



## Inside the Maze

Ownership of a fone remained a unique feature of Anteje's realm, which is why she received an external piece of bad news by word of mouth and then letter. Word of mouth came from a unit of military scouts sent ahead by Empress Helene to ensure safe passage to Castle Obersee. Queen Erinia's own scout unit arrived an hour later.

Satisfied there were no hidden threats they left and several hours later two messengers turned up, one from Helene the other from Erinia, each accompanied by an armed guard and enough flags and banners to suck the townsfolk out of their houses and shops and inns to see the pageant. And they were only the messengers.

Anteje received them on the drawbridge of the castle. "Queen Anteje" said one of the messengers from horseback, "I have an invitation from the Empress Helene, High Majesty of Bavaria, Franconia and Bohemia, Protector of Austria and the Magyar-"

"Yes, I know who she is." Anteje beckoned the other messenger.

"I too have an invitation from Queen Erinia of-"

"Is it the same invitation?"

They weren't sure. Both messengers drew their horses together and read the messages. "It seems they are," said Helene's messenger who wore more metal in his armour than Erinia's messenger whose leather armour was elaborately embossed with birds and fishes.

"What is the invitation?" Anteje's presence on the drawbridge was humbling, backed by three Warrior Scholars on foot and forced to look up at messengers who were so much lower down the social scale. The remaining Scholars on the battlements hadn't bothered to unfurl so much as a handkerchief.

"The Empress Helene has formed a territorial alliance with Queen Erinia. Together they control great swathes of Central Europe, major waterways and strategic towns and cities. They now invite you to join their alliance to fill the gap that your realm currently occupies."

"I see. Do you want a decision now?"

"No. The Empress Helene and Queen Erinia will arrive the day after tomorrow. They ask that you consider the offer and give them your response during the visit."

"A visit at my expense, I presume."

"Would you have them stay in the local tavern?"

"Why not? It's warmer than the castle."

"I will relay your refusal to accommodate the Empress-"

"I'm not refusing to accommodate her. Don't be so touchy. Of course I'll accommodate her and Queen Erinia and no doubt their entire entourage."

According to Erinia's messenger the total entourage would come to about two hundred people and when the messengers left Anteje went back inside to be told there was only enough food to feed her own entourage for the next four days.

"Great. As if this alliance invitation isn't a big enough problem." Anteje had a throne room with a throne, but she rarely used it except when she wanted to be alone. The throne room reminded her of ancestry and heritage. And it reminded her of her parents, the legacy they left, the gift she never wanted.

The Anthologist knew he was in her bad books, but he also knew he was one of the few people to whom she would reveal her deepest concerns. He kept silent waiting for her to choose the moment to speak.

"Close the door," she said and slumped into the throne, letting her arms dangle either side of it. "I hate politics. I hate alliances and strategies and always looking over my shoulder. I love this castle. I love this town and this lake and this valley, but I hate the world they all occupy." She sighed and dragged her fingers through her straggly dark hair. "Look at me. I dress like you. I can't sit in a chair properly because of this sword and everyone I know is either terrified of me or licks the ground I walk on." She acknowledged him for the first time. "Except you, of course. I don't know whether that's because you're very brave or very stupid. Do you have laryngitis?"

"No."

"Well, say something."

Cautiously, he stepped towards the throne fully aware of her suspicions. "I'm no politician myself, Majesty."

She waved her arm. "Don't, you don't need to call me that. Sorry. I was in a bad mood. Call me Anteje again. It makes me feel human."

"Anteje. I'm not a politician or a legal expert, but could you not declare your realm neutral territory? Don't join the alliance, but don't oppose it either."

"Yes, no. I don't know. That's a short term measure, isn't it? It's everything. I always knew my life was precarious, but the assassin's letter came as a shock. Maybe I shouldn't have been shocked, but I was."

"But look what you did. You outwitted her. You turned her into an asset. And without ever raising your sword. You can win battles without fighting. You're intelligent enough to do that. You can counter these two. I'd stake my reputation on it."

"I'm flattered. But you don't have a reputation. Sit down." She invited him to sit on the throne of the consort. "There won't be a war. I have soldiers I can call on. There are families out there who would stand by me, and Helene and Erinia both know the size of their armies are unwieldy. Any number of them could be turncoats, it would be a bloodbath. No one would win. To them this would be a matter of honour. Succeeding would bolster their popularity."

"Why do they want an alliance now? What's the threat forcing them to consolidate?"

"Who knows." Anteje's position in the throne was growing more and more horizontal. If she had a stool she would have put her feet up on it. "But it's one more aggravation, one more inconvenience."

"Stopping you from doing what?"

"Travelling. I want to do what you do. Travel, explore, make discoveries. See the world beyond these valleys. I'm very proud of the library here. Spend enough time in it."

"That's good. That's a good thing. Can I make a suggestion?" Now he was chancing his arm and talking off the top of his head. Anteje didn't move, but rolled her eyes left to study him.

"What?"

"Travel. Leave Lineus in charge. I'll take care of the library, she can take care of your realm. If she parks her ship over the castle towers no one will dare come near."

The toes of Anteje's boots tapped together. "That's a more appealing idea than an alliance." She leapt out of the throne. "Let me consider it. Thank you." She stopped and turned back to him; the sight of the Anthologist in the consort's throne pulled her up sharply. "Seriously. Thank you. I'm sorry I suspected you of, you know."

"Don't apologise for it. I understand."

"Good. And don't get too comfortable in that throne. I was thinking of throwing it out."

She didn't walk, she marched. Whatever her mood, Anteje took long strides and she was out of the throne room in seconds, leaving the doors open as a signal that it was time for him to leave too.

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The visitation of the messengers was a brief distraction compared to the ground trembling arrival of the Empress Helene, High Majesty of Bavaria, Franconia and Bohemia, Protector of Austria and the

Magyar Territories, and Queen Erinia of Somewhere Else. A cloud of black flags with gold cross keys and red scorpions announced the entourage, Erinia's black and white cross brought up the rear.

From the Battlements the Anthologist stood alongside Maya and Anthea and Yvalanne and Ambria and watched the ground change colour. "They're not all going to try and get in here."

Ambria sniffed and rubbed her nose with an armoured gauntlet. "They'll camp by the lake. The castle's only just big enough for Helene's ego."

And her ambitions. At the table in a suite of offices cleared out for the event Helene prodded and pointed at several maps. Erinia used a riding crop to demonstrate new boundaries and trade routes, defensive lines and safe havens.

"What's all this for?" said Anteje. "What threat are you countering?"

"Threat?" Helene and Erinia spoke together.

Erinia's grin always reminded Anteje of a blood orange opening up and revealing the inside to be full of teeth. "There's no threat. We're not digging in. We're consolidating as an outward show of force to deter anyone out there," in the direction of the whip, "who may have ideas to come and conquer us."

Helene couldn't take her eyes off the map. "It's a message. A statement that we intend to remain rulers of our land and anyone who thinks otherwise will suffer for it. Do you have an answer to our invitation, Anteje?"

She'd had long enough to think about it and when the moment came she had the Anthologist and Guinevere alongside her. "I need persuading. I know you're not going to force me to join, that would be catastrophic for everyone. So if I say no, what then?"

This was not the answer they were anticipating. Helene's frustration pulled her into a chair. "Why? Why? It strengthens your position, Anteje. We come to your aid in times of trouble, you come to ours."

"Exactly. It's a little one sided. I have the smallest army. How do I know you'll come to my aid? You might be away invading the Baltics when I need help."

"We'll sign a treaty." Erinia's grin was no reassurance.

"You're so predictable," said Helene. "So predictable we came here with a contingency plan."

"Really." Anteje found herself alone at the table with her adversaries when everyone else retreated to the walls.

"A challenge," said Erinia. "Just the three of us. The outright winner decides on the alliance. There's three of us, which means one of us must win two of the challenges."

"What challenges?" Like three chess players they sat on their own side of the table, with Anteje the only one in the dark.

Helene explained. "A test of accuracy. An archery contest. I know you're a fine archer, Anteje. You stand a good chance of winning."

"And a test of courage," said Erinia. "A joust. I believe you are trained by one of the finest horseback warriors on the continent? Hilda of Brandenburg?"

"She works with me, yes. The third challenge?"

"A test of memory," said Helene. "And you can choose that challenge. A challenge that involves this wonderful library of yours." She glanced at the Anthologist and the whole reason for the visit and the alliance began to point towards the existence of one particular book in the castle library.

"If that's what you want." Anteje anchored herself to the table and breathed in. "Archery tomorrow, the joust the day after and the final day the memory test."

It all sounded like a good idea. When Helene and Erinia were gone Guinevere and the Anthologist joined Anteje at the window. "I'd be wrong to assume this is going to be a three point victory to you." said Guinevere.

The mid-afternoon sun flashed off Helene's armour when she crossed the courtyard to a private suite of rooms on the north side of the castle. "She is a very good archer. She makes me look like a clown. And the other one." Erinia strolled amongst her advisors and guards, all of them like

lost shadows looking for something solid to follow. "Have you ever seen Erinia joust? I have. I've never seen her miss an opponent."

"In that case you need a good memory test and there'll be a tie." The Anthologist received a pat on the shoulder for his suggestion.

"I'll let you sort that one out then. Guinevere, help me find my suit of armour. I'm not even sure I still have one."

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The suit of armour was found in a room in one of the towers. Some of the joints were rusty and the last time Anteje wore it she must have been almost a metre shorter than she was now. "If someone can adjust it today in time for tomorrow. And some embellishment, some kind of eagle or lion or something with sharp teeth. I can't go into a joust looking like a yeoman."

On the archery field in front of a large eager crowd the three noblewomen lined up for the first contest. The targets were set at a range of one hundred metres. Helene's bow was hand crafted specifically for her exact measurements; draw strength, draw length, arrow length. Every arrow flight had her cross keys and scorpion emblem, her leather quiver embossed to match her leather armband, and with an outfit designed for maximum comfort, finished off with long thigh boots she distracted her opponents before a shot was fired.

Helene's accuracy left her arrows in an intimate cluster in the dead centre of the target. Erinia who knew there was no point competing peppered her target with enough confidence to win any other contest not involving Helene, but she was pushed into third place by Anteje whose long days of practice in all weathers delivered a respectable score.

"Two points behind." Helene shook Anteje's hand. "A good contest. Perhaps a stronger wind blowing across the field would have evened things up."

"I doubt it." Anteje's mind was on the Anthologist and his secret preparations for a memory test.

"Congratulations," said Erinia. She knew her moment was lying in wait. The others knew it too and neither Anteje nor Helene slept that night.

The morning after, before the jousting preparations began, Anteje asked the Anthologist what he had come up with. He grimaced. "Obviously it can't be something that might look as if you have an unfair advantage' Find the bible, guess how many steps run up the east turret. I'm still working on it."

His great idea, as he called it, was finalised when Anteje came plodding out of the stables, weighted down by a suit of armour half of which was adorned with gold panels and a plume of swan feathers in the helmet. The Anthologist forgot his words and for the first time he considered Anteje not to be his employer, but his Queen.

"This is not the real me," she said adjusting a cuirass engraved with two identical rams' heads with sinister faces and long horns curling backwards to follow the contours of the chest. "For all the protection it offers from Erinia it might as well be made from alabaster." She winced when Hilda lifted her right arm to tighten the belts. "I've lost round one, I'll lose round two. If you don't have the answer for round three, librarian, we'll all be living in caves this time next week.

"I know the real you is in there somewhere," said the Anthologist. Anteje's cowters and pauldrons were decorated with four pairs of small angels' wings; an unfortunate reference to where she was going if the joust went horribly wrong. When he told her his idea for round three she dropped the helmet.

"A maze?"

"Yes. The three of you go in, the first one to come out wins."

"And where is this maze?"

Filled with a sudden sense of servitude he was reluctant to question her lack of territorial knowledge. "It's on the south west corner of the gardens, Majesty. Anteje. Sorry."

Stuck for words, she left Hilda to retrieve the helmet and they walked away discussing

tactics and how to avoid being impaled on Erinia's lance.

The result of the jousting was a foregone conclusion and not wanting to suffer for longer than necessary Helene opted to joust first against Erinia whose warhorse could have stepped the length of the arena with half a dozen strides.

The crowd loved it, entranced by Erinia's colossal presence made all the more disturbing by the dull and gloss of her black armour, a silver exoskeleton deliberately darkened by her royal blacksmith and a woodland supply of charcoal.

In contrast Helene preferred to be seen, which was probably a mistake in a contest where she was the target. And when her horse thundered across the sodden ground the result of the challenge almost came second to Helene ending up face first in the mud.

The first pass and Erinia's lance glanced off Helene's shoulder. She wobbled and swayed, grabbed her horse's neck and survived the bumping of a vigorous trot when the horse slowed to come back. The second pass was more accurate, but still left Helene in her saddle, lurching to hang on, Erinia tried to turn her head, but had to wait until she stopped, just in time to see Helene slide out of her saddle and land in a pool of mud.

"What do you suggest?" said Anteje. Hilda surveyed the field and the muddy outline of Helene being reintroduced to her horse by several aides. "She ducks down behind the horse's neck."

"Which means she'll have limited vision and a split second to direct her lance. You need to aim for the horse. Between the eyes."

"I can't kill a horse."

"You won't kill it. The speed of reaction means you'll just miss it and hit the Empress. If you aim for her you'll miss."

"Right. Aim for the horse, aim for the horse. . . ."

Hilda helped Anteje to mount and gave her one final piece of advise. "Look the horse in the eyes. The lance will go where you're looking."

She followed the instructions to the letter, made no effort to hide herself even though her horse had a neck as wide as a cathedral door. She watched Helene accelerate, the muddy rider lowering herself as the horses came together. Anteje lowered her lance, caught the large brown eye of the opposing horse and waited.

The impact almost knocked her off her own horse. Helene flew like a kite, arms flailing, legs higher than her head, she came down in a second pool of mud sending up an exuberant splash and bringing the crowd to their feet. Anteje was on home soil, she had the people behind her and they roared. They roared for their Queen.

Erinia loved the challenge and the opportunity to fight someone who was her equal. "That was a shot I'd be proud of." There was a possibility her helmet was designed to accommodate that smile.

"I'm sure you won't be so easy to hit," said Anteje catching her breath.

"Don't belittle yourself. Helene has a good riding position. Eye contact." Erinia knew.

"That's how it works. I'd make sure you keep Hilda at court. A teacher like that could command her own salary."

The joust that would decide the outcome was held during a break in the cloud, but the strong sunlight made no difference to Erinia's black armour. Anteje had to decide whether to play defensive, avoid Erinia's speed and accuracy, or throw away any sense of caution and go for the eyes again. If she lost, the pressure would be on the memory challenge and a half-baked idea involving a maze she didn't know she had.

"Where is the maze?" said Hilda as Anteje headed for the arena.

"It's in the garden somewhere."

"The yew hedge? I always thought it was a boundary."

"Well, apparently there's a maze behind it. Wish me luck."

"Be positive, Majesty."

"Be positive. Yes. I just hope I don't land in the mud."

The threat of injury didn't worry her, the worry was defeat, how the townsfolk would react to

seeing their Queen weakened; entering the arena in a suit of (half) golden armour and leaving it encased in turf. The mountains grew in height, the eager sun closed its eye and in the gathering gloom Erinia's faceless black obstacle stood to attention. The smile gone, the lance primed, the warhorse stomping its hoof.

He was the one looking into Anteje's eyes.

The charge began, the horses maddened by combat. Erinia remained upright, Anteje lowered her centre of gravity, kept her focus locked on the horse's eyes and aimed the lance. She saw nothing else other than Erinia closing in. The gallop took forever until suddenly Erinia was on her. . . .

She felt the punch, a tremendous singularity straight into the centre of her cuirass. Her own horse carried on without a flinch leaving Anteje suspended with her boots entering her line of vision, her armoured knees following them. The crowd inverted and the mountain peaks pointed downwards changing places with the hanging valleys.

There was no sympathy in the way the ground welcomed her. The momentum flung her like a metallic ball, turning and pitching, the clatter of metal, pauldrons and cuisses airborne and scattered in all directions; her legs refusing to stop and dragging her torso in an endless loop. She bounced like a rock, flew like a fallen tree, and eventually battered the arena wall and came to rest, if rest was the right word, with her shoulders buried in the soil, her ankles skyward and a small group of puzzled faces staring down at her.

A young boy obediently fetched her detached helmet and offered it to her. "You've burst your nose," he said.

A hurried group of new faces fussed and snatched the helmet. They were unrecognisable for a moment until the strong hands of Hilda ushered them apart. "Don't move her. Majesty, can you feel your toes?"

"Yes." She drowsily pointed at her feet. "You mean those toes?"

"Those toes yes. Look at my finger."

Anteje blinked certain Hilda only used the singular when she held up several index fingers.

"She's concussed. Leave her a moment. . . ."

According to the Anthologist Anteje was only out for five minutes, but when she came round she was determined to ban ice cream even though no one knew what ice cream was. She was taken to the castle infirmary, carried on a hazel hurdle by six Warrior Scholars.

"I take it she was announced the winner?" Anteje sipped a large tankard of brandy.

The Anthologist stood next to the bed and examined various bits and pieces of shattered armour in his hands. "It was a pretty conclusive victory. This armour is very good you know. We all thought a blow like that should have gone right through you."

"It felt like it did." She wheezed when she breathed in. "I hope I never fall down the stairs."

"I hate to raise the subject, but it does mean you have to win the memory challenge now."

"Don't remind me."

"We found the designer."

"Designer?"

"Of the maze. He still lives in the town. Plays the fiddle. He's going to give you all a plan of the maze and one hour to memorise it."

"Did they carry out my instruction?"

"Instruction?"

"To ban ice cream."

The Anthologist dropped the armour on the foot of the bed and called for Anteje's nurse.

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The memory challenge caused a rumpus before anyone had gone near the entrance. Twenty-four hours after being jabbed off her horse at high speed, Anteje was still feeling groggy and wanted to take an assistant into the maze.

"The same applies to everyone. We can all take one helper."

"You'll take your librarian," said Helene who had tried to disguise a bruise creeping from collar bone to jaw. "I don't trust him."

"Neither do I," said Erinia fresh as a flower and grinning again.

"You two chose the other challenges. You can take who you want." Anteje's obvious inability to walk without a limp persuaded the others to relent and when the maze designer arrived with the plans Erinia had chosen a guard as tall as a pine tree, whilst Helene had asked her code breaker to help.

"One hour," said the maze designer. In spite of great age he skipped and flitted like a man desperate to get out of his own maze. Fiddle in hand he distributed three plans and left shouting, "One hour. I'll be on my fiddle beating time and then I'll be back. Be ready."

Anteje sat at the table, unrolled the plan and shoved it in front of the Anthologist. "I'm the helper then?"

"This whole thing was your idea."

"That doesn't mean I have great memory. Text, yes, but patterns."

"Well, all is lost. In fact," she had that accusatory expression again, "who were you expecting to win?"

"Hang on. Do you think I've arranged all this so that Helene can win? Erinia might win."

"Thanks for your confidence." The sound of a fiddle seeped through the open window. "Get memorising."

One hour later the only person fiddling was the Anthologist. Fiddling with his coat sleeves, his pockets, his collar. The competitors gathered at the entrance to the maze where its designer welcomed the challengers.

"Remember the maze is not an arbitrary pattern. Having studied the plan you should by now be familiar with the code." The word code pleased Helene and cast a frown across Anteje's expression.

"No one mentioned a code," she whispered to the Anthologist.

"You each have a helper," said the maze designer. "Are you all ready?"

"Yes," said Helene.

"Of course," said Erinia.

Anteje was distracted by a small girl who had pushed through the legs of the crowd and stood gesturing to her Queen. "What is it?"

"Please, Majesty, may I be your helper?"

"And why would you want to be my helper?"

She shrugged and stared at her feet. And then with a wave of her tiny hand beckoned her Queen to come close.

"What is it, liebe?" Anteje placed her ear to the girl's mouth to listen to her secret. Anteje stood up. "My new helper."

The crowd gasped. Helene twisted her head in suspicion and Erinia scratched her chin.

"Shall we start?" said Anteje.

"Please," the maze designer held up his fiddle, "let the contest begin."

Erinia was the first to enter the maze and found herself descending two steep steps onto a grass path, the drop in height leaving her tall guard useless. Helene ignored the fiddle and the jaunty music and followed Erinia.

Anteje moved to go next, but the girl pulled her back. "Wait a few seconds, Majesty." She turned her head to the sound of the fiddle and waited, the Anthologist shared the crowd's bemusement and then without signal the girl stepped into the maze, hand in hand with her Queen.

"Who is she?" said the Anthologist to Guinevere.

"Queen Anteje. Don't you know anything?"

In the wait for a victor to emerge several members of the crowd danced to the fiddle music and the Anthologist found a place to sit on a grassy bank. A central timber tower indicated the middle of the maze and from there a bridge carried the successful out of the maze without the need

to negotiate any more turns and junctions.

Until someone appeared at the tower there was no way to judge progress or who might be getting close, but eventually a head appeared on the steps leading up to the tower. Anteje's head. Once in the tower she lifted the girl up to look back across the puzzle they had conquered. The girl raised her fists and cheered along with her Queen and an ecstatic crowd.

When she emerged from the bridge and the exit she was met by a woman who introduced herself as the girl's mother. "She is a wonder," said Anteje. "You should be immensely proud of your daughter."

"I am. A little surprised, but proud all the same."

"Haven't I seen you before? You play in the castle quartet, don't you? The violin."

"I do, Majesty."

The Anthologist joined the celebration where the crowd had surrounded the girl, her mother and Anteje. The maze designer had to fight his way through the pack. "Congratulations," he said. "A worthy competitor. And now, would you like to share with us how you did it?"

The girl laughed, too modest to explain, but prompted by her mother she revealed the code.

"When the fiddler plays his music a rising note means turn right, a descending note turn left. The intervals determine which entrance to choose, one whole interval next turn, two whole intervals skip the next turn. And a half interval means continue straight on at a crossroads."

The explanation forced the crowd to erupt and they clapped with enormous excitement. But then Anteje hushed them. Holding a finger to her mouth she pointed at the yew hedge. Someone, still trapped and fighting to get out was on the other side listening.

Without a word, Anteje took the maze designer's violin, handed it to the girl's mother and whispered, "Play something, anything, but make it complicated."

The girl's mother knew the perfect piece and played on as the crowd celebrated. The challenges tied, the realm safe for now, but even so. . . .

"Even so?" said the Anthologist watching Anteje attack a side of beef.

"There'll be no more calls for an alliance," she said. "No more calls for anything."

The cooking meat and fire pits masked the smell of a distant blaze that only became apparent when the smoke crossed the fields of the pageant and the burning maze alerted a tremendous panic. Anteje remained at her outdoor dinner table and watched Helene's entourage scurry to the lake for water, Erinia's guards amongst them.

"They're not still in there, are they?" said the Anthologist standing on his chair.

"Go and find out. I don't know. Every challenge comes with risk. Even memory challenges." She washed down the beef with a satisfying mouthfull of wine. "If they got out they'll be fine. If not." She raised a glass to Guinevere. "To the future."

"To the future, Majesty," said Guinevere.