



## The Blacksmith and the Firebird

When expected visitors arrived at Castle Obersee Queen Anteje would make a decision on what to feed them. Those she liked were given beef, those she disliked mutton, (bad cuts of it). She thought the Anthologist was strange because he liked mutton and this made her rethink how she expressed her hospitality.

"You can't feed him dog," said Ludmilla. Anteje's closest advisor on expressions of diplomacy had a keen eye for detail and knew that if word ever got out that the latest dignitary had been given half a spaniel for his main meal there'd be repercussions.

"Mutton is enjoyed by some people." Anteje glanced down the stairwell to the landing that led to the library. "He might enjoy it."

The guest, before he sat down to eat, would also endure another ritual Anteje insisted on. Announcing visitors by their full name. She believed pretentiousness lay in every name and the longer the name the bigger the 'cack,' as she once said. And there was a real cack on his way: Duke Harald George Jan-Heinrich von Schueller-Thiessen Borenheim Volker.

Having two hyphens in his name drove Anteje to the bowels of the food store hoping to find the most rancid stray canine in the salt barrels. "Who enjoys mutton?" said Ludmilla holding her nose.

"He does. Our learned friend."

"The librarian?"

"Yes." She held her breath and dragged the lid off a barrel. "Loves it. Simple food for simple folk, he says. And . . . dips his bread in the broth."

The Anthologist was there when Volker blew into the dining hall like a gigantic flower head. "This the latest cack?" he said to Guinevere.

"Mm." Guinevere's ceremonial armour shone like a small star and was too bright to look at directly. Eleven other Warrior Scholars lined the corridor leading to the dining hall and when Volker was in and the doors closed the sound of glistening armour could be heard running away. The Scholars heading back to their baths and backgammon, anything but the boredom of standing upright to be leered at by a man with seahorse embellishments on his shoulders.

During the meal he leaned across his plate towards Anteje and said, "I heard the Empress Helene serves her guests rats if she doesn't like them."

"That's just impertinent," said Anteje.

"It's comforting to know you are not prone to such petty cynicism."

With her mouth full, Anteje said, "No."

"What are we eating?"

Her mouth remained full (even though she had just swallowed). "A local speciality. I have a team of people who go out everyday to find this. It's a, how would you describe it?" she said to the Anthologist.

"Well, some say it originated in the far east. Korea, I believe. Gaegogi they call it over there."

"Heavens." Volker stuffed his face. "Quite an honour."

"It's not to everyone's liking," said the Anthologist. "More of a mutton man, myself."

"That's not what I've heard," said Anteje and suppressed a grin with another mouthful of cow.

The dinner guests survived their dead cows, sheep and dogs and the ones that mattered

retired to a drawing room that overlooked the lake. With the sun setting Guinevere's armour took on the character of security instead of ceremony and with Ludmilla prowling around the room Anteje adopted the upper hand in the negotiations.

Beyond the enclosing mountains, Volker's land began and stretched west along the Koenigsee. Such was the width of the lake merchants could easily bypass his monitors and tax men and move about without being officially robbed. Volker wanted to put a stop to it.

He pointed at a large hand drawn map of the area. "There is the pinch point. No more than a hundred metres or so. Merchants passing through there would be easy to stop."

"Easy to tax," said Anteje.

"Please, Majesty. This isn't just about money. I'm not in the business of extortion. It's a security issue primarily."

"Are you suggesting my people are threatening you?"

"No, no, no. I'm referring to those travelling a long way. They come through your realm and then enter mine. I want to be sure they are who they say they are. And any other business can be dealt with at the same time."

The straps on Ludmilla's armour groaned when she peered over Volker's shoulders. He tried to ignore her.

"A simple checkpoint at the pinch point, manned by your good ladies. And an added benefit, they can monitor people entering your realm from mine. Everyone's a winner."

Ludmilla placed the point of her dagger on the map. "We already have a security point here."

"Could you move it?"

"No." She let the dagger swing between her fingers.

Volker sat back in his chair. "Well, I suppose I'll just have to let them all through. When my people become restless and start to threaten the stability of the area what do I tell them?"

"I don't know," said Anteje.

"Well, do I tell them these people are getting in because Queen Anteje refuses to help me keep them out."

"What people?"

"The revolutionaries, the predators, insurgents and agitators."

"You make it sound like the region is overrun with them. It's quite stable where we are." She looked to Ludmilla for confirmation.

"Let's be honest," said Ludmilla, "this is a tax collecting initiative. And you're perfectly entitled to tax merchants entering your land as you see fit. It's not for us to determine your fiscal policy. But a second checkpoint is beyond our resources. We have other commitments and priorities."

"Such as?" Volker raised his voice.

"None of your business," said Anteje.

Volker's agitation lifted him out of his chair and he stopped and started as if his Gaegogi was coming up again. "Queen Anteje," he held his arms out, "it's not just about tax or security, but consolidation. I came here. . . ."

Ludmilla's eyes widened when she saw Anteje's roll.

"I came here to ask for your hand in marriage. There, I've said it."

Fortunately for Anteje she was about to sip a glass of wine which gave her an opportunity to choke, a pretend choke obviously. She spluttered and heaved and allowed the coughing fit to last until she knew she could control the laughing behind it all. "My lord, what a surprise. Decisions like this can't be made in a moment." She cleared her throat and wiped her eyes dry. Ludmilla had vanished, retreated to the patio outside where she and Guinevere wrestled each other in a fit of hysterics.

"You will consider my proposal," said Volker, handkerchief in his left hand, sincerity in his right.

"Of course. Goodness, I think my lungs have collapsed."

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The night air was always the sweetest when life felt good. The Anthologist tried not to let Volker's bouncing footsteps influence his own, but outside the castle he directed the bouncing Duke to the stables where his horses waited to take him home.

"You like travelling at night?" said the Anthologist. "I thought you said the place was overrun with killers."

"A ruse, my friend, a ruse. I'll confide in you, I am a terrible opportunist. Of course I need to obtain taxes as much as possible, but you're a man, my friend, don't you agree the Queen is the most magnificent woman to ever walk God's earth?"

"She's-"

"Go on, admit it. Haven't you ever wanted to enter her royal bedchamber?"

"Where I come from, that's called a euphemism."

"A what? Oh." Volker roared and slapped the Anthologist's back. "You mean her-"

"Yes. Yes. Stop!" He held up his hand. Volker froze. The castle surroundings were in perfect harmony with the stillness of the moonlight and its gentle glow across the lake and the valley. With no natural sound to disturb the peace the Anthologist and Volker listened to the distant song of a woman's voice.

It floated across the water like gossamer, a perfect tone as serene as any breeze on young leaves. "That's what you need," said the Anthologist softly. "A siren."

"A siren?"

"To lure the merchant's boats onto the rocks. If they avoid your checkpoints draw them in with the alluring song of a siren."

They continued to listen, the haunting sound occasionally disturbed by a horse hoof on stone or a blustery snort of impatience. Volker was enchanted. "You have a point. A very good point. I must find the source of this beauty. I must meet this siren."

"What about the Queen? I thought you wanted to get into her royal bedchamber?"

"Time and place for everything, my friend." He headed for the horses. "I want to meet this siren."

Should he succeed there'd be chaos, knowing what he knew, the true source of the sound, the Anthologist followed Volker to the stables. "I can help you, but prepare yourself for a shock."

"Keep talking." An aide helped Volker into his saddle.

"Hang on, I need-"

"Keep talking." He trotted out of the stables.

"I need to go with him."

The Duke's aide helped him into the saddle of a second horse and he caught up with Volker passing through the castle gates. "You're going the wrong way."

"I'm heading in the direction of the siren."

"No, wait. The siren . . . the siren is actually the Firebird."

"The what?"

"The Firebird. It's a local legend. The Firebird lives in a ball of fire on the lake. The sound you can hear is its birdsong."

"Nonsense. I recognise a woman's voice when I hear one. And besides, where's the ball of fire."

Good question. "It needs time to intensify and then it ignites."

"What are you trying to hide?"

"Nothing."

Volker continued, always several horses' lengths ahead and when the path solidified he cantered away to follow the edge of the lake until he was on the other side from the castle, the Anthologist struggling to keep up. They came across a light in the forest and a small house with outbuildings. The outbuildings were the source of a blacksmith's hammering and the voice of the siren.

"She's here." Volker pulled up and jumped down off his horse.

"She isn't. You've got it all wrong." The Anthologist wished he could dismount with such grace, but he always slid off a horse like a loose sack of turnips. "The sound, it's an illusion."

"An illusion, a firebird, a siren, make your mind up."

Sneaking up to the outbuildings, they followed the heat and the sound of the anvil and found the Blacksmith at work. Sweating and breathing heavily he would occasionally pick up a large blackened rope and heave an enormous mobile furnace towards him. Several shovels of coal later he would use a thick length of timber to lever the furnace back into position and continue his hammering.

"Where's your siren?" said the Anthologist.

Volker said nothing and slipped away towards the house. He stood next to a window when the sound of the siren began again and through the glass a young woman paced around the room reading.

"There she is," said Volker, "there's your siren. Firebird my foot. Look at her. Look at her."

His infatuation made him clumsy. He tripped over a large plant pot alerting the young woman who opened the window to investigate. "Who are you?"

"My apologies. My deepest apologies, my lady. I am Duke Harald George Jan-Heinrich von Schueller-Thiessen Borenheim Volker."

"Are you? Couldn't your parents decide on a single name?" She leaned on the window sill, her round face framed and the closed book still in her hand.

"You have wit, my lady. An excellent quality. And your voice is enchanting."

"My voice?"

The Anthologist watched in fascination as Romeo and Juliet played out in front of him.

"The sweet song of the siren, my lady. It can be heard from Castle Obersee."

"It's a very still night," said the Anthologist. "Everyone's voice is carrying for kilometres."

"And who are you?"

Volker intervened and stood between the young woman and, "Some fellow following me about. I would like to invite you back to my own castle on the shore of the Koenigsee and entertain me more with your bewitching song."

She held her head at the angle people adopt when they're fighting disbelief. Her mouth ajar, not quite gaping open, but one more lovestruck exultation would do it. The Anthologist nudged Volker in the back. "Propose to her."

"Patience, good fellow. The night is young," he said to the woman.

"How big is this castle?" The Blacksmith, his arrival masked by Volker's lust and the Anthologist's disbelief, stood rubbing his hands with a rag. "You should take him up on his offer, Kora. Men like this are never at home. You'd have the run of the place."

"True," Kora nodded. "Well, how big is it?"

"Enormous," Volker said. "One hundred and seventy-five rooms, a great hall as big as most people's palaces, fourteen towers, battlements several hundred metres in length, walls as high as the mountains."

"But no library," said the Anthologist.

"I'm not a man of learning," said Volker. "He held Kora's hand. "But for you I will build one. The greatest in the land. Please say yes."

"What do you think, father?"

"I could move the business over there. Expand. Buy a new bellows."

"You could have a hundred new bellows," said Volker. "I will make arrangements. You can join me tomorrow."

On the way back to the castle, the Anthologist couldn't wait to tell Anteje she'd been dumped for the daughter of an opportunistic blacksmith.

"Good luck to her," said Anteje at her morning archery practice the following day. "Keeps him off my back for the foreseeable future." She released the bow and fired the arrow to the bull's eye.

Anteje's tutor fussed over the way she held out her arm. Hilde had a reputation for firing arrows from horseback as if she and the horse were a single being. Her skill and attention to detail made Anteje the archer she was, but the queen had little time for Hilde's persistent corrections no matter how good she was. "The man's a nut. He speaks Alemmanic which is never a good thing, and I'll be damned if I share anything with him. I wouldn't share a church organ with a man like that."

She aimed again. "Concentrate, Majesty," said Hilde.

"I'm concentrating, Hilde. I'm concentrating. How did he come to meet this blacksmith's daughter? They live on the other side of the lake."

"He thought she was a siren."

"A siren?" Anteje's arm was readjusted again.

"We heard a voice last night, like a woman's voice, but it was the blacksmith's bellows. The air escaping from a torn seam in the leather. I have to admit it was an eery sound, but the Duke heard it. I told him he should forget you and get himself a siren and off he went."

She breathed in. "So, I've got you to thank." And fired. The arrow brushed against the first.

"Who are you picturing when you fire those arrows?" said the Anthologist.

"No one you know," she said. "Although, I have to admit, your explanation for the dog was genius. You have your uses after all."

"Nice to be of service, boss."

"Go away."

He left her to her deadly practice and considered Volker's observations. She was a great woman, but her beauty was her personality, the mischief alongside the authority, the reserve behind the robust facade, the underlying honesty and sense of justice that set her aside from her peers in the region. He could love her for all those qualities.

What he couldn't deal with was Guinevere's near telepathic ability to read his demeanour. "You like her, don't you?" she said when he found her in the library.

"Who?"

"Who! I watched you walk away on the archery field. Looking back over your shoulder. Go on, admit it."

"You're a spy, Guinevere. I'm not an idiot. You don't admit things in front of spies."

Warm weather necessitated the opening of windows and the Anthologist and Guinevere heard the commotion at the castle gates. The Blacksmith was trying to get in. He shouted some distressed message about his daughter and took several minutes to calm down when he was allowed in to the castle.

Anteje cross-examined him. "Start at the the beginning. The Duke invited your daughter back to his castle and then locked her in a room?"

"Yes." The Blacksmith gulped down his brandy. "He's obsessed. Obsessed with the siren."

"And wherever did he get a stupid idea like that?"

"Goodness knows. He locked Kora in a bedroom and ordered her to sing. If she sung for him he'd feed her, keep her alive. If she refused, he'd wall up the door to the bedroom and starve her to death."

"And then what?"

"She's a stubborn girl. Kept her mouth shut. And he's a man of his word. He's walled her up. What can I do?"

"You can do nothing. Coming here puts the burden on us. You should never have taken up his offer. What were you thinking?"

"I didn't know he was that kind of man, Majesty. He seemed to have Kora's intentions at heart."

"Are we talking about the same person?"

The Anthologist said, "He eats dogs."

"Shut up. What are we to do? Any suggestions, librarian?"

"Oh great. Put the onus on me."

"You introduced them."

"I did not. He cantered off on his own. I tried to keep him away. That's why I told him about the Firebird."

"The what?" There was no space between Anteje's eyes and her eyebrows when she was angry.

"The what?" said the Blacksmith.

"The Firebird." The Anthologist's hand free wheeled around his waist. "I said that sound, the one coming from your knackered bellows, was the bird song of the Firebird. I said it to stop him riding off towards your house."

"He obviously didn't listen to you."

"No one ever does. Majesty."

She never backed down. "Well you caused this mess, you can find the solution."

"I caused it? I did nothing of the sort."

Guinevere intervened. "Majesty, can we focus on the problem and not who caused it?"

"Yes." Anteje pulled on her gauntlets. "I'll visit the Duke. You can sort something out at this end."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she exploded. "You're the one with the brain the size of a planet, think of something."

He could only think once she was gone.

Guinevere bobbed up and down on her heels and toes, hands behind her back, lips pursed.

"Someone's not very pleased with you. I wonder why."

"Where's the Blacksmith? We need the Blacksmith."

Guinevere followed him. "Why?"

"To find the Firebird." On the way out he turned back and bumped into Guinevere. "Follow the Queen. Take a book to her. It might help."

In the library he searched the shelves for a book on Scottish history and a particular title about Glamis Castle. Deep in the text, half way through, he found the episode relating to a search for the hidden monster of Glamis. "There," he bookmarked the page. "Get that book to her, tell her to read that chapter."

The Blacksmith roamed the grand avenue in the castle gardens and grabbed the Anthologist's arm when they met. "Have you found her?"

"We haven't started yet. Give us a chance. We need to get back to your forge. The Queen has gone to the Duke's castle to find Kora. We need to bring the Duke back to us. In your forge, that furnace. How heavy is it?"

"Very heavy. It would take the two of us to lift it."

"Two's enough."

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When Volker heard of Anteje's arrival he was playing croquet and still had the mallet in his hand when he welcomed her. "Excuse my, er, equipment. I wasn't expecting you."

"Fine weather for a game. I don't blame you."

"Do you play?"

"No."

"No. Frivolous game." He handed the mallet to his aide. "Would you care to come inside?"

She came straight to the point. Once he was sat down in a chair that would contain his weight should any unexpected news drop him to the floor. "I wish to accept your proposal."

"What? You accept. Queen Anteje, I'm. Queen Anteje. . . ."

"Please. None of this queen rubbish. Majesty will do."

"Majesty. I am, I don't know what I am."

"Understandable. Now you know how I felt when you proposed. But I gave it a lot of thought after you had gone. These are difficult times and it doesn't do to be complacent. Just

remember you would be my consort. I don't plan on making you king or anything."

"Of course, Majesty. Fully understand. Quite understandable, Majesty."

"Good." She huffed. "Feel free to celebrate if you like. Don't let me stop you."

"No." He clapped his hands and several aides scurried into the room. "Drinks. Let the wine flow and all that. Food as well. I bet you're hungry after travelling here, Majesty."

"I'm fine. Just a glass of water."

"Water? Right. Come on, chop chop. A glass of water for her majesty. She is to become your queen."

The aides bowed and smiled and bowed again and never spilled a drop as they poured glass after glass for Volker, and so much spirit went down his throat he was fast asleep within an hour. Only after he was unconscious and quiet did the rattling against the window become apparent. Outside, Guinevere was lobbing handfuls of gravel at the glass.

"What do you want?"

"Let me in. I've got something for you."

Anteje wasn't expecting a book when she met Guinevere in the hall at the foot of a great staircase. "The Anthologist said you'd find it useful. He's bookmarked one of the chapters."

She skimmed the pages and bewilderment gave way to understanding. "He's not as stupid as he looks," she shook her head and smiled. "We need to gather pendants, rags, towels, anything we can hang in the windows." They raced up the staircase and found an open bedroom with a wardrobe and drawers. Ransacking the place for fabrics and cloth they continued to all the rooms on the lake side of the castle. "He wanted Kora to act as his siren so she must be in one of the rooms on the same side as the water. Hang up all this stuff and then go outside. There'll be one window we've missed."

The task took an age to carry out and by the time they were by the lake the sun was almost beyond the mountain tops. The high walls were not high enough and each window displayed its signal except one.

"There," said Guinevere. "It must be the third floor on the corner of the wing."

A vertical line of narrow windows, each with a tell-tale bit of cloth, revealed the narrow flight of steps where the south wing met the west tower. They went back inside, raced from floor to floor, wing to wing, and found a corridor where the plasterwork turned a funny colour. The wall was hollow and surrendered to a relentless assault by sword. Anteje and Guinevere smashed through to the door and forced it open.

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Volker woke from his drunken state when several escaping horses alerted his aides. They came rushing, shook him violently and helped him to saddle up and give chase. He assumed he would catch them; one rider pursuing three, but he was in pursuit of Warrior Scholars who rode as if friction didn't exist.

They were out of sight by the time the Obersee came into view, its vast expanse stretching away to sheer mountain faces hovering above the near permanent mist that settled across the lake when nightfall approached. Volker could continue all the way to Anteje's castle, but a bright light on the lake stopped him.

Between mist and water a ball of light drifted across his view, distant and ghostly, its gentle progress accompanied by the beautiful sound of the siren. The fire burned with astonishing intensity as if the sound fed it the oxygen it needed to maintain its deep orange radiance.

Volker couldn't stop himself. He blundered into the water and along the edge of the lake, watching the Firebird whilst pushing aside the reeds and sedges. A small rowing boat lay half in half out of the water and grabbing the oars, Volker pushed off and rowed out to the Firebird.

The sound increased, the same sound he had heard at the Blacksmith's house, but as the Firebird grew ever closer the vision changed. The bird was not a bird, but a boat, the fire a furnace carried along by it, and the boat rowed by the Anthologist. Next to the fire, the Blacksmith pumped

the bellows, feeding the flames and both men startled when Volker surged on, propelled now by fury at having lost his siren and seen his Firebird turn into a mobile blacksmith's furnace.

He rammed the boat knocking the Blacksmith off his seat. The Anthologist struggled with Volker who scrambled himself into the pitching boat before grabbing the Blacksmith by the neck. In the fight, the Anthologist managed to pull himself from one boat to the other then leaned back to rescue the Blacksmith trying to hang on to his bellows.

"Let it go."

"Not yet," the Blacksmith had a hand around his throat.

"Any time would be a good time," said the Anthologist before tugging at a handful of blacksmith's apron and his belt. He pulled, the boats lurched, Volker was pitched into the Blacksmith's boat where he came face to face with the furnace and an abandoned bellows.

The boats drifted apart. Volker held up the bellows and shook it. "If I can't hear it no one will."

"You have to keep pumping," said the Blacksmith.

Volker floated farther away. "I won't. I'll keep this and the song will stay with me. Your furnace will die with the song."

"He doesn't mean that," said the Anthologist. "The bellows isn't feeding the furnace, it's pumping water out of the boat. You have to keep pumping."

He was about to explain the dynamics of a heavy iron furnace inside a leaking boat, but as soon as Volker stopped pumping, the boat and the bellows sank like a rock, sent down by the enormous density of the iron furnace. The Duke descended, taking a peculiar light with him as the fire died in the depths of the lake and when he was gone his location was marked by the resurfacing of the bellows.

"We can get you another furnace," said the Anthologist. He rowed over to the bellows and the Blacksmith held it close to his body as they returned to the shore and Castle Obersee. They were met by a landing party. Kora hugged her father and squeezed a siren-like breath of air out of his precious bellows.

"Is that it?" said Anteje. "Is that sound the siren?"

"Yes," said the Anthologist relieved to see his queen again.

Anteje headed back to the castle with Guinevere and whispered, "Sounds nothing like a woman's voice. Does it sound like a woman's voice to you?"

"No."

"No. It just sounds like a, like a. . . ."

"Like a bellows?"

"Like a bellows, yes."