



Hand to Mouth

The most advanced technology available to Queen Anteje and every other ruler in the known world was probably a lock and key. Some of the printing presses were quite complex and builders insisted their buildings were machines with moving parts, but neither Anteje nor the Anthologist had ever seen a moving part other than doors, windows and rooves blowing off.

All this explains why the Anthologist's wife was often spoke about as a sorcerer, an alchemist, a magician, a witch. People didn't understand her machinery. Pods that appeared and disappeared, she was rumoured to live in a ship that floated not on water but above the clouds. She possessed devices that were powered by a force she called Electrics; the flow and movement of dust so small the human eye needed a viewing contraption called an Electronmicroglass.

It was all too much and most people, like Anteje, found it easier to attribute Lineus's wonders to magic rather than science. She was in no rush to share her secrets, but happy to help when requested and she had been requested.

"Communication is a problem." Anteje stood at the edge of a large field waiting for a small dot to increase in size and land on her arm. The falcon's leg carried a small roll of paper inside a tiny metal tube. "As much as I love these birds they're not the most reliable way of getting a message over the mountains. But your, what did you call it?"

"A fone."

"Your afone-"

"No. Sorry. Fone, just fone."

"Your fone would be an immeasurable improvement."

"And it would put you at a strategic advantage." Lineus had several fones, different sizes and colours, slender rectangles no thicker than a small prayer book. "I heard about the assassination attempt."

"Did you? Did you hear who was behind it?"

"No."

"Well if you ever do, let me know."

"It wasn't my husband. He would never do a thing like that. He respects you."

People who knew her mistrusted Lineus's science, not Lineus herself and Anteje, normally adept at recognising a lie, had to concede she had a look of innocence in her eyes. She was tall enough to be a soldier, with blonde hair like a Valkyrie and a proud stance that reflected her Prussian ancestry and self-discipline. But the way she came and went like a ghost was unnerving.

"Well, that's another story," said Anteje. "Show me how this fone works."

Around the field Anteje had six Warrior Scholars, one of them holding a white dish like a large ceramic platter. On a distant mountain ridge another Scholar with another dish and out of sight in the next valley Guinevere waited for a very special message.

Lineus prodded the numbers on the glass screen of the fone. Anteje gazed at the sky and waited for Guinevere's voice. "Hello."

"Hello, Guinevere? I have your Queen here with a message." She handed the fone to Anteje.

"All I do is speak?"

"Yes."

With doubt and hesitation she held the fone to her face. Lineus moved it to her ear. "Hello."

"Hello. Majesty, what is this magic? How does it work?"

"God knows. More importantly it works, whether by magic or science or the passing wind. It

works."

"Your voice is so clear. Are you sure this isn't a trick?"

"How can it be? If this is a trick it requires a cleverer trick to work." She asked Lineus, "What was that other thing called? A disc recorder? Anyway," back to Guinevere, "enough of that. We need to build a network of these dishes so that they can . . . do whatever they do. Lineus can explain better than me. How do I stop it?" she said.

"Press that key there."

Anteje pressed a red key.

"Usually helps to say goodbye before you press the red key."

"Oh, sorry. Goodbye Guinevere. I suppose it's too late now, isn't it."

"Yes." Lineus checked the conversation had ended. She was watched by Anteje's chief of communication, Bergmann. A reliable but creeping man who moved as slowly as one of his messages. In constant dread of making a mistake he would creep in and out of rooms, creep across fields and through forests and often startled people when he appeared without any apparent entrance.

"You sent for me, Majesty." He said wringing his hands.

"Yes. You need to familiarise yourself with this fone system and how it works."

"Yes, Majesty."

"You don't need to understand the science or what's inside a fone or what's up in the air doing whatever goes on up there."

"Yes, Majesty."

"You need to help develop a system of communications across the realm, coordinate the construction of towers and so on. Lineus will guide you."

"Yes, Majesty. Who is this Lineus? How will I recognise her?"

"She's a very tall woman with a long blonde ponytail, blue eyes that match her clothing, which are a sort of shiny one piece material that I can't describe."

He did a double take when Lineus smiled and shook his hand. "I shall look out for her, Majesty," he said and crept away.

"You see what I have to deal with," Anteje sighed. "He came with the castle."

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There were times when Bergmann shifted up from a creep to a scuttle and seeing the Queen and the Alchemist dabbling in black magic with a slice of some strange unidentifiable material propelled him to the town and the spot where the Town Crier stood. On a quiet news day he leaned against the wall of the pipe shop and didn't move when Bergmann raised his hand.

"We're surrounded by sorcery," he said. "Have you seen the latest development?"

"I haven't seen anything. I've been here all morning."

"The Alchemist has some magical device that allows her to speak to anyone in the world."

"How does that work?"

"I don't know. She holds it in her hand, places it next to her head, next to her ear, and speaks into it. Someone with another device can hear her voice and speak back to her."

In his time as town crier, the Town Crier had been asked to announce some extraordinary events including the birth of a fully clothed baby, but he still cocked his head in disbelief. "They play tricks on you, you know."

"This was no trick. I saw her."

"You see a lot of things. It's your job to pass on the information given to you and sometimes they give you disinformation. It's a common political ploy. Disinformation."

Bergmann didn't like being lectured to by a man whose job it was to pass on the information given to him. Usually given to him by Bergmann. He could see the Town Crier wasn't too interested and the wall of the pipe shop had become a very comfortable spot, so he left him to it.

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But the wall of the pipe shop wasn't as comfortable as it first appeared. As soon as Bergmann was out of sight the Town Crier was off. He kept his bell stuffed in an inside pocket of his vivid crimson coat. He believed the silence would allow him to move through the town unnoticed.

He made a final check he hadn't been followed and disappeared into the shadowy door frame of the Pamphleteer. "Are you busy?" His voice grappled with the rickety racket of a printing press.

A strangled whisper shot back. "Who wants to know?"

"Me. I've heard something odd you might be interested in. Something that might affect your line of business."

Without easy access to a mirror the Pamphleteer was constantly unaware of the ink stains across his face. He was covered in ink, couldn't lean on anything without leaving a hand mark or a fingerprint. It was one of the reasons he never left his lightless workshop. Those who knew him often threatened to roll him across a sheet of paper to see what it would say.

"What have you heard?"

"I'm only the messenger and don't ask me about my source, but the Queen is liaising with the Alchemist."

"The Alchemist?" The Pamphleteer licked his lower lip.

"Not like that. A scientific relationship. Strange science."

"Go on."

"The Alchemist has developed a way of talking to anyone in the world simply by talking into her hand and then holding it up against her ear."

The din of the printing press forced the Pamphleteer into a smaller darker side room. "Are you sure? How's she managed that?"

"I don't know. I'm only telling you what I've heard, but if everyone starts talking into their hands, well, there'll be no need for pamphlets, no need for all this secrecy."

"Secrecy." He ushered the Town Crier back to the entrance and the quiet street outside. "I'll give you secrecy. My biggest client is the Queen herself. She won't let me go out of business."

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His biggest client may well have been the person most of his pamphlets conspired against, but if she had a new means of spreading rumours and propaganda she'd use it. And that worried the Pamphleteer, who rubbed himself down with an inky rag, pulled on an ink saturated overcoat and hurried away to find the Postman.

Few things in life were as certain as finding the Postman at home after ten in the morning. If anyone's letters hadn't been delivered by then, tough luck. He had a monopoly and he knew it, abused it, worked it to his advantage and used the vast amount of spare time cooking, brewing, breeding fish and playing the organ.

Knocking on his door was useless, but tapping his kitchen window would bring him out into the daylight.

"I wouldn't like to be in your shoes," said the Pamphleteer avoiding the surfaces of the Postman's house.

"Why, what's wrong with them?"

"You might be needing a new vocation."

"Do you use water-based inks?"

"Yes. Why?"

He didn't answer, but armed himself with a wet teacloth ready for the Pamphleteer to leave a record of his visit.

"Let me mention two words. Queen and Alchemist."

"That's three words." The smells of honey and spices hung in the air, eavesdropping and mixing with the scent of jasmine and honeysuckle on the climbers around the Postman's kitchen

door.

"Three words, two words, what difference does it make? The Queen and the Alchemist have between them developed a new form of communication."

"Oh."

"Instant communication."

"Instant? What do you mean instant?" He wiped his forehead with the wet teacloth.

"She has a talking hand. The Queen. If she wants to speak to someone in the next valley she has a talking hand."

"Are you sure your inks are water-based? I've smelt some of the fumes that float around printing workshops."

"I'm not intoxicated. I've been told by a reliable source. This affects us all. No more printing, no more letters, no more public announcements. If everyone has one of these hands who knows where they'll lead."

A black smear of ink ran down the pristine birch wood of the door frame, but the Postman gripped his wet teacloth as if he was preparing to strangle somebody with it. "Well. It's the end. People said she was a harbinger."

"Who?"

"That Alchemist woman. Flying around like a demon. It's only a matter time before she starts flying over us dropping things on the town, you'll see." He rubbed his face with the teacloth and stepped across his threshold. "You'll have to excuse me. My goulash is burning." He closed the door in the Pamphleteer's face. The sudden reflection of his ink stained features startled him.

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The day after his wife's demonstration of the fone, a gadget she didn't trust him with, the Anthologist stopped by the butcher's shop to buy ribs for a recipe he had received from the Postman several weeks earlier.

The butcher shook his head. "Not at the moment, I'm sorry. If you want ribs you'll have to buy a whole rack and cut them yourself."

"That's okay. How big is a rack?"

The butcher nodded at the window behind the Anthologist where half a pig's chest cavity filled the display. "That hasn't come off one pig?"

"Where do you think it's come from? A horse?"

"Sorry. I didn't think they were that big. Why can't you cut the ribs yourself? Have you had your cleaver stolen?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. How did you know?"

The butcher's assistant turned away from a tub of tripe. "Last night. Someone broke in, stole a cleaver. Nothing else, just a cleaver."

"Well it wasn't me. If I stole your cleaver I wouldn't come back the day after to buy something to cleave with it, would I?"

"You've just admitted you couldn't carry a whole rack of ribs."

"I'll have some steak. And I'll let the Queen know you've been burgled."

"She won't do anything." The butcher stopped himself and weighed the steak, the scales bobbing up and down when he couldn't decide on the right weights to use. To spare himself the risk of uttering another treasonous statement he muttered to the steak, but couldn't contain his anger and his voice grew in volume until he was shouting at his own hands. "Build a house, build a whole town and stick them all in it. Then burn it down. Rebuild it and burn it down again. Burning's too good for them if you ask me. They should chop them up and then burn them all down. Chop them up like a sprig of spices because that's all I'll be left to sell if this thieving carries on. They'll pinch anything, pinch it all until there's only rubble left and then what will that lot up there do, all those women trying to put it all back together again, it'll be too late then."

"It was only a meat cleaver. Haven't you got a spare?"

"A spare? I shouldn't need to have a spare of anything."

The Anthologist paid and left the shop before he had his steak forced down his throat. He kept his head lowered and pulled up his hood, but a local lady still recognised him.

"Hello. Sorry to stop you in the street."

Frau Griss was a wealthy learned woman and although she lived in a nearby village had a supernatural ability to bump into the Anthologist whenever she came to town. She had sparkly brown eyes which projected a lot of personality, but struggled to see anything smaller than a coin. For this reason she employed a man to read her letters and the occasional book.

"Is it true your wife has a talking hand. My letter reader Herr Romer thinks it will put him out of business if such a thing becomes common. I hope you don't think I'm being impertinent, but if I had one of those hands could it read my letters for me?"

There were several elements to what she had said and the Anthologist paused a moment to prioritise them. "She, my wife, she . . . a talking hand? Even if she did have a talking hand how could it read a letter? It hasn't got any eyes."

"Of course, yes."

"Tell your letter reader he's worrying for nothing. There is no talking hand. Who told him my wife has a talking hand?"

"I don't know. He arrived this morning to read a letter from my son, and he was quite nervous about all this. But as you say, a hand has no eyes." She laughed and patted the Anthologist's arm. "How could it read a letter?"

They parted without the need for the Anthologist to point out that a hand didn't have a mouth either, so couldn't possibly talk. But townfolk being townfolk and having no decent war to read about would fill the time and the vacuum with all sorts of nonsense. Nonsense that was beginning to breed.

"Excuse me." This time he was interrupted by a French business man who was somehow aware of the Anthologist working at the castle. He was also aware of Lineus's peculiar inventions. "My name is Trenteneot, I employ a translator who is becoming quite alarmed at a talking hand your wife possesses."

"Really."

"Is it true?"

"That your translator is alarmed or that my wife has a talking hand? How do you know I have a wife?"

"You are the librarian who tried to assassinate the Queen, yes?"

"No, I didn't try to assassinate the Queen. If anything I helped to thwart the attack. Would your translator murder you, the man who pays his wages."

"No."

"No. Exactly."

"Unless he wanted to steal everything I own, including my business contacts, title deeds, certificates-"

"Yes, yes. Look, my wife does not have a talking hand, and even if she did how would it translate a foreign text or foreign conversation. It can't speak multiple languages."

The penny dropped. Of course. How would a hand learn a foreign language. The whole preposterous rumour was a joke. "I can tell my translator he has nothing to fear then."

"Yes."

From the way Trenteneot continued down the street, he was clearly a relieved man, unlike the Anthologist who had been left with a head full of questions. Anteje didn't need a fone, all she needed was to spread a rumour and word of mouth would have the message sent to the farthest corners of the realm within minutes.

And all this background noise about him being part of an assassination plot could lead him to the gallows if he wasn't careful. One stolen cleaver and he was being linked to every crime in the town. A stolen cleaver. A talking hand. He gazed up at the looming battlements and confronted the suspicion that was gathering around him.

He tried not to share his concerns later that evening when he was joined at his writing desk by Lineus. She coiled around him and released her blonde hair across his shoulders, the ends brushing the paper he was writing on. She rested her chin on his shoulder and read his messages which were about nothing in particular.

"Why are you writing to them?"

"Frau Griss will have her letter read to her and Trenteneot will have his translator translate for him. I want to know what they're up to. The reader and the translator."

"How will you know they've got the letters?"

"I'll specify an exact delivery time. Then I'll be there waiting when the letters arrive."

Lineus grinned. "And the chances of the town postman delivering them on time are as remote as you going twenty-fours without losing something. You could be waiting for months."

"Perhaps." He took hold of her hands and kissed her long fingers, stroked the diamond in her wedding ring and rubbed the tip of her nose. "Trust me."

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Lineus didn't use her fone to tell Anteje the news was out. What should have been a secret development was the talk of the town. It wouldn't take long for news to reach other towns, other realms, enemies and adversaries all clamouring to obtain a fone of their own.

"That's not all that's happening," Anteje said. "The butcher was burgled and people think your husband stole a meat cleaver."

"My husband."

"Yes. He seems to be connected to all sorts of criminal behaviour these days. Is he incapable of staying away from trouble?"

"He's part of your court. People will always look for weak links, back doors, any way of striking at you. I can guarantee his loyalty."

"I'm sure you can. But for now I'd like to find out if there's a link between the theft of this cleaver and your fone contraption."

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At 11 am the letter to Trenteneot arrived. Lurking in a bush, the Anthologist watched the Postman virtually run to the front door to meet his delivery schedule. Trenteneot bowed to the Postman when he accepted the letter, opened it on his doorstep and read it himself.

The Postman left and the Anthologist skulked around Trenteneot's house looking for the room where he conducted his business. His bureau was in a small study next to the kitchen and a second man took the letter and read it. The translator.

"I had a word with a gentleman yesterday. I prefer not to say who because of treasonous connections, but he assured me your job is safe."

"How so?"

"This talking hand you mentioned."

The translator sat down.

"How do you think it learns a foreign language? How does it read a text without eyes, how does it listen to a conversation without ears?"

The questions had no logical answers and the translator conceded the stupidity of the rumour. "I suppose you're right, yes." He put his spectacles on and prepared to read the letter.

"By the way," said Trenteneot, "another gentleman who visited the house yesterday happened to value a number of my belongings. Do you know he said they were all worthless."

"Oh, Jesus," said the Anthologist. He left his hiding place and headed off to the village where Frau Griss lived, hoping nothing would stop him arriving later than the Postman.

It was a close call.

Frau Griss took the letter inside. The Anthologist relocated to the window of a sitting room

and listened in on the conversation.

She reassured the letter reader his job was safe, she appreciated his work and welcomed his company. Tempted to peek through the window to see how appreciative she was, the Anthologist held his ground. She repeated what he had told her about hands and eyes.

"I hadn't thought about it myself, but then it is obvious, isn't it?"

"The librarian told you this?" The letter reader had his doubts. "He could be an assassin. Can he be trusted?"

"Oh, come on," said Frau Griss, "assassin or not, a hand doesn't have eyes. How can it read a letter?"

"Yes, your right. Of course you're right." He clicked his fingers. "In fact, a hand doesn't have a mouth. How can it even speak at all?"

Thank God someone got it. The Anthologist, satisfied his work was done, headed back to the castle. The day was pleasant, in spite of the threat of storms blowing up out of nothing, and as he strolled along a path that stepped in and out of the rocks of a tumbling stream he began to think about the stolen cleaver, the accusations, the loose tongues and gossips and how one thing was connected to another.

Except in some cases the opposite applied. A stolen cleaver. A talking hand. The cleaver designed to chop through bone, the kind of bone that might attach a hand to a wrist. His wife's hand.

He ran towards the castle and met the Postman running away, the battlements throwing out a pursuing shadow. They both stopped, calculated the next move, a shimmy, a side step, a shoulder charge, but the Postman had the advantage of carrying a weapon. A cleaver. He made sure the Anthologist was aware of it, but the weight of his sack affected his balance and on the stony ground lost his footing when he swung the cleaver in a desperate arc.

He fell against the Anthologist whose fury pitched the Postman onto his back. He dropped his sack, but not the cleaver and the two of them struggled and wrestled for a torrid few minutes until the contents of the sack became apparent. Amongst the undelivered letters and small packages a gloved hand, the long fingers of Lineus's right hand.

Inflated by an uncontrollable wrath the Anthologist threw his fists like clubs battering the Postman until he lost consciousness. He didn't dare touch the hand resting calmly as if Lineus was still attached invisible. The amputation was clean, left not a drop of blood on the glove cut clean as if the glove maker had done the deed. The cleaver's blade was also free of blood.

Now he picked up the hand. It was wood, the carved hand of a tailor's mannequin and when he sat back flushed with relief and some confusion he was surrounded by a group of Warrior Scholars and Lineus alongside Anteje.

"You found him then?" said Lineus. She picked up the glove and took out the wooden hand.

"I saw that and thought. . . ."

"You thought it was mine." Lineus knelt down and consoled her husband, stroked his head and nuzzled his chin with her nose.

"We knew what he was up to." Anteje collected the cleaver and handed it to Guinevere who inspected the blade edge.

"How?"

"Well, we summoned my Chief of Communications to find out where the leak came from about the fone. And he told the Town Crier who told the Pamphleteer who told the Postman who told the letter reader and the translator. And at every stage the message lost a bit until, where is it?"

Lineus waved the hand.

"Until everyone thought there was a talking hand. And the Postman here had convinced himself he would soon be out of a job so decided to get hold of it for himself. Thanks to you sending those letters to Frau Griss and Trenteneot we knew where he'd be and we followed him back here to the castle."

The hand was smaller than the real thing. Lineus held it palm to palm. "We left it on a table in the entrance hall."

With a new sense of calm taking over the Anthologist's fists started to ache and his knuckles

were bloody. He drew Lineus's head closer and tried to kiss her lips, but the curse continued, the resistance still strong. Anteje noticed the lingering despair, turned away and suggested Guinevere should return the cleaver to the butcher.

"I'll be in the armoury if you need me," Anteje said. The Postman was dragged away with his sack and the Anthologist and Lineus remained in the shadow of the castle until nightfall, waiting and hoping for an answer or inspiration. A way of reattaching their desire, a way of connecting again.