

The Princess in the Tower

By Gavin Miller

The Players

Princess Julia

A princess defending an enchanted island

Sir Steven De Vere

A crusading knight

The Prologue

Julia (to the audience):

Ladies and gentlemen,
Welcome to our house.

It is a haunted place of sorts,
Haunted by brief glimpses of the past.

This little stage can grow to fill the world,
Or shrink down to the smallest part,
Of a secret thought.

In making others live, our selves must sleep,
Walking with another's gait,
And feigning other's speech.

But if in this we leave behind our hearts,
We lose our way,
The magic dies,
And all the play is lost.

We hope to charm with laughter and with song,
And leave sweet thoughts long after you have gone,
Back to the world and all your private cares.

For now be calm, sit back, relax.
Be happy if you dare.

Scene 1

Scene 1. The Castle. There is a wall dividing the stage which has a gate in it. The wall has a battlement allowing the person behind the wall to climb up into it for the purposes of observation and defense.

(Sir Steven De Vere, a knight in armor, approaches the wall from outside.)

Steven: Princess! (A pause) Princess!

(Princess Julia appears on the other side of the wall and climbs to the battlements.)

Julia: What do you want?

Steven: Princess Julia, I have been sent by King Richard of England, to ask you for your treasure so that we may continue our war in the Holy Land.

Julia: And what if I refuse to give it to you, as I intend to do?

Steven: Then I am supposed to insist.

Julia: You are not the first man to want to steal my fortune. My father was a great sorcerer and he left this island impregnable to attack.

Steven: So I have learned.

Princess Julia: Then what makes you think you can succeed where whole armies have failed?

Steven: Princess, when the stories of your great fortress reached the court of King Richard, I upbraided those cowardly knights for attacking you. To send a whole army against a single woman was most unchivalrous. They talked much about your magical defenses, but I, in a moment of bravado, claimed that I could win your treasure single-handed.

It was foolish, I now admit, but a knight's word is his bond, so here I am. King Richard gave me a week to see what I could accomplish. Then I must sail on to join him in Malta.

Julia: Why do you still wear your armor if you come in peace?

Steven: So that an angry arrow from you may not kill me.

Julia: I will do you no harm as long as you don't try to scale the walls.

Steven: I understand.

(A pause. Julia starts to climb down.)

Steven: Princess?

Julia (more exasperated): What do you want?

Steven: Well Princess, since I am to be here for so long, can we pass the time by talking to each other?

Julia: What could we possibly talk about for a whole week? We are strangers to one another?

Steven: If you will indulge me . . . Tell me which is the more beautiful, the blue of the sea or the blue of the sky?

Julia: The sky of course. Its subtle colors and variation exceed the palettes of our finest painters. The blue of the sea is just a distant echo of the beauty of the heavens.

Steven: But Princess, the sky is just a lantern to the beauty of the waves as they glitter in the dusk of evening. Surely it is the canvas, and not the candle, which holds the true secret of the painter's heart.

Julia: An interesting answer. What is your name?

Steven: Sir Steven De Vere of King Richard's Court.

Julia: Well, Sir Steven, if we are to talk like this much longer, I shall lose my voice. Because of this, I am going to let you into the first courtyard, but remember, if you try to harm me, you will not leave the castle alive.

Steven: Of course.

Julia: But if you are a gentleman, we may talk some more about the color blue.

Steven: I accept your terms.

(Julia opens the gate and lets Steven through.)

Julia: I see you have rather fine blue eyes. Was that really why you asked the question?

Steven: We can discuss a different color if you like.

Julia: Very well, which is the most perfect shade of green?

Steven: The green of emeralds glittering in a crown of gold.

Julia: Come, come, a very dull answer.

Steven: Forgive me. Which is your favorite green?

Julia: The best green is a blazing green - the green of a field of grass on a bright summer's day after a night of rain. The field beyond the outer walls was once a lush meadow - then the knights came and trampled it to mud.

Steven: I'm sorry.

Julia: You needn't be. I am used to the dust by now. But we are becoming melancholy. Let us choose another color. Red, that's it, which is the purest red - and no talk of rubies or you shall leave the castle and never return.

Steven: I fear that roses would also incur your displeasure, so I shall use cherries to champion the most passionate of colors.

Julia: In that we agree. Before these walls were built there was an orchard here. We had apples and peaches and oranges, and the reddest cherries you have ever seen. Only one tree now remains - deep in the heart of the castle. I draw water for it from the well by the tower. The tree is suffering, poor thing, from a lack of sunshine, but it does still blossom and bear fruit.

Would you like me to bring you some?

Steven: That would be very gracious of you. I'm famished.

Julia (leaving): I won't be long.

Steven (to himself): How lonely she is, and how gentle. The knights who attacked, sword in hand, would have done better to bring flowers.

Julia (returning): Here you are. I think these are the best ones, and I brought you some wine.

Steven: Delicious, thank you. (Aside) But a pewter plate, she does not trust me with gold.

(To Julia) And the wine is outstanding. But I'm afraid that it starts to grow dark so I shall bed down for the night, here if you don't mind.

Julia: Of course.

Steven: Might I make a request?

Julia: What is it?

Steven: May I tie a blue ribbon to this door in celebration of our discussion?

Julia: So that you may find your way out again one day.

Steven: No, well yes.

Julia: You are quite safe here Steven, and you can leave whenever you like.

Steven: Of course, I'm sorry.

Julia: No need. You are new to the castle. It must make you uneasy.

Steven: I'll be fine.

Julia: Well, sweet dreams then.

Steven: Good night.

Scene 2

Scene 2. Steven is on the left of the next wall asleep in the same position as he was on the right of the previous wall. Julia climbs this wall from the other side.

Julia: Good morning!

Steven: Ugh.

Julia: I enjoyed our conversation yesterday, but today I am the general of the castle again. We may talk, if you wish, but do not think that I can be charmed into giving up my treasure.

Steven: I would not dream of it. Princess, I have been on many quests and none of them were quite so hopeless, nor conducted in such charming company.

Julia: You can't keep my interest with mere flattery Steven. Do you have no more questions for me? Surely the topic of beauty is not so easily exhausted.

Steven: Indeed I do. Which is the more beautiful, the melody of bird song or the strumming of a lute?

Julia: Bird song, of course. The birds are free. Their whole body becomes an instrument of their health and love. A lute, on the other hand, is an unnatural prison for the fingers - a hollow box taught with cat gut. How can there be any comparison?

Steven: Bring me a lute, and I will show you.

Julia: I will.

(She climbs down, exits and then returns with a lute or guitar. She opens the gate and lets Steven through so that he may play to her.)

Julia (handing Steven the instrument): I'm afraid it's a little out of tune.

Steven: Never mind about that. (Tuning up the instrument) This reminds me of my serenading days.

Julia: I'm sure it does.

Steven: Let me see. Ah, I know the one.

(The words and music are from the second part of the song by John Bartlett, "Sweet birdes deprive us never")

Surcharged with discontent
To Silvane's boure I went
To ease my hevye grief oppressed hart
And trie what comfort winged creatures
Could yeelde unto my inward troubled smarte
By modulating their delightful mesurs
Mesurs delightful to my ears pleasing ever.
Of straines so sweet, sweet birdes deprive us never.

The thrush did pipe ful cleare,
And eke with very mery chere,
The lenit lifted uppe her pleasant voice
The goldfinch chirpid and the pie did chatter
The blackbird whistled and bedde me rejoice
The stockdove mormored with a solemne flat
The little daw ka ka he cried, the hicquaile he beside
Tickled his part, in a partiecoloured coate
The jay did blow his how boy gallantly
The wren did treble many a pretty note
The woodpecker did hamer melowdie
The kite tiw whiw whiw whiw full oft cried soring
Up aloft and down again returned presently
To whom the heralde of cornutoes all
Sung 'coockoo' ever, whilst poor Margery cride
'Who, who did ring night's larum bell withal?'
All did do well, O might I heare them ever,
Of straines so sweet, sweet birdes deprive us never.

Julia (almost in tears): Before the walls were built, the trees were full of birds. They used to fly up to my window every morning and sing until I awoke. I always buried my head under the pillow and wished that they would go away. I was only little then. I didn't understand. Now that they've gone, I miss them terribly. I'm sorry Steven. It was a beautiful song. I don't want to ruin it for you. I should go now.

Steven: Will I see you tomorrow then?

Julia: We'll see.

Scene 3

Scene 3: The scene is the previous scene shifted right to left. The right hand side of the stage now contains comfortable wooden benches.

Julia is up on the wall looking over it at Steven.

Julia (cheerfully): Good morning.

Steven: Good morning. You look happier today.

Julia: Yes I have had time to think. You are very clever Steven, with your stories and music of the world outside, but you are still a knight and I do not trust you.

Steven: I did not mean to upset you yesterday. When I'm away on a crusade, I sing that song to remind me of home. That was why I thought you would like it. Please forgive me for making you angry.

Julia: I never said I was angry with you. I said I don't trust you. That's quite different.

Steven: May I ask just one more question then?

Julia: If you insist.

Steven: Have you ever been in love, Princess?

Julia: I don't see why you want to know, but yes, twice. What about you?

Steven: Oh many times. Sometimes happily, often hopelessly, once just before a battle, and always just before I had to go away.

Julia: I see.

Steven: But love is too private a thing to shout to the roof tops.

Julia: Well, come into the next courtyard. There are comfortable benches there where we can talk.

(Julia climbs down and opens the gate.)

Steven: So you said twice.

Julia: Did I? Oh yes. Well the first one was Frederick, the head of the palace guard. I was very young- only fourteen and he was tall and strong and brave - and my father wanted me to marry him, so that I would be safe. No other kingdom would have me without an exorbitant dowry - and my father thought the money was better spent on fortifying the castle.

Steven: Did you love him?

Julia: I'm not sure. I was very much in awe of him - and when he was killed in one of the attacks, I cried for months.

Steven: And what about the other one?

Julia: Oh Edmund was delightful. He used to serve us at dinner. I think it started on his first day as squire at the court. He was serving me vegetables and I saw that his hand was shaking. I felt so sorry for him that I whispered in his ear "Don't be afraid. I love you."

He nearly dropped the spoon. I don't know why I said it. My father would have killed me if he'd known. I think he took my fancy, but part of it was pure mischief. Well, after that, Edmund often lingered over my plate, dishing out the carrots as lovingly as a miser counting his gold. Sometimes, when he was feeling very daring, he would brush my hand with his sleeve. I really was in love with him by then, so it used to thrill me to distraction.

One day he dropped a tiny note into my hand and I hid it instantly, knowing what it might propose. We met high up in the castle, in a room used for storing arrows and cross bows. It seemed like a fitting place for Cupid to run free, and we kissed many times.

Frederick had always been stiff and respectful. He kissed my hand once, but more out of duty than pleasure. Edmund, on the other hand, was like putting a buttercup to my lips and finding them golden. He was so gentle, I could have kissed him forever.

Then, of course, the guards came. I had been missed by my mother and she was turning the castle upside-down looking for me.

Steven: What did they do to him?

Julia: My father wanted him executed - but I pleaded and pleaded, saying I would kill myself if he hurt him. Eventually my father relented and banished Edmund to a far off land. I wrote reams of letters, of course, but no-one would take them for me. I never heard back until, one day, a note came from his father saying that Edmund was now married and living quite happily as a farmer.

Steven: I'm sorry.

Julia: There's no need. It was all a long time ago.

Steven: But why no-one since then? Were you too heartbroken?

Julia: You are sentimental, Steven. No, it wasn't that. You see the attacks came in earnest after that - Knights in armor with massive machines trying to smash the walls. Sometimes there were suitors - but when I refused their 'love', they used to return in anger at the head of an army.

Steven: You must hate us then.

Julia: Not really. I'm just tired of war-like men saying I'm the only woman they've ever loved.

Steven: Well, I won't do that. I've been in love lots of time.

Julia (disapprovingly): I can imagine. Who was your first love?

Steven: It rather depends on how you define it.

Julia (matter of factly): Let's start with a yearning ache which takes away all other hungers and banishes you from sleep.

Steven: Oh that! Well, when I was thirteen, I was in love with my cousin Isabella. She was a rather distant cousin and three years older than I was. I used to worship the ground she walked on. The problem was how to tell her without being laughed at. I thought about what to say for many weeks. Finally, after much agonizing, I had a brilliant idea.

I went to Isabella and said that one day I hoped to be a great knight, fierce at arms and a perfect gentleman with the ladies.

Julia: Very commendable, I'm sure.

Steven: That was the idea, so I asked her to teach me how to be charming. We could pretend that I was her suitor. She would rebuff me, as would a real lover, but afterwards she could explain to me what she was really thinking.

Julia: You were a rather cunning thirteen.

Steven: Well, maybe I was fourteen. I don't really remember. Anyway, Isabella explained that the way to a young lady's heart was to go out on a quest and bring back priceless treasures. She also noted that I was quite ignorant about the herbs and wild flowers which grew near the castle. Each day, to test my resolve, she would ask me to bring her a particularly obscure flower or curative plant. If I succeeded, she would allow me a single kiss. If I failed, I suffered the cruelest of punishments - I was barred from her presence for three days.

Julia: A subtle cousin indeed, enhancing both your ardor and your learning at the same time.

Steven: That seemed to be the plan. Unfortunately, I was always occupied learning heraldry or studying horsemanship. To save myself the bother of finding those elusive herbs, I used to

employ a stable boy called Anthony. He was a veritable magician at rustling up whatever obscure plants my cousin wanted. Well satisfied, I gave him a farthing every time he helped me.

Julia: You can't have really been in love then, to have deceived your beloved in such a way.

Steven: Oh, but I was! The fear of not seeing her for three whole days drove me frantic with despair.

Julia: So how did it end?

Steven: One day, I came to Anthony earlier than expected and found him laying in the hay with Isabella. They were obviously in love and were joking about the flowers which she should ask me for that day. Knowing how lazy I was, Isabella had thought up her clever plan. She had found a way of giving her lover a little money without offending his dignity.

Julia: I don't know who was more despicable, you or your cousin.

Steven: I was a mere pawn, a go-between. Think of my age.

Julia: A rather knowing pawn.

Steven: Better a knowing pawn than a dead king.

Julia: Very witty. Anyway, what happened to your cousin and Anthony? Did they marry?

Steven: Sadly no. She was swept off her feet by a fierce and wealthy knight who carried her off to his castle and was never seen again. Anthony died from the scratch of a poisoned rose.

Julia: I'm not sure that I believe any of this you know.

Steven: Well, what do you expect? If I told you about my later loves it might make you angry or jealous.

Julia: So you made it up.

Steven: Perhaps.

Julia: Well, to atone for lying to me, if you did, I command that tomorrow you must tell one of your recent adventures. If it fails to be exciting and scrupulously truthful, I shall ban you from seeing me for three days.

Steven: A cruel fate indeed.

Julia: And no less than you deserve.

Scene 4

Scene 4. (Shifted again. This time the new courtyard has benches and a couch.)

Steven (in a friendly way): Princess! Princess! Are you awake?

Julia (enters yawning): I could barely sleep. I kept thinking of what tales of valor might unfold today.

Steven: Now you are teasing me, I think. (In a huffy voice) If you really don't want a story, we can always talk about something else.

Julia: What do you suggest?

Steven: Let's see. Answer me this. Is it men or women who fall more deeply in love?

Julia: Women, of course. There is no room for discussion.

Steven: But I claim it is men.

Julia: Then I see we have a battle on our hands. (She opens the gate.) Come through and state your reasons.

Steven: A topic such as love is very complicated, so I shall start with an obvious fact. It is widely accepted that women are beautiful creatures who far surpass men in both softness of skin and grace of movement.

Julia: Undoubtedly.

Steven: Then it is the male heart which is more often swept away with tender feelings. Women may find us charming, but men are practically forced by nature to be in love.

Julia: A very dubious argument. It is the fickle nature of men's hearts which forces us to become more beautiful. Women love far deeper qualities in men than their appearance. The best of men may be brave but gentle, and artful but true.

Steven: And what is it that makes the warrior gentle, or the trickster sincere? It is the alchemy of love which transforms our fickle hearts into gold.

Julia: Ah, you are clever - but false. You claim that women only love in men that part which loves them first. The more we love you, the more it shows that you love us.

Steven: Isn't that right?

Julia: Oh Steven! A woman can love a man before he even thinks of her, and long after he has forgotten to do so. Women are the raisers of children. Their hearts do not waver in the wind of temptation. They plant a tree and nurture it and help it grow. They don't just ravish and move on.

Steven: And what about men?

Julia: Men love because they are vain. The more beautiful the beloved, the prouder they will be to show her off to their friends. If men love more it is because they are thrilled by the prospect of using a woman as a mirror to their own greatness.

Steven: So men do love more, even if it is out of vanity - so I win the argument!

Julia (very angry): That isn't the point, Steven.

Steven: Oh, I thought it was. Well, anyway, what shall we talk about next?

Julia: Something safer, I think.

Steven: How about the weather?

Julia: The weather is anything but safe. Since the trees were destroyed, we've had nothing but dust storms and burning heat.

Steven: Yes, I'm sorry, I forgot about the meadow.

Julia: No need, it isn't your fault. Let's change the subject.

Steven: Well, Princess, answer me this. Is it better to fall two hundred feet to your death or to be slowly tortured in a dark dungeon?

Julia: Neither prospect sounds very enticing. Why do you ask?

Steven: That was exactly the dilemma I was faced with during the siege of Acre.

Julia: I sense an adventure about to unfold.

Steven: A small one, perhaps.

Julia: Well start from the beginning and tell it properly. Remember, it must be truthful and exciting, otherwise the ultimate penalty.

Steven: Three days of seeing you makes three days of not seeing you seem like an eternity.

Julia: Charmingly put. Please continue.

Steven: With the story or the compliments?

Julia: The story, of course.

Steven: Very well. King Richard and his army were laying siege to Acre on the way to Jerusalem and we were confronted with a dangerous problem. Many of our supplies of food had turned rancid and the local people had burned the fields and taken their livestock into the city.

Julia: So you either had to attack or starve.

Steven: Exactly. Now by a great piece of good fortune, we had in our army two Turks who knew the city intimately. One of them revealed to King Richard that there was a secret passage which led right up into the city behind the fortifications. He was not sure where the passage ended nor could he say whether its existence was known to the Sultan.

Since this passageway might be of great advantage to us in storming Acre, King Richard decided to send one of his men into the tunnel to see what he could discover.

Julia: That must have been very dangerous.

Steven: Indeed it was. The man had to be chosen very carefully, any mistakes could be fatal to our cause. Now, King Richard was aware that I was one of the last remaining Knights of St George.

Julia: Which meant what?

Steven: We are a secret brotherhood of knights. We pride ourselves both on skill at arms and stealth in movement. This allows us to travel silently towards an enemy in near total darkness. Originally, of course, such stealth was vital when creeping up on a dragon as it slept on its piles of treasure. Lately, though, such pursuits have fallen out of fashion.

Most knights content themselves with clanking armor and flashing blades. They claim that silent walking is unmanly. Fortunately for our cause, King Richard knew the value of surprise, so he chose me to find out what I could.

Julia (concerned): Weren't you afraid?

Steven: I was a little. Being alone I had no hope of fighting my way out if I was discovered. It was agreed that if I did not return, our army would give up the passageway as lost and make a frontal assault on the city.

Julia (very interested): So what happened?

Steven: The chosen hour came, and I entered the tunnel. I'll spare you the details of the rotting skeletons and man-eating rats.

Julia: Thank you.

Steven: After picking my way along the murky pathway I came to a large stone door which opened silently to my touch. I peered round it and saw that I was in a lavish courtyard containing an ornamental garden. In the garden were fig trees and flowers, and sparkling fountains of fresh water. The trees cast leafy shadows on the ground and in this oasis of silence I saw silken couches fit for a king. I realized to my horror that I had stumbled into the harem of the Sultan of Acre.

Julia: How did you know?

Steven: Well, on one of the couches was a very beautiful woman. She couldn't have been more than twenty - and she had lost herself in a luxurious slumber. She smiled as she slept and it was as if the garden she dreamt of was even lovelier than the one in which she lay.

Julia: So you very sensibly turned round and went straight back to King Richard.

Steven: I should have, I know, but I couldn't help myself. I walked a little closer. Enraptured by her restful breathing I became clumsy, made a noise and woke her. Now I knew that any man found in the harem would suffer a terrible death - and this would be doubly so for a Christian spy - so I fell to my knees in terror.

She was about to cry out when, in a moment of tender panic, I looked into her eyes and kissed her hand.

(Steven does this to Julia as if acting out the part.)

Now to my great good fortune, she had never seen a man with blue eyes before. All she had been taught since childhood was that we Christians were ugly monsters who raped and pillaged and murdered with no mercy. But here was a man on his knees kissing her hand, and then her other hand - indeed showing her gentleness and tender affections which the aged Sultan had long since abandoned in his arrogance.

(He kisses Julia's hands and arms profusely.)

Julia (slightly pulling away): You're a very ardent storyteller.

Steven: I was just trying to bring the story to life.

Julia: Well, being too vivid can spoil the effect.

Steven: As you wish. (He releases her hands.)

Julia: So what did you do next?

Steven: Seeing that she wasn't going to give me away, I gradually rose to my feet. I was about to hazard a real kiss when we heard guards approaching. She took my hand and led me to a great

urn into which I slipped as she placed the lid over my head. The guards came on their inspection, but did not discover me. I then had to wait some time for my new lover to return.

Julia: You do fall in love quickly.

Steven: Under the circumstances, it seemed like the sensible thing to do. To my great surprise, when my protector returned, she brought all the other ladies of the court with her. They gasped to see my strange appearance and stared at me with frightened eyes. Some of them giggled and then one of them came forward. To my great relief she was a Byzantine woman who had been taken prisoner. She even spoke a little English.

Julia: Was she pretty?

Steven: They all were really, although this was in a time before I met you.

Julia: Stop it you rogue. On with the tale.

Steven: She asked me what I was doing in the harem. I answered that I was on a secret mission for King Richard. I explained that I intended them no harm and it was only beauty which had uncovered my plan, otherwise I could have crept away unnoticed.

I said I had come to steal away their secrets, but instead the young girl had stolen away my heart.

Julia: Which they believed of course.

Steven: I'm not sure, but the lady in question laughed very prettily and told me that her name was Jasmine. I said "Jasmine" many times, and most wistfully, which seemed to have the desired effect. Then I asked very politely whether I could leave. I said it would be punishment enough never to see Jasmine again.

Julia: To give up your new lover so soon. Really Steven, this isn't a story to charm a woman's heart.

Steven: Well, at the back of my mind, I couldn't help remembering the horrible tortures I was risking.

Julia: I see.

Steven: Anyway, the ladies held a conference. The Byzantine woman explained to me that the women had great sympathy for my plight. In many ways they were prisoners themselves. On the other hand, they were loyal to their master and could not let a spy escape to help the king of their enemies.

My heart sank, and I was torn between trying to climb down the city walls or killing as many guards as I could before I was taken.

Julia: Your terrible dilemma.

Steven: Just so. However, the Byzantine woman continued. As long as I was not free to return, it seemed to the women that I would serve just as well trapped in the harem as in a dungeon.

Julia: I think I can see where this is going.

Steven: Perhaps. Well Jasmine was the youngest of the women, and had come to the harem when she was still a child. She had never known true love - merely the fumbblings of an old man - and she had rather taken a fancy to me. The ladies were prepared to hide me and feed me well so long as Jasmine's ardor flourished.

Julia (sarcastically): Oh poor prisoner.

Steven: Indeed, but I adjusted. Jasmine was the sweetest girl I ever knew. She was generous, kind and playful - and she spoke no English whatsoever, so we never had any arguments.

Julia: How long did this go on for?

Steven: My sweet incarceration lasted for six days. Alas, after that, tragedy struck.

Julia: What happened?

Steven: King Richard, despairing of my life, launched a frontal attack on the city. One morning I awoke as knights poured in through a breach in the walls and found me in the arms of my beloved.

Julia: I would have strung you up to the nearest tree.

Steven: In fact, they were quite understanding. They took me to King Richard who welcomed me as if returning from the dead. In gratitude for my safety in the harem, I placed all the ladies of the court under my personal protection. I'm glad to say that this prevented any of those appalling atrocities so common in a conquering army.

Julia: And what happened to Jasmine?

Steven: When the siege was over, she pleaded with me to stay, but my first loyalty was to the king. I like to think that she helped to protect the Christian women when the city was retaken, two years later, by the Saracens.

Julia: Is that it? Your great story.

Steven: Wasn't it exciting? Danger and adventure mixed with beauty and charm.

Julia: But how truthful was it?

Steven (as if found out): Ah.

Julia: You would have been thrown to the wolves in five minutes. Knights of St. George indeed. I heard you coming from over two miles away.

Steven: So you didn't like it?

Julia: Exciting and truthful were my requirements, on pain of three days banishment. What have you to say in your defense before I pass sentence?

Steven: How long do I have?

Julia: Take as long as you like.

Steven: Well firstly, I have been a knight since I was eighteen, and a squire before that. My life has consisted of war or preparation for war, for almost as long as I can remember.

Julia (sarcastically): Which left you with no adventures to speak of.

Steven: As you know, war is mostly dust and waiting, with brief moments of terror in between. I don't enjoy killing, and I would never brag about it simply to entertain a lady.

Julia: I'm sorry. You're right of course.

Steven: Secondly, tales of romance are much more enchanting than tales of valor.

Julia: Quite true.

Steven: And thirdly, much as it breaks my heart to think about it, I have to leave tomorrow.

Julia: I thought you said we had a week together!

Steven: I said King Richard gave me a week, but it's a long journey to Malta.

Julia: That isn't fair!

Steven: Why not?

Julia: You've done most of the talking.

Steven: But Princess, one of your sentences is worth ten of my lengthy speeches.

Julia: A cunning answer.

Steven: And tomorrow shall be dedicated to you.

Julia (jealously): And the day after will be filled with Jasmine or whoever the next one is who comes along.

Steven: If Jasmine tries to enter my dreams she will find them filled with thoughts of you.

Julia: Go to bed Steven. I've had enough of this.

Steven: Forgive my silly stories. I was just trying to make you smile.

Julia: Don't worry, you did.

Scene 5

Scene 5. The same the next day.

Julia: Steven, wake up! The Sultan's guards are coming!

Steven: What? Oh, it's you.

Julia: Yes. Now do get up. Today is dedicated to me if you remember.

Steven: Of course. I hang on your every word.

Julia: I've been thinking about that, and I've decided to ask you some questions for a change.

Steven: Whatever you like.

Julia: Well firstly, did you really have a cousin called Isabella?

Steven: She wasn't exactly my cousin, but I was in love with her, and so was my older brother. He was the one who kissed her, whilst I had to go off and find the flowers. He was bigger than I was and a terrible bully. That was why I decided to become a great warrior, so I could get my own kisses. Of course life never quite works out the way we plan.

Julia: Such a tale would break my heart, if it were true, but the answer is satisfactory.

Julia: And what about Jasmine?

Steven: Every word was true except . . .

Julia: Except?

Steven: Except for the rats. I made that bit up to make it more exciting, as you requested.

Julia: Well my third question is most unselfish - and since today is dedicated to me, you must answer it honestly.

Steven: As if I would do anything else.

Julia: Won't it be more dangerous for you to travel if you set out from here later in the day? You could be set upon in the dark and killed.

Steven: The danger is slight. I am a knight at arms, after all, and if they capture me, I could always talk them to death.

Julia: Or talk them to life as you have with me.

Steven: When you speak with your heart, my words seem feeble in comparison.

Julia (reprovingly): What a shame then, that a woman's love is a poor tarnished weakly thing compared to a man's.

Steven: Oh not that again! I wish that I'd never brought it up. Both love equally, at different times in different ways. I didn't mean to upset you.

Julia: You didn't, and I shouldn't harp on it, but I do have another question. Don't answer if you don't want to.

Steven: I shall try, of course.

Julia: My question is this. If you hate fighting so much - and love life - why do you go on crusades? You know that they gain little and bring about great suffering.

Steven: I fight not for the cross, but for Richard. He is a brave and just man who would be a great ruler if he only stayed at home. His brother John, on the other hand, is a greedy tyrant who ravages the land when Richard is away. I believe that if John ever became king, he would drive my countrymen to the point of rebellion.

Julia: So you fight to protect Richard?

Steven: If I can. I am his shield in battle and the bane of his assassins. I check his food and taste his wine. He is also my friend, and I would give my life to save him.

Julia: Well, try to save both lives, if you can.

Steven: Of course, life has many joys for me.

Julia: I have a last question for you.

Steven: Very well.

Julia: Since your first day here you haven't asked me for treasure to help your crusade. Why not?

Steven: Once I got to know you, it didn't seem polite.

Julia: A rather evasive answer.

Steven: A sense of mystery is part of my charm.

Julia: Maybe your charm is a mystery.

Steven (insulted): Thanks very much.

Julia: But you do leave me deeply mystified.

Steven: If things were different, I wouldn't leave you at all - but time is passing, so I must ask two questions of my own.

Julia: Very well. What is the first?

Steven: This is very embarrassing.

Julia: Never mind. I promise not to laugh.

Steven: In that case, no I really shouldn't.

Julia: Come on!

Steven: If I must - How do I get out of the castle?

Julia: I thought you might ask that. I don't know if you realized it, but we've been circling the walls never getting any closer to the center. The angles make it rather confusing. (rather bitterly) It's all part of the brilliance of our defenses.

Steven: I see.

Julia: If you go through that gate and turn left you should find your piece of blue ribbon.

Steven: Thank you.

Julia: And the second question?

Steven: Tell me Princess, which are more beautiful, the tears of laughter or the tears of farewell?

Julia: The tears of farewell since they carry distilled within them all the laughter and tenderness of our friendship.

(She starts to cry.) I didn't mean to cry. I promised myself that I wouldn't.

Steven: So did I.

Julia: You should go now. Dusk will come all too soon.

Steven: Goodbye then. Try to be happy.

Julia: Take care, Steven.

Steven: I will.

Scene 6

Scene 6. The same two years later. Julia looks out over the desert. She is alone. A storm is blowing louder and louder.

Julia: Oh another sand storm. A cloud of dust rising to the heavens. (She sighs.) Well Sir Steven what do you say to that? To the inexperienced eye, one might think of travelers - a magnificent parade of elephants carrying a famous king.

But we know better don't we Sir Steven? This is a desolate isle - unvisited for many years. It is most cruel of the dust storm to try to trick us like that.

It is even said that the wind can mimic the sound of a loved-one's voice. The wind lashes the rocks with harsh blows and they cry out for mercy.

Steven (mostly muffled and weak, almost drowned out by the wind):

Princess! Princess!

Julia: There you see! You can almost hear him calling to me. Madmen say if you talk to the wind, it will answer you.

(Calling out unbelievably in a haunting voice.) Steven, where are you?

Steven: Over here!

Julia (now believing): Steven! Over where? Keep calling. I'll come to you.

Steven: Over here. I can't see you. I've got sand in my eyes.

Julia: Don't move. I'm coming.

Steven: I won't.

Julia (finding him as the storm reaches its loudest): Take my hand.

Steven: Where are we going?

Julia: Into the passageway.

(They enter a tunnel and the sound of the storm recedes.)

Steven: What passageway? (rubbing his eyes) I think I can see a bit now.

Julia: Oh Steven, you came back to me.

(She throws her arms round him and he winces in pain.)

Steven: Ah.

Julia: You're hurt!

Steven: It's nothing. If I could just sit down for a while, I'll be fine.

Julia: Of course. I'm sorry. Follow me. Be careful. It's dark.

Steven (weakly): I will.

(She takes him by the hand and leads him directly to the bedchamber where he sit on the bed.)

Julia (looking at his wounds): You're bleeding!

Steven (slightly disoriented): Am I? I thought it had stopped by now.

Julia (tearing up the sheets): What happened to you?

Steven: It was stupid of me. I was so glad to be back here that I let my guard down. Two robbers jumped me from behind and one plunged a dagger in my arm.

Julia: I did tell you about the robbers.

Steven: Well two years is a long time, and I forgot.

Julia: Two years is a very long time. It seemed like forever.

Steven: I know.

Julia: I thought I would never see you again.

Steven: I wanted to come back sooner, but things happened.

Julia: What things? Tell me everything.

Steven: Where shall I start?

Julia: The crusade, start with that. How is King Richard?

Steven: It went well at first. The Saracens were driven back to the gates of Jerusalem. We could see the domes and rooftops on the other side of the wall, but it was hopeless. We couldn't get to them. A stalemate ensued and weeks turned into months of no progress.

Julia: Was there enough to eat?

Steven: Hardly, and the water was awful. Many of us became ill and winter closed in. I was struck with fever and lay delirious for four days. When I woke up, they told me that Richard had received bad news from England and had set off as fast as he could. He went disguised as a musician to take a short cut through Europe.

Julia: Wasn't that dangerous.

Steven: I'm afraid so. The Emperor caught him in Vienna and demanded a huge ransom for his release. England is being torn apart for gold.

Julia: And they sent you out to find it.

Steven: As usual.

Julia: Oh Steven, I wish I could help. I just can't. These simple things are the only treasure I possess. My father spent all our money building this castle. The larger it grew, the more men came to steal what they thought must be inside. To keep them off we spent all our money on moats and towers and fortifications.

Steven: Don't you think I know that? You are the treasure in the castle, poor, orphaned and lonely as you are. You are why I came back, not for gold.

Julia: Do you really mean that?

Steven: Of course.

Julia: But what about the king? You can't let Richard lie in prison whilst we are happy. That would be horrible.

Steven: Oh Richard will get his money soon enough. I went to every castle in England asking for it. They threw insults at me when I came, and sometimes worse than that. But they gave me the money eventually.

As I stood there in the rain, vilified and miserable, I couldn't help thinking of you and the lovely things you had said to me. I promised myself that I would come back one day and stay with you if I managed to raise the king's ransom.

Julia: How long will you stay this time?

Steven: Forever, if you'll have me.

Julia: But how shall we live? The castle makes everything so barren and desolate.

Steven: We'll tear down the castle and plant cherry stones from your beloved tree. We'll grow orchards and meadows and wild flowers. (He produces a wild flower from his tunic.)

Julia: But my father's magic is too strong for us. Many have tried to breach the walls and failed. The castle is indestructible.

Steven: With our kisses, your father's magic becomes your magic. You can change his plan into your own. You are a queen now, and I love you. (He kisses her.) And one day your magic will become our children's magic - so we had better teach them all we've learned.

(A pause)

Steven: Julia?

Julia: Yes.

Steven: You're not saying very much.

Julia: No.

Steven: You do love me just a little don't you?

Julia: Oh Steven. I did miss your silly questions.

Steven: And I missed your beautiful replies.

(They kiss again.)

The End

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