



## Golden Pastry

One of the advantages of living high up in a castle was the solitude, the calm, the peace and quiet. (Conditions that didn't apply if the castle was besieged or bombarded; conditions Anteje had managed to avoid by a pattern of diplomacy, keeping her head down and a small amount of, let's say, questionable magic.)

But not today. The Anthologist was drawn to the battlements by a racket so loud it travelled up the castle walls and penetrated the interior as far as the library. He joined a line of Warrior Scholars who leaned and lounged against the wall, observing a raucous crowd pulsing and funnelling through the tight streets of the village like a black tidal wave.

"What's going on?" he said.

"Down there," said one of the ladies with a pony tail that almost reached the back of her knees.

"I know it's down there, but who are they?"

"What, everyone of them? You expect me to know their names?"

"You're a Scholar, aren't you? I thought you lot knew everything."

"Look there." Ponytail's colleague pointed at the centre of the crowd. On a cart that was on the verge of collapse, under pressure from the crush of the people, a coffin slid about, pushed back into place by a succession of arms until it slipped to the edge again. The horse struggled to make progress.

"Must be someone popular," said the Anthologist.

Ponytail puffed out her cheeks. "I can't think of anyone other than our Queen who is that popular."

"No one?"

She shook her head.

"No one at all?"

"What are you hinting at?"

He left them to gawp and wondered if they'd be as casual if the castle ever came under attack. Anteje, also disturbed by the noise, met him on the steps down to the main gates. "Where are you going?"

"To see what's going on. Do you know, your lot carry swords, but I bet they only use them to open envelopes."

"What do you mean?"

"They're all up there on the battlements like bored crows. This could be an uprising and they're not bothered at all."

"So the big brave librarian is going down to sort it all out?" Anteje put her hand on the hilt of her own sword.

"Not in so many words, no. I'm curious to know who it is they're burying."

Anteje left him at the foot of the steps. "Well, give them my regards."

He had to squeeze through a gap in the gates because the crowd was so great they wouldn't fully open out into the street. He held his breath before the surge carried him off and for several metres his feet didn't touch the ground.

"Who is it?" he gasped.

"Don't know," said the face next to him. "I just want one of his pies." Before he could explain his face disappeared in the chaotic turnover of heads and bodies, a human convection that

swirled from the centre to the edges, carrying the Anthologist through the crowd until he could hear the wheels of the funeral cart faltering over the cobbles.

"Do you know what I think," he shouted to the woman next to him, "the Pied Piper's up there somewhere playing a tune."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

In spite of the crush and confusion, if he listened long enough he could hear a common theme in the chatter and eventually a respectable couple emerged alongside him. The street widened as it approached the edge of the village and a merciful amount of space opened up.

"Pretty good turn out," he said. "Popular, obviously."

"Popular," the woman straightened her hat, "everyone hated him."

"I see. They're making sure he's dead then?"

"No, no, no." The man patted his sleeves and adjusted his twisted shirt collar. "Thief. Real undesirable of the highest constituency. Probably stole the coins. In fact I'd stake my house and its substantial grounds on it. Thief like his brother. Yes, look, there he is."

Up ahead, the cart had stopped and a tall man checked the stability of the coffin by yanking it backwards and forwards.

"It was them, if you ask me. Had to be," said the woman. Progress drifted now until they were close to the cart.

"What are you saying exactly?"

"You haven't heard?" she said. "Choked on a coin, didn't he?"

"The inevitability was beyond the limits of the probable," said the man straining his neck. "Water will always find its course wherever it springs from." He walked with a bit more respect now that the deceased was within earshot.

The woman was no so candid. "He did it. The whole family were bent. Still are."

"A bit harsh, isn't it?" said the Anthologist. The widow standing a few steps away remained upright in spite of her grief. "He's not cold in the ground yet."

"Don't feel sorry for them," said the woman. "Once they've buried him they'll be back to their old ways. Guilt doesn't go away just because it wears a different coat."

The man grimaced and disagreed. He adjusted the lion-shaped pin fastening his cravat. "If you build a church with stones from a witches' prison, it's still a church, is it not? The guilt does not travel, but you're right to be suspicious. They were never part of this village, no matter what people said. Always considered themselves to be separate."

"What are these coins you're talking about?" said the Anthologist.

"From the bank," said the man. "A consignment of gold coins stolen from the bank a few months ago. He choked on one, which can only mean," he turned away from the cart and whispered, "the rumours must be true."

"Rumours?" said the Anthologist. He hated being in the dark, especially on matters happening around the base of the castle.

"Where have you been hiding?" said the woman. "The coins were stolen and hidden in sacks of flour. Then they started turning up in pies and pie sales went through the roof. Everybody wanted one hoping they'd find a gold coin inside one of them. Why do think everyone's put on so much weight lately? It's all that pastry they've been eating."

There was a grain of truth in what she was saying. For several weeks when the Anthologist wandered around the village he would come across short queues outside the bakers' shops. One of the businesses, a married couple called Voss, bought a field. Another baker called Hegel started promenading in a succession of increasingly flamboyant breeches and dining a string of elderly wealthy women. Money attracts money no doubt.

And now the rumours, the potential jackpot contained in every pie case, had proved true when Rutger Schilver took a mouthful of his sister's pork pie and choked on a gold coin.

"He did not," said a woman in black pulling away from the cart to confront the gossipers. "That rumour was started by the bakers themselves. Pretty lucrative rumour it turned out to be. They

used their own money," she said.

"Did they?"

"They started the rumour, claimed the stolen coins were reappearing in the pies. Nossing to do mit us," she said in a pretend baker's voice. "Vee take se flour, bake se pies. Nossing to do mit us the coins get inside zem. Liars. It actually benefits them when they keep the rumour going by putting their own money in the pies, make people think the rumours are true."

"Rubbish," said the woman.

"It's not rubbish."

"You would say that, wouldn't you?"

"Don't you go accusing me and my brother."

"You've always been the wrong element."

The Anthologist let the man intervene first to keep the two women from going at each throats.

"Made a killing out of it. It's the bakers who ought to be on trial, not my family." The cart rolled forward. The crowd shuffled along, but it soon became clear they weren't interested in the cemetery and the burial. They were here for the wake.

All the way to the cemetery the jibes and back biting continued. The woman accusing the widow of being the gossip monger, the widow accusing the woman of being a gold digger. When the crowd arrived at the cemetery and the priest had to be carried to the grave to conduct the burial the mood was one of impatience. Get 'im in the ground and have done with it. Sensing the tetchiness, the priest rushed the service, lobbed a few lumps of soil into the grave and before he had finished making the sign of the cross the crowd were off.

A few stragglers stayed behind, including the Anthologist who approached the widow and her brother and then thought better of it. He chose instead to leave them with their grief, their rejection and gave in to a sense of morbid curiosity. He followed the crowd back to the dead man's house.

No one was in any doubt about the man's guilt and the role played by his siblings in pinching the coins and stashing them away. How they reconciled that with the coins turning up in someone else's pies was never explained, but the widow baked. Put two and two together. . . .

Before he could satisfy himself with an explanation the Anthologist joined the crowd at the dead man's house, or rather the smouldering ruin that was once the dead man's house. The early arrivals were already in the middle of the ash pile, stumbling over scorched kitchen furniture and heaving aside the collapsed roof timbers. Like ravenous cattle they hunted through the mess for any remains of the funeral buffet, but such was the blackened aftermath that no human being could possibly distinguish between a burnt pie and a burnt chair leg. But they tried; sniffing and tasting, one desperate man swallowed a hard round lump and waited for a gold after-taste. The hushed crowd waited until he shook his head and the ghoulish foraging continued.

Sickened by the spectacle, the Anthologist examined the other rooms that were less devoured by the fire. The heat remained potent, but the fire had failed to destroy metallic items of furniture and decoration. Sumptuous decoration for a family that were hardly rich. Silver candelabra, a brass book rest. Book shelves untouched by the flames protected a small, but elegant collection and in the list of titles he found one that he knew was priceless. A bible printed in Gothenberg in 1594.

He held it with great delicacy, made sure no one could see him or the bible and examined the pages. The question continued to bother him: how had this simple family come to acquire a book of this value? The villagers called them thieves. Was it stolen? He found a tablecloth and wrapped up the bible. He was unsure what should be done with it, but as the crowd grew more agitated he didn't want them finding the book and destroying it in a fit of rage.

He stuffed it inside his jacket and slipped away from the house. A man standing alone stared at the crowd and spoke to the Anthologist without looking at him. "Beasts. Look at them. What a sorry condemnation of the times we live in. The Queen should not allow this."

"The Queen doesn't know it's happening."

"She should. She should be aware at all times what her subjects are up to. She'd be appalled."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that." What he needed was an escort back to the castle, but the Warrior Scholars would still be on their battlements, bored stiff and trying to figure out how to start a fight with someone.

"All this nonsense about choking on coins," said the man. "I carried out the post mortem. He choked on a piece of pie crust. Gold coins my hat. If his sister paid as much attention to her baking as she did to all these rumours her brother might still be alive."

"Yes. Fascinating." A horse approached, a war horse, and ridden by one of Anteje's Scholars. She pulled up by the crowd, studied them, spun around and was about to canter away when she spotted the Anthologist.

"What are you doing here?"

"I followed the crowd. Can you take me back to the castle?"

"No." Eager to go, she almost left him, but he grabbed the rein.

"It's important. I need to," he waited for the doctor to leave. "I need to get something valuable back to the castle."

"Come on then. Jump on. But we have to take a detour." She pulled him onto the horse and took off. He hung on for all his life.

"What's the rush?"

"The arsonists are escaping."

"Arsonists?"

"Yes. A man and a woman. They're heading south. Three others are after them. Don't fall off."

Fine words, easier said than done. Several times he felt himself sliding off the horse's back and with the bible under his coat, struggled to keep a grip. He had the Scholar's body to cling to, but decorum limited where he could put his hands.

The horse surged along a narrow track, encouraged by the nameless Scholar whose hair billowed out from under her helmet. She saw several other Scholars and kicked on. The Anthologist didn't think the horse could go any faster on the terrain, but it could. A lot faster and within several heartbeats he was part of a terrifying chase as four accelerating Warrior Scholars hunted down a horse and cart.

The cart had no chance. Guided by a man and a woman, it had no cargo other than several sacks. When the path settled in a woodland clearing one of the cart drivers turned and fired a crossbow. It struck the leading Scholar below the collarbone. She cried out, peeled away and fell in a tumbling heap between the trees.

Regardless, the others galloped on and caught the cart before the driver could reload. Surrounded and outnumbered they stopped. Dragged from their seat, the man was beaten and disarmed, the woman forced to kneel on the ground.

"Go back, see if she's okay." Beyond the trees, the wounded Scholar was on her feet and examining the protruding bolt as if it were a faulty belt buckle. "She looks okay."

The Anthologist couldn't stop shaking and jumped down from the horse before he fell off it. The Scholars examined the cart and the arsonists. "Why did you burn down your own house?"

"None of your business," said the woman who turned out to be the widow, the same widow the Anthologist had pitied before she made a life-threatening run for it.

"Travelling light. Where's the rest of your possessions?"

Feeling the strength return to his legs, the Anthologist placed a fist on one of the sacks on the back of the cart. The widow and her brother had left a burned out house with its silver candelabra and a priceless bible, and all they had with them were three sacks.

"Three sacks of flour?" The Scholar waited for an explanation, but the widow kept her head down.

"Cut the first one open," said the Anthologist. "There's more than flour in that sack."

"Cut it open?" The Scholar drew her sword, pierced the sack and sliced open a long gash.

Flour slumped onto the cart and glittered in the afternoon sun breaking through the woodland canopy. The Scholar stirred the flour with the tip of her sword and revealed a gold coin. It wasn't alone. She shoved in her hand up to the end of her gauntlet and pulled out a handful of gold coins.

"You could make a lot of pies with those," said the Anthologist, but none of the Scholars understood him. "We won't be going back to the castle in such a rush, will we?"

They had their hands full. Two prisoners tied to a cart and one injured colleague meant the Anthologist was forced to ride one of the war horses, a giant gelding with a peculiar sense of humour. Anteje thanked him for his insight and after several days of thought she issued a decree to the village: any stolen property turning up in foodstuffs baked, boiled, stewed, steamed, fried or poached belonged to the crown until the rightful owner came forward. And in the days that followed the villagers began to lose weight and Hegel the baker opened a grocer's shop.