



1001 Bizarre Assassinations

No amount of insistence could persuade Anteje the Anthologist was not the Empress's new lackey. "A whipping boy," she said.

"She didn't whip me."

"What did she do?" Anteje concealed her grinning and smirking by holding a book in front of her face, but it wasn't big enough.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you? I still haven't figured out if she was serious about killing me."

"She wasn't serious. She enjoys the power play. I can't understand why she never took up fishing."

"Fishing?"

"Playing people on a hook seems to be her favourite pastime when she's bored."

A heavy downpour rattled the glass around the library. In between the rain showers a nosey sun would direct shafts of brilliant light into the library as if it was also searching for the book.

"What does she want with the Book of All Resolutions?"

"She didn't say. But everyone wants it for different reasons."

"Call this a stupid question, but how will you know you've found it? It won't have the Book of All Resolutions on the cover."

"I think it's one of those esoteric things. You'll know when you see it."

Anteje groaned. "One of those books. And I suppose it'll be full of ambiguous wisdom. Question, how do I defeat the fiery dragon? Answer, follow your inner strength, my girl. A better answer, a useful answer, would be more like use a sword with a cutting strength of seventy-five kilos to slice through the Achilles tendon of the dragon's trailing rear leg."

He didn't want to agree, but she had a point. The Anthologist had found so many books of wisdom that were nothing more than wordy codswallop written by people who preyed on trust and ignorance, and if he was honest with himself he was praying the Book of All Resolutions wouldn't be like that.

Unseen, hidden by the bookshelves, Guinevere and Maya shared a joke. Maya's filthy giggle echoed around the library. Anteje shook her head. "You sound like you've made a full recovery."

"Sorry," Maya appeared from behind a collection of ecclesiastical instructions. After being hit by a crossbow bolt she had been put on archiving duty in the library, but spent her days looking for rude illustrations in classical medical books. Guinevere shared her distorted sense of humour.

"What's so funny?"

"You've had a letter delivered, Majesty. The spelling is terrible."

Guinevere leaned against the spiral staircase and waited for Anteje's reaction.

Excuse the impertenance of my note to you, but i am giving you fourwarning of my intenshens. At 6pm on the 6th day of the 6th munth I will asasinaet you Queen Anteya in your own orchad, and taste your deth with a glas of wine

"And you found this funny?"

"It was the spelling, Majesty. They spelt month with a 'u.'" Maya stopped smiling.

"Do you know how many threats I receive like this? I don't find these things funny."

"No. Sorry."

"One day the threat will be real. I have to take them all seriously, no matter how badly they spell the word month."

The Anthologist took the note and examined the handwriting. It was tidy, the letters even and carefully formed, the paper high quality cotton rag, very smooth. Guinevere provided the envelope. "He or she isn't illiterate," he said. "The handwriting is too neat. They spend this much time learning to write the spelling should be equally as good. And the paper. Expensive. I would say the paper belongs to the assassin's client." He took advantage of another strong ray of sunlight and looked for a watermark, but the paper was clear. "No watermark, so someone is being clever. Hiding their tracks."

"It sounds contradictory to me, Majesty," said Guinevere. "Why would they tell you the time and place?"

"Another game." She shared her earlier concerns with the Anthologist.

"You think Helene's behind this?"

"I don't know. My first reaction is to avoid the orchard on that day, but maybe that's what they're expecting, so I go to the orchard on that day to fool them."

A game indeed. A game of bluff and double bluff and they could have stood there all day deciding whether to camp in the orchard or head north to Scandinavia. The letter had arrived in the standard daily delivery of letters and packages, no messenger to interrogate, no third party to cross examine. Anteje sniffed the paper. "Is that hawthorn blossom?"

The Anthologist agreed. Maya and Guinevere agreed. "Strange scent for a male assassin," he said, "unless he wants you to think he's a woman."

While Anteje and the Scholars studied the note the Anthologist retrieved a book that contained a history of killings. "1001 Bizarre Assassinations." He put the book down on the table next to where the note was being examined.

"What is that?" said Guinevere.

"This is a historical record of all the weird and peculiar ways you can knobble a ruler. Like this one here. The Duke Jalobert III of Normandy who upset so many people his wife had him killed by a vicious pelican. The Duke stood too close to it and it pecked him in the eyeball. Pierced his brain. Killed instantly. And you can't prosecute a pelican, can you? Conclusion, tragic accident. All birds with long beaks should forever more be kept in cages."

"That doesn't really help us," said Anteje, but Maya was already flicking through the pages for more peculiar murders.

"Here's one," she said. "The Earl Errant of Tewkesbury became tiresome for making false claims against the genuine Earl. He was invited to open a bridge across a gorge and as he stepped out to cut the ribbon fell through a trap door," she recounted the rest in a barely controlled fit of hysterics, "and plunged to his death."

"I don't think that's funny," said Anteje.

"I do. Are there any more?"

"There was another strange one. Not sure I believe it, to be honest." The Anthologist found the entry for Rutha, Lady of Heidelberg and tapped the page. "Read that one."

"Rutha, Lady of Heidelberg, a most tiresome woman who's aristocratic demands led many to murderous thoughts. After complaining about her bed being too hard to sleep on, the mattress was replaced by one that was so thick and soft when she lay on it the first time did sink into the feathers and suffocated." Maya's laughter was infectious, but Anteje had an immunity that forced her to grab the book and take it away.

"Get that letter to my intelligence corps. Examine the handwriting and alert the town guards for outsiders smelling of hawthorn."

"And cut down the orchard." The Anthologist apologised as soon as Anteje glared at him. "Ignore that last remark."

All consternations led to a barn used by a barrel maker on the edge of the town. The cry went up when the royal vintner burst out of his shop yelling he'd been robbed. Several guards, already on alert for an assassin smelling of hawthorn, chased a figure who started running when the vintner started yelling. The pursuit was frenetic, but the thief had no chance against Anteje's town guards trained by the Warrior Scholars and swift enough to catch any sprinter, human or otherwise.

But the thief was no ordinary thief and knowing the speed of the guards opted not to run, but to hide and disappeared amongst the town's nooks and crannies. For several hours the search continued, the town's main gates locked, and a curfew imposed to give a group of Warrior Scholars led by a guard called Ambria a free hand to search anywhere they pleased. By nightfall they found the barn and in the barn they found the thief. Next to the thief they found a bottle of wine.

"Is this it?" Ambria sniffed the bottle, held the cork as close to her eye as she could without losing focus and held the glass up to a flame to check sedimentation or cloudiness.

"You can have it back, if you let me go. I haven't opened it." The thief sat against the wall of the barn brushing hay off her breeches. "It looked like a good vintage."

"Of course it's a good vintage. The vintner supplies the Queen."

"Oh. I suppose that means I'm in a lot of trouble now."

"More than you know. This isn't the best time to be caught stealing wine from the royal vintner. What's your name?"

"Olivia." She had an innocent smile and the untidiness of someone who hadn't eaten for a while.

"Where do you come from?"

"Everywhere. Nowhere. If I get arrested will there be food in the prison or is it one of those where you have to catch your own rats?"

Ambria handed the bottle to her colleague. "Get it back to the vintner. I don't know what to do with this one."

"I think we should take her in. Be on the safe side."

The thief Olivia was about to be shackled, but Ambria had doubts. "You sound Italian. Are you a deserter?"

"No."

"You look like a soldier."

"I'm not a deserter, honest."

A voice called from outside the barn. Ambria went outside where several Scholars were holding up their flaming torches and illuminating the white blossom of hawthorn trees. "That changes everything."

Olivia stood like a soldier. Confrontational, determined. She remained on her feet as the Scholars searched the barn, almost dismantled it until they found a leather bag in a void between the inner and outer layers of the roof. In the bag was a battered letter, the paper dirty, the writing faded and the postmark of Venezia. A small notebook contained observations, hand drawn town plans, the vintner's shop marked with a large 'v' and the castle's orchard outlined. A final handful of stones and crumbs of dirt in the corners of the bag concealed the remnants of a detached wax seal with a symbol containing cross keys and a scorpion.

"So far so good," said Olivia.

"You planned all this?"

"That would be telling."

"You wanted to get arrested? Why not just walk up to the castle gates?"

"You tell me."

They didn't. They couldn't. Ambria didn't play mind games, so she hauled Olivia up to the castle and left her in a cell.

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When Anteje arrived Olivia was sat cross legged on a bench, calm and composed as if she had

reached the destination she was looking for. With the cell bars between them Anteje spoke to her nemesis.

"I'd be naive to think this is not what you wanted."

"Think whatever makes you happy."

"Who sent you?"

"Discretion is part of the contract. You should know the rules."

"Is it so important? You might think events are taking their course, but unless you're a magician you can't carry out your promise in the letter."

"Don't believe everything you read."

"I don't." The cell bars were cold and damp with a light film of fungus where the damp settled in the joints. "Let's take the game up a level. You promised to kill me at 6pm on the sixth day of the sixth month in my own orchard. I'll execute you at 5pm. We'll see who raises a toast then, shall we?"

Olivia smiled and offered the palms of her hands. "My fate lies on that side of the bars. Majesty."

"So it would seem. But let's not take anything for granted. If you'll excuse me, your arrest interrupted my reading. I'll see you again in four days time?"

"It's gone midnight, Majesty," said Ambria.

"Three days then. How time flies."

They left taking their torches with them and leaving Olivia in the pitch darkness, alone with her plan. "I'd be careful, Majesty," said Ambria. "I think the Italian may have a surprise for you yet."

"I've no doubt this tale with end with a sting in it for one of us. No, I'll send our Little Venezian back to her paymaster. They may rule over seven hills, but I rule over seven mountains and all the valleys between them. No one strolls into this realm and murders me in my own orchard."

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The orchard was never designed for executing people. The lack of space meant the gallows was overhung with several apple trees and at one point the executioner suggested hanging Olivia from a branch. But branches break, said Anteje, and she wanted a 5pm execution. Not ten past. . . .

The calm on Olivia's face when the noose was hung in front of her head was either acceptance or cunning, an unrevealed element of her plan, a detail Anteje had overlooked. The Anthologist knew he didn't have Anteje's devious sense of strategy and wanted to trust her judgement, but they were both watching an assassin who was within minutes of carrying out her threat.

"Are you sure about this," he said.

Anteje accepted a glass of wine and held it under his nose. "Does it smell funny to you?"

"No."

"Does it remind you of anything?"

"No."

She headed towards the gallows. "Well it should."

Both the executioner and Olivia wore a mask and obediently waited for her final instruction. She played with the wine glass for a moment, stroked the foliage of the apple tree which bowed to her when she stepped onto the gallows and took hold of the noose.

"I'm feeling merciful today," she said. "Money can have such a disproportionate effect on events and I know how important it is to people like you. Do you hate me enough to kill me?"

"No," said Olivia. "I'm a professional."

"I thought so. I'll pay you double to go away."

The offer altered the expression on Olivia's mask and her true intentions became apparent. "My reputation would suffer if people heard I came so close to a result and then backed away when offered more money."

"Then work for me."

"I suppose my current circumstances limit the time I have to consider your offer."

"I thought people like you could think quickly."

"Yes. Double the amount today, place me on a retainer, but I remain independent should I wish to accept other offers."

The Anthologist didn't hear Maya come alongside him. She whispered, "Have you ever played chess with her?"

"No. I wouldn't want to play her at anything. What's she up to?"

Part of Maya's uniform contained an old watch. The time was one minute to five.

"The wine," said the Anthologist. Maya nodded.

Anteje agreed to Olivia's conditions and offered her the wine glass. "Let's seal the agreement with a toast." The satisfaction was short lived; Olivia hesitated to take the wine and drink.

"Something wrong? Do you want more money?"

She shook her head.

"There's nothing wrong with the wine. Would you prefer to sign the agreement in writing?"

Struck dumb by the predicament Olivia delicately took the noose between her fingers.

"You only need to take a sip and the deal is done. Don't you trust me? We can't work together if you don't trust me. One sip and you're free. If you refuse I'm sorry but the noose is the only alternative."

With a gentle chime, Maya's watch announced 5pm. Anteje turned away from the gallows and the executioner continued his task.

"I know you want to tell me. How did you know?"

"Know what?" said Anteje.

"The wine."

"The wine? What's wrong with the wine?" She drank the glass empty. The Anthologist's mouth dropped open. Maya stiffened expecting her queen to drop but she took the bottle and poured another glass full.

"Are you going to tell her?" said the Anthologist.

"You tell the stories better than me."

He preferred a less captive audience, but he approached Olivia and recounted the tale of King Stanislav, a Hungarian ruler from a long lost time.

"Hated fortune tellers. Thought they were all crooks, taking advantage of people. So he decided to catch them all out. He visited one and asked for his fortune to be told. The fortune teller went through the old routine, eye rolling, hand waving and then told the King you'll be assassinated at 6pm on the sixth day of the sixth month and the assassin will be someone you know.

"The King let him know how he felt, told him he'd be back at the allotted time and if the fortune teller was wrong he'd have him executed. In the meantime, the King had everyone he knew killed.

"On the sixth day of the sixth month the King returned to the fortune teller at ten minutes to six. Here I am, he said, full of life. Magnanimous in defeat the fortune teller offered the King a glass of wine. Taking a sip the King said I've killed everyone I know, so tell me now how can your prediction be true?"

"The fortune teller leaned forward and said, but you've overlooked one person. You know me, do you not? And at this point the King began to choke and the clock chimed 6pm."

The Anthologist turned away unable to watch what came next, but Anteje's hand was raised. Her glass full again, the offer still open to the Assassin. "It's the best offer you'll get today," Anteje said. Olivia accepted and the executioner removed the noose.

Watching her new employee being led away Anteje made sure Maya could hear the question. "How was she familiar with that particular story?"

"She must be well read."

"Or someone used it to plant the idea in her head."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything," said Anteje. "And when you ask me a question it's Majesty. What are you suggesting, Majesty?"