

THE QUARRY

The Wedding Eve

Alison Graham

Altan had hardly expected to enjoy the day of the pre-wedding celebration, but things took a significant downturn after the rehearsal.

One of the girls had decided to ask him a question.

‘Shouldn't you be with your future bride?’ she asked, teeth bright in a cheeky smile. She was a pretty thing with large blue eyes, cinnamon skin and unusually bright auburn hair. Her question sent a ripple of giggles undulating among the other girls surrounding the prince, glittering butterflies orbiting a single bright flower.

Altan stifled a scowl, glancing at the figure in the corner of the ballroom.

His betrothed cut an embarrassing figure. She was too slight and pale, garish in a puffy purple gown in the style of her homeland. She was rarely dressed in such finery, and it showed in how her calloused fingers tugged uncomfortably at her ruffled hems and pulled at the brocaded waist. Flowers had been woven into her glossy dark braid, but its beauty did little to offset her perpetually red cheeks and nose, and she hunched awkwardly over the glass in her hand. He knew she sipped at it to keep her hands and mouth busy, to hide the fact that nobody was talking to her.

Next to him, they made a bizarre pair, so he preferred to keep his distance. Altan was lithe and dark, with fine features. His mauve kaftan skimmed his figure perfectly, comfortable as a second skin. His jewellery was carefully placed, each link of gold

painstakingly measured, garnets chosen in just the right colour to match his orange eyes. He was better suited with one of the glimmering courtesans currently surrounding him, but they lacked the power or lands that better piqued his mother's interest.

He swallowed these thoughts, deciding instead to deflect the girl's question. 'My bride and I will be spending plenty of time together soon enough,' he said, sliding an arm around the girl's waist. Her cropped blouse and the gap left by her draped sari meant his hand travelled along bare goosebumps. 'Are you ungrateful for this limited time left with me?' Another peal of giggles dispersed through the group, and the auburn-haired girl flushed.

As the laughter settled, Altan felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned, and found himself facing the hard stare of his mother's advisor, Odval.

Odval's eyes were the cold hardness of amethyst, and even on this occasion she hadn't traded her simple black abaya for anything more festive. Only a jeweled chain headpiece over her hijab gave any indication of her rank, and her face was as stern as if there was nothing to celebrate.

'Your mother would like a word, Highness,' she said in a low voice. She tilted her head, and Altan's eyes followed the direction. Sure enough, his mother had sequestered herself by a gilded fountain. She was barely a shadow from his distance, but her golden-eyed gaze was clear across the hall.

He sighed, extricating himself from the auburn-haired girl. 'All right, Odval,' he said, following her as the dumpy-silhouetted woman led him through the throng towards his waiting mother.

The queen of Baliqas greeted her son with a lengthy sigh. 'Altan, sun of my stars,' she said, taking his hand. Her gold-lacquered nails pricked his palm. Where Odval was plain and utilitarian, Aigiarn was bright and effervescent with jewels and colour. She'd worn a purple gown that consisted of so many sheer layers that she seemed to float more than walk, and her long inky hair was woven with pearls and gold chains. A gold ring made a feature of her regal nose, and gold paint along the rims of her eyes accented her dark skin.

'Mother,' Altan said. 'Odval said you wanted a word.'

'I see you've been enjoying your rehearsal ball,' Aigiarn said, eyes scanning the huge ballroom.

'It seems all have been merry, except for one very key reason for the revelries, sweet.'

Altan fought to keep his expression neutral. ‘She seems to be enjoying herself just fine.’

‘Altan,’ Aigiarn stated. ‘Sascha has been hiding in the corner by herself since we finished the ceremony rehearsal. She looks utterly despondent, watching her groom flirt with every young person in the room but her. Would it torture you so to even smile at her?’

Altan's hand clenched ever so slightly on his mother's grip. ‘I'll have all the time in the world to smile at her after tomorrow, Mother,’ he said carefully. ‘I'll be the happiest prince alive once we're wed, I can promise you.’

Airgiarn's glittering eyes narrowed. ‘I take flattery and dressed lies from many, child-of-mine, but I won't take them from you.’

‘So you know, the truth is I don't want to marry her,’ Altan hissed, dropping his voice so low he wasn't sure even his mother heard. ‘That's hardly a surprise to you. We've never gotten along!’

‘You've never given her a chance,’ Aigiarn murmured, steel in her voice.

‘And what chance was I given? You dropped a little girl I'd never seen in front of me one night when we were both six years old, and you told me to be nice to my future wife. Did you really think I'd do just that?’

Aigiarn took a deep breath as if to speak, then paused, exhaling slowly. Her eyes still darted across the room, never ceasing to monitor the guests.

‘I'd always hoped you'd grow to care for each other eventually,’ she said softly. ‘I expected resistance – of course I did, Altan. You're *my* son. But I'd hoped you'd inherited some of my... I don't know. Romance? I thought you'd at least feel sorry for her, this poor princess taken to a foreign realm where nothing is familiar. I saw long ago I was wrong.’

Aigiarn paused to straighten and square her broad shoulders, flashing a quick smile at a passing courtier. ‘Nonetheless, the marriage is necessary,’ she reminded Altan. ‘And you know this well, otherwise you wouldn't bother putting on a show. You know what this means, both to our nation and hers.’

Altan looked across the room again, at the forlorn girl in the corner. He knew exactly what was at stake and what he needed to do, but it didn't mean he had to enjoy it. He dropped his mother's hand.

‘I'll be all smiles and blissful marital delight tomorrow,’ he muttered. ‘I promise. But at

least let me have fun tonight.’

Aigiarn pursed her lips. ‘I wish you'd see her from a different perspective, Altan.’

Altan turned away. ‘Enjoy your night, Mother.’

He could see the girls as he'd left them, no worse for his absence. But as he approached them, another hand landed on his elbow. Scowling, he pulled away and turned to face whoever now demanded his attention.

Huge brown eyes looked at him, jarring over an unlovely face and downturned mouth.

Oh.

Sascha.

‘What?’ he asked.

She was little; at her height, she had to look up at him, like a child. She hesitated, chewing her lip, and Altan's frustration flared. She was so *timid*. ‘Get on with it,’ he snapped.

Her milky cheeks filled with colour. ‘I just wanted to ask how you were,’ she said in a low voice that mirrored his exasperation. ‘I saw you'd been speaking to your mother. You looked unhappy. I wanted to see if everything was alright.’

Altan reared back. ‘If I needed comfort, I wouldn't seek it from you,’ he said.

Sascha blinked slowly, breathing in deeply. ‘Forgive me for my concern, Highness,’ she said, and turned to walk away.

As she left, the auburn-haired girl peeled away from the group to greet him. ‘I think you need a moment in peace,’ she said, grinning at him and taking his hand.

She led him out of the hall and outside, into one of the quiet courtyards littered across the palace. This one was mercifully quiet, with only a light breeze and faint birdsong accompanying the pair. The sun was low in the sky, painting a pale sunset behind the palace's white marble.

‘You seem troubled, Highness,’ the girl said, skimming a hand over Altan's shoulders. ‘I am surprised a prince would have woes on the eve of his wedding.’

The orange light lit up her skin and made her blue eyes appear to glow. Altan smiled and caught her hand.

‘No woes,’ he said. ‘Merely concerns. Political marriages are not all bliss.’

‘Your bride seems less happy than you,’ the girl said, raising her eyebrows. She pulled Altan over to a seat bordering a little stone-bounded patch of greenery, a fine maple reaching over bright flowers and shrubs. Altan obliged her and sat, ignoring the cold stone for the girl’s warm skin.

‘I am sorry for her,’ the girl continued, twining a finger around a lock of Altan’s blue-black hair. ‘She seems so lonely. How long has she been here? Enough to make friends?’

‘Twelve years,’ Altan said. ‘She arrived here when we were six. She made friends, but...’ Altan waved a hand in the air. ‘Palace staff, pot-scrubbers and guards’ daughters.’

He could envision them so clearly – the woman who taught the pair to ride, lovingly easing Sascha into the saddle while unceremoniously dumping Altan onto the back of his lioness. The sword master who left him covered in bruises, while Sascha’s fair skin remained unblemished. A young cook who’d sneak up to their chambers to share leftovers with Sascha, the two of them giggling when Altan grimaced at the homely food.

All people who could not be invited to the wedding festivities. Altan didn’t know if he should have felt guilty or smug when he saw Sascha alone.

‘Did you never try to befriend her?’ the girl asked.

Altan could not hide the wince he made. ‘We are very different people,’ he said.

The girl laughed. ‘They say opposites attract, Highness.’

‘There is such a thing as being too different to be compatible.’

‘I don’t know,’ the girl said. ‘I think sometimes it’s a matter of perspective. Do you view a person’s differences as flaws, or as unique attributes?’

‘I don’t know,’ Altan said, starting to feel irritated. ‘I didn’t realise you wanted to come out here just to talk about her. Of all things, she’s the last person I want to think about tonight.’

The girl’s blue eyes narrowed. ‘It’s a shame for you to be so cruel to her, Altan. I would have liked to think you’d give her more of a chance.’

Altan blinked, shifting away from the girl. ‘Did my mother send you to talk to me?’

‘Your queen?’ The girl laughed. ‘She’s in no position to order me around, I’m afraid. No, I attended because I wanted to see how the wedding would play out. I didn’t realise the Baliqan prince was such an ass towards his bride, though. She seems nothing if not sweet.’

Altan's mouth fell open. 'Who do you think you are to speak to me like that?' he demanded.

The girl sighed, smoothing a hand over her face and hair. As her palm passed over her features, they *shifted*. Her skin became as green as a sapling's leaves, and her ears grew long and pointed. Her nose and cheekbones were sharper, her shapes harder, becoming too strange and beautiful to look directly at. Wings flashed kaleidoscopic colours as they shimmered into place. Only her hair, clothes and eyes remained the same.

'My queen is interested in the dramas of your court,' the fairy said. 'She sent me to collect gossip for entertainment – I'm no spy. She won't be entertained by a spoiled prince's arrogance, though. I will need a better story to tell her, so... I think it's time you had a change of perspective, dear Altan.' She laid a slender, gentle finger on his chest.

A sharp pain bloomed in Altan's stomach, a ripping sensation that spread outwards. He grunted. The pain surfaced, sending jolts of it over his skin, not unlike pins and needles. He looked at his arms; his clothes were melting into his skin. He stared in horror as the silk sank in, morphing; turning into gold-orange scales the same colour as his eyes.

The pain enveloped him completely, as his bones scraped and popped and groaned and *changed*. His lungs tore into shreds, and he felt long gashes slice across his ribs.

His fingers fused, his hands flattening and becoming translucent, the same occurring to his legs.

He gulped for air to scream, only to drown.

He felt himself being grabbed, and thrown. He splashed against water. The impact stung, but at last he could breathe. He gasped, sucking at the water. He tried to kick, but found he couldn't move his legs. He couldn't move his head to look at himself.

He drifted motionless for a moment, registering the new form of his body. There was a tail, and fins. He wriggled the tail, and could swim forward.

He looked up, and the fairy was grinning down at him, her face distorted by the surface of the water. He swam up and broke the surface. She smirked. 'Welcome to your new home, prince,' she said. 'I hear goldfish make wonderful companions.' Then with a flutter of her glittering wings, she was gone.

Altan looked around him. He was in a stone pool, with algae-covered rocks at the bottom, several plants, and other goldfish. They swam in lazy circles around the pond,

apparently oblivious to the newcomer.

Altan propelled himself upwards, pushing himself out of the water. If he pushed hard enough, he could glance out of the pond for moments at a time. The pond was in the centre of a circular courtyard that now seemed gargantuan, bounded by trees and a tall iron fence. Large glass doors led in to what appeared to be a bedchamber.

He knew where he was.

These were Sascha's chambers. She had a large pond in the courtyard outside her bedchamber, filled with bright little goldfishes that she cooed and chatted to. And now he was one of them.

There was a bang, like a door slamming. He heard footsteps, and the rustle of crumpled fabric. Someone came into view, slumping by the pond. He looked up to see milky cheeks blotched red, soft brown eyes watery. Tear stains tracked down the cheeks of a face he'd known for twelve years, that he'd never seen so close, or from below.

'You'll never believe the night I've had,' she sobbed to the fish.

Altan sunk low into the pond as she raged and wept and lamented her many frustrations with him that she never voiced in his presence.

New perspective.

Right.