



Finding the Forger

At last she agreed to show him the library. Castle Obersee possessed a great collection and Queen Anteje possessed the great castle containing it. From every window the lake and the valley shimmered as if they couldn't decide to exist. Few could see the castle. Fewer were allowed inside.

"The only reason I'm letting you in is to confirm I'm not going mad. The book you want is here, but I'm damned if I can find it."

"Can you remember reading it?" The Anthologist striding alongside her (with some difficulty) had suggested an audit of the book collection: value the valuables, fill the gaps, repair the older manuscripts, but the greeting he received at the main entrance suggested Anteje had changed her mind.

"No."

The castle itself was like a book collection; poetic in its myriad corridors, mysterious staircases, secret rooms; an encyclopedia of history displayed in the architecture, the ornaments, the furniture, some of it old, some of it ancient and some of it even older than that. Paintings presented the characters in works of fiction spanning centuries and dark images of foreign landscapes they once roamed.

But the castle had one blind spot. Its owner. Anteje gave nothing away and her castle was equally silent. She wore her wealth and her strength, a mixture of embroidery, fine detail and elements of battle. Like her guards, the Warrior Scholars, Anteje was always ready for fight or flight. She was everything the Anthologist was not. Uncompromising, powerful, brave. The only common ground was the respect for books and knowledge.

"Here." Passing through the wide doors of the library was like stepping on a stage to face a waiting crowd of book spines.

"You know I'm not the only one who wants this book," he said.

"True."

"I'm not saying anyone could get in here and steal it."

"True."

"They'd never get out in one piece."

Anteje was taller than the Anthologist. "True."

"But it might be useful to have a copy."

She sat down on a hard timber stool. "You can't outwit me, so explain why I need a copy."

"If anyone ever did get near it they'd take the copy, not the original. And if the copy had subtle alterations to it they wouldn't be able to resell it."

"Rubbish."

"It's not rubbish. Every great library has copies of its most important books. I've been caught out myself."

"Stealing books?"

"Valuing them, Anteje. Valuing them."

She let him wander, down the central aisle to begin with before detouring along the narrower passages and between shelves that seemed to have no upper limit. Somewhere above him, huge timbers supported the roof that may have supported the sky it was so far away. When he found himself back in the central aisle she was waiting for him, cape drawn across her broad shoulders, engraved chest plate shining like a mirror, her sword long and heavy and no doubt sharp.

"I don't know where to start," he said.

A second woman joined them, one of Anteje's intimidating Warrior Scholars, and sat on the same hard stool by the entrance. "Guinevere will help you," said Anteje. "Help you with the audit, help you with the rules of the house, help you if you need money, food or travel arrangements. Make yourself at home. Don't abuse my hospitality. And come with me to Erinia's castle. I believe your wife will be there." She left Guinevere to explain and closed the library doors behind her.

"I'm married," he said.

"Yes, I just heard," said Guinevere.

"Lineus. She's a scientist."

"Yes, I know. We all do. Everyone knows your wife."

"Yes, she has a certain notoriety."

Guinevere grinned. "Is it true she's a sorcerer?"

"No, no, no. She doesn't mind being called an alchemist. Sorcerer is stretching it a bit. People don't understand the work she does."

Guinevere's grin was relentless. "Appearing and disappearing, I've heard."

The Anthologist sniffed and hung up his hat and coat. "Something like that, yes."

Queen Anteje made showstopping entrances and when she entered the great hall of Erinia's castle with a humble librarian beside her the expectation mixed with wonder and a dash of curiosity. He was a peculiar royal adornment, almost like a pet. Erinia inspected him like she would one of her guards and the guests at court waited for her conclusion.

"I suppose its his brain that attracted you to him," she said.

Anteje held in a laugh for as long as she could, but it was too strong, too much air backing it up. "He'll come in useful. Once he's settled in."

"Is my wife here?" he said.

"Your wife?" Erinia thought for a moment. "Yes. I think she is. She should be. Perhaps her machine has broken down."

He grabbed a glass of wine off a passing plate. "Her machines never break down. That's why you're all terrified of her."

He wanted to be straight with Anteje. A working relationship succeeded on trust and honesty. He wasn't here to be displayed like a trained monkey, he was here to find the Forger, but he hadn't told her yet. He would. Eventually. Given the right moment. For now there was too much noise, too much babble and distraction and the music from the gallery hooted and belched as if the musicians were still warming up. The guests ignored it, too preoccupied finding out who was who and what was what. It paid to keep up to speed, to stay one step ahead of the latest conspiracy.

They were all smiles and nods, sips of wine punctuating the boredom of small talk. The Anthologist crept about in search of a familiar face, a male face in an ocean of noblewomen. Erinia caught up with him.

"Prowling about? I believe your wife is in the east courtyard. Her flying machine is attracting a lot of interest."

"Is it? I'll find her later."

"What are you up to?"

"I'm not up to anything. That's the problem with you noble ladies, you're all paranoid."

"We survive by being paranoid. Suspicion is a skill. Why has Anteje brought you?"

"Perhaps she didn't trust me enough to leave me alone in her castle."

"Mm." Erinia would understand. Suspicion, paranoia; a stranger left alone to wander through the sideboards and closets. Rummaging through drawers. . . . "Come with me." She led him outside to the courtyard where his wife was explaining how her machine could come and go by disappearing. The words quantum tunnelling passed through them like one of her tame neutrinos. It stood out, a silvery white pod shaped like a beetle, bigger than a warhorse. And standing next to it, his wife Lineus was alone in the way she dressed; devoid of armour, her belt carried communication devices rather than swords and daggers.

"Someone said you were here," she pushed her face against his, a movement that began as a kiss before her lips were deflected by some repelling magnetic force. The other women muttered.

"Passed all the trials then," said the Anthologist.

"Yes. It's ready to travel anywhere, with anyone if they were prepared to trust me."

"They don't trust you," he whispered. "They think you're a sorcerer, they think you're the Devil."

"Maybe I should dress in red." She spotted Anteje and moved away. The Anthologist took the opportunity to slip back inside the castle where the corridors and rooms were emptying, the guests drawn by the enormous flying insect parked outside.

News travelled around the castle quicker than any visitor and the Anthologist was soon caught up by the man he was looking for. A voice followed him down a wide corridor. Streaming light through long ornate windows coloured the floor like the keys of a piano. "What are you doing here?"

"You. I came looking for you."

"Why?" The man, a forger of manuscripts, kept his distance and stood next to a carved gargoyle.

"I need a favour."

"Why me?"

"Why not?"

"It's a bit inconvenient at the moment. Contracts, agreements." He dabbed his neck with his handkerchief.

"Something wrong?"

"No. Why should there be?"

The space between them answered his own question and the emptiness of the corridor only emphasised the possibility that they weren't alone. No one was ever alone in Erinia's castle, she had spies everywhere, probably bricked up in the walls or encased in roof cavities. The Forger backed away when the Anthologist stepped towards him.

"We can't talk here. It's safer to talk in that crowd outside."

"I can't be seen talking to you. What do you want?"

"A forgery."

"She'll kill me this. Just for talking to you-"

"The Book of All Resolutions."

"God help us." He scurried away.

"What's wrong with that?"

The Forger waved away the words. "I didn't hear that, I didn't meet you, I've never heard of you. You're a ghost."

"No, I'm not." The Anthologist caught him up. "You forge it, I steal the original. It's my head on the block."

"You're mad." He tried to escape into a side room, a classroom filled with tall writing desks, each one adorned with a large illuminated manuscript. On one desk lay a sheet of vellum and a clumsy attempt to recreate a page from the adjacent manuscript.

"What's going on?"

The Forger shut the classroom door and locked it. "I'm being held here. Erinia will let me go, or she says she'll let me go, when I've finished teaching her students how to copy scripts."

"Students?"

"The next generation of tyrants. I blame the parents."

"You mean you're teaching them how to forge."

He nodded and dabbed his neck again. Sweat poured out of his face.

"And if you refuse?"

"She'll feed me to the pigs. I've seen her do that. They have no table manners."

"If I can get you out of here, will you forge the Book?"

"You won't get me out of here. The only reason you'll get out of here is because you came with Queen Anteje."

"Don't underestimate me."

The Forger hadn't underestimated him. Far from it. When he unlocked the door Erinia was waiting and flanked by two guards, their faces concealed by masks, but the eyes were unmistakably female.

"Are these your students?" said the Anthologist. "He said they were difficult to teach."

Erinia hooked her finger under the Anthologist's belt and pulled him out of the classroom. "A quiet word with you." The Forger was escorted back to his quarters.

"I need him," said the Anthologist.

"He's unavailable. He works for me. If verbal instruction wasn't key to his work I'd cut his tongue out."

"And do what with it?"

"Don't play games with me." Erinia's office overlooked the head of the valley and the extent of her land. Beyond the ridge was Obersee and safety. Anteje's version of safety that is. "Why do you want that man?"

"Forge a book."

"What book?" She sat on the edge of her table and held a golden arrow between her fingertips.

"The Book Of All Resolutions."

Erinia patted her chin with the flights of the arrow. Eyes narrowing, she waited for more, for a reason.

"I know where it is. Anteje doesn't. I could leave a copy, she'd be none the wiser."

The arrow may have been solid gold or it may have been a cheap piece of wood painted orange. Erinia twirled it between her fingers.

The Anthologist sat down. "I'd be like the Oracle. Ask me a question and I'll answer it . . . for a fee obviously. Anyone who helps me would earn a commission." He shrugged his shoulders. "We could come to some arrangement."

The arrow point followed the seam along Erinia's breeches.

"Obviously I can't bring it here to forge, he needs to go over there." He had no idea an arrow could fly if it was thrown. It landed in the chair next to his throat. "You've found a flaw in the plan, haven't you?"

"Quite a big one. You taking me for a mug."

"I was hoping you'd acknowledge my honesty."

"I'm always amazed how many times honesty and stupidity go hand in hand." She came forward, grabbed the arrow and left her hand on it long enough for the Anthologist to take in a lungful of her perfume. The aroma of hawthorn took him back to spring when he was a free man devoid of problems. "You think I'm letting him out of this castle?"

"Why is it so important he stays? You can find other forgers to teach your students. Who are these students anyway?"

"None of your business." The news gave her a dilemma. In spite of having the upper hand and a deadly weapon the Book was over there, the Forger over here and no way of bringing them together without some form of risk. Erinia swung the arrow against her thigh harder and harder. The solution spun her round. "Anteje doesn't know what you're up to?"

"No."

"She'd kill you if she found out?"

"Slowly and painfully."

"You bring that book to me and your secret is safe." She placed the tip of the arrow against the Anthologist's forehead. "You pull a fast one and I'll help her kill you. She can do the slow bit, I'll do the painful bit."

"Co-operation. It's what the world is lacking." Pushing the arrow tip away he said, "I'll take him back with me."

"I didn't say that." She put the arrow point back in the same position. "You bring the book here. If she doesn't know where it is, she won't know it's gone." Erinia's smile was very very wide. "Didn't think of that, did you?"

The guests continued to crowd the courtyard. They leaned towards the pod, but refused to touch it. Lineus sat on a wall, deep in conversation with a woman possessing more opulence than all the other guests put together. Dripping in diamonds, she wore a silver exo-skeleton decorated with fine braids and a sash. (Queen Anteje never wore sashes.) Her polished thigh boots were like midnight against the gleaming white daylight of her breeches. No one stood near her as if she occupied an impregnable glass bubble.

Lineus beckoned him. "Here he is. I told you he was shy."

The mysterious woman lifted her chin.

"This is the Empress Helene. She's interested in the transporter."

"Transporter?"

"The pod."

"Is that what you call it?"

Lineus rolled her eyes. "Absorbed in his work," she said. The Empress wouldn't take her eyes off him. "Transporter is the commercial name."

"I see."

"You're working for Queen Anteje," said Helene.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes. Why?"

He struggled to answer. "It's, it's an audit of her library. She has no idea what's in it."

"And that is important because?"

"You never know what might be in there."

"Books?"

"Yes."

Helene approached the pod - the transporter - and glared at it. "This has value. Purpose. I can see the reason for taking an interest in this, but books."

The Anthologist tapped the outer shell of the pod. "This comes with a manual."

Lineus shook her head.

"Doesn't it? What if it needs mending?"

"It won't need mending."

"That would be someone else's job, not mine," said Helene. "This has strategic value." Half way up the steps leading into the courtyard Erinia and Anteje listened to Helene's assessment. The words *strategic value* didn't go down too well. They were probably the reason she was an Empress and they were only queens.

Helene continued her inspection and the Anthologist whispered to Lineus, "Do empresses have more land than queens?"

"I think so."

"Where does she come from? I've never heard of her."

"She owns the northern stretches of the Alpenberg. Killed her husband in a coup. Copped the lot. She came here just to see this."

"You're not going to sell one to her, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous." She slipped off the wall. "She's ordered two dozen."

"Take her for a test ride."

"What?"

"Trust me." He lowered his voice. "At seven p.m. take her for a quick spin in it."

"A quick spin? Travel is instantaneous."

"Well take her to Asia, stop off in Paris on the way back."

"Why?"

"Diversion." He tickled her chin and walked away.

With fresh air in short supply, Anteje had left the crush of the courtyard and stood by an open window in the hall. "If I find the Forger raise the alarm. Tell Erinia I've disappeared."

"Okay."

"She's a threat to you, isn't she?"

"Erinia? Don't be absurd."

"No, the other one. Ming the Merciless."

"Who?"

"Sorry. 20th Century pulp fiction. I'll explain it to you later. I can get him out of here if I can find him. Wait until seven and then raise the alarm."

She had problems of her own, but the Anthologist's plan made sense in the long term. Empress Helene may have had a fleet of strategic transporters, but they'd be carrying an ignorant army. Anteje would have the Book.

The Forger was in his sitting room, part of a small suite above the classroom where he taught his nefarious trade to Erinia's hoaxers-in-waiting. "We have to go."

"I can't go," said the Forger.

"Yes you can. It's all set up. Erinia knows about us, about the plan, about the book, about everything. Move it."

The Forger had tools to collect, but abandoned all his other possessions. They hurried out on to the battlements where they could hear a commotion down below. The time was one minute past seven and the pod had gone. The Anthologist and the Forger, according to garbled reports, had gone with it. Down below, on a terrace away from the guests, Anteje held conference with Erinia.

"He's stealing your book," Erinia said.

"Book, what book?"

"The Book of All Resolutions."

"What? There's no such thing. It's a myth."

"He's found it. He's going to forge it and now he's on his way back to your castle to get it. And he's taken my forger with him. He works for me." An alliance was formed in an instant. Erinia's guards and Anteje's Warrior Scholars would track them down and bring them back. At the entrance to the castle a large unit of horse riders surged across the drawbridge. When they were almost out of sight a flash illuminated the courtyard.

"Right, come on." The Anthologist dragged the Forger with him and they raced through the unguarded castle. In the courtyard, Erinia shouted orders at her guests that were clueless, including Lineus who stepped out of the pod into a barrage of questions.

"Is your husband in there?"

Empress Helene emerged.

"Is he in there?" Erinia tried to barge Helene out of the way.

"What are you talking about?"

"What have you done?"

"I took the Empress on a test run. What's going on?"

"Your husband has escaped."

"Escaped? I thought he was a guest."

"He has absconded with an employee of mine."

"No."

"No?"

"He's not that kind of man. Never been unfaithful-"

"I don't mean that." Erinia hurtled up the steps with such velocity she didn't see the Anthologist and the Forger slip by and disappear into the pod. The Anthologist reappeared and alerted Lineus.

"Oi! A quick favour. You said this thing travelled instantaneously. Get us up to your ship for a couple of days."

The order for two dozen transporters was sealed with a handshake and a promise to return in five minutes with the relevant paperwork. "I don't really do paperwork," said Lineus, "we're a paperless operation, but I'll make an exception for you traditionalists."

"Good." Helene didn't have time to blink before the pod vanished.

Two days passed, enough time for Erinia's guards to give up the chase and for Erinia to realise she had been hoodwinked. "Does she know you know?" The Anthologist brought Anteje into the library to meet the Forger.

"Does she know I know what?"

"That you think I'm trying to steal the book."

"I don't know. Erinia is too hasty. Doesn't think things through. When you left she didn't know I knew. I didn't know either to be honest, it all happened so quickly."

"And the other one? Empress Helene."

"We don't speak about her. If she ever gets hold of the Book that's when I'll start to worry. For now don't let it out of your sight." The Forger stood up to greet her. "And don't let him out of your sight. He's slipped away once."

"With my help."

"With your wife's help."

"Joint effort."

"So where is this book?"

The Forger waited for the Anthologist to answer.

"It's in here somewhere."

"You mean you don't know?"

"I never said I had it."

Anteje was a lot taller than the Anthologist and the difference in height grew at the same rate as her anger. Her hand went for her sword, but paused at the hilt. "Find the Book."

"I will."

"Make the copy."

"Yes."

"Stay out of trouble."

"I always do. I always try."

When she walked away Guinevere sat cross legged on the hard stool by the library entrance. She bit into an apple and winked at the Anthologist when Anteje slammed the doors behind her. "I'd be careful if I were you."

"Her barks worse than her bite," said the Anthologist.

Guinevere grinned. "I didn't mean her." And for the briefest of seconds her teeth, her long canine teeth, bit another chunk out of the apple. "Tell me more about your wife."