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# The Three Kingdoms

by Mary Soon Lee

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WHEN ALARIC RODE into the Three Kingdoms to seek a bride, he was dark of skin but light of heart. On the morning before he came to the Eastern Palace, he whistled to himself as he braided his long black hair with scarlet ribbons. And as Alaric fed and groomed his horse, he hummed a bawdy drinking song, somewhat out of tune but with a great deal of enthusiasm.

He smiled at the strangers he passed on the road to the palace. He smiled at the cool spring breezes, at the birds in the trees, at the wild flowers dotting the fields. For he was Alaric, son of Alaric, and that day he would gaze upon the face of the third loveliest maiden in the Three Kingdoms, the Princess Valentia.

He reached the palace shortly after noon, only to be told by the steward that the princess was busy. ?Ah,? said Alaric, picturing the princess practising the harp, her delicate fingers plucking sweet chords, or perhaps she was checking on the well-being of the kingdom's more lowly inhabitants. ?No matter,? said Alaric, ?I will come again tomorrow.?

The steward cleared his throat noisily. ?I'm sorry, sir. Tomorrow the princess has an appointment with her dressmaker, and that always takes a whole day.?

The smallest of frowns marred Alaric's features. ?Then I shall come two days from now.?

?Sorry, sir. That'll be the day the Lady Winifred comes, the princess's aunt.?

?But of course,? said Alaric, ?the Princess Valentia will wish to avail herself of her aunt's wisdom.?

The steward snorted. ?Wisdom? Not likely. It'll be gossip and fashions and the latest face paints.?

?I see,? said Alaric, and there was a coolness in his tone that startled him. ?Then perhaps I can come three days from now??

?Hairdresser,? said the steward. ?Sorry.?

A pulse leapt in Alaric's temple, and a faint throbbing started behind it. Was this a headache? He had never had one before. ?When exactly would it be convenient for me to call on her Highness??

?Monday week,? said the steward. ?Better come early, there'll be a lot of other people waiting.?

\* \* \* \*

Alaric arrived at dawn on the Monday. Even so, he was the fifth in line. The audience chamber was a cold, echoing room with stone floors and tiny slit windows set high in the walls. Alaric tried to banish his surroundings from his thoughts, going over the various possible speeches he might make to Princess Valentia. But first someone sneezed, and then they coughed, and before long Alaric was entirely distracted. The young woman ahead of him sneezed again, a pathetic creature with bare feet and bedraggled brown hair, shivering from head to toe. There was something curiously fragile about her, as if she would vanish in a strong wind.

Alaric took off his cloak, and handed it to the woman.

?Thank you,? said the woman. ?Did you have to come far??

?Yes,? said Alaric. Pointedly, he turned his back on the woman. He was here to see Princess Valentia, not to prattle with a peasant.

The morning wore on with excruciating slowness. Servants lit the fire, plumped the cushions in the chair the princess would sit in, arranged fruits and cakes on a low table. And eventually the princess arrived. Her hair was the color of sunlight on water, her eyes a deeper green than the emeralds she wore at her slender neck. When he beheld her perfect figure, Alaric's heart pounded so loudly he thought the whole room must hear it.

He scarcely noticed the delay while the people ahead of him addressed the princess. He would gladly have spent the whole day watching her, a week, a month, a lifetime, if she but let him.

The steward called his name.

Alaric walked forward, bowed.

The princess giggled. "Turn around, turn around, Sir Alex."

"Sir Alaric," said Alaric.

"Yes, yes." The princess clapped her hands together, and whispered something to one of her ladies-in-waiting. "Turn around. Slowly."

Slowly Alaric turned around, then back to face the princess.

The princess giggled again. "Why's your hair so long, and why have you got ribbons in it?"

Heat stained Alaric's cheeks. "I am a warrior, your Highness. In my country a warrior's hair is only cut when he loses in battle."

"How silly," said Princess Valentia.

Very stiffly, Alaric said, "I am glad to have afforded your Highness amusement." And then he turned on his heels and walked out of the audience chamber to the stables, saddled his horse, and rode away, the last of the princess's titters still echoing painfully in his memory.

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Alaric's progress toward the Northern Palace was a decidedly gloomier affair than his first journey in the Three Kingdoms. Try as he might, he could not banish the Princess Valentia from his thoughts. How could a form so lovely be allied with such a weak and frivolous mind?

He smiled only when other travelers called out greetings to him, and at other times a frown worked its way into his features. Sternly he bade himself take heart. By all accounts Princess Evangeline, the second loveliest maiden in the Three Kingdoms, was as clever as she was beautiful. Alaric had spent long hours in the scholar's tower at home, studying the dry art of philosophy, the cool elegance of astronomy, the rational purity of mathematics. He had not been the best of students, but at last his labors would be rewarded.

And indeed when he reached the palace, the steward told him that he could see the Princess Evangeline immediately. Alaric let the man lead him to the palace library, where the princess apparently spent most of her time.

The library was full of shadows, the few windows curtained over, candlelight flickering across endless rows of shelves. Alaric took a few paces forward, but saw no one, only the shadows filling the aisles, the air musty and oddly oppressive.

"May I help you?"

Alaric started. A young woman with bare feet and bedraggled brown hair stood in front of him, an insubstantial looking creature. How did she get there so quietly? "I am seeking the Princess Evangeline."

"Take the fourth aisle to the left, turn right at geology, and you'll find her at the end of the aisle."

‘Thank you,’ said Alaric. There was something familiar about the woman’s face, but he didn’t waste time trying to place it. Fourth aisle to the left, right at geology? and there stood the princess, at first he could see only her back, the long midnight-black sweep of her hair reaching almost to the floor. She turned at his approach, and her eyes were the color of shadows, of waves crashing in a desolate sea, of the sky on a summer’s day, shading outward from deepest gray to blue-gray to purest blue.

‘Why have you come?’ asked the Princess Evangeline.

‘To see you,’ said Alaric, all the speeches he had rehearsed lost in his wonder.

‘Then you have accomplished your goal. Good day, Sir Knight.’

‘Wait? please?’ Alaric took a deep breath, started again. ‘I have traveled far in the hope of meeting you. If you would let me stay a while? if we could talk?’

‘There is little to be gained by further conversation between us,’ said the princess. ‘You are not the first man who has come to court me. I can assure you that you will woo me neither by your wit, nor by your looks, nor by the description of the estate you will one day inherit.’

‘Then how? That is, if there is anything I could do for you. . . .?’

The princess smiled, and Alaric was pierced by the cold beauty of her gaze, direct as a falcon diving to its prey. ‘I would be grateful,’ said the princess, ‘to the man who brought me the head of the Princess Amaryllis.’

Alaric blanched. ‘Never, I could never harm the princess. In my country, we do not make jokes about such matters.’

‘It was not a joke,’ said Princess Evangeline. There was a hardness in her eyes, sharper than the cutting edge of a diamond. ‘Not a joke, but rather a whim. I was intrigued by a tale of a similar request, and Amaryllis is an inconvenience. But don’t trouble yourself, Sir Knight. I have other means of dealing with inconveniences. Good day.’

The princess turned away. For a minute Alaric stood in silence, and then he backed awkwardly down the corridor, trying to tell himself it wasn’t a retreat, but the more he thought of the princess’s cold gaze, the more it unnerved him.

He must have taken a right when he should have taken a left, or a left when he should have taken a right, for in a minute he was lost. He ran down one aisle, then another, but none of the sections seemed familiar.

‘May I help you?’ The barefoot young woman he’d seen earlier appeared out of nowhere. She must have been hidden in the shadows. Perhaps she was the librarian, though her clothes seemed too shabby for that. Maybe a cleaning girl.

‘I’m looking for the way out.’

‘Let me show you.’

Alaric nodded. ‘My thanks.’

?Did your meeting with the Princess Evangeline go well??

?No,? said Alaric curtly, hoping the woman would be silent. He had no intention of discussing his affairs with a servant. Surely the entrance couldn't be much further. One turn, and then another, and then the entrance emerged from shadow.

Candlelight caught on the woman's cheek. Was she crying? With a scowl, Alaric asked, ?Is something wrong?? hoping the woman would say no and he could leave.

?Take me with you. Please.?

?But you don't know where I'm going,? said Alaric.

?You're leaving. That's enough. I'll go wherever you do.?

?No.? The impertinence of the woman, thrusting herself at him. He didn't want a traveling companion, and he certainly didn't want to be burdened with some runaway servant. He strode to the library doors, scowled, stopped. He took the ruby ring from the little finger of his left hand and thrust it at the woman. ?Here, take this. That should fetch enough money to get you wherever you wish.?

He strode out the door without looking back.

\* \* \* \*

Alaric's journey to the Western Palace was a troubled one. Whether he spent the night on a mattress in a tavern or stretched out in a field beside his horse, sleep came only in brief snatches. His dreams were disturbed by women, one woman with hair like sunlight and a mind as empty as a butterfly's, another with hair like midnight and a gaze like a whetted knife. And once he woke with a memory of a barefoot woman with bedraggled brown hair, and there were tears on his cheeks, and he didn't know why.

He came to the palace at dusk, but there were no lights visible in the windows. He was on the point of leaving for the night and trying again the next morning, when a voice called from inside, ?The doors are unlocked. Keep going straight. The Princess Amaryllis is in the main audience chamber.?

Alaric pushed the heavy doors open. Blue lanterns hung from the hallway walls, so that it was as if he stepped through one globe of blue light after another as he walked along. Ahead, he heard the sound of weeping. He entered the audience chamber. A crowd of people knelt around an iron bed. Pale flowers floated in glass bowls, the air sweet with lilies and roses.

Alaric stepped closer.

On the bed lay a young woman, her skin so pale he knew at once she must be dead. She wore a traveling cloak pulled tight around her. His cloak. The one he had given to the shivering woman.

Alaric took another step forward. On the woman's pale, still middle finger of her left hand was a ruby ring. His ring.

He looked at her face.

The same and not the same; as if the two women he'd seen had been sisters and now they had been blended together. And, yes, she was beautiful, the loveliest maiden he had ever seen. It wasn't the color of her brown hair, though it shone like spun silk; it wasn't the shape of her lips, though they were exquisite

in every particular. No, it was the union of perfection in every curve of her body, the sad, gentle sweetness of her expression.

He could not bear to look. He could not bear to stay.

\* \* \* \*

Long before he reached home, Alaric's rage was permanently etched into his features. He rescued lost children, fought perilous monsters, battled with giants. But it brought him no surcease.

From time to time, he heard tales of the dead princess, of the living beauty of her eyes, as kind as they were wise. And then he was grateful that her eyes had been closed that night, for surely the memory would have driven him insane. Or perhaps he was already insane, for he saw her eyes anyhow, through the world's wind and the world's rain, in every star in the night sky, in every beast he slew, in every breath he took.

**The End**

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