



## Owning the Word

There were times when the Anthologist felt like one of the books in Anteje's library. Passed around, borrowed, overlooked, undervalued. A request had come through from the Empress Helene. His expertise was needed, which should have been an honour, but he knew the Empress always had an ulterior motive.

He was packed off in the company of Yvalanne and Emilia, an insurance policy designed to reduce the risk to his life. But the Empress Helene wasn't an Empress for nothing. She had a huge army, spies everywhere and the minute he crossed the border they picked him up.

"Are you capable of fighting them off," he said to Yvalanne when the trio was stopped by more than a dozen soldiers on horseback.

"Why would we fight them off? You're here to help them."

"Thanks."

A captain rode forward. "Are you, I'm sorry I haven't been given a name. Are you the librarian?"

"Yes, I'm the librarian. Is it that obvious?"

"Follow us."

The soldiers surrounded the trio. Yvalanne and Emilia continued their conversation about music theory leaving the Anthologist to worry about his fate. And his fate waited for him in the main square of the town where a large crowd gathered in front of a raised stage. On the stage were three people: a man and a woman sitting either side of the Empress.

Formalities were brief. Helene delighted to see him et cetera et cetera and then straight into proceedings without any hospitality or a chance to settle down after the long ride. Taken to the side of the stage behind a ceremonial screen, Helene asked about Queen Anteje.

"Is she well?"

"Yes. She keeps herself busy. You know. Bit of archery, bit of study, bit of this, bit of that."

"She sounds like a nun. She's capable of so much more."

"Perhaps she's happy with her lot."

"It's not much. She has no ambition. Don't you feel restricted working for someone like that?"

"I'm there for a reason, Empress."

"Call me Helene. I remember." She pulled him away from the screen. "Have you found the book yet."

"Book?"

"Don't play games, the Book of All Resolutions. I remember you were looking for it. I remember you spirited away the Forger from Erinia's grip. She hasn't forgiven you for that. She's a wicked woman. Anteje won't be able to protect you if Erinia comes looking."

"I'll bear that in mind." But Helene had already left him. Message sent. A sort of threat disguised as help. A guard appeared out of nowhere and shoved him back onto the stage where an empty chair waited for him.

Helene addressed the crowd. "You all know I am not opposed to ambition. I encourage entrepreneurial skill amongst my subjects. But it can be taken too far and today I aim to set a precedent, set the boundaries. On my right, Mina Chevanne has tried and failed to publish an anthology of poetry titled *The Blinding Contrast of Colours*. On my left, Karsten Holst has claimed the rights to the title of Mina's anthology, thus preventing publication unless she pays a fee for the

use of that title."

The crowd stirred, the chatter building until it changed direction and blew across the stage in the face of Karsten Holst. The word thief was thrown at him, shame, charlatan. He was not a popular man.

A guard handed Helene a scroll. "It's not the first time Karsten Holst has done this. He has blocked the publication of seven novels, fourteen anthologies, five songs and an opera. Stand up."

Holst stood. His verticality suppressed by a fear of Helene that made him tremble and stutter. "Empress. I am a mere businessman. I trade in words and phrases. It's not my fault these authors fail to protect their intellectual property."

"Did I ask you to speak?"

"No, sorry Empress."

"I said, did I ask you to speak?"

Holst was a slow learner. "No-"

"Did I ask you to speak?"

He shook his head.

"You are currently protected by the law and whilst I have the power to change such laws on a whim, I prefer the judicial route. Your defence. This ownership you mention. How do you come by that ownership?"

Holst waited to speak.

Helene tutted. "You may speak."

"Thank you, Empress. I purchase works in which certain phrases are used for the first time. And under current statute that grants me ownership of the phrase as originating author."

"Sounds like a lot of nonsense to me, but if it's the law then there it is. We have to live with it until the law is changed. However. . . ."

The Anthologist sat forward knowing the caveat was about to be revealed.

"If you are mistaken that is a capital offence. We have an expert with us today. I've asked him here to investigate the origins of this phrase. Should he find an earlier example than the one you claim to own you will be executed."

The crowd's spirits lifted. They liked a good execution especially when the condemned was as unpopular as Karsten Holst. The Anthologist was impressed until he caught Helene's attention and realised she had placed the fate of Karsten Holst in his hands. She waited for him to speak, a broad smile bursting across her face. He smiled back and felt his stomach turn.

Hospitality came later in the evening when Helene hosted the Anthologist and several other important guests. She sat next to him and offered various dishes for him to try. He hoped he could tell the difference between dog and beef, but Helene had no known reputation for poisoning people.

"Am I being fair?" she said drawing patterns in her soup with a spoon. "I'm aware it puts you in a quandary. The provenance of writing or a man's life."

"I can't understand why you don't just hang him. It's obvious you don't like him and the crowd hated him."

"The scales of justice are difficult to handle when they naturally tip one way instead of the other. It's the burden of being an absolute ruler, I suppose. I'm an empress, not a president, and all presidents aspire to be emperors, do they not? Why is that? They think they're releasing themselves from the burdens of justice and fairness, but it doesn't work like that. The temptation to be a tyrant is always there. I call my people subjects, they call me our lady. The imbalance is fixed, contained in everything." And she loved it. When she spoke the power darted across her features like an imp. "I could be a tyrant. Sometimes I have to be, sometimes I want to be and when that happens I disguise it. I play the merciful fair minded ruler."

"Yes it would be easy to hang him, but where's the fun in that?" She blew across the hot soup. "He thinks he's clever doing what he does. Well, let's make him sweat a little."

"If I find an earlier example of the phrase you'll execute him. I'm not used to delivering life and death decisions. I'm a librarian."

"And you came here with two Warrior Scholars. What do they always say? The pen is

mightier than the sword. Admit it, you love it. You love it as much as I do." The room fell out of focus when Helene looked him full in the face and grinned. "You cut a man's head off. What sort of librarian are you?"

Unless the witch was one of Helene's spies there was no way she could know that detail. "He had something that belonged to me."

"A pair of spectacles. You cut off a man's head for a pair of spectacles."

"They were a gift."

"Yes. Your wife. Have you kissed her yet?"

He threw down his spoon. "How do you know that?"

"I know everything. I know about the curse. I even know your name." She nudged his shoulder and continued eating. She continued talking to other guests and by the time dessert came around she was back on the subject of writing.

"I wrote a book of poetry. Many years ago." She called for an aide to bring the book to the table. Bound in delicate maroon calfskin, the pages contained a collection of short poems and observations, and throughout the book each composition grew more beguiling. The wordplay exquisite and unusual, the rhythms playful, expression delicate and thoughtful. The collection was the work of a skilled writer and the Anthologist found it hard to imagine Helene being capable of such subtlety.

"It's very beautiful. When did you write this?"

"When I was young. I spent a lot of time waiting for my moment to come, as I knew it would. I wasn't interested in learning. I don't know the names of the planets, or the square root of the hypotenuse. I'm ignorant of most musical instruments and wouldn't be seen dead sewing. But words, I love words. As do you."

And here she was, sharing her most intimate thoughts conceived before she took power; marshalling her thoughts before she began marshalling her armies. She was a bard in a uniform, armed with a sabre and a quill. "Keep it," she said.

"What?"

"Keep it. I'm the only one who reads it. I won't let anyone else see it because they don't deserve to. I know you are capable of appreciating it."

Such a book could start a war, and if not a war at least cause a lot of trouble in the wrong hands. "Would you sign it?"

"Absolutely not."

"It would be the finishing touch. It needn't be obvious."

"How so?"

"Lemon juice."

"Oh, the old lemon juice trick." She tapped the table top and asked her aide to bring a pen and a bowl of lemon juice. "The things I do for you. I expect something in return."

"A man's life?"

She liked the sound of that. "Perfect. See what a good team we make."

In teams of two, both parties were equal. Anything less was servitude and the Anthologist knew he was expected to produce results quickly. He recalled the title of Mina Chevanne's work, *The Blinding Contrast of Colours*, and set off to find a bookshop in the town. The work he was looking for had been published fifteen years earlier and the bookshop owner remembered the first edition arriving in his shop.

"The Romance of Flags of War. I didn't like the book. There's nothing romantic about war." The owner of the shop had collected more dust on himself than any of his books on the shelves and displays. His sales ledger was the biggest book of the lot, but only because of the meticulous accounts and details. "The Empress has no patience for shoddy accounting," he said turning each page carefully. "No patience for much to be honest."

"Should you be telling me that? I might be one of her spies."

The shop owner shook his head and continued searching. "You wouldn't be so short of breath when you speak if you were a spy. Wouldn't be so nervous. Here it is."

He turned the book around to allow the Anthologist to read the record. "Gustav Poistica."

"Book agent. He buys and sells on behalf of clients. Lives in the muddy grey cottage by the bridge."

The mud grey colour was a deliberate choice to create a charming earthiness to a small house sitting within a well maintained garden. Poistica was as colourful as his flower beds, but had no concept of hospitality. "Have you made an appointment?"

"No. I didn't know I had to."

"Who gave you my name?"

"The owner of the book shop-"

"Did he? He had no business doing that. I'm a busy man."

"Gardening?" said the Anthologist.

"Don't you criticise my garden. My wife breaks her back keeping this place ordered."

"I wasn't criticising-"

"Look, if you're not here for anything stop wasting my time." He shut the door before the Anthologist could say he was there for absolutely no reason other than to wind up the owner of a mud grey cottage. He knocked again.

"Now what?" said Poistica.

"I'm here on business. I'm trying to trace the sale of a book."

Poistica had frozen.

"The Romance of Flags of War."

Still no movement.

"You bought it on behalf of someone."

"If you know so much about me why are you here asking questions?"

"Why are you being so obstructive? I'm only trying to trace the ownership of a book."

"My services are confidential. Come back with a warrant." And he shut the door again, a little harder than last time.

He was probably joking when he mentioned the warrant, but considering the urgency of his work the Anthologist decided to take him literally. The Empress, however, didn't do warrants. Her chief of security, a tall female general with symmetrical tattoos on each side of her neck, laughed at him. "Warrants? Who are you?"

"I'm working-"

"It was a rhetorical question. I know who you are." When she stood up the Anthologist thought her table and chair were on some kind of hidden platform, but the general really was two metres tall. She pulled open a side door to her office and called for a lieutenant. A woman half her height rushed in and stood to attention. "Take Lieutenant Kramer to this man's house and ask her to ask him to cooperate. She has the authority."

Lieutenant Kramer said nothing and only came alive at Poistica's house. "I've come back with a warrant," he said.

Before Poistica could ask what was going on Lieutenant Kramer had dragged him into his own hallway, bent him double at the knees and held a knife to his cheek. The Anthologist took a moment to adjust to the policing methods of Helene's empire.

"Please excuse the robust questioning, but you did tell me to do things the formal way."

"Just ask and leave." Poistica's wife peered from the dining room; clutching a large bowl to her body she waited for the questioning to end.

"The Romance of Flags of War. Who did you sell it to?"

"Karsten Holst."

"When?"

"Eighteen months ago."

"Okay. Thank you. You can let him go, Lieutenant."

"Are you sure?" She did speak after all. Outside Poistica's house she had more to say. "If you need any more help you can approach me directly. Anything discreet, but I don't do poison."

"Don't do poison? What are you talking about?"

"If you need someone . . . bumping off. It looks good on our resumes."

"I'll bear it in mind. Thanks. Very useful." She walked away blowing her nose and left the Anthologist in a state of anxiety. The place was a madhouse, but he was a step closer to finishing his task and getting out.

Nightfall covered Holst's house. He owned a row of squashed terraces bookended by a bakery and a shoemaker's workshop. In the middle a grand entrance with portico displayed the date the terrace was built. A solitary light glowed in an upstairs window.

Holst shouted from the window when the Anthologist rang the door bell. "You've come to kill me?"

"No. I don't know. That's out of my hands. Only the Empress can decide that."

"Really." He leaned casually on the window sill and inspected the empty street. "For someone so tyrannical she is a great believer in delegating responsibility. She does it well. She has you feeling guilty already."

"No, she doesn't."

"Oh, come off it. Heads I win, tails you lose. If she executes me people will say it's because you caught me. If you don't get the proof she wants she'll concoct some excuse to have you executed for incompetence."

The book. She could claim he stole it. Planted the evidence on him with an inviting smile, the distraction of the signature, but it would be a sign that the book belonged to her. He could see it all unfolding, the whole grisly routine from the bedroom door bursting open, Lieutenant Kramer dragging him off to the gallows. At least he wouldn't have to endure the nauseous experience of being poisoned.

Lost in his private prophesy the Anthologist was surprised by Holst opening his front door. "You look like you need a drink."

"A drink?" Holst lived on the first floor of the terrace, a long collection of rooms off a narrow spine of bookcases and framed paintings. One room was Holst's office and it was here he kept his most important titles. "You'll be looking for this." He held up a copy of *The Romance of Flags of War*, held it over a candle flame to illuminate the title page.

"That book is going to cost you your life if you don't come up with an escape plan."

"How so?"

The pages were close enough to ignite when the temperature was right. The Anthologist wanted to snatch the book away and avoid the horrible spectacle of a burning book. "Be careful. Be very careful."

Holst laughed. "Let me guess. You care more about this book than about my fate."

"I care for both."

"So what do I do? Tell me."

"Reverse your claim on the poetry collection. Let Mina Chevanne publish her work."

"And be executed for wasting the Empress's time. She'll hang you for anything, you know."

"I believe you." The Anthologist reached out, ready to snatch the book from the candle flame.

"There is one option, I suppose." Holst examined the title page. "If you fail to prove the existence of this book. The pressure is back on you then." He had a match concealed in a back pocket. Striking it on the wall he set fire to the title page and the old brittle paper lit up with a vigorous dance of destruction. The Anthologist shut his eyes to avoid the book's death.

"Now, whether I had this book is neither here nor there. I know this place better than you do. There is one thing the Empress hates more than a greedy publisher and that's a servant who lets her down." The final leaf of ash to land on the floor was the Anthologist's only hope of going home unless he could charm the Empress, offer her something unexpected.

He had the time it took to return to her palace to conjure up a plan, but he was so enraged by the calculated destruction of a book he found himself tongue tied when he was brought before her. She expected a result. A conclusion. He had none.

Helene raised her eyebrows, drummed the arms of her chair with slender fingers that

contradicted the severe ambitions of their owner. The drumming slowed, the eyebrows settled, continued downwards until Helene's expression had transformed from speculation to worrying menace. "And that's it? He burned the book?"

"Yes. With a match."

"With a match?"

"Yes. He said you'd execute me now for failing to find the book. He also said. . . ." He stopped himself. Lying about what Holst had said about the Empress would only complicate matters.

"Said what?"

"Said, he said you didn't like people who let you down."

"And he'd be right." Helene stood up to draw her sword part way from the hilt. The edge, even from a distance, looked like it could slice through flesh without leaving any sensation until the victim was washed away on a tide of his own blood. She called for the guard by the door. "Send for Mina Chevanne."

And now there would be no witnesses to his fate. "A book has condemned you, but a book could also save your life." Helene stepped up the Anthologist. The sword blade appeared vertical between their faces, its shape fascinating her. "For now the only thing holding back this blade is the Book of All Resolutions. Now I could take it by force. I have enough of an army to overwhelm Anteje's realm and ransack that library of hers. But not yet."

He was right about the sword's edge. The tip pierced the flesh beneath his chin. He didn't feel the skin being punctured, but he felt the warm line of blood run down to the collar of his coat.

"Get . . . out."

He didn't dare look back. In the corridor outside he met Mina Chevanne rushing the opposite way. She detected his nervousness and offered a half smile. "Republish your book," he said as they passed. "But rename it Fortune Is a Purse That Never Empties." The words followed Mina down the corridor and into the room where Helene waited. The Anthologist followed his own words.

"Mina, we can't allow this situation to continue. Tomorrow I want you to republish your work. Make an announcement. I'll be there alongside you."

"May I ask why the exchange of heart?"

"If you want to do anything round here you have to do it yourself. I've been let down, so I'm taking the initiative. From tomorrow I'll declare it illegal to buy books simply to own the words and sentences within them. Announce your intention to republish, choose a different title, and we'll take it from there."

"Thank you very much." Mina hesitated a second too long.

"Well, that's it. You can go now."

Mina's footsteps approached and she was off, through the door and down the corridor, keen to get her book of poetry into the public sphere, "And you can come back in. I know you're out there."

"I'm sorry," he said trying not to bow. "That all happened very quickly. I didn't have time-

"Oh, shut up."

He was given his marching orders a second time and still no explicit threat or promise to hang him. It could have been part of Helene's personal strategy, her own specific way of forcing her subjects to forever live on a knife edge. People lived in danger all the time. There was one in front of him, scurrying down the street, beneath the dim light of the bakery and up to the front door of Karsten Holst. Poistica hopped about like he had pins and needles and was relieved to be allowed in to the relative safety of Holst's house. Poistica emerged a lot more relaxed and ambled away, arms swinging. The light from Holst's window burned for several hours.

Holst must have worked late because he wasn't in the crowd when Mina Chevanne strolled onto the stage in the town square. She received light applause and warm smiles, but the crowd shared the Anthologist's curiosity over Holst. Would he gatecrash the announcement and ruin her publication day a second time?

Instead, a different figure altogether joined Mina on the stage. Helene looked confrontational

in both the way she dressed and the way she stood. "Before Mina announces the new title of her latest works I have an announcement of my own and a statement." She spotted the Anthologist, but ignored him. "From today it will be an offence to own words and phrases other than your own original work. This ridiculous anomaly in the law of copyright is a thing of the past. And to make sure the message sinks in it will be a capital offence for those found guilty."

The announcement was met with polite approval and hand clapping. Why it mattered to ordinary mortals the Anthologist had no idea, but they gave a good impression of gratitude that a great wrong had been righted. Then came the statement.

"I have also been the victim of theft." The Anthologist felt his legs tingle and a distance opened up between him and the mumbling crowd. "A book of mine, a very important book has been stolen. Until the book is found the town gates will be closed, the perimeter sealed. No one will leave or enter. Every building in the town will be searched, an operation that is ongoing. You must all return home and wait for your property to be given the all clear. Unless you are the thief who has this book."

Fate must have been smiling on the Empress because the book was found in one of the first houses searched. Karsten Holst was escorted from his terrace and brought to the permanent gallows at the crossroads facing the main church.

He protested his innocence without waiting for the usual permission to speak. "I bought it in good faith. I had no idea the book was stolen."

"Did you check? Do you check the provenance and ownership of all the books you buy?"

"I've never felt the need. I buy from an agent. Gustav Poistica. He'll support me on this."

If he was here. Poistica must have been too distracted by his gardening to be present at the latest spectacle.

"I would not have bought the book had I known it was yours. There is no mark or signature to indicate your ownership."

"Ownership? I wrote it." Helene grabbed the book and took a burning torch from one of her guards. She took care to avoid setting fire to the page, but held the flame close enough to reveal her signature; its eery arrival on the page like an accusing magic trick. She offered Holst a chance to reply.

Restrained by the arms he was still able to lift his hands. "I had no idea. I bought it in good faith. I didn't steal it."

Helene acknowledged the Anthologist. "Should I believe him?"

"Without Poistica's evidence it's hard not to."

"Thank you. A very ambiguous reply. Thank you." She let Holst sweat a little more. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt." Holst raised his hand. "Yes."

"I have a receipt. If I produced the receipt it would be proof of purchase, would it not?"

"I suppose so."

"Thank you. Thank you."

"Well, if you didn't steal it, who did?" Helene waited for the Anthologist's answer again.

"I don't want to be obstructive, but isn't Mina Chevanne waiting to announce something?"

"Yes. You're right. How rude of us to interrupt her publication announcement." The crowd followed their Empress back to the stage where Mina stood proud as a peacock and ready to reveal the title of her new work. Holst found himself within thanking distance of the Anthologist.

"I'd wait a moment before you thank me," he said. "I haven't forgotten what you did to that book."

"What?"

Mina spoke up. "I'm very happy to be able to finally publish my anthology. It is a collection of poems and the title, the new title is Fortune is a Purse That Never Empties."

The crowd clapped. Helene clapped and smiled. The Anthologist clapped, smiled and winked at Holst who couldn't do anything, restrained by his guards and stiffened by the title's revelation. His foreshortened life flashed before him.

He tugged at the chains on his wrists and pulled himself alongside the Anthologist. Making

sure the crowd didn't hear him he said, "You might think you have a future, but your goddess of the dawn has kidnapped my liberty and used you as a worthless water carrier. I'll soon be free of this Babylonian captivity, but for you, our lady up there already has you in her mausoleum. Think on that. There is only one winner when the Empress plays games."

"I know my fate," said the Anthologist. "I'm not stupid." He had escaped one devil, but he knew it would take more than a fillet of fish to escape a second. He moved forward to the stage and shouted, "The words of the title do sound familiar."

Mina waited for Helene to explain. "I believe you're right. In fact, excuse us a moment, Mina, weren't those my words?"

"Yes." The Anthologist had the book in his hands. He turned to page twenty-five and read the line to the crowd. "We place a value on fortune, but fortune is not the coin, it is the purse that never empties."

Mina smiled. Helene pretended to blush and the crowd, the incredibly well trained crowd that knew when to laugh, when to smile, when to boo, when to clap, muttered and chortled and ignored Holst who had some more explaining to do.

Helene stepped to the edge of the stage. "You've already said you bought the book in good faith. How did you know it contained the new title of Mina's collection?"

The whole town waited for an answer, but Holst only had enough energy to raise his pleading eyes to the Anthologist. He opened the book again at the same page, the same page bookmarked with the receipt. One sale to Gustav Poistica, with the Anthologist's signature in the bottom left corner.

After Holst had been heaved back to the gallows the Anthologist said to Helene "Do you want to see the receipt?"

"No. Burn it. Consider yourself lucky you're not joining him."

"Yes."

"Go home. And find that book for me."

"Yes. I will. I'm presuming this is still mine?"

Helene gazed at her own book and in that moment she and the Anthologist had one common interest. "I said you could have it. I never go back on my word."