



Carve My Name

On Thursdays, sometimes Wednesdays if the weather was bad, Queen Anteje would go down to the village and listen to appeals, passing higher judgement on those who insisted they were victims of a mistrial. Previous occasions had seen thieves praying for miracles after being caught overloaded with stolen goods, and a man who insisted he was not as close to his goats as people made him out to be. (The appeal went against him.)

Under a merciless sun, a man called Trove tried his best to explain why he was raising hell in the village centre two nights ago.

"I'm not denying my behaviour was erratic, y'Majesty. But you would have been in a state if you saw what I saw."

"You've explained what you saw." Anteje sat in a hard backed royal chair brought down from the castle to lend her a touch of authority. Flanked by two Warrior Scholars, she tried to ignore the Anthologist stood with all the dignity of a bishop and occasionally throwing a knowing glance at her.

"But y'Majesty I sense you don't believe me." Trove appealed to the Anthologist. "You've read the tales, sir, cemeteries the world over are haunted by ghouls, including our own. I could show you the rock it were carving."

"Carving a rock?" said Anteje. "You didn't mention a rock."

"Hammering away, y'Majesty. Like it were going to chisel right through it."

The Anthologist nodded again. Anteje tapped his shoulder and whispered, "Are you drunk?"

"Drunk? Me? Why do you say that? I'm not drunk."

"Well stop bobbing your head then." She turned back to Trove. "If we go to the cemetery and there's nothing there to support your testimony then I will rule against you."

Royalty couldn't move anywhere without a great deal of difficulty, even royals as humble as Anteje, but her entourage pushed away through the crowd, the chair lifted and carried, Anteje surrounded by several servants and a librarian.

"What is going on?" she said to the Anthologist's neck. "You know something, don't you?"

"I always nod when someone's telling the truth."

"How do you know he's telling the truth? You're not the ghoul, are you?"

"I'm not the ghoul. But I know who is." On the way to the cemetery he explained.

I came this way many years ago. I was researching a book about Martin Luther and I called at the church here to look at the parish burial deeds. When I was inspecting the deeds one name stood out. A name I recognised.

There had long been rumours about a vampire living in this part of the world. I knew her name, but not much else. When I saw the deeds I realised that her death had been recorded in this parish, but in all the years she had lived here no one knew her name. Anyone determined to find out could have used the deeds to link her identity to the name of the woman mentioned.

Well, being the opportunist I am, I kept the deeds to myself and delivered them to her. She met me after the sun had set and was very grateful.

"Why are you doing this?" The Vampire held the burial deeds in her hands, her fingernails long like talons, and the fire she stood before was for decoration; she had no need for the warmth. She dropped the deeds into the flames and approached me. The fire and her face were the only elements in the room that were not black. She wore an outfit of dark jacquard and lace, black

breeches like a second skin, black riding boots deflecting the light of the fire. She tied back her silky black hair with a large black bow, the colour matching the gloss of her painted lips.

When the cold air surrounding her forced me to shiver I was calmed by the musky aroma of dried blossom, a perfume that had no sweetness, but an overwhelming taste that intoxicated me. I tried to speak, but she stood so close, and when she smiled she took a while to reveal her teeth, her dreadful secret.

"I wanted to help. I," (I cleared my throat.) "I just wanted to help."

"I'll ask again? Why?"

I don't know how long her hands were on me, but before I could answer, her fingertips stroked the sides of my neck. "You never know when you might need a favour returning." I thought the answer would seal my fate, but she paused a moment and in a flash of irony smiled with such glee I saw those teeth again.

"I'm sure one day I'll have the opportunity to repay the favour, but while you're here it would be such a waste to let such honest blood escape without a taste."

Her fingernail pricked my skin and she rolled the tip of her tongue across the pensive drop of blood that ran down my neck.

"You won't take too much, will you? I've got a busy day tomorrow, I might need it."

"You can trust me. You know my name, may I enquire of yours?"

I told her and she smiled, took a final drop of blood on her nail and sucked her fingertip all the while staring into my eyes. "Be careful on your way home," she said. "There are monsters that pray on the unwary."

I promised I'd take care and left her house, more concerned with getting lost in the tangle of vegetation between the main doors and the gate at the end of the driveway. Several years passed and I found myself back in your service, the memory of the encounter vivid, but filed away.

We were in the library several days ago when two of your Scholars entered to update you on the delivery of the relic.

"Majesty, good news and bad news." Yvalanne wasn't sure how you'd react to the news and kept her distance from you. "We collected the relic. It was as exactly as described. Mary carrying the infant Jesus carved from a single piece of mahogany. Everything went as planned. The merchants from Bohemia met our convoy on the hill where the bridge crosses the spring. We delivered the relic to the church, positioned it in the glass case and placed the lot on the display stone next to the altar."

"Presumably that's the good news."

"Yes."

"And the bad?"

"The display stone cracked and collapsed smashing the glass and tipping the relic onto the altar floor."

"Was it damaged?"

"Fortunately not. However, we went back to the stone mason to tell him about the stone he had supplied and he told us caveat emptor. The priest had inspected the stone, accepted it, there was nothing further to be done."

The priest, Father Steiner, hadn't given the stone his full attention because he had other issues to deal with including a grave survey.

Anteje huffed and puffed. "He's hardly rushed off his feet. Why would a grave survey distract him so much?"

"Apparently there was an error," said Yvalanne. Her colleague Emilia stood close for moral support. "The names on his burial deeds didn't match."

I felt the blood drain from my head. It must have drained from other parts of me too because my toes went cold. Before you and the Scholars concluded your next move I hurried to see Father Steiner, curious to see the burial deeds he had in his possession.

He was older than when I last saw him, on paper and in the flesh, and thankfully he didn't remember me otherwise he would have asked for his burial deeds back. "I understand you're having

problems with the stone mason," I said.

"Yes, God bless him. I suppose one should turn the other cheek and forgive the swine."

"I was told you were distracted by a grave survey."

"Yes. How did you know that?" He stood outside the entrance to his church and scanned the cemetery.

"I'm working for Queen Anteje. I overheard her talking with a couple of Warrior Scholars."

"Did you? Forgive me, but there's nothing scholarly about those women. Hard as the nails in a coffin lid, but you didn't hear me say that."

"Why is the survey distracting you so much, Father?"

He pointed a rolled up document at the headstones. "Out there, I'm one short."

"I see."

"I have a name, but no grave and no matter how many times I do a count I'm always one short."

"And the name is?"

"Steiner. Father Steiner."

"No, not your name, the extra name on the deeds."

A few delicate drops of rain fell on us. "Oh. Pardon me." He unrolled the document. It was a special inventory and had the seal of the Bishop of Munich.

"Has this document come from Munich?"

"Yes. My own copy went missing. Heaven knows where it went, but you know how it is when you reach my age, misplacing things."

"And which name is surplus?" Before he spoke I knew what he would say. The Vampire's name was on the list in the same position as the list she had burned on her own unnecessary fire.

He pointed his slender fingertip at the name. "Can't think where the grave must have gone. They don't just walk off, you know."

I nearly said graves don't but the occupants do, but I held my tongue. "Lost grave, Father, overgrown grave, grave with no headstone. Could she be buried in another grave without her name added to it?"

"Highly unlikely. Highly unlikely. She died eight years ago. I was sharp as a pin then. Nothing like this would have slipped my attention."

"Graves can become overgrown in eight years. If she had no relatives tending it for her. Shame isn't it? To be forgotten."

"Shame for her, not for me. There's no other option. I shall place a notice on the village board and see if anyone else has an explanation. You're obviously no help."

His predicament explained his grumpiness, but the words still scratched the surface. I decided to pay a visit to this stone mason and test his acute knowledge of contract law. His name was Eric Klugmann and I found him covered in dust, chipping and chinking in his workshop. He coughed like an asthmatic and cursed when his chisel didn't quite do what he wanted it to do.

"Hello. Are you open for commissions?"

"Aye." He continued with his chipping.

"Do you do headstones?"

"Is it yours?"

"No. A relative."

Klugmann took his time standing upright, waited for his back to straighten and then yawned. "What do you want doing?"

"I want you to correct an oversight. A cousin was buried in a family grave, but there was a delay in adding her name to the headstone. I'd like you to do it."

"Oh yeah."

His fingers were wide as if they had been battered every day by his own hammer. "It's all a bit embarrassing, so if you can do it without making a fuss the family would be very grateful."

"Would they?"

"Yes. Can you do it?"

He wiped the dust off his hands with a rag as filthy as his workshop. "I'll need to see this headstone. See how much space I've got to work, what kind of stone it is. I can give you a quote then."

"Good. Meet me at the cemetery this evening and I'll show you the grave."

We agreed. I headed back to the cemetery and found a headstone with enough space to add another name. After a while mooching about I found Klugmann sitting on a large granite bible. There was something disturbing about his expression. He wagged a wide finger at me.

"You're up to something, aren't you?"

"No."

"It all sounds a bit dodgy to me. A bit irregular. You're not one of them grave robbers, are you?"

"Librarian actually."

"I see. So who's this woman you're working for?"

"She's dead. I'm her cousin, representing the family."

He wouldn't have it. Crows warned him to be on his guard and as the sun set an owl joined in the protests. I was losing the argument.

"I'll need to add a surcharge for the implications of this job. An indemnity in advance. Altering graves is a serious criminal offence."

"I know."

"If the authorities found out what you were up to, Queenie up there would have your head on a pike."

I wanted to tell him why I was certain he was wrong, but I kept my employer's details to myself for now. "Okay, okay. I'll come clean. You're obviously no idiot." I sat on the bible next to him. "She faked her own death. Debts. This is the best way to throw people off her trail. Her name's already on the burial deeds, so the paperwork's in place. We just need the name adding to the headstone."

A cold breeze made our eyes water, but it also cooled my blushing face. Inside Klugmann's cranium his brain calculated, turning over the numbers before emerging in the form of an inflated price.

"How much?"

"Ten thousand."

"Ten thousand? That's daylight robbery."

"Well, more accurately it's twilight robbery, but what you're asking is extremely immoral, unethical for a professional tradesman like me and no doubt will upset God in his heaven. And we don't want to incur his wrath, do we?"

"No. I don't have ten thousand."

Klugmann made a point of picking up his work bag. "What about your cousin? On the run, must have saved up a bit. I bet she hasn't paid any taxes in a while."

"That's because she hasn't earned anything. I could ask, but I'd never persuade her." I waited for a cocky look in his eye. "I'm not very good at asking for money."

"Takes a bit of practice."

"Do you think you could persuade her? Perhaps it's better if you two negotiate . . . face to face." The idea seemed to impress him. I whispered, "She's a very attractive woman."

"Is she?"

"She'd be very grateful."

"Would she?"

"There's no harm in you meeting her, I suppose. She doesn't bite."

I gave him the address and promised to look after his bag of tools while he was away.

The royal entourage arrived at the cemetery. The curious crowd had swollen along the way and in the scramble to get a decent view several bodies obscured one headstone that had a new name carved across the top. Anteje didn't have time to take in the quality of the lettering, up and down and

misshapen as if done by an amateur in a hurry.

Trove found the rock and stood next to it. "Y'Majesty, this is the stone where the ghoul was carving and chopping, gnashing its teeth and all sorts."

Anteje stepped forward and traced the letters with her gloved hand. E - R - I - c - k - l - u. . . . She removed her glove and slapped her arm with it. Her gaze fell on the other headstone before returning to Trove who held his breath and waited for his fate.

"I believe you." She waved her glove in his face. "You're free to go."

The crowd wasn't expecting the judgement and murmured. Trove almost walked backwards to the cemetery gates, bowing and thanking his Queen, bumping into headstones and people who didn't get out of the way quick enough.

Left alone with her Warrior Scholars, attendants and a speechless librarian she returned to the headstone she had noticed earlier. Before she spoke she studied the Anthologist, her attention focusing on the damp patches at the knees of his breeches and a white powdery scuff on the edge of his collar. Her eyes narrowed and making sure no one heard her she spoke in his ear. "You need to do something about your terrible handwriting."

"I will," he said. "Promise."