse.

The wealthier passengers stood a little apart, surrounded by their servants and expensive trunks. Grumbling under their umbrellas, they fanned themselves futilely, sweating into their lace ruffs.

The procession halted and the gates began to close behind them, dimming the sound of the braying mob.

A few final stones bounced off the crates, bringing the assault to an end.

Letting out a long sigh, Arent bent double, hands on his knees, sweat dripping from his forehead into the dust.

'How badly are you hurt?' asked Sammy, inspecting a cut on Arent's cheek.

'I'm fair hungover,' grunted Arent. 'Otherwise, I'm not too bad.'

'Did the watch seize my alchemy kit?'

There was genuine fear in his voice. Among his many talents, Sammy was a skilled alchemist, his kit filled with the tinctures, powders and potions he'd developed to assist his deductive work. It had taken years to create many of them, using ingredients they were a long way from being able to replace.

'No, I stole them out of your bedchamber before they searched the house,' replied Arent.

'Good,' approved Sammy. 'There's a salve in a small jar. The green one. Apply that to your injuries every morning and night.'

Arent wrinkled his nose in distaste. 'Is that the piss-smelling one?'

‘They all smell like piss. It’s not a good salve if it doesn’t smell like piss.’

A musketeer approached from the direction of the wharf, calling Sammy’s name. He wore a battered hat with a red feather, the floppy brim pulled low over his eyes. A tangle of dirty blond hair spilled down his shoulders, a beard obscuring most of his face.

Arent examined him approvingly.

Most musketeers in Batavia were part of the household guard. They gleamed and saluted and were good at sleeping with their eyes open, but this man’s ragged uniform suggested he’d done some actual soldiering. Old blood stained his blue doublet, which was dotted with holes made by shot and sword, each one patched time and again. Knee-length red breeches gave way to a pair of tanned, hairy legs riddled with mosquito bites and scars. Copper flasks filled with gunpowder jangled on a bandolier, clattering into pouches of saltpetre matches.

Upon reaching Arent, the musketeer stamped his foot smartly.

‘Lieutenant Hayes, I’m Guard Captain Jacobi Dreht,’ he said, waving a fly from his face. ‘I’m in charge of the governor general’s household guard. I’ll be sailing with you to ensure the family’s safety.’ Dreht addressed himself to the musketeers escorting them. ‘On the boat now, lads. Governor General wants Mr Pippa secured aboard the *Saardam* before the –’

‘Hear me!’ commanded a jagged voice from above them.

Squinting into the glare of sunlight, they craned their necks, following the voice upwards.

A figure in grey rags was standing on a pile of crates. Bloody bandages wrapped his hands and face, a narrow gap left for his eyes.

‘A leper,’ muttered Drecht, in disgust.

Arent took an instinctive step backwards. From boyhood, he’d been taught to fear these wasted people, whose mere presence was enough to bring ruin to an entire village. A single cough, even the lightest touch, meant a lingering, dreadful death.

‘Kill that creature and burn it,’ ordered the governor general from the front of the procession. ‘Lepers are not permitted in the city.’

A commotion erupted as the musketeers peered at each other. The figure was too high up for pikes, their muskets had already been loaded on to the *Saardam* and none of them had a bow.

Seemingly oblivious to the panic, the leper’s eyes pricked every single person gathered before him.

‘Know that my master’ – his roaming gaze snagged on Arent, causing the mercenary’s heart to jolt – ‘sails aboard the *Saardam*. He is the lord of hidden things; all desperate and dark things. He offers this warning in accordance with the old laws. The *Saardam*’s cargo is sin and all who board her will be brought to merciless ruin. She will not reach Amsterdam.’

As the last word was uttered, the hem of his robe burst into flames.

Children wailed. The watching crowd gasped and screamed in horror.

The leper didn’t make a sound. The fire crawled up his body until he was completely aflame.

He didn’t move.

He burnt silently, his eyes fixed on Arent.