

# amaris



## *Journey of Destiny*

Eighteen-year-old Amaris has grown up in the Eastern palace of King Merchal, as an adopted daughter and unlikely heir to his kingdom. Even as the mystery of her exotic past is revealed to her, she embarks on a journey that will send her spiraling through untouched pathways of her past, and into the grasp of eternity.

## *the scimitar and the rose*

A haunting vision. A bewitching spell. The premise of evil lurking in the shadows. As King Merchal's palace prepares for the much-anticipated summer festival, a powerful adversary bides his time, waiting for the final showdown. The one who rises to the challenge will be master of all.



**amarís**

**JASMINE ST. CLAIR**

# Contents

## **JOURNEY OF DESTINY ..... 1**

Once Upon a Time...	1
In Search of Destiny	11
Exchange of Secrets	19
Father Michael	27
Father Michael's Discovery	35
Step by Step	45
To Face the Past	53
The Vision	63
Gain and Loss	71
The Touch of God	77
Forever	83

## **THE SCIMITAR AND THE ROSE ..... 91**

The Power of Life and Death	93
The Scimitar and the Rose	101
Preparations	109
The Web of Temptation	115
Suspicious	123
The Spell of the Ring	129
The Confusion	137
Escape and Capture	147
Confrontation	157
Beyond the Hour	165
The Challenge Begins	173
Proof of Power	181
Not Goodbye	191

Cover by Hugo Westphal  
ISBN # 3-905332-55-8

Copyright © 1999 by Aurora Production, AG, Switzerland.  
Printed in Thailand.

*journey of destiny*

- /-

## **ONCE UPON A TIME...**

The smell of incense was thick in the air as Amaris lay sprawled on her bed. Always graceful and dainty in public, this was her one time to relax and be herself. This was Amaris' favorite place of all, her most private chambers, behind the many folds of protective curtains that separated her from the servants and ladies in waiting that stood without.

Amaris was a petite but shapely teenager, with soft golden hair that fell clear to her feet when she let down her lovely tresses (a thing which did not happen very often). She had almond-shaped eyes which sparkled and danced.

Amaris stretched her arms way up, and wiggled her torso from side to side. Ah, relaxation! Such a word was scarcely within her vocabulary, for it seemed that her every waking moment was taken up with rituals, ceremonies and pageantry of the sort that often made her cringe. Not that she didn't like it, but it just had its times!

Her thoughts were interrupted by the gentle pinging of a bell. It was the entry bell, the equivalent of a knock upon the folds of her curtains.

"Do come in," she spoke softly.

It was Jordan, her most trusted eunuch. "My lady," he said, "the king wishes me to inform you that he

would like to see you presently. He is readying himself in his chambers, and will join you in the palace gardens.”

“Very well,” Amaris responded. “Tell his majesty that I will be there.”

Jordan was gone, and Amaris once again descended into the depths of her thoughts.

Whenever she was troubled, she pictured herself descending into a deep cavelike hole in the ground. She would climb down a ladder, into the stone-hewn, circular pit. At the bottom was a chair, and there she would sit and ponder her life until such a time as she felt it was safe to return to the outside world again. This meditative ritual did not always provide relief, but seemed to give her some comfort when things became a bit too overwhelming.

In her mind, she was climbing down that inner ladder now, and having positioned herself on her chair, she thought about her life.

“My God!” she exclaimed. The sound of her own voice startled her. She continued on—still aloud, but lowering her voice so the servants would not be alarmed.

“How have I come to this place? What am I doing here? Here I am, residing in the palace of one of the most powerful monarchs of the East, as though I were royalty myself!” She shook her head to one side, leaning over towards the mirror that hung by her bed, and watched as the golden curls tumbled out of her headpiece and fell around her shoulders. “That feels so much better,” she sighed.

The bell outside rang again, and she hastily returned her hair to its semi-permanent placement. She drew the veil down over her face and her robe around her slim frame, and stepped out from behind the curtains.



Once in the palace gardens, Amaris felt very small

indeed, dwarfed by the beauties that surrounded her. Tall trees of many shades of green towered above her, and tropical flowers of all kinds bloomed in abundance. Exotic birds of paradise sang in the trees. High above it all, the midday sun smiled, adding a touch of warmth and serenity to her anxious heart.

She did not have to wait long before she heard the swishing of robes approaching behind her. She did not turn around at once, but waited, grasping a wooden railing with her slender white hands, and looking off towards the horizon.

A low commotion sounded behind her. She could tell that the soldiers and servants accompanying the monarch were withdrawing. She turned to face His Royal Highness King Merchal. As always, Amaris caught her breath at the impressive sight. Brightly and lavishly arrayed, he was the picture of riches and elegance. His brown face was more than half-covered by white, bushy whiskers. Beneath thick eyebrows, his fiery blue eyes smiled kindly at her.

Rising from the deep curtsy which served to hide her awe, Amaris timidly accepted the king’s outstretched hand.

“My lord,” she began, “I am honored at this request. I am filled with wonder that you would wish to see me. But I am your humble servant, and please know that your wish is my command. You have but to utter your request and...”

“Silence, child,” the king interrupted. “I have not come to petition you. I could have done that formally. I need to speak with you about a matter of great importance. Come.” He grasped her arm, and they began to walk.

“Amaris,” the monarch’s voice softened, “you know that I care about you a great deal. I have raised you all these years as my own daughter. It has brought me great joy to watch you grow, and to see you learn and become such a lovely young woman. You have

helped to fill the void...”

His voice trailed off, and for a moment, Amaris forgot everything. She was no longer an eighteen-year-old woman; she was no longer in the presence of the most powerful man in the country. She was suddenly a little girl again, impulsively flinging her arms around the neck of the man who had been so kind to her. How she wished she could ease his pain!

“But you have, my child,” Merchal said, looking into her eyes, “you have given me simple, childlike love, and for this I am truly grateful. And that is why I now must come to you and tell you the truth, so that you may decide for yourself what course your life should take.”

Amaris felt like her insides were freezing up. Somehow, she had known that this day would come, and she had looked forward to it with a mixture of dread and anticipation—anticipation and curiosity at being able to at last know the secret of her life, but dread at the thought that what she would learn could tarnish her life, perfect as it now seemed.

But she had a great love and respect for her monarch, and she knew that whatever he chose to do, he did so after a great deal of silent prayer and meditation. And therefore she knew that whatever it was, it would be the best thing, when all was said and done.

“The path your life may take, my dear,” Merchal’s voice was soft as they continued to walk through the lush greenery, “may be full of twists and turns. But always remember to keep your eyes on that light in the sky. Keep your eyes looking upward, and you will have the strength to see your quest through till the end.”

Amaris nodded, and swallowed hard, hoping to suppress the tears that were hiding below the surface. She didn’t know why she felt almost engulfed by a feeling of loss. The king hadn’t even finished talking

yet!

“My child, you were very young when you were brought here to me.” He sighed, and his eyes took on a faraway look, as though he was contemplating a day long since gone by, with a mixture of pain and regret.

“In truth you were as much a boon to me as you may have felt that I was to you. After the tragic death of my angel of light, and with her my dearest child, I had no reason to live, no hope to go on. If it had not been for my duty to my people, I probably would have sunk into a living death.

“But then you came, and it was as if you took the place of my own child, and you brought back life and joy into my world. You saved me. And when I realized that God had sent you to me, I swore to Him an oath. On that day I cried tears of thankfulness as I realized that my life and my sanity had been restored. I promised God that one day I would return you unto Him, when the time came.”

The king paused for a moment, looking at a bush of lovely yellow blossoms. He plucked one, and held it out. “Stay pure, my dear,” he said. “Always soak up the dew of the morning, as I have taught you. Always dig your roots deep into the fertile soil, and close your petals to the harsh rays that would dry you up and blemish your soul. Share your beauty freely, as the gift of God that it is. May the warmth and light of your love be a strength to many, as it has been to me.” He pressed the stem of the flower tightly into her hand.

“And so, Amaris, the time has come. Not many days ago, as I sat upon my bench beneath the stars, communing with my Maker, I felt a voice speaking within my being. I knew that it was time for me to let you go.”

“But Father!” Amaris began. “My lord, I cannot...”  
 “Make not haste to speak, little one.” The king was,

as always, patient but firm. “Hear my tale through till the end, and then make your decision. For the choice is yours. God knows that I would have you stay here until the very last of my days, but for my part, I must fulfill the promise I have made unto Him who is Most High, to return you when His time was right. And from there, the choice must be carried on by you.”

Amaris walked on in silence, wondering what this great mystery could be that the king seemed so hesitant to tell her.

“On that day long ago—which was to end up so blessedly, but to which I awoke dreading life itself and feeling as a lesser dreg of society than those unfortunate souls who found themselves in chains at my command—I told my God that He must give me a reason and a purpose to my life. Before this time, I had held my God in high esteem, but He always seemed fairly distant from me. However, on this day I heard His voice speaking to me, as a hushed whisper within the innermost recesses of my soul. It is a blessed sound which I have heard many a time since then, and which I love to hear. But it was altogether new to me then.

“This voice of Majesty instructed me that I was to go into the city, and that in the marketplace He would tell me what I was to do next. As I arrived in the midst of the bustling square, my attention was drawn towards a large vendor of slaves. I felt the Most High Being guiding my gaze as I passed over one and then the other. And at the very end of the row of miserable souls, I saw...”

Amaris smiled in remembrance of that moment. The visit of the king that day was one of the very few things there had been to smile about for a long time before that!

“I saw a small, frail little slip of a girl—barely five years old, or so I thought.”

“Although I was well past my sixth birthday!” Amaris burst out eagerly.

“And so I was to find out. For it seemed to me that the dove of God settled down upon your golden hair, and your whole body was illumined in a glorious light divine. It was so very real to me that I looked around about myself anxiously, to see if others were taking note also of this glorious miracle. But everyone was jostling and shouting and pointing towards the slaves that appeared to be more useful or marketable. As I paused before venturing in closer, I heard that voice speak to me once more. Would you like to hear what He said?”

Amaris nodded. She had never heard this story before, as from her childhood she and her adopted father had agreed never to talk about her past. Now a whole new perspective on her life was being opened up.

The king pulled a weather-beaten scroll from his pocket, and Amaris looked on in surprise.

“Did you dictate those words to your scribe right in that very marketplace, before all those people?” She couldn’t help being amused by the thought.

“Of a truth I did!” King Merchal chuckled at the recollection, and seemed rather surprised himself. “I am not very sure just why I felt so compelled to do so, but I know that many is the time that in reading over these Words I have been grateful that I did. They have been an enormous source of strength to me.”

He began to read, slowly and solemnly:

“On this day, let it be recorded that I, the Lord God above all gods and the Most High above all beings, have heard the request of your heart, and have given you the answer to your petitions. This frail creature upon which you see a portion of My Spirit descending is the embodiment of My response to you. For you she has been sent, and her life has been prepared for this purpose. She shall bring great joy and strength



into your life, and give you new meaning and purpose. She shall be all that you have asked for. And yet, there shall be a cost on your part.

“For in the day that I shall speak forth My voice unto you, you shall return her unto Me. For she is to be My servant. Yours is the task of grooming her and teaching her, and then she must be entrusted into My hand for such a time as I shall see fit, to complete a very special mission which I shall reveal to her at a time appointed. Give her unto Me at the time of My request, and it may be that she shall be returned unto you in due season.”

For one long moment, it seemed that every plant and creature in the grove held its breath. The king courageously cut through the silence. “So you see,” he smiled at her tenderly, “you have been promised and spoken for already. I cannot but comply with His orders.”

“I understand, my father, I do. But what do I do now? What does He want of me?”

The king looked away for a moment and then replied, “I have not been shown clearly where you are to go or what you are to accomplish. All I know is that you must set out on a journey for God, not knowing what will be your final destination or why your journey, simply trusting that as you take this first step that I shall outline to you, God will reveal His great plan to you.”

“I believe, but I don’t know if I can trust Him as I see that you do.”

“My child,” the king spoke wisely, “if you do not yet feel that you can trust the Most High Lord above all, then think upon this humble servant of His. Have you fared well in your time with me?”

“More than all things, my lord. You have brought me into your own household as though I were flesh of your flesh. I have been given the place of an heir, and the unconditional love given to an offspring. I

trust you implicitly and I love you with all of my heart.”

“Thus and more do I feel for my Creator,” the old man spoke humbly. “So can you not transfer that same love and reverence and confidence which is in your heart for me, unto One for whom I feel the same? If you are not yet able to leave everything out of love for Him, will you do it out of love for me?”

There was nothing to decide. Amaris knew that she would do anything for this one who had done so much for her.

“Indeed, my lord,” she bowed her head. “I submit unto your will, and I will perform the will of Him who is Most High.”

The king placed his arm around the shoulders of the young one whom he loved so dearly. “Now come, child,” he said, “let us talk about where you shall go from here.”

## IN SEARCH OF DESTINY

The sun was still high in the sky as Amaris turned her eyes for the last time to look at the palatial mansion that she had come to know as home for so many years. Bathed in the warm golden rays of the afternoon sun, it seemed to glow with an almost unearthly light. "I feel like I'm leaving Heaven," she whispered to herself.

She had already bid farewell to the king, but she could see him still, standing on the balcony of the upper floor of the palace. Even from her distance she could see the tight lines on his face and the whiteness of his knuckles, as he clenched the railing. Amaris knew full well that this was probably one of the hardest things the old man had ever willingly done. And, despite her own anguish of heart, she marveled at God's power to bring so great a king to such a decision.

"What a love my sovereign must have for his God," she mused, "that he would concede to such a thing while he yet lives."

Now he was waving; a brave attempt at a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. But she could almost see the well of unshed tears glistening in his eyes, and knew it was only a matter of time before

they made their presence known. That she could not bear. She had to be on her way.

“Farewell, my lord,” she called out. “Farewell.”

Suddenly she felt as though something were taking hold of her, a power beyond her control. She fell to her knees in the grass. She felt words spinning through her mind. *Chosen for Me! Chosen for Me! Give unto Me your all and I shall return unto you the desires of your heart!*

Amaris felt as though she were gasping for breath. “I do!” she whispered. “I do give all ... my God!”

As abruptly as it began, her experience ended. The world returned to its normal shades and colors, and everything seemed as it was. The king stood still in his place, looking somewhat puzzled, yet now with more of a tranquil peace in his eyes, as though he, too, had partaken of the experience.

Still somewhat shaken, Amaris waved her last farewell, and boarding the litter, she gave the order to move forward. Her adventure was beginning.



A curious sense of anticipation filled Amaris’ heart as she adjusted to the monotonous jostle of the litter, as its bearers trod the dusty roads. This was certainly unlike anything she had ever experienced. She raised her hand to her breast and pulled out a medallion which hung on a chain around her neck. She pressed it to her cheek, hoping to still feel some of the warmth of its former owner, her most-loved father, the king.

For a moment, her eyes misted, but she determinedly brushed aside memories, and concentrated on the medallion. It was circular, plated in gold and with a large image of a sun impressed in it. In the lower corner of the sun was the image of a bird in flight—motionless, yet bursting with life, captured and immortalized forever to tantalize the mind and imagination of all who gazed upon it.

She turned the piece over, and read the inscription

—although she could just as easily have recited it from memory: *The journey of one’s life begins with the discovery of one’s soul. As my God hath said, “Search for Me and I will be found of thee.” Every being is created for the purpose of fulfilling his destiny, that purpose for which his God hath created him. I go in search of my destiny, for with it I will find my God.*

No matter how many times she had read them, these words still sent a shiver through her entire being. Amaris pulled her wraps closer around her shoulders. She gently tugged on the thick drapes hiding the outside world, and peered through the small opening made. An ominous cloud loomed directly ahead, blocking the last rays of warmth from the setting sun.

Jordan approached, as the men slowed to a halt. “It looks like a downpour is approaching, my lady,” he said. “We’d better take shelter and continue when it has passed—that is, if it is still light enough to travel.”

Amaris desperately wanted to keep moving, but another look at the sky convinced her that her servant was right.

“Very well. Do as you see fit,” she conceded. “Is there a place nearby where we may make refuge?”

“I see a trail going up to a rocky crag in this mountainside. I dare say that we shall find shelter aplenty in that direction. Although...” Jordan cocked his head to one side hesitantly, looking at his mistress with an amused smile.

“Speak on, man!” Amaris felt comfortable and natural with him. “Say your mind!”

“It may be that my lady would do better on foot,” he said gently. “The path is steep and we would not want a spill.”

“I am able to walk, Jordan!” she said, in mock haughtiness. “You needn’t be shy about asking me. Yes, I shall most certainly dismount here.”

She pulled back inside the canopy and put on her walking sandals, then pulled her thick robe over the thinner satin traveling gown she wore. On a sudden impulse she reached across to the shelf and pulled from it a leather pouch, which she placed beneath her robe. Adjusting her headpiece, she jutted her hand daintily out of the curtained opening. Jordan took her hand firmly and helped her climb out.

“Thank you again, my man,” she smiled at him.

“Duty alone, O royal one,” he whispered coyly.

Two armed escorts started first up the path, followed by Jordan and Amaris. Two maidservants followed dutifully behind. And bringing up the rear were the four litter-bearers with their now much lighter burden, tottering precariously back and forth as they climbed the narrow pathway.

The drops were beginning to come down now. Amaris pulled the cloak back from her face, turning it toward the heavens. First she gazed at the gray, shapeless mass above her, with the drops falling like tiny bits of crystal. Then she shut her eyes and opened her mouth wide, stretching forth her tongue to catch some of the tiny droplets of refreshment.

A jab in her foot brought her back to reality, as she stumbled on the rocky path. Jordan caught her, and reprimanded her with a glance. “Eye the road, my lady; the way is treacherous.”

Amaris smiled. It felt good to be out in nature. Somehow, she felt more in her element here than in the palace life she had grown accustomed to.

*I suppose this is the best of both worlds, really. I get to be royalty in the countryside! How I wish they could see me now! A shadow flashed across her face, but was gone before it had time to make a dwelling place. She had long ago resolved in her heart not to keep looking back in life. The past is past, and we must go forward with the present, for indeed, there is enough of that to occupy all of our time and energy!*

“Before us!” the first soldier called out over his shoulder. “I see an opening in the rock!”

“And none too soon!” one of the maidservants wailed plaintively. “For I was not made for treks such as this!”

Everyone laughed. They were a friendly group, having learned that their mistress was somewhat less formal than the traditional royals, and, while maintaining her status and dignity, was still glad to have a relaxed air about her, and did not mind friendly chatter amongst them.

In seconds they had arrived at the mouth of the cave, and waited while the front guard ventured inside. He reemerged shortly, and with a nod, beckoned the rest to join him.

“Well, it’s not the palace, that’s for sure,” one of the soldiers said. “But it’s dry and free from drafts, and that will do us well enough, I believe.”

One of the maidservants scurried around to bring pillows and bedding from the litter to prepare a place for her mistress, while the other placed some food on a wooden tray and carried it to where Amaris had now settled down in a cushioned corner.

Amaris took the tray as she surveyed her new lodging. Makeshift torches cast copper-colored streaks around the cave, which was not more than six large steps across in either direction. A dark passageway continued off on the right side; to further hidden mysteries, no doubt.

She sighed. “Be near me, Jordan,” she said.

“At your service, as always.” The man came forward and offered his strong shoulder as a resting place for her weary head.

“Perhaps we should all take some rest now, while we may,” Amaris softly murmured, as she felt her own thoughts drifting heavenward. “For the way before us may be long, and we shall need all the strength we can muster.” She opened her eyes for a

moment and, smiling, caught the eye of one of the litter-bearers. “And I would say you need much more rest than I do!”

The soldier blushed at the show of attention from his mistress, and the company settled themselves into positions of relative comfort, and slept.



Several hours must have passed when Amaris woke with a start. She had no idea what had awakened her, but she felt compelled by some unusual sense of urgency. She stepped over Jordan, who was still asleep, and made her way to the front of the cave.

The night had now well fallen, but the rain had stopped. The air smelled fresh and clean, with the heat and dust of the day all washed down into the muddy river below. Amaris filled her lungs with the crisp air, and sighed contentedly.

But what was wrong? Why did she feel a strange knot in the pit of her stomach? She shrugged. *I must be getting jumpy after all my years behind palace walls*, she thought. *I see nothing wrong here.*

But there *was* something wrong, and she knew it. She was nearly startled out of her wits by a loud shout coming from inside the cave. She screamed, and poised herself to run, but it was only Jordan, who ran out looking like a man whose worst nightmare had come upon him.

Seeing Amaris, he stopped abruptly and tried unsuccessfully to regain his composure.

“Oh, madam ... oh, God ... oh, I thought you ... I woke up and you were gone. I thought you had been taken or...” He leaned wearily against the rocky mountainside. “Praise be to God, He has kept you well, as I had entrusted Him to.”

Amaris felt a curious warmth at seeing what a fright her seeming absence had caused. But she was intrigued by his last words.

“You entrust me to God? I did not know that you knew of God.”

“Indeed I do, my lady,” Jordan spoke sincerely, and his brown eyes seemed to glow in the soft moonlight. “For He has been more to me than any other, and to Him I do owe my life and my all. He...” The man faltered, and reached his hand into the air as if chasing an elusive word, “...He is everything to me.”

“You sound a great deal like another man whom I have heard speak not many hours before,” Amaris smiled. “Well, I would say that a love for God does certainly produce fine men!” With a lift of her eyebrow and a tilt of her head, she turned again towards the mouth of the cave.

But Jordan caught her arm before she could change her footing. “Wait, madam,” he said hesitantly, his voice taking on a more serious note.

“What have you to say?” her eyes narrowed. “There is something wrong, isn’t there?”

“The soldiers, madam, and the maidservants. And the litter-bearers, with their burden ... they’re all gone!”

“Gone?” Amaris’ eyes widened in horror. “Are you certain?” She wrenched her arm free of his grasp and burst through the opening of the cave. A dim flicker of light burned on the floor where Jordan’s hastily lit torch had been thrown to the ground. And surrounding the gloomy shadows: emptiness. A pile of cushions in the corner where Amaris had slept, a few scraps of food alongside the far wall, and then nothing.

Amaris could hear Jordan’s irregular breathing behind her, sounding worried. “Why, what shall we do?” she continued. “Why? Where? I ... I am just so stunned that I am at an utter loss for words. How could they?” Her blue-gray eyes filled with tears.

Jordan stood silently behind her. He was unable

to think of anything comforting to say, and so determined that he was better off remaining silent.

Then she brushed her hand determinedly over her face, and turned resolutely towards him. “We must go on,” she said firmly.

“My lady,” Jordan spoke hesitantly, “I would suggest going back to the palace for another litter and escort. We could also give word to your father, that he may send out search parties for them. They will be caught in no time. I feel that it would not be safe to continue this journey on our own.”

“Jordan,” Amaris looked him right in the eye, “you have told me of your God, and that you have committed our lives into His hands. As powerful as He is, the One who sees and knows all, do you not suppose that He is even now guiding us?”

Jordan did not answer.

“Do you not think that perhaps His hand guides us in ways unbeknownst even to our own minds? I do not know why, but I feel deep inside that we must go forward, and let nothing deter us from our mission. What say you?”

Jordan hunched his shoulders and raised his hands. “What *can* I say? My lady speaks with a wisdom I did not know she possessed. I would say that my lady learns quickly.”

“Then let us make our way onward!”

- 3 -

## EXCHANGE OF SECRETS

The remainder of the night passed quickly for the two weary travelers, who, exhausted from the long day before and the events of the night, had dropped into a sound sleep. In the morning, Jordan awoke with the rising sun. He gently shook Amaris.

It took Amaris a few moments to recollect all that had taken place, but when she did, despair settled upon her like a dense, sticky cloud.

“Oh,” she moaned. “Why, Jordan, what shall we do? How can we make the remainder of this journey alone? And on foot!” She looked down at her dainty sandals.

Jordan suppressed a grin, feeling rather ashamed to be seeing the humor in such a difficult situation. “I suppose the journey will be more difficult for you than for me ... the part about being on foot, at least!”

Amaris smiled, realizing that it wouldn't be that different for her partner. Then a thought occurred to her.

“Jordan,” she said. “Would you do something for me?”

“Anything, my mistress,” the man answered.

“That's precisely what I am talking about. For some reason, it seems that God has seen fit to place us on

equal levels during this time, and I want to do nothing to interfere with that. I shall walk alongside you, and I wish for you to feel that you are walking with an equal. Will you be relieved, for this time, of your duties as my servant, and allow me to be relieved of my duties as royalty?"

Jordan was taken aback, but, as was his personality, took it all in stride and with a grain of humor.

"I would be honored to be your equal, my lady," he said, with a smile.

"That 'my lady' will have to go then," the girl replied. "I grant you royal permission to address me as Amaris."

"Just 'Amaris'? That's it?" Jordan tilted his head to either side, as if shaking the idea around would help it to stick better. "Very well, if that is your wish."

"Then," cried Amaris, "we're set! Jordan and Amaris, on the road again!"

"We are off!" he agreed. "And let us pray that our journey leads us towards some food, for I begin to feel the pangs of hunger!"

Amaris reached over to collect the little leather pouch. How thankful she was to have taken it from the runaway litter. Jordan surveyed the bedpile.

"I suppose that the bed should remain here?" he questioned.

"It seems to me it would be a lot of work to lug those pillows around with us," Amaris agreed. "But let us bring the coverlet. We may need it if we have to sleep in the open air tonight."

Having made those decisions, the two stepped out of the rock cave, and made their way down the steep dirt trail they had precariously climbed the evening before, and back onto the road.



Amaris was the first to break the silence. "I didn't know it was this much fun to walk!" she remarked.

"My lady—I mean, you take it well for a beginner!"

Jordan returned.

"Well, I may not do a lot of walking in public, but I have kept in good form."

"I would say that your form leaves nothing to be desired," Jordan said, almost under his breath.

Amaris hid a smile in a mock frown of disapproval.

"Equals, are we not?" Jordan retorted. They both laughed.

A while later, Jordan decided to break the silence. "Would my lady ... that is, Amaris ... I hope I do not seem forward to ask this, but would you tell me about yourself, about your early life?"

"My early life?" Amaris caught her breath. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I have never said anything," the man continued, "but I have always thought to myself that things are not entirely as they seem. The story which has been put forth is that you were a distant royal relative of his majesty, sent to join him after the tragic death of his own child and his wife. Yet something within me seems to contradict that notion."

He looked sideways, and noticing that Amaris was looking very uncomfortable, he quickly added, "Of course you don't have to tell me. I understand if you would rather keep it hidden."

"Jordan, if I were to tell anyone it would certainly be you, but..." She rolled her eyes and sighed, "Oh, what do I really have to lose? Can I trust you that this will go no further?" She looked his way for a confirmation, and when he nodded affirmatively, she returned her gaze to the road.

Her eyes took on a faraway look, and, gazing at her sideways, Jordan could almost see the reflection of disturbing images of days gone by roaring through them.

A full five minutes must have lapsed before Amaris began her tale. "I was born Sarah Jane Norman, to British parents. My father was some sort of official

for the government, and he was in this country on business.

“For my sixth birthday, we three—for I was an only child—went to visit the beautiful gardens said to resemble the ancient hanging gardens. While there, I playfully hid inside a maze, expecting my parents to follow me, but somehow we lost contact. I came out in a few minutes but they were gone.

“I ran around the garden for hours, but never found them.” She sighed. “Do you mind if we stop and rest for a few minutes? I feel rather short of breath.”

“On this rock here.” Jordan’s voice was very low.

Amaris sat down, but her mind was elsewhere. “An old lady befriended me, as by that time I was half out of my wits with worry. She seemed kind and friendly, but she took me straight to the slave traders, who gave her a handsome sum. I was too young to know what was happening. They took me to an old shed, where I remained for a long time. I cried a lot, and...” A sudden smile came to her face. “How strange! I had forgotten!”

“What is it?” Jordan asked, seeing that she hesitated.

“Well, the guards forbade any of us to talk to each other—there were perhaps eight of us girls in this shed. The doors were locked and we were never allowed outside. The windows were covered with tarpaper. It was dark and miserable. My bed was by the door, and one day, when the door opened, a beautiful little blue flower blew in through the door. It fell right under the head of my bed. It was a sign.”

“A sign?” Jordan asked.

“Yes,” she smiled. “My parents had taught me of God’s love and His care. I had seen so much that was bad and wicked in those few weeks or months—how long it was I do not know—that I had begun to wonder. I asked God that if He was real, that He should send me a sign.

“And that same day came His flower, as a boon to me. And with it came hope, and with hope, deliverance. For it was not many days thereafter that I was taken to the marketplace, where his majesty found me—which I have since heard from him was an act of God’s design as well.

“Here,” she continued, “do you want to see it?” She reached into her leather pouch and fumbled around for a few minutes. “I had completely forgotten about this!” She laughed as she pulled out a simple piece of brown paper, folded in two. She unfolded it, and there, between the pressed leaves, was a tiny blue flower.

“This paper was all that I could find. I pressed the flower under a floor stone, and I have kept it ever since. It will always symbolize God’s love to me.”

“Amaris,” Jordan said hesitantly, “if you don’t mind me asking, there’s something that I don’t understand.”

“What is that?”

“You speak of knowing about God as a child, and I know that our gracious majesty expresses a deep love for Him as well. Therefore, how is it that you spoke to me earlier as though you did not share the same belief or love?”

Amaris was silent. “I am not sure, Jordan. I know that it is not for a lack of tutelage, as you have said. I believed as a child, but as I have grown in years, I have found myself questioning things that I always held as truths.

“Things that seemed simple and clear to me when I was young now seem muddy, as though pollutants were being poured into my stream. It is not that I do not believe, but I struggle.

“These last few years have been difficult. My dear father knows this, and I believe that that is why he has sent me on this journey. Well, it was not his idea, but apparently my life is being controlled by the Great One whom I have loved so hesitantly in recent years.”



“To me that seems very obvious after hearing your tale!” Jordan exclaimed. “I do not think anything is more clear right now than the fact that you have been chosen by Him who is Most High!”

“Indeed,” Amaris agreed, “it is strange, but I feel like I know Him better each day. Being out like this, away from the support and shelter of the palace makes me feel vulnerable, and in great need of a supernatural Protector.” Then she laughed. “Of course, my earthly protector is not bad either!”

“Come, Amaris,” Jordan held out his hand to help her up, “we must cover more distance while the light holds.”

“How long do you think it will take for us to arrive at the home of Father Michael?” Amaris asked.

“I would say that if we keep up this pace we may be there by tomorrow sundown. What exactly is it that we will do there?”

“My father has said that the Lord told him only that I must make this journey to visit Father Michael, and that the next step would be shown me from there. Perhaps I shall join the order!” Amaris grinned across the road at her companion.

“Now that would be a waste in my opinion,” Jordan retorted, then added hastily, with a joking look heavenward. “No offense to my Lord, but a life of celibacy, it seems, would not be suited to such a lovely one...” His voice trailed off in embarrassment.

“Speaking of celibacy, Jordan...” Amaris was embarrassed too. “Please do not read more into this than I intend, but are you really a eunuch? I have always assumed that you were, but sometimes I wonder.”

“Now what could make you wonder, my lady Amaris?” Jordan’s eyes sparkled as the sunlight reflected on his dark hair, shiny with sweat from the vigorous walk. Then he twitched his lips, as if in deep pondering. “Well, you have trusted me with your

secret, I suppose I should trust you with mine. To everyone I always have and always will be nothing but a eunuch, but in actuality ... I am not.”

Amaris raised her eyebrows, but said nothing.

“I have no real explanation for the reason, except that ... perhaps my God was also preparing me for a purpose unknown at the time?” He laughed. “No, seriously, it came about because I had learned a secret about the man who prepares the eunuchs and performs the operation. When we were alone in the room, I ... let us just say that I convinced him that in return for my silence, he could do me this favor, and allow me to remain intact.”

“Why did you want to become a eunuch in the first place?”

“Well, I needed to find work, and this was a promising job, with good pay, a respected position, plenty of beautiful sights...”

Amaris giggled, as Jordan continued. “The only requirement is to give up your manhood. As you know, there are not often many takers for this otherwise highly coveted position.”

“I would say that you have kept up your pretense quite well,” Amaris said admiringly.

“I have had to. If anyone had the slightest notion that such a thing were possible, I could have been examined and expelled immediately. And ... once I began working for you, this was the last thing that I would have wanted to happen.”

“Why, Jordan!” Amaris stopped in her tracks, and when the man turned to look back at her, she pulled a silken curl from her headdress and twirled it between her fingers. “Do you think I’m pretty?” she teased.

Jordan turned around to face the road again, and walked in silence.

Amaris dropped her curl and ran to catch up. “Wait up, man!” she said breathlessly. “I was just joking!”

Please do not be offended!”

“You take lightly something that is very serious to me,” was all that he would say.

“Forgive me.” Amaris slipped her small hand into his. “Let us speak of something else.” The conversation had grown too awkward for both of them.

- 4 -

## FATHER MICHAEL

The afternoon sun languished in the sky, blushing a hot orange as it slowly sank into the horizon. An old, white-haired man sat in a comfortable reclining chair, on the porch outside a small wooden house. He shut his eyes for a moment, and sighed in satisfaction. It had been a good day.

“I don’t think I could ask for anything more to end a perfect day,” he sighed. When he opened his eyes, however, he focused on two weary-looking figures making their way up the dusty path to his abode. A thin, young girl, and a taller, well-built man, with striking features and jet-black hair. His gaze rested on the girl, questioningly. Then he suddenly lifted himself up from his chair, stepped warily off the porch and walked towards the approaching travelers.

“Could that be little Amaris?” he called out.

“Indeed it is, Father Michael!” Amaris shouted, forgetting her aching feet and tired body, and dashing the rest of the way in a burst of youthful zeal. She flung her arms around the old man’s neck. “Why, sir, it’s been terribly long since we’ve seen you!” she said.

“Ah, child, too long it has been! But who is your companion here? And how is it that you come to me on foot?!”

“It is a long story, Father. This is Jordan, my ... my friend.” She smiled quietly as the two men greeted each other warmly. “As for the rest of our party, let’s just say that God worked His way in a fashion most unusual, which required their abrupt absence. I am sure we shall discover the reason at some point.”

“Please,” the old man said quickly, “do call me Michael. And do come in. I have set a place for you both.”

“Then you knew we were coming? How could...?” Jordan trailed off, as Michael interrupted.

“Ah yes, his majesty and I have a most unique method of communication. It never ceases to amaze my acquaintances. They’ll be astonished that he replied so quickly. Mmmm, it must have been hard for him to see you go.” The old man shook his head.

“What method of communication is this, Father?” Amaris inquired curiously.

“Ah, we send our requests through the heavenly airwaves. I was taking time in the quiet not more than five days ago, and I knew that the time had come for you to pay me a visit. So I asked my heavenly companion to carry a message to my friend and soul-mate, King Merchal, requesting your presence here as soon as he could see fit to arrange for it. I counted a couple of days for him to get used to the idea, a day or more for you to make your journey—and then all I had to do was wait.”

Amaris and Jordan shook their heads in wonder.

“My admiration for you grows by the moment,” Jordan said.

“And mine for you, lad,” Michael replied, noting the typical servant’s uniform that clad the young man. “That her little majesty calls you her friend—you must have gotten very friendly indeed while on your journey.”

Jordan blushed.

Amaris giggled nervously, and quickly said, “So,

Father, how are things with you?”

“Well, well! In all the years I have been here in this blessed country, never has my God felt so close, nor have I seen the fruits of my labors more manifest than in these last months. Truly it is a great time of harvest, and the years that I have toiled in work and weeping are at last beginning to show forth the true and bountiful reward that He promised me long ago. Twenty years old I was, the day I set foot on this land,” Michael chuckled, and patted his round belly. “A sight different than what is before you today, you can be sure!”

“You’re wonderful just as you are, Father,” Amaris said protectively.

“A kind lass you are,” the old man smiled. “Yes, and twenty-and-four I was when I came about this property, with my lovely wife Elsie—my dear bride. We shared thirty-eight years together”—he hesitated, and nodded emphatically at Jordan as he reached over to pat a nearby mattress—“on this very bed!”

Jordan grinned.

“Yes, my dear Elsie was God’s gift to me from the moment she came into my life, even till now. Don’t give me those looks, you two!” he said quickly, seeing their eyebrows go up. “I’m not falling weak in the head. My dove is still with me. She whispers in my ears. She watches over me. She’s my messenger, who carries my petitions to those I request. I know,” he nodded emphatically. “God has told me so. And I believe that it’s she that’s helping me reap such a harvest of souls as I now am. She did all that she could down here, and then He took her up to His side, where she could do even more.”

“Well,” Michael suddenly returned to reality, and rose to his feet. “What am I doing starting on a preachathon when you two darlings are sitting here, tired to the bone—and with visions of a hot stew reflectin’ in both of your eyes!”

“We are hungry,” Jordan conceded.

“And tired!” Amaris had removed her sandals and was holding her feet.

“Why child, let me look at those. Oh, that doesn’t look good at all. Those sandals were definitely not created for traveling.”

“No,” Amaris said. “I’m afraid I designed them myself, and my cobbler made them. I never did much long-distance walking before. I’ll have to make a few revisions on that design.”

“Well, why don’t you take some time in the water room, there behind that curtain. Wash the dirt from yourselves—one at a time, of course!” he laughed. Michael had a weakness for teasing them on the obvious. “And then come and relax here by the fire while I heat up this turnip stew. It’s nothing fancy, but I dare say it’ll taste mighty good after the rigors you’ve been through.”

“Thank you kindly, sir.” Amaris smiled gratefully, and made for the water room.

Several hours later, dinner was over and Amaris was feeling great. Her stomach was full, her feet had soaked for over an hour in a special herb bath that Jordan had prepared, and she was filled to the brim with the most utter contentment she had ever known.

“I feel good!” She said aloud, as she lounged on the large pillows by the flickering fire.

“Why child, did I put too much wine in that stew?” Michael laughed at his own joke. Then he said, “I am glad, young lady. I hope you will always be this happy, for you certainly deserve it.”

Amaris sat up in sudden remembrance. “Father Michael, why did you want me to come? There must have been some other reason besides just wanting to see me after all these years.”

“Why yes! Come to think of it now, there was something I had to tell you. But to be truthful, my dear, I do not care to launch into the tale at this late

hour of the night. Would you do me the kindness of waiting until tomorrow morning, when we will be refreshed and in good spirits to tackle whatever may come our way?”

Amaris would have protested, for she was very anxious to know what had brought her this great distance, but she was interrupted by a yawn, and once that was over, she knew that her kindly friend was right. The last days’ journey had taken their toll, and she felt her eyes closing despite herself.

“Let us be off to bed, then,” she reluctantly scraped herself off the pillows and bestowed a goodnight hug and kiss upon her long-time friend.

She then turned to the young man, and said awkwardly, “Goodnight, Jordan.”

Not knowing what else to do, she held out her hand toward him, and he caught it, just as awkwardly. Making the best of an uncomfortable situation, Amaris laughed, and shook his hand. “Now we’re real businessmen!” she said. Then she froze and sank to the floor, wrapping her arms around her legs.

“Why, I haven’t said that—or thought of that—in years!” she exclaimed. She clutched her legs more tightly, to keep her hands from trembling. “My ... my father used to say that to me. That is, my first father, you know, my British father. That was a long time ago. I don’t know why that came back to me!”

Jordan slipped down on the floor near her, and reached his strong arm around her small shoulders. How he wished that he could protect her from the worries and fears within as readily as he knew he could fight off the terrors of the real world in her name! “It has been a long and trying journey,” he said softly. “I’m sure that with some rest you’ll feel better in the morning.”

“Indeed you shall, my dear,” said Michael emphatically. Then he added, “There’s nothing like a good night’s sleep to wipe away the problems a mind has

had the night before.”

“Yes, I’m sure that will do it,” Amaris brushed her hand over her eyes. “Thank you both; you have been so kind.”

Michael helped Amaris to the large bed, which he had made up especially for her, and, after tucking the covers in carefully, he drew the thick curtain around her bed. By the time he returned, Jordan had prepared two bedding rolls for them on the floor by the fire.

“Thank you, lad,” Michael said. His knees cracked loudly as he knelt and then prostrated himself on the mat.

“Ah, they ain’t what they used to be, my old bones!” He laughed aloud. “But I reckon they’re still good enough to keep up the good Lord’s work! For as He said to me many years ago, ‘Not one hair of your head will perish until My time for you has come.’ And He’s been as true as His Word! I’ve had aches and pains here and there, but never have I missed so much as a day in His service! Sometimes I didn’t feel much like carryin’ on, but each time I asked Him about it, He either cleared up the problem or gave me the strength to carry on despite it.”

“You mean you’ve never been sick in all your years here?” Jordan was incredulous, knowing how sicknesses often spread like wildfire in these mountain villages.

“Ah, lad! I’ve had my up days and my down days, you know. But the point is, nothing in me has lacked, and I have not suffered any permanent problems that hindered me from doing God’s will. Neither have I suffered any temporary problems that were not for the purpose of conveyin’ me some message of His, or of being a witness or help to others. He has His ways!”

The old man shook his head, then ran his hands through his hair. “And see this? Not a hair of my head has perished, as He said! Just as thick as the day I

set foot here!”

Then Michael grew serious, as he stared into the dying embers in the fireplace. “Has Amaris talked much with you about her early life?”

“She told me how she came to be in the king’s palace, if that is what you mean,” Jordan responded.

“I thought as much. You two seem to have grown rather close. You’re a good man, I can see it in your eyes. I’m glad you love her.”

“I - I what?” Jordan was caught off guard. “What do you mean, sir?”

“Ah, isn’t that the way it goes?! They get all polite when they’re trying to hide something! Needn’t be shy about it with me, son! I’m not going to go babbling. No, I believe these things are led by God. I mean, you can’t make yourself fall in love with someone, now, can you? So then who’s the One who does the tweakin’?”

Jordan smiled.

“But—aside from any personal intent that He may have, or some future plan, I’m sure He knows—besides all that, I think that He made you love her so you’d keep a good eye on her. She’s a special, chosen girl, she is. And she needs someone to keep a good lookout for her. When you love someone, you want to take care of them and then it’s more than just a job; it’s a personal commitment, you know?”

“Like with our Lord,” Jordan said quietly. “We serve Him because we love Him, and that is much more powerful than serving Him just out of duty. I see what you mean. When I first began working in the king’s palace, I was only there because of the good pay. But the more I grew to know Amaris ...” he looked apologetically at Michael and added, “she asked me to call her that on this trip.”

“Of course, please do so! I do all the time.—Shorter, you know?!”

“Yes, well, the more I grew to know her, then it

became personal, like you said.” He looked embarrassed. “I hope we never have to be apart.”

“Well, don’t tell that to me, lad! Tell it to your Friend Upstairs. He’s tops in those matters, I’ll have you know. He’s got your best interests in mind. If she’s the one for you, you can be sure,” Michael pulled the covers up to his chin, “you’ll get her. Now close your eyes and let an old man get some sleep. Morning comes mighty quick around this place.”

“Of course,” Jordan murmured softly. Placing his hands behind his head, he stretched himself out on the bedroll, but try as he could, sleep was the furthest thing from his mind.

- 5 -

## FATHER MICHAEL’S DISCOVERY

Despite anxieties over the morrow, the night passed more quickly than Amaris would have hoped. By the time the clatter of Father Michael preparing the morning meal began to penetrate her curtains, Amaris would have much preferred to stay within the warmth of her covers. However, curiosity is a powerful motivator, and Amaris felt herself propelled out into the biting morning cold. Throwing on her garments, she dashed over to the hearth, thrusting her hands out as if to grasp the heat of the roaring fire.

By the time she had recovered feeling in her hands, she noticed that Jordan was there too, and that he was staring at her curiously.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, looking down to make sure that she was fully clothed and that some personal piece of undergarment was not protruding.

“It’s nothing,” Jordan said quickly, trying to tear his gaze away. “It’s just that I’ve never seen you without your headdress on. Your hair ... it’s ... it’s lovely.” Jordan stumbled over his words and felt uncomfortable at having settled for such an inadequate adjective. In truth, he would have priced those honey-colored, silken tresses along with the finest rubies and gems of Samarkand. *Nay, even more*

*costly than those*, he told himself fiercely. Her locks were as the adornment on an already perfect box of treasures.

“You are right!” Amaris suddenly felt rather naked, realizing that she was without her usual head covering. “But it is such a trouble to have to wear that thing all the time. I hope you will not mind if I leave it off while I am around the house here?” She looked over at Father Michael for his approval.

“Of course, my dear,” the old man retorted. “This is your home away from home; you can do just as you wish.”

Amaris pulled an ivory comb from her leather pouch which was lying on the floor nearby, and, having undone her long braids, began the lengthy and arduous task of returning them to their usual tidy state. “I am thankful that I learned how to do this years ago,” she laughed, “or else I should be very lost without my maidservants to tend to all my grooming! Perhaps my man Jordan would like to try his hand at the art of hairdressing?”

“I think I should perhaps need to decline,” Jordan smiled. “I would be much too timid to put my rough hands upon such splendor.”

“It is but a gift of God,” Amaris said simply. “I have always consoled myself that what I lack in my face He has made up in my hair—although in this part of the world it is not a great and obvious gift, as I do not have much opportunity to make it known!”

“Indeed,” Michael laughed, “for what relation of his royal majesty, however distant, would be blessed with hair of such a color! You must have had to walk a very fine and well-protected line, little one!”

“It has been awkward at times,” Amaris admitted, “but my love for his majesty made any difficulties more than worthwhile. Oh, but Father Michael!” Amaris jumped to her feet, with one hand keeping her place in her half-braided tress—no amount of excitement,

however great, was going to cause her to lose her place in that difficult task which had already taken up too much of her time—“Father Michael, you must tell me the great and important reason which has prompted my journey here.”

“Come, sit at the table with me,” the old man told the two, “and as we fill our stomachs, I shall fill your ears and minds with enough to keep them busy long after this meal has been replaced by the next.”

Amaris quickly secured the last braid with a thin ribbon, and coiled them skillfully over her head. After pinning them carefully in place, she joined the men at the table.

“Dear Lord,” Father Michael had folded his hands together, resting his elbows on the rough wooden table. His eyes were pressed closed, and his voice gave forth an earnestness that Amaris always noticed when he spoke of and to his Lord. “We come humbly before You to beg Your guidance upon these faulty lips. May they not stumble in the uttering of this message. This I ask in Your precious name. Amen.”

“Amen,” Jordan said, in a heartfelt voice.

Amaris mumbled her consent under her breath. She felt a bit ashamed to be still pulling away from open expressions of devotion. Although she was warming up, she still felt rather distant compared to these two men who seemed so solid in their faith and love for God. Amaris sighed and rolled her eyes. Maybe she just wasn't cut out for this type of dedication. But she was shocked back into rapt attention by the first words that rolled off the old man's tongue.

“Your father...” Michael hesitated as he saw the look of disbelief that came across Amaris' face. Her white face became almost ghostly. Then she cracked a smile and croaked, “Oh, you mean his majesty!”

“You heard me right the first time,” Michael continued. “I mean your father—that is, your natural father. I have news of him, and that is why I have

called you here.”

Amaris felt as though she had been catapulted into another world. Her head began to spin uncontrollably, and everything else in the room became part of an unearthly whirl. Part of her wanted to grab the old man by the shoulders and compel him to force the words out faster than he was already doing; another part of her wanted to stop her ears and run the other direction as fast as she could.

For a moment she yearned for the happy and carefree life she had known only seconds earlier. She dreaded the thought of the future, with all the pain and problems she knew that it would bring. But then she realized that, once again, she was being led along step by step. Someone was guiding her, and she would have to discover what was the purpose that was being wrought.

“Go on,” Amaris said. Having now resolved her inner struggle (at least for the moment), she was eager to hear the news. “I am all right, I can handle it.”

Father Michael pushed his chair back from the table, and stood up slowly. Claspings his hands behind his back and striding over to the fireplace, he began to speak. “Ever since my chance encounter with his majesty that day in the marketplace, we have held our friendship dear to our hearts. Once I discovered that he was the king, as I did later that day, of course I was shocked. His disguise had been such that I had no idea that he was not an ordinary nobleman, seeking a new slave for his household. But he trusted me, and he sought my advice on how to go about integrating you into his own family, as you know. And then he was anxious for you to learn of your former culture, so that is how you came to spend those times with me.”

“And a good instructor you were, dear Father Michael!” Amaris smiled, as happy memories danced through her mind. “I couldn’t have done better under

any formal tutelage.”

“Yes, well,” the old man smiled, “that’s a matter of personal opinion, I suppose! Nevertheless, I came to feel a special bond with this little one who was, in a way, my link with his majesty. As much as I loved and admired him, so did I love you; but I was always curious about your past. I knew—and know—that you are probably one of the most well cared for subjects in the realm, and that in his majesty’s palace you do not lack anything. Yet I’ve always had the impression that sometime, the past would resurface.

“I have heard whispers of it in my times of quiet ... never anything specific, but floating whispers that I have only caught drifts of.

“Actually...” Michael hesitated, as if deciding whether he should say what he was thinking of right then. After a moment of thought, he continued. “Actually, I wrote some of them down. Do you want to hear them?”

“Oh yes!” Amaris burst out.

Michael went over to a small shelf on the left side of the room, and pulled out a small bundle of parchment sheets. He then returned to the table. For a moment he looked up at Jordan. “You’re awfully quiet, young man.”

“Oh ... I ... actually, I feel a bit out of place here,” Jordan stammered. “I wonder if I might go outside to get some air. You may feel more comfortable discussing this personal matter without me being present.”

“Amaris?” Michael indicated that he was fine either way.

“Oh!” Amaris reached out and grabbed Jordan’s hand in both of hers, and looked up at him pleadingly. “Oh, please would you stay? There’s nothing that could be said that I wouldn’t want you to know. Anyway,” she said laughingly, “it will save me having to tell you all about it afterwards, right?”



Jordan smiled, and it was settled.

Michael had found his place by now, and looked up at Amaris. “Don’t fall off your seat now; it’s nothing great and mighty. Just a few wee words I caught blowing in the wind. Okay, here we are—this is just what I wrote. I’ll read it out to you:

“I’m sitting on the hill, and the sun is setting on my right, all big and golden. The whole countryside appears to be bathed in liquid gold. A gentle breeze is blowing over me. It’s strange, this golden light makes me think of Amaris. I can almost feel something, a message, blowing in the wind, trying to break through to me. I can’t quite grasp it. If only I could reach out my hands and catch these messages. My God, give me a clear channel for what You want to tell me!

“I hear the wind again: *She is blown about by My hand. I have blown her high, but she must return low again before the end of all things is at hand. She has blown far, and she must return from where she has come.*”

The old man looked up a little sheepishly.

“I think that’s it,” he said. “Oh wait. There was one more. This one came a few weeks later. All this must have been nearly a year ago. ‘The time will come for My little servant’—That’s you, of course; none so little as my princess! ‘The time will come for My little servant to step out with little more than her faith in Me, that I may test and try it, to see what it is made of. I shall purge her gold that I may see how brightly it doth shine.’”

Amaris’ eyes were filled with tears. “Why did you never show these to me?” she asked.

“It wasn’t that long ago that I got them, and I haven’t seen you since then. Besides,” he said, “what would I have said? I probably wouldn’t have mentioned it now except that the subject came up. I just feel a bit strange showing them to you.”

“Oh, I know, I understand!” She said quickly. “I’m

sorry! I do appreciate you showing me; it really means a lot.”

“Here,” Father Michael carefully held the two leaflets towards her, “why don’t you take these? I’m sure they will help you on your journey—and I suppose that you will need all the help you can get!”

“Journey?” Jordan said. “I don’t recall you mentioning a journey yet!”

“Ah yes!” Michael put his hand over his mouth—though he was obviously much too late. “Ah yes, but I am getting ahead of my story. Let me continue. Where was I now?”

“You were getting impressions that I would need to return to my past,” Amaris said.

“Yes, I just had sort of an instinctive feeling, you know?—Nothing very concrete, but feelings. So then, not more than a month ago, I was in town buying produce and a few odds and ends that I needed for the house. I happened to be standing in line behind two old busybodies, and they were yakkin’ away. I took it as a good chance to brush up on my local language.

“The ones who come here so often want to practice their English on me, so I don’t get much opportunity anymore to speak in the local tongue. So I was casually translating their conversation in my mind, without really taking in what they were saying, until something started to sound very familiar to me.”

Michael stood up again, and began to pace back and forth. “I don’t remember their exact words, but they were talking about the austere Englishman, and what a shame it was. How handsome he was, he and his lovely wife, and that lovely daughter of his. How it seemed that fate had dealt him a blow that was more harsh than such good looks deserved.”

Amaris remained as silent and motionless as a statue, too transfixed to show on her face any of the emotion that was spinning through her soul.

Michael continued. "They talked about how his little daughter had disappeared so many years ago and had never been found. That was where I took interest, because it was beginning to sound very familiar. Then..." Michael paused, as if the words he was about to say weighed so heavily on his tongue that they could hardly be uttered, "...his wife had died a few months before."

Amaris caught her breath.

"I'm so sorry, dear." Michael went and stood behind Amaris, placing his weather-beaten hands on her shoulders. For a moment he stood silently, as Amaris pondered all that he had said so far.

Michael then resumed his account: "And now, the ladies continued, this man himself had been stricken by a debilitating illness that left him scarcely able to move. And then I do remember almost their exact words." Michael paused. "Why doesn't he just go back to his country?" the one said. "I'm sure he has family there who could care for him. Why does he pass his days alone and in pain?" The second answered, and I tell you, child, those words burned through my heart more than anything I think I have heard. "He has never given up hope. He still waits for his child's return."

For a moment it seemed that time stood still. Amaris was breathing slowly and laboriously, her chest heaving up and down. Her face was wet, but the tears had stopped coming. It all seemed to be a long and complicated dream.

"Is this all true?" she asked doubtfully, though she knew the answer well.

"It is, little one," Michael said, "though I don't know if I should feel happy for you or sad. I know there's probably a bit of both feelings on your side."

"Yes," she said. "Great joy, and great sorrow, all at once! But Father," she said suddenly, "you said this took place some weeks ago. Why did you wait so long to inform me?"

"Well," Michael continued, "by the time I realized what had happened and gathered my wits about me—believe me, child, I was near as floored as you feel now—the ladies were gone! So I had to launch into full-time investigative work, questioning the store owner as to the ladies' identity and searching for them, and slowly following the resultant trail, until—I located your father."

"You found him?!" Amaris stood straight up. Her chair clattered to the floor behind her, startling Jordan. He rushed to pick it up for her.

"Yes," Michael said, "I spoke with him just ten days ago. I told him nothing of our mutual acquaintance, of course. But once I had found him and knew that he was well, then I requested my heavenly Father's permission to inform you of the fact as well. My Lord actually asked me what I thought He had led me on this wild chase for, if I wasn't supposed to tell you about it!" Michael chuckled. "But of course, He also said He was glad I had asked. He said that I should ask his majesty that you come as soon as possible."

"Does the king know the reason for my visit?" Amaris asked.

"I do not know how much detail he picked up from my message," Michael said. "I did not get very specific, but I did say that it involved your past."

"Well, he did seem rather melancholy, more than usual," Amaris remembered. "It was as though he were giving me up for good and not sure whether I would return or not. What a great deal has happened since that day that I stood in the courtyard, looking up at his dear face! Oh my, what a turn of events! What shall I do? Jordan, what shall *we* do?"

"I suppose we must go!" Jordan said. "We must go face the past, that we may find our way into the future."

## STEP BY STEP

“I suppose we had better be on our way,” Amaris said as she stood squirming in the doorway, looking anxiously towards the horizon.

Ever since Michael had broken the news several hours before, Amaris had not been herself. She was nervous, fidgety, and obviously very anxious to be on the road again. Michael had already attempted to convince her to stay the night and depart early the following morning, but she would not hear of it.

“Too much of my life has already passed in darkness,” she explained. “I cannot stand it one second longer now that I know that the sunrise is just around the corner.”

“My child,” Michael spoke from a depth of wisdom yet unknown to the younger ones, “remember, as you go, that life is not spun of the same fabric as dreams. Imagination is a flimsy, silken garment, but more often you will find that reality is made of coarser stuff—less airy and appealing to the eye, but strong, sturdy, made to last.”

The words seemed to only brush over Amaris, but Jordan thanked the old man. “We will remember that,” he promised. “And I will take good care of her, sir. You have my word. I will protect her with my own

life.” Michael knew that he was in dead earnest.

Now the moment of departure had come. Michael had provided them with a change of garment—something a little less conspicuous than their previous garb—and enough provisions to last them several days. He had gone over the directions carefully several times, and Jordan had repeated them back to him to show that he remembered them well. Michael seemed almost as anxious as Amaris.

Jordan felt like a native caught between two nervous foreigners. *I guess I am, really!* he thought to himself with an inner chuckle. But of course, his Amaris was different. She was as much a native of his land as he was. And the thought that anything might change with her was almost enough to give him the jitters. But sensibly realizing that both of the others were tottering on the edge of distraction, he put aside his own concerns and worries of loss, and steeled his nerves for the difficult journey ahead.

“So you are sure that everything is clear?” Michael was asking again. “Do you want to go over the directions one more time?”

Jordan had lost count of how many times they had gone over the instructions, but he smiled understandingly at the old man. “Thank you, dear Father,” he said reassuringly, “but we will be all right. Remember, we are in the hands of the Almighty, and thus, our safekeeping and ultimate success is assured.”

“Of course, you are right!” Michael sat down wearily. “I had almost forgotten, in all of my anxiousness over this very troubling situation. It’s all so very unsettling, you know.” He mopped his brow with an old frayed handkerchief. “Very unsettling indeed. But you are right. God is in control, and He will bring His will to pass. Yes,” he stood up again, “yes, you’d best be on your way then. May God bring you along as He best sees fit!”

After exchanging an affectionate hug with her old tutor, Amaris stood poised on the front porch, like a racehorse at the starting gate. Jordan came out the door behind her, with the bag of provisions thrown over his shoulder. “Thank you again,” he said to Michael, “and do remember us in your prayers, for we shall need them.”

“Oh,” said Amaris suddenly, turning around towards him again, “and I wonder if you wouldn’t mind sending a little message—you know, one of your special messages—to his dear majesty, to let him know that I am well, and on my way again.”

“That I will do, child.”

Without another word, the two set foot back on the dusty trail that led towards the main road, where they would take up their journey once more.



After some time of walking in silence, Amaris said thoughtfully, “You know, I do think it’s marvelous how it’s worked out that it’s just us carrying on with this journey. It would have been much more complicated to make this whole trip with all the servants and soldiers. You can’t exactly blend in very well like that.”

“Yes, you are right,” Jordan said. “Still, it’s highly unusual that they would all leave like that in the middle of the night. I have never heard of such a thing in all of my life. They must have gone temporarily mad to risk their lives like that, courting the anger of his majesty! But as you said, I suppose we are better off. I know that I certainly am.” He timidly stretched his free hand out from his body, leaning it slightly towards the girl to see if she would respond.

But Amaris was much too caught up with her own thoughts to notice this small gesture, and walked on, oblivious. Jordan cast his eyes downward again, biting his lip. Why couldn’t he learn to stay within his bounds? There was a huge gulf between Amaris and

himself, one that would be obvious even to the youngest of his brothers. Why could not he, a grown man, see that?

*Love is a strange thing!* he thought to himself. *It can gloss over differences and barriers just as though there were none. But I suppose it doesn't do much good for the boundaries to be gone on one side, if they are clear as ever on the other.* And with a renewed resolution of self-restraint, he turned his thoughts back to the road.



The city was a little more than a day's walk away, but Amaris was still tired from the first leg of their journey, and the pair did not make fast progress. By the time nightfall descended, they were less than halfway to their destination.

"I think that we shall have to sleep out in the open tonight," said Jordan, "for the terrain around here is flat, and I do not see any shelter up ahead."

"Perhaps we could continue walking through the night." Amaris couldn't bear the thought of sleeping when, in her mind, that time could be much better used to make forward progress. "We have had a good rest at Father Michael's, and I see no reason why we should waste these cool evening hours in idleness and sleep!"

"My lady Amaris," said Jordan, "I understand that you are eager to arrive, but your strength must be conserved. Consider what a toll it shall be to come face to face with your past. At that moment I do think that you shall be thankful to have taken a few hours in rest. Additionally, the way is so dark on this starless night that we should be in peril of hurting ourselves if we were to continue any further. Those dark clouds have nearly covered the moon, and I can hardly see you standing just five feet from me. I beg you to take some rest beneath this tree, and I will keep watch."

Amaris opened her mouth to argue, then abruptly

shut it again. "You are right, Jordan," she said gloomily. Then she dropped to the ground and flung her arms around her knees.

"My lady, what is the matter?" said Jordan as he quickly dropped to her side.

"Jordan, I've been a beast today, haven't I?" she asked tearfully.

"Why no, not at all," Jordan said. "You've just been ... buried in your thoughts."

"No, I have been very nasty to you. I've been so full of myself that I haven't given you the time of day." She smiled through her tears, "Even if I knew it, which I don't."

Awkwardly, Jordan put his arm around her, forgetting all about his earlier resolution. "It's all right," he said seriously, "I can teach you."

They both laughed, and Jordan pointed up towards the sky. "You see the position of the moon?" he asked. "It's not very clear tonight so it's hard to tell, but you can see it partly hidden behind that cloud. On clear nights, the stars are guideposts as well. Anyway, my expert skill tells me..." he tugged an imaginary beard on his chin with an air of mock wisdom, "it must be around nine o'clock."

"That is truly amazing!" Amaris exclaimed, casting her eyes towards her handsome servant. "You are a remarkable man, Jordan."

"Only because of having been so long in the presence of a remarkable lady," he said with a shy smile.

The air was thick, and it seemed to Amaris that the world was moving in slow motion. She had never felt this queer sensation that seemed to be swirling in her belly. She raised an eyebrow and opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. She closed her mouth again and turned her eyes towards the sky.

At that moment the clouds parted directly above

them, leaving a patch of gloriously shimmering stars.

“Oh!” Amaris burst out. “It’s a sign! It must be a sign!” She turned to Jordan. “What do the heavens say to you, Jordan?”

He lifted his brown eyes to the stars, and as she looked at him, she could see their reflections dancing like so many infant sunbeams.

“The heavens are a reflection of the joy that bursts in my soul. I am truly the happiest man alive!” he said. He turned to his companion with a thoughtful look in his eyes. “Amaris, would you grant me one request?”

“Of course,” she said. “You went along with my last request rather marvelously, I thought.”

Without another word, he leaned over and placed a tender kiss on her lips. Then he returned his back to the tree. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Amaris was caught rather off guard. *A good thing, she thought to herself, or else my royal upbringing might have intervened and I would have missed that delightful experience!*

“We’d better get some sleep, I guess,” she said aloud, not knowing what else to say. “We have a big day ahead tomorrow.” She leaned against his shoulder and shut her eyes. But just a few seconds later, she opened them again, and lifted up her head. “Jordan,” she said, “I have a feeling about this trip.”

“What is that?”

“Well, when I think about meeting my natural father, I feel nervous, awkward and excited, all at once. It’s a very big thing for me, and this morning I thought it was the ultimate purpose of my life. But somehow—I don’t know why—I have a feeling that there is something more. I think that God has engineered this as just a small part in His plan. I don’t know what it is, but I have a feeling that He has some greater purpose for this trip. What do you think?”

“Amaris, on this trip I am little more than a companion for you. I cannot say what the purpose or end result will be. But I do know that as surely as our God has led us this far and has made clear our way step by step, He will do no less for the remainder of our journey.”

## TO FACE THE PAST

Amaris felt very small as they approached the large city gates. They had made good time, and arrived well ahead of when they had expected. Under Jordan's tutelage, Amaris discerned from the skies that it was nearing six o'clock. She was very pleased with her new skill.

"I feel so strange," she said to Jordan, as he passed the gatekeepers with a nod. "It's unusual for me to be coming into a city like this. I usually just get a glimpse from behind the curtains of my litter. I like it, though," she smiled. "It's so much richer, like I'm actually partaking of life instead of merely observing it from a distance."

"I would say that the carried life has its advantages too," Jordan remarked with a grin, "speaking strictly from an observational standpoint, of course."

"Of course," Amaris laughed. "I can't see you in a litter, Jordan. You're much too ... rugged!"

"Should I take that as a compliment, my lady?"

"By all means, noble sir—for of course you know that you are noble to me," she replied.

"What do you mean by that?" Jordan liked the direction the conversation was heading, and hoped to prod it along further. But Amaris caught on and

just shook her head and laughed, dancing ahead of him a few steps.

“Is this the crossing that Father Michael mentioned time and again?” she asked suddenly.

Jordan nodded, and mentally replayed the instructions that had been imbedded into his consciousness. “We go left here,” he said. And they did.

After they had continued on a ways, Amaris was suddenly struck with a panicky thought. “Have you thought about what I’m going to do when I get there?”

“Have I?” Jordan echoed. “To that I can honestly say that I have not. Although,” he added hastily, noting that she was not speaking in jest but was earnestly terrified, “I could certainly do so in a hurry if it would be of help.”

Amaris looked deeply into his eyes, waiting in earnest expectation.

“Let’s see, what will you do when you get there... Hmm... Ah!” He clapped his hands together as the answer struck him. “Of course! That’s it!”

“What? What?” she opened her eyes wide.

“Why, at the time appointed, it will be revealed to you,” he said, smiling with satisfaction. “God will put the words in your mouth when you get there.”

“Oh, Jordan!” Amaris wailed. “Don’t keep saying that! It’s so easy to say, but I want to prepare, rehearse, and coerce my wits to respond in the situation, lest I find myself face to face with a man I used to know and be struck dumb!”

“Peace, little girl!” Jordan grabbed her by the waist, halting her walk. He swung her around to face him, and—surprised by the boldness that came over him—held her face in his two large hands. Too shocked to resist—and, if the truth were known, slightly pleased as well—Amaris let him.

“Peace!” he continued. “My father always said, ‘Rambling never saved anyone from dying of thirst in

the desert,’ though I don’t know why that comes to me at a moment when I should have deep words to say instead! Just give faith to the good words that have been spoken before to you, which you have recounted to me—those by his majesty, and those inscribed by the dear old man we just took our leave from. As surely as we have been led along step by step thus far, Almighty God will complete our journey and reveal to us what our next step should be. And...” he took a deep breath, “I am glad to see that you agree with me, for ... we have arrived!”

Amaris’ knees nearly buckled under her. She had counted on a couple more hours, at least, to work on her wits. But the surprise arrival succeeded in scaring away her fears—caught off guard as she was. Before she knew it, Jordan had gently pushed her inside a narrow doorway, which opened to reveal a flight of steps.

“Father Michael said you should go up the flight of stairs and, at the top, knock on the door on the left. I will wait here for you.”

Amaris nervously turned around. “You’re not coming up with me, Jordan?”

“I think I had better wait here,” he said. And so she began up the stairs on her own.

Never had a flight of steps seemed so long, yet before she was ready, the climb was over! Then she wished that it had been longer. The door loomed large in front of her, with dark shadows all around it. She fancied it as the large mouth of a wild beast, which she must pass through before she would know exactly for what purpose she had journeyed this long way.

She cast one last look down the stairs towards the entrance, but Jordan was not visible from where she stood. For a moment she contemplated running down the stairs and not stopping until she was back in the royal gardens. But she knew that then she would just be running away from the fears that she knew she



must face. The only solution was to go forward! Mustering up all her courage, she gave a loud knock on the old wooden door.



Several eternities passed in Amaris' mind, and she was now slowly starting back down the flight of stairs, wistfully figuring that no one was home anyway, when a low voice from within said, "Come in." It was a voice she knew—a voice she had known ... a lifetime ago.

Amaris felt like she was going to be sick. She opened the door and stepped inside. The door opened into a narrow hallway that curved around towards the right. Several doors were shut along the hallway, but towards the end of the hall she could see a partially opened door and a dim light shining inside.

"Pamela?" the voice called. "Are you there?"

"No," Amaris answered, "it's not Pamela." She followed the voice towards the lighted room. She paused at the threshold, when unexpectedly, a wave of confidence swept over her. She felt as if she had stepped out of a raging tornado into a quiet garden. Peace and tranquillity swept over her. *The peace that passes understanding!* she thought to herself in amazement. *What a relief to feel it at such a time as this!*

She pushed the door open the rest of the way, and, pulling her veil off of her face, she stepped inside the room. A narrow bed stood in the far corner of the room, underneath a large shuttered window. The room was strewn with clothes and other assorted items. A small nightstand stood by the bed, with a flickering lamp on it, from whence came the only light in the room.

In the bed lay a gaunt figure of a man, paled by the mixture of lamplight and shadows, who now struggled to lift his head and peer at his visitor.

"Who is it?" he asked.

Amaris did not reply, but before she knew it, she

was kneeling at the side of the bed. She reached for the man's hand. Then his eyes met hers, and he stared at her, as if he was seeing a ghost. "Sarah?" he whispered incredulously. "Could that be my Sarah?"

"Yes!" She wrapped both of her hands around his. She could not believe how peaceful she felt. By this time she should have been crying, or at least teary-eyed. But all she felt was a wonderful sense of peace and joy. She was on the path that had been carefully prepared for her, and she knew that all was going to work out perfectly.

But Edward Norman was crying. "I knew it!" he whispered. "I knew He would return you to me. I knew that I would live to see this day!"

Amaris reached forward and threw both of her arms around his thin frame. "Oh Father!" she said. "I never dreamed this would actually come to pass! God has been so good to us!"

Edward looked startled, and then the tears began to roll hot down his cheeks once again. "The promises!" he exclaimed, shaking his head in awe. There was a long pause as they both looked at each other, transfixed in a timeless world.

Finally Edward broke the sacred silence. "How has your life been?"

"It has been wonderful in every way, my father," Amaris responded, looking deep into his eyes, as if seeking to draw out hidden mysteries of the past concealed within.

"That is what Jesus told me! His very Words! When your mother and I were beside ourselves with grief, lying on our faces before Him, begging Him to reveal to us what we could do to return you to our sides, fearing that you had been killed, or worse ... then He spoke. You might think this foolish..." Edward looked up, rather surprised at how quickly the conversation had progressed, and how comfortable he felt with someone whom he scarcely knew.

But Amaris shook her head gently, “Oh, no,” she smiled, “believe me! That type of celestial dialogue seems to be the common practice these days.” She laughed softly, and her father continued.

“Your mother and I had always loved Jesus. We felt Him close in our hearts, and His voice guided our paths. But this experience was unusual. It was almost as if it was an audible voice, and we *both* heard it. Afterwards we repeated to each other the Words that we had heard, and they were the same. On that day, He told us that you were a part of His great plan, and that you had been sent to succor another needy soul. He asked us to bring three petitions that we would want for you, and that He would fulfill them.

“We agreed together, and told Him our petitions. First, that you would grow up in the same love and nurture of our God that we had tried to give you from your birth. Second, that your life would be pleasant and...” he paused and shook his head in amazement, “...and ‘wonderful in every way’—those very words.” He clasped his daughter’s hand more tightly.

“And our third request—well, it was mine, actually. Your mother—bless her loving heart—said she would be happy with just the others. I think she must have had a premonition that she would not see you on Earth again. But my third request was that someday I would see you again, before I would be rejoined with Him whom I love. Help me sit up, dear girl, and let me look at you!”

Amaris helped Edward into a sitting position, propping a pillow behind his back. He looked her up and down, and smiled with satisfaction.

“Oh, you’re every bit of your mother, you are!” he smiled. “She lives in you, little girl! I think that when her time came to go, she knew that she could do you more good from over There than she could here. I see her spirit shining through your eyes.” A deep cough echoed through Edward’s entire body, and Amaris

reached forward to hold onto him.

“It’s going to be all right,” she said. “I’m here now, and I’ll take care of you. I want to hear all about what’s happened to you and to mother during this time that I’ve been gone.”

“Oh, yes! Lord, I’ve got a lot to tell you! Ha! Won’t that be fun!” It seemed that every minute that passed saw Edward looking younger and healthier. He had not only been reunited with his beloved lost child, but his faith had also been restrengthened as he saw the literal fulfillment of what had been promised so many years earlier. “Yes,” he continued, “well, where to start?”

A loud knock on the door startled them both, and Edward called out, “Come in!” Then to Amaris, he said, “It must be Pamela!”

Seconds later, a familiar voice called out, “Amaris?”

“Jordan!” She turned around to see Jordan enter the dimly lit room.

“Amaris?” Edward raised an eyebrow questioningly, and only Jordan’s intensive training enabled him to smother a huge laugh when he saw that familiar expression of his mistress reflected in the haggard face before him.

“Oh!” Amaris laughed. “Oh, yes! I guess I have a story of my own to tell, don’t I?”

Then an entirely new voice broke through the slim moment of silence when the two newly reunited ones considered who would be first to deliver their tale of recollection.

“Father?” It was a young voice, and Amaris’ eyes widened as she was struck with an entirely new thought.

“Why, Father, did you...? Do I...?” Amaris was almost afraid to turn around and look.

Edward smiled and said nothing. Then he held out his hand towards the newest arrival, who stood in the doorway, looking very perplexed.

Amaris held her breath as she watched a copper-headed ten-year-old sidle her way over to stand at the end of Edward's bed. In what was obviously a family mannerism, Pamela raised an eyebrow and asked rather fiercely, "Who are these people?"

"Now that," Jordan ventured—figuring that it was his turn to say the now-familiar words—"is a *very* long story!"

At that, everyone burst out in a hearty laugh—even the reluctant newcomer, who was very curious as to what was going on.

"Well, well," Edward said, grabbing Pamela's hand and pulling it towards Amaris', "we do have a lot to talk about. And there will be plenty of time for all of that. But first things first. Pamela, this is your long-lost sister—Sarah."

Pamela grasped Amaris' hand awkwardly, and mumbled, "How do you do?"

But Amaris stepped forward and threw her arms around the uncertain little girl, "Oh, I do love you!" she burst out. Then Pamela hugged her with all her might.

Amaris then turned to her father. "Yes, my name is Amaris now," she said.

"Amaris? I've never heard of such a name before."

"Well, neither had I," she replied. "But—well, to make a long story short—I have been living in King Merchal's palace all this time. He named me Amaris because it means 'promised by God,' and that's what I was to him. He's been like a father to me."

"A princess!" Edward's mind was somewhere else. "How perfectly astonishing! Why, our God is a God of marvels, isn't He? That's what your name—that is, Sarah—means ... a princess! It was your mother who took a special fancy to that name. 'Darling,' she told me, when you were just weeks in the womb, 'we must name her Sarah. I have a feeling about this child, that she is very special.' I knew when she got that

look in her eyes that she knew what she was talking about, and so Sarah you were. And now ... what was that name again?"

"Amaris," Pamela piped up. She had not taken her eyes off her newly found sister since she had entered the room.

"Amaris!" Edward said, running the sound of it over and over in his mind.

"Amaris," echoed Jordan, only because he didn't know what else to say, and he felt he should say something at this point or he would lose his reason for being in the room.

Three pairs of eyes turned abruptly to look at him. Both Edward and Pamela echoed in unison, "And who are *you*?"

Jordan hadn't expected such a response, and immediately forgot who he was and what he was doing there. "I—uh—I ... I—I'm a nice fellow, really I am!"

"Oh, don't worry!" Amaris rose from her father's bed and put her slender arm around Jordan's muscular waist. "He comes with me." She smiled, and the other two raised their eyebrows at each other, with a "what have we here" look.

"Well," Edward said, seeing that no more information concerning this handsome stranger was going to be offered just yet, "how about we all have something to eat, and then we can swap life stories? I'm sure we have a lot to talk about!"

"Yes," Amaris said, and then added quietly, "and plans to make."

## THE VISION

It had been a long day, and despite her desires to the contrary, sleep was weighing heavily on Amaris' eyelids. They had been talking busily for nearly two hours; by popular demand Amaris had been the first to recount her life story. She was desperately curious to hear from her father, but she knew that she had had about all that one day could take.

Edward noticed her drooping lashes, and figured that he would need to be the one to call an end to the gathering. "I suppose we had better close for the night. You two look like you could use some recuperation time."

"Yes," said Jordan, rather wearily. "We have walked a long ways, and have met with much excitement as well."

They were all piled on or around Edward's bed, as it was obviously not easy for him to move around without difficulty. Pamela had graciously fixed them all some food, which they ate hungrily, yet hastily for all the excitement. But now that same excitement was taking its toll, and tiredness was overcoming them all.

Amaris was soon settled on a cot in Pamela's room, and Jordan retired to the front room. A deep sleep sank upon them all.



As dawn broke over the distant mountains, Amaris sat up in her bed. Something was troubling her, and she felt that she would do best to have some time alone before she continued with the excitement that the day was sure to bring.

She dressed quickly, covering herself in the common wrap of the country and finishing with her thick veil. As she passed through the front room on her way to the door, Jordan stirred and opened one eye sleepily. Seeing Amaris up and dressed, he sat up straight.

“What is the matter, my lady?” he asked, in his grogginess forgetting her previous entreaty to address her as an equal.

“Don’t trouble yourself, Jordan,” she whispered, hoping to not wake up the others. “I am just going outside to clear my mind and get some air. I need to do some thinking. I’ll be back before the sun is fully up.”

She had scarcely finished her sentence before Jordan was out of bed, still fully dressed from the previous night. He took his work seriously, and felt the personal responsibility to always be ready to go at a moment’s notice. When he was out of the palace and guarding his lady, he felt himself responsible to be on duty every moment. Undressing would leave him vulnerable, a luxury that he did not care to indulge in.

“Allow me to accompany you, Amaris,” he said. And seeing the refusal rise to her lips, quickly added, “I will keep my distance, well out of earshot, and I promise I won’t watch you—just cast an eye over every now and then to make sure you are all right. Your father—that is, his majesty—has entrusted you into my care, and what should I tell him if something were to happen to you? This is not the palace, and one can only guess what types of rogues could be wandering the streets at this hour.”

Amaris realized the wisdom of his words. Recalling only too well the types of rogues and vagabonds that *did* fill the streets, even at a much more decent hour of the day, she nodded her assent. She left her leather purse in plain view, so that if the others should wake up, they would know that she and Jordan had only left for a short while, and would return presently.



“Where do you wish to go?” Jordan asked, as they stepped out into the quiet streets.

Amaris’ eyes were fixed on the ground before her. She shrugged her shoulders, then lifted her head and looked around. “I just want to be out in nature somewhere. Do you think there’s any of that around here?”

“I think the east gate of the city is not more than twenty minutes in this direction,” he replied, leading her down a small road. “There will be plenty of greenery beyond there.”

“Thanks for coming, Jordan,” Amaris replied. “I do appreciate it. I just feel like I need to get away and do some thinking, you know?”

“I understand,” he said. “And I am sure that you do have a lot to think about.”

“Jordan,” Amaris broke the silence again after a few minutes’ walk, “what do you think about the meaning of life?”

Jordan choked on a laugh he only half-succeeded in suppressing. “The meaning of life? My lady is indeed reflective today!”

“Truly, what do you think about it? What is life to you?”

Jordan thought a minute, then tilted his head up towards the sky. Taking a few long strides, he stepped in front of Amaris and turned around to face her, spreading his arms wide in a gesture of inadequacy. She stopped and looked at him intently.

“Life... I don’t know. I suppose to me, life is

following the path I was created to walk, and fulfilling the plan that God intended for me.” He faced the road again, and they continued walking.

“So you really believe that God orders our lives, and we must but follow?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I do. But not in the sense that He is making us do things that we wouldn’t want to do. I expect that He has His particular design for us, and once we truly find what that is, we will feel it and it will feel right—that it’s leading somewhere. And eventually we will be able to look back and see that it was a good path.”

“The path of destiny,” Amaris said pensively. She reached inside her cloak and pulled out her medallion. “That’s what this journey was really all about for me, you know. It was all about discovering what path I have been on all this time, and how I have been led. I think that is what my royal father was hoping I would discover. Well, I don’t know that he knew all the details himself, but he had the general idea. But it wouldn’t have been enough to tell me for himself; he knew that I had to be shown it in God’s time.”

Amaris smiled. “Funny, but I seem to have grown so much closer to God during this time. I guess I am seeing sides of Him that I never knew existed before. I had no idea He had such a hand in planning my life.”

Jordan grinned, and looked sidelong at the pretty girl walking beside him. “Well, I always knew He had a hand in mine!” he said.

Amaris stopped in her tracks and put her hands on her hips, “Now that’s enough!” she said. “Jordan, you keep giving me these little insinuations and sidelong flirtations. Do you have something that you want to tell me? Are you trying to tell me something?”

Jordan was caught entirely by surprise, and his tanned skin flushed slightly. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ll refrain from making such comments in the future.”

As they walked on, Amaris bit her lip. That wasn’t at all what she was trying to say, but she still felt rather confused and didn’t know how to react to Jordan’s obvious interest in her. In a way—well, in a great way—she felt very flattered and surprisingly agreeable to it. But on the other hand, how could it ever work?

Suddenly a cool breeze flushed over them both, carrying her thoughts away. They had reached the bottom of a green hillside, and Jordan motioned that he would wait at the bottom while she made her way up further.

She climbed for five minutes or so, then fell to her knees in the dewy grass. “My God, my God!” she cried softly. “Help me! I feel so unclear, so confused in my thinking. This should be the happiest day of my life, and yet I feel so very lost and uncertain.”

There she was, in the seclusion of her mind again, seeing her familiar retreat—her pit in which she had found comfort and had sorted out many a despondent thought in years past. The same wooden chair sat there, at the bottom of the hole, and Amaris could picture all the agony of soul she had experienced, trying to make sense out of her problems and find answers to them all. Most of the time she had climbed back up that ladder little more enlightened than when she had come down it.

So there she sat, alone in the innermost chambers of her mind, when ... all of a sudden, something changed. She stood up and heard the chair clatter down on the stones behind her. A light was flooding down the ladder—an incredibly bright, warm, almost tangible light. She reached out her hand and felt it as it drew nearer. She felt as if she was putting her hand inside a soft glove of finest woven flax.

She suddenly saw the ladder being transformed into a flight of golden steps. She could see no person or other form inside the light, but somehow she knew

that everything—the light, the warmth, the stairs, all of it—was *Him*: The Most High One.

Then He spoke, His voice reverberating through her mind like a thousand orchestras all blending in harmony: “Ask!”

“Ask what, my Lord?” she trembled, and pressed her back against the wall of her rugged abode.

“Ask what you will, My child, and I will answer you.” The Voice, so majestic, was so incredibly loving, so patient, full of tenderness and inexplicable longing.

Amaris broke down, and tears began streaming down her cheeks. “I do not understand!” she burst out. “What am I supposed to feel now about his majesty? I have always regarded him as my real father, but now I have my natural father, so where does he fit in? And what am I supposed to feel towards my natural father? And what about Jordan? He’s my servant, but ... I feel strangely towards him, not like I would towards a regular servant. And what about You? I want to give my life to You, but I don’t know how...” she trailed off tearfully, and buried her face in her hands.

The Voice did not begin again until her sobs had quieted, and she had lifted her head again towards the light. “Do you see these steps?” the Lord queried. Amaris nodded. “There are many levels of love in My Kingdom. You are yet young, but I want you to see that there are many types of love, and each one has its place. I have begun to reveal unto you the mysteries of love, but in order to understand them, you must be willing to put aside your natural mind and your carnal reasoning.

“And I say—for your expectation and delight—that you have not yet begun to touch the mysteries of love in the Kingdom of Heaven. For so many and so varied are the magical tiers of love, that you would not be able to count them with your earthly mind. Even as these stairs, which go up...”

Suddenly it seemed to Amaris that she could see the stairs as they continued on up past the mountains, past the skyline, past the clouds and off endlessly into space.

She put her feet on the first step, and the Voice continued, “When you were a child, you learned the love of parents.” She moved forward a step. “Then you learned to know and begin to understand some of My love for you.” Again she went to the next step. “Then difficulty came your way, and you learned of the love that can be found in Me to overcome such hardship—love that is shown by faith and perseverance.” Forward again.

“Another step of love: to accept the love of one who needed you desperately, and to learn to return that love. And here I wish to say to you, child, that this gift of parents who truly love without the obligation, this is love that is not inborn, but it is true love. And yes, more than true love—it is My love. For children of natural parents can expect that the love is there unconditionally. I have made it so. But for those who have taken in and raised another’s child as their own, in the spirit this child truly becomes their own, for they have paid the highest price to obtain this child—their love, given of a free will.

“This is where you are at now, My little one, but do you see the many steps that are before you? Learn to reconcile these types of love one with another. Give each their place, and learn to love beyond appearances. That is very important.”

Turning around, Amaris found that the golden stairs had carried her out of her hole. As she cast a look down into the gloomy depths, she knew that she would never return there again.

## GAIN AND LOSS

Amaris walked slowly down the grassy hillside and came up behind Jordan, who was sitting against a large, smooth boulder. She sat down on the rock, and slipped her hand onto his broad shoulder. He looked up with a smile.

“I’m sorry, Jordan,” she said quietly, and looked down at her lap.

“Why are you sorry now, my lady?” Jordan inquired cheerfully.

“Back on the road, earlier ... I didn’t mean to mock you. I understand that no matter what you might think or feel, you probably don’t feel in a position to just come out and talk to me about it. I hope I didn’t make you feel bad.”

“Amaris...” Jordan turned around and knelt before the rock where she sat. With his large work-roughened hands he grasped the delicate one on his shoulder, and held it tightly. His large brown eyes searched deep into hers.

“I think you know that I love you more than I could ever say. I have loved you ever since I first came to know you, years ago, and every day that has passed has only made this love flow more deeply and richly in my heart. I had long since buried this feeling as a



foolish and childish dream, but, since coming on this trip, I have experienced more hope than I had ever dared to imagine.”

He dropped her hand and passed his palms over his face impatiently. “I only wish...” he paused, then continued hesitantly, “I only wish I could be worthy of you. No matter what you might say or what I might hope you would feel, there is just no way anything of this sort could ever come true. Our roles are too different—these things are just not done.”

“Jordan, Jordan! Don’t you see...?” Amaris was bursting with a passion she had not known she held.

Jordan caught his breath at the tremor he felt in her voice, but did not dare look up into her eyes. He waited silently for her to continue.

“Don’t you see?” she said. “I am not true nobility any more than you are. You’ve seen my father with your own eyes!”

“Perhaps,” Jordan said, “but in his majesty’s eyes, and in the eyes of the realm, you are royalty nonetheless. And how would it look to...” Jordan trailed off uncomfortably. He realized that he didn’t even know what Amaris was thinking of, and he did not want to put words in her mouth.

“Jordan, look at me!” she begged.

He did, and for a moment she thought her heart would break at the tender longing in his eyes. “It does not have to be,” she continued, “for has not our God said that when we are near Him, all things are possible? Not a week ago, I woke up an entirely different person than the one I am today. I have been revitalized and given an infusion of zest and passion for life and for our Lord such as I had no idea could exist. I feel that I am consuming and giving out pure energy, where before I was only floating along on the tide. And somehow...” she reached down and grabbed his hand firmly, “somehow I feel that we are meant to be together.”

“What do you mean?” Jordan spoke softly, trying to suppress the hopes that were threatening to beat down the doors of his countenance and gush forth. He knew that once he let them go, they could no longer be held in.

“I mean that I love you, Jordan,” she said as she pulled up her veil, threw it back over her head, reached over, and kissed him.

That was it. The barriers Jordan had so desperately tried to hold up crumbled to dust. Before he could tell what was happening, his arms were encircling her, holding her so tightly she thought she would melt into him. Now they were standing—their lips still joined—tenderly, passionately, retracing every thought and desire that had haunted them for years. In a moment that seemed to last an eternity, their love was sealed forever.



How different Amaris felt as she walked down the now-bustling streets towards her father’s home. Jordan walked by her side—although it could hardly be said that he walked, but more that he floated, for he was much too far gone into his world of bliss to come down for such trivia as earthly travel.

“Come along,” she laughed, pulling his hand towards the door to the stairwell that led to her father’s rooms. “We’ve arrived, and our hosts await upstairs.”

Pam had been watching the road from the window, and no sooner had Amaris set foot inside the entrance than the upstairs door flung open and the vivacious girl ran down to escort her newfound sister up the stairs. She was bubbling over with questions that had germinated through the night after hearing her sister’s incredible life story.

“How is Father?” Amaris asked.

“Oh!” Pam’s face fell. “He’s not doing so well right now. I think all the excitement of seeing you again and staying up so late talking was too much for him.

His breathing has become difficult.”

Amaris moved quickly down the hallway towards her father’s bedroom.

“The doctor will come by later today,” Pam continued.

Amaris swept off her headpiece as she came into the dimly lit room. The man looked up weakly, but upon seeing her, his face lit up with the radiance of a sunbeam. “Ah, my starlight!” he whispered. “Come close to me, child.”

Amaris knelt by the bedside and placed her head on the pillow alongside him. “You’ll be all right soon, Father dear,” she whispered. “You’re going to get better now. I’m sure that his majesty would be happy to have you join us at the royal palace. And there you would be able to regain your strength.”

“You are going back then, aren’t you?” Edward asked. Amaris bit her lip, but he continued quickly. “Of course! You must, child. I know that as well as you do. I am not going to be the one to pull you from your destiny. As for me...” he smiled, and moved his cheek closer to hers. Amaris was startled at how cold it felt. “As for me, I am content just to have seen you before passing on to my reward.”

“Please don’t say such things, Father!” Amaris exclaimed. “You will get better!”

But the old man shook his head. “I’ve always known it was a matter of time, little one,” he said. “I was only holding on until my Lord fulfilled His last promise to me. I have accomplished my mission in life, and now I must be on my way, for...” He looked up at the ceiling with a faraway look of longing in his eyes. “...for my dearest one awaits me There.” A tear or two trickled down his wrinkled cheek, and Pam dashed forward to bury them in a soft handkerchief. Edward reached for her plump little hand and held it tight in his. His other hand reached for Amaris’.

His voice was barely audible now, and Jordan, who

was standing near the foot of the bed, could scarcely make it out. “Take good care of your little sister, Sarah,” he was saying. “And Pamela, be obedient and helpful. Love each other always, both of you, and never stray from the path to which our Lord calls you. If you continue therein, then I have no doubt of your happiness and ultimate success, for that He has guaranteed.” The tears were gone now, and only a soft smile remained, glowing with an unearthly light and peace.

“Goodbye, my precious ones. And always remember, I will be near you...” With those words, he was gone.

Amaris closed her eyes. She could almost feel her father’s soul floating upwards on the breath of his love to meet his Creator and his long-missed wife. Tears rolled down her cheek as she sighed, but it was a peaceful sigh. Parting so soon after having just been reunited with her father was difficult indeed; yet amazingly, Amaris felt content. It was an almost supernatural feeling that came from knowing that God’s will had been done, and that all was well.

Jordan walked over to Pam and placed his arms around her. “It will be all right,” he said, stroking her hair. “He will never be far from you, and at this moment he is happier and healthier than he could ever have been if he had stayed.”

The little girl nodded, and her sobbing subsided. She knew that Jordan spoke the truth. For a moment that knew no earthly time, they all remained silent.

The silence was broken by Pam’s tear-choked voice. “What will happen to me now?” Then her face lit up. “Can I become a princess too, Sarah?”

Amaris managed a chuckle through her own tears. “Why, I do believe you can, little sister!” she replied. Then Amaris turned to Jordan, as if wondering where they should go from there.

“I suggest we send a messenger to the palace as

quickly as possible, and ask that they send a litter to fetch us. Meanwhile we could pack up all of Pam's belongings..."

"And we'll need to leave the house clean..." Pam added.

"Well, we can start on that, Jordan, if you want to go out and hire a messenger." Amaris began to roll up her sleeves, then stopped. "But come, let us first say a few words to the One who has brought us this far." Gently pulling the sheet over her father's face, she knelt down by his bed. The others followed.

"Thank You, blessed heavenly Father, for perfecting Your will in all of our lives," she prayed. "We are but instruments that move at Your command. We marvel at the perfectness which results from following Your plan. At this time, when so much around us is changing and uncertain..."

Her eyes opened a crack to look across the bed at Jordan, who looked more kind and tender than ever in the soft light. She shook her head and continued, "...we can only thank You for having brought us this far. Grant us the grace to continue along the path that You have chosen, that we may fulfill the remainder of our destiny with the ease of a life carried along by Your current. Amen."

- 10 -

## THE TOUCH OF GOD

A loud pounding on the door caught Amaris by surprise. Before she could gather her wits, Jordan was already in the hall, calling, "Who goes there?"

"It is the litter, come to fetch her highness!" a voice rang out.

"So quickly?" Amaris was quite unprepared, and ran into the other room to don her headdress.

Jordan opened the door and motioned to the servants that entered which boxes and bags needed to be carried out.

"Jordan!" Amaris beckoned fiercely from the side room. He ducked in, and she shut the door behind them.

She leaned back against the door, and he leaned towards her, brushing his lips along her neck.

"We shall have to resume our respective positions for the time being," she said.

"Of course," he nodded.

"Kiss me one last time," she said. "It will have to last me all day, at least." And so he did.

They were interrupted by a jolt as Pam tried to open the door on which Amaris was leaning. "Are you two in there?"

"Just a moment!"

Pam rounded the door to see Amaris and Jordan standing apart, hands behind their backs, with their faces flushing a mild red. “Oh,” Pam said matter-of-factly. “Well, the servants are all ready. And they have prepared Father’s body and placed it in a coffin to be carried back with us. I think we can be off.”

“Well, let us go then,” Amaris said, as she gave Jordan’s hand one last clandestine squeeze.

But as she rounded the corner into the hall, there she remained with open mouth, staring at the maid-servant that faced her. “What are *you* doing here?” she gasped in amazement. She walked quickly into the front room and there saw the second maidservant, and one of the litter-bearers. “But you ... you left us in the cave! What happened? Why are you here now?”

The first maidservant hung her head in shame, and the other two were speechless.

“What is going on?” Amaris asked again.

A voice from the entrance broke the awkward silence. “Madam, we beg your pardon most humbly.” It was one of the soldiers, and he entered the room, then bowed low before his mistress.

Amaris motioned for him to stand. “Go on,” she said.

“Your highness,” the soldier continued, “it was thus instructed us by...”

“I instructed them to do so!” An authoritative voice reverberated through the small room, and half of the onlookers fell to the floor. Amaris turned to face His Majesty, King Merchal.

“Your majesty!” she exclaimed, as she bowed before him. “Why, what has brought you to this place?”

The king nodded at the servants, and they all scurried out of the room. He then turned towards Amaris. “My child!” Tears of joy sparkled in his eyes as he reached for her hand. “I could not bear to be away from you one moment longer! As soon as I heard that you were on your way back to me, I had to come

and join you. I was hoping also to be able to meet your father...” His voice trailed off as he read Amaris’ reply in her eyes. “I’m very sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be, Father,” she said, and couldn’t help but notice his eyes light up at the sound of the word that put his fears and uncertainties to rest. “My father, Edward, has passed on to his reward, which I am sure is a very great one. He was a good man, and I am honored to have met him.”

“I only wish that I could have,” the king said quietly.

“Well, if you will receive it,” Amaris said hesitantly, “he has left you a gift.”

“A *gift*?” King Merchal suspiciously noted the twinkle in the girl’s eye.

“Wait here a moment, and I will fetch ... it.” She dashed out of the room, and returned a moment later with a reluctant little redhead.

“Your majesty, this is my sister, Pamela Norman. Pam, this is His Majesty, King Merchal.”

“I am honored to meet you,” Pam curtsied low before him.

“Another little Amaris!” the king exclaimed. “What a glory has been bestowed upon me! I sent forth my one love, and I have gained her back twofold!” He looked into Pam’s eyes with a beaming smile. “Little one,” he said, “you are welcome in my home!”

“I am honored, my lord,” she said quietly.

“I hope that one day you will also come to think of it as your own home, and that you will welcome me into your family, as you have your blessed sister.”

Pam smiled, but she was obviously very nervous; all of this was a lot to take in at one setting. To her, the last three days all seemed like some sort of dream. Amaris pulled her close. “It’s all right, Pam,” she said soothingly. “Take your time. We’ve got plenty of time to get to know each other.”

Then Amaris recalled her unfinished question.

“But Father, what was the soldier trying to tell me—that *you* had ordered the retreat of our company?”

The old man looked bashful. “I apologize for the deception, little princess,” he said. “I felt that due to the nature of your journey, it was best taken alone, with only Jordan for your protection. But I thought it best that this removal be unexpected, otherwise you would have worried and wondered why I wanted you to make this journey alone, as such a thing has never been done before. It was difficult for these who live to serve you to think that their image may have been tarnished in your eyes, but I hope that you will forgive them. The blame is mine.”

“Not at all, my lord,” Amaris smiled. “I understand completely, and I hold nothing against them, or you. I see how this journey was perfect in every way, according to God’s plan. It would have only been less so had we had much company. Oh, Father!” She leaned her head against his chest. “I have so much to tell you!”

“And I cannot wait to hear it,” the king replied. “Let us make haste then in our journey home, that we may begin to partake of the joyous remainder of our lives!”

“Yes!” Amaris exclaimed happily. “Let us go home!”

“Home!” Pam’s eyes glowed at the thought, for though her young life had been happy, the last months had seen their share of toil and heartache with her mother’s passing and her father’s illness. She had sometimes felt the burden too heavy on her small shoulders. Now she was looking towards an entirely new life. She felt safe in the loving hands of her newfound sister; the deep tenderness in Amaris’ eyes told her that all would be well.

“Come, sweetest!” Amaris put her arm around the little redhead. “Let us be off.”



Amaris’ excitement had been mounting steadily

with each passing hour. At last she could contain it no longer, and she reached for the curtain to get a view of how they were progressing.

At that very moment, the king—who had been riding alongside the litter—poked his head through the curtain. “Patience, little sprightly one,” he remonstrated with a smile, seeing Amaris’ anxious look. “We shall arrive none the quicker for your anxious fretting!”

“Oh, Father,” she wailed, “there is so much that I want to see again! I feel like I’ve been away so long and now I value my place in your wonderful home so much more! I cannot wait to show my sister all of my favorite places.”

Just then the footmen halted their walk. The king dismounted and cast an approving glance ahead of him, while guarding the litter’s curtain with his hand. “Well, it appears that before too long you will be able to do so. We have arrived.”

“Now wait,” he said, opening the curtain, “As you step forth, remember this: You are both the most precious reward I could ever have. My God has returned unto me that which I have given Him, and I have promised Him that I will do my utmost to love and cherish you with every bit of my soul. Now, you may go.”

Amaris stepped out of the litter, followed by her little sister. Their eyes widened in amazement. The litter had been set down just before the palace entrance, and as the girls looked up at the palace, it appeared to be entirely made of flowers! From the top to the bottom, in every conceivable crack and opening, bloomed flowers of all colors and shapes. Small and large, common and rare, simple and spectacular, all blended their cheery faces as one shining banner of welcome. The girls stood transfixed, overcome by the beautiful fragrance that cascaded upon them.

“I have had this done as a welcoming gift to you.”

The king's voice startled them from their reverie as he placed a hand on each of their shoulders, "This is what you have done to my life. You have transformed it from dull, lifeless clay into a beautiful blooming garden of flowers, aglow with life and beauty and joy."

"And God has done that to us all!" Amaris whispered. "For I think each one of us has been the salvation of the other in some way! And thus, it is not me or any one of us who are the blooms that give life to another's dull existence. It is the breath of God that whispers forth and causes each place it touches to blossom. And the more we give ourselves unto Him, the more blossoms fill our lives and the lives of those around us."

"Thank God for His blessed touch!" the king whispered.

The two girls threw their arms around him, and they held each other close.

- 11 -  
**FOREVER**

Amaris slipped her hand into her father's as they walked through the lush greenery, made fragrant by the evening air. The moon gazed serenely down at them with a round, full face, bathing the whole garden in a most tranquil beauty. But Amaris felt a twinge of restlessness. It had been days since their return, and a question that she had been fighting to subdue rose resolutely to the surface. At last she determined that, no matter what the outcome, she would be more at peace once it was out. *Surely there must have been a good reason...*

"My lord..." she began gingerly. Noting the uncertain quiver in her tone, the king stopped in his tracks and turned to give her his undivided attention.

"What is it, little heart?" he asked gently.

"Father, one question has returned to haunt me many times since I have heard the news of my past life. You have always been the most loving of fathers to me, and have seen to my every need. But ... did you ever attempt to find my first parents? Did you ever search for them? It seems that they could have easily been found, knowing their names..."

The king sighed, and reached his hand out to touch her shoulder, then paused in midair. His hand fell

back to his side. “I must be true with you, child,” he said sadly, “for I have held much torment in my soul over this. When you first came to me, I closed my mind to the idea that you could have relations close by. I assumed that the traders had brought their slaves here by ship, and that any relations were too far away to be discovered. So for some time I did not inquire. I had heard from God that He had sent you as my angel of comfort, and how could you be that for me if I were to return you from whence you came?” He looked sidelong at Amaris to see her reaction, but she was careful to hide any feelings until she had heard the rest of his tale.

“After a month or more I became too stricken with guilt, and I determined that, come what may, I would not be able to live with myself if I did not do all I could in this direction. So, at the risk of losing that which was most precious to me, I launched into a search.”

“Was that the long trip you went on, soon after I arrived?” Amaris’ mind shot backward in keen remembrance. “You looked so sad. The image of you at the door is burned into my mind to this day.”

“That, little one,” the old man spoke from the depths of his soul, “is the look of someone who is putting his dearest treasure on the altar, and saying unto his God, ‘Do with it as You will.’”

Amaris leaned her head on his arm as they walked on together, and the tale continued. “I journeyed out myself, because I did not want to tell another soul the truth of your past unless it would be absolutely necessary. I made arrangements to visit the English ambassador, to tell him of your situation, and he told me the strangest tale! He recalled well the name of your father, for the man had been greatly distraught at the loss of his young child, and feared for her safety. He said that for weeks the man had put out requests and bulletins and had conducted searches of his own,

but finally, one day—about two weeks before my visit—your father had come and told the ambassador, ‘I must confess that in all my searching I knew...’”

Amaris’ head shot up as the king’s voice trailed off. “Did you hear that?” she whispered.

“Someone was saying the words along with me!” the king whispered.

Amaris nodded. “I, too, heard the same words spoken by another! What is this?”

“I do not know.” The king held the girl closer to him.

Amaris pulled her cloak tightly around her slender frame, for the garden seemed to have suddenly grown cold. Then, before them, a figure materialized. The two looked at each other, blinked several times, and then looked again. The figure was still there.

“In all my searching...” the voice reverberated through the stillness of the grove, “...I knew that my search would prove fruitless. I told the ambassador that day, ‘Search no more, for God Himself has taken my child to serve His purpose, and in His good time, I will see her again.’”

King Merchal trembled uncontrollably, and could not speak. He looked up into the warm, loving eyes of the spirit before him, and then did a thing he had never done before. Before Amaris’ eyes, the great king and ruler of the land threw himself forward and bowed in the dirt before the shining spirit that he owed so much to. “I am speechless,” he murmured, “I cannot face you.”

“Arise. I am but a mere servant of our Lord, like you,” the spirit said. His voice was soft, his eyes were kind, and the two mortals were filled with an abundance of peace. “Continue the story for our child.”

King Merchal rose slowly, and Amaris quickly leaned forward to brush the dust and bits of grass from his garments. “The ambassador then told me,”

he said as he cast a glance at the spirit who was still smiling at them both, “that the man had said to call off the search. He would retire from his government position and devote his life to serving his God in this country that had been chosen for him, until God’s will was accomplished.” King Merchal mopped his brow.

“Since that time, the ambassador had not seen Edward Norman or heard of his whereabouts. I told him if he ever did, to send word to me at once, which he promised to do. I never heard from him again.”

The king stopped, but Edward looked deep into his eyes. “Go on,” he said, in a deep yet tender voice. “Tell of your feelings.”

“For years—well, I guess for all of this time, ever since—I have berated myself that it was my fault that you were deprived of your natural family. Had I acted sooner, I could have returned you before your father called off the search and disappeared. So although I have been wonderfully happy with you, I have always felt guilty, and felt that I had wrongfully taken you from...” The king looked up at Edward.

“Oh, but don’t you see?” Amaris burst out. Her heart swelled as she remembered her experience on the golden steps not many days before. “It was all a part of God’s plan. I loved...”

She gulped and looked over to the kindly specter who stood alongside her. “I *love* my dear father Edward very dearly, but you, my king, are no less my father than he! For as God has told me in my time of great distress, there are many forms and levels of love. One of His great purposes for our lives is that we would come to understand and appreciate them all. It is clear to me that the great Designer above in actuality engineered this whole plan, including what seemed to you to be a mistake. But tell us the truth,” she said, turning to Edward, “for certainly it is clear in the realm where you are.”

Edward smiled, and to the eyes of the onlookers that smile brought pure joy, for it came from the depths of the soul of one who had been translated into that eternal world where all is truth and bliss. He looked young and radiant and beautiful beyond words. “The last thought that passed through my mortal mind before I departed for the land above was this: ‘I have no regrets.’ And do you know why I could say that?”

The two felt they did know, but they shook their heads. They wanted to hear it from Edward’s mouth.

“I have no regrets because the life that I lived was ordained by God, and led by Him at every step. He used the fruit of my body to accomplish His will, and He kept every promise He ever made to me. What more could I ask? My life was filled with joy in every way. It seemed that God did nothing but try to compensate me for the sacrifice that He had required. He showered upon our small family every blessing and bounteous supply. We truly had a wonderful life.

“So you see,” he said to the king, “you had no cause for your remorse; your very hesitation was directed by the hand of God to suit His perfect will. Let this knowledge bring you the perfect peace that you so richly deserve. You have now experienced the greatest and truest freedom of all—that which comes from placing on the altar that which you most dearly love. When you give fully and freely to God, He always pours forth in return so much more that you feel you can scarcely contain it.”

The king’s eyes filled with tears, and Amaris’ vision became blurry as well. When they regained their composure seconds later and looked up—and all around—their mysterious visitor was gone. He had vanished as abruptly as he had appeared.

The king shook his head, wiped his eyes and smiled. “Friendly man, your father,” he said.

Amaris laughed. “I have been blessed with close-



ness to two of the greatest men I could ever hope to know,” she said fervently. Then she caught herself. “Well, I would have to say, three...”

The king looked at her questioningly. “Amaris,” he said, “is there something you would like to tell me?”

Amaris’ eyes widened as she realized that she had given herself away. *I suppose it is all for the best anyway*, she thought, *for I shall have to tell his majesty if I intend to do anything about this.*

And so she told him everything, from the very beginning. She told him Jordan’s secret, and of his long-time love for her, and how she had grown to deeply care for him as well. On and on she went about his wonderful tenderness, his love for God, his sincerity. Finally the king could take it no more.

“Peace, child! Be still!” He laughed aloud and covered both his ears. “I think if I hear one more virtue attributed to this fellow I shall feel entirely too small myself!”

Amaris looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I got carried away! But what do you think? I realize it would be a difficult thing to make it work, for the realm thinks me to be royalty, and he is but a servant. But perhaps he could continue to serve me, and we could continue our romance clandestinely!”

“I do not know about that, Amaris,” the king said, tugging on his bushy beard. “This is a very complicated matter. Let me first say that I am very happy for you. I have seen that Jordan is an excellent man, true and upright, and noble in heart. And to me that is of far greater importance than lineage or station. I can see that your heart is set on him, and I will honor that. But I cannot help but feel that for him to continue in your service, with your mutual feelings the way they are—and being that we now know what he *isn’t*—I fear the temptation will be too great. You may slip and cause others to question.”

Amaris’ heart sank, her eyes fell, and she felt as though she were about to cry. But before she could say anything else, the king continued.

“I have a plan,” he said. “I have need of a counselor to advise me in matters of state. This post has been empty for too long now, and I think one who was a good companion to her highness on her trip of utmost importance would be a worthy candidate. From such a position, then, it would be more fitting for you two to see each other. We could then see how your love progresses. What do you say to that?”

Amaris could not say anything. She threw her arms around the king’s neck and buried her face in his shoulder. She hugged him until her arms felt weak, and he pulled her off him. “Come now,” he said, “we must move along. There is someone who no doubt anxiously awaits a word with you.”

“Oh yes!” she exclaimed. “I’ve got to tell Jordan! Thank you again, Father dear!” And she was off, dashing through the gardens.



It was late, but Amaris and Jordan were as two who knew nothing of the trivialities of time. Their hearts channeled tireless energy into their bodies, and their eyes drank in each other’s every detail.

Jordan could hardly believe what was happening to him. “You are sure that your father has promised all this for me?” he asked incredulously.

“He has!” Amaris said, looking up at him with gleaming eyes. “And what he has promised, he will surely bring to pass, as I will deliver what I have promised.”

“And I likewise,” Jordan said, holding up his index finger.

Amaris raised hers, and they pressed them together.

“Forever,” Jordan whispered.

“Forever,” Amaris echoed.

***the scimitar  
and the rose***

## THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH

From her vantage point on the palace balcony, Amaris drank in the fullness of beauty that surrounded her. The evening air was cool and moist, rich with fragrance rising from the lush flower gardens below. Soft melodies drifted up from the musicians' quarters. The sunset was all but over, and its fiery tendrils were quietly melting into the indigo sky.

Unfastening the side of the veil which covered her face, Amaris leaned her head way back and looked up toward the heavens. Already a few stars had gathered the courage to emerge, as the glorious competition was out of the way and it was now their turn to shine. Amaris smiled. How she loved the evening skies!

Her gaze returned to the garden below, and again a smile crossed her face as a sprightly figure dashed across a pathway and disappeared into a bush. *Pamela!* She thought to herself. *What a fiery little sister I have!*

A soft rustle sounded behind Amaris, and before she had time to turn around, she felt two strong hands grasping her arms. "Would I be permitted to join my betrothed on her balcony?" came a deep, silken voice.

"Why, Jordan," Amaris smiled, "you know that you

are welcome in my presence at any time!” She turned around to face him. “And how is the king’s counselor today?”

“I am well,” he said, “and becoming the more so as the seconds pass.” He reached for her hand, dwarfed as it was by his large one, and brought it tenderly to his lips.

Amaris leaned against him, tilting her head to rest on his shoulders.

The silence was shattered by a loud, girlish laugh, and a playful shriek. A blue-clad figure, scarcely visible in the waning daylight, streaked through the garden with several other figures in close pursuit.

“The royal gardens do not know what has come upon them,” Amaris shook her head.

“Ah,” said Jordan nonchalantly, “but the gardens love it. Why, look at that tree! I could have sworn I saw it crack a smile! It’s great to have young life on these grounds again. How old is the little one now?”

“Soon to be little no more!” Amaris replied, as if she could hardly believe it herself. “She is almost twelve years old.”

“Well, she certainly is entitled to her playful years! Why,” Jordan grinned teasingly at Amaris, “I remember when you were her age...”

“Oh!” Amaris raised her fist at him playfully. “You most certainly had better not remember when I was her age! But even when I was, I was much more dignified!”

“In truth, you have always been a princess,” Jordan replied. “But you must confess, you were wild in your younger years.”

Amaris had been nearly twelve when Jordan had joined the palace, he then being seventeen. That was seven years ago, and how much had changed since that time! He was brought back to the present by the look in Amaris’ eye, as she lifted an eyebrow and looked at him challengingly. “Was?” she asked. “Was

wild?” Her hands were grasping the top of the waist-high wall that surrounded the balcony area, and Jordan widened his eyes in consternation.

“Amaris!” he cautioned. “Don’t do anything foolish!”

But before he could even finish his sentence, Amaris had hoisted herself up and was standing on the balcony wall precariously. Jordan came closer, nervously, wanting her to get down as soon as possible but not willing to speak loudly for fear of startling her into a fall. “Please,” he begged. “Please come down! You know that’s not safe; you would have a terrible fall if you lost your footing!”

“It’s fine, Jordan,” Amaris continued, placing one dainty foot before the other as she proceeded along the little wall. “I’ve done this before. Don’t worry! It’s perfectly safe!”

Another voice chimed in now. “Go, Amaris!” It was Pamela, applauding from the grounds below. Then she whispered to the awestruck companion who stood next to her, “My sister is the greatest, isn’t she?”

Realizing that she was gathering an audience, Amaris quickly descended from the balcony ledge, and hurried back into her room. Right at that moment, the bell outside the room sounded gently. Amaris replaced her veil while Jordan went for the door. He spoke a few low words with the servant at the entrance, then moved back towards Amaris.

“You must come, quickly!” His tanned face had suddenly paled and his eyes were wide. “It’s His Majesty—your father! He is not well and has called for you!”

The two were down the hall in less than a minute, and reached the door of King Merchal’s bedchamber. As they were bid enter, Amaris rushed up to the bed where the king lay, looking wan and rather weak. But seeing the two, his face brightened, and he struggled to sit up. A servant helped him, arranging

soft pillows at his back.

“My father, my father!” Amaris wailed. “What has taken hold of you? Are you ill?”

“Not too ill to appreciate your ever-increasing beauty, my little one,” he said, kissing her hand. “And truly, I feel better already. I must confess that for a moment I felt the full frailty of my flesh. But it appears it was only passing, and for that I thank God.”

“As do we all, sir,” Jordan said sincerely, for the king was well loved by his subjects, both near and far.

“Nevertheless, my children,” the king continued. “Realizing the vulnerability of my position, I have been earnestly communing with my Maker about the future, and He has bid me make haste in consolidating future plans.”

“Whatever do you mean, Father?” Amaris hoped that she had misunderstood what he was saying.

“Amaris, dear, it is not given unto us mortals to know the hour of our passing, but we should do what we can to place our lives in order in preparation for such a day. In our case, there is much to do to prepare for such an event, and it is never too soon for that to be done.”

“Of course,” Amaris said in a rather subdued voice. “So what shall we do?”

“I must rest now,” the king said. “But let us meet again tomorrow when the sun is high in the sky and the cool breezes come down from the mountain. Then we shall confer in the garden, you and I, and together we will seek the Lord about the future of the realm. It may be that the calling God has appointed for you will soon descend upon your shoulders!”



The following day in the garden, the wind softly caressed Amaris’ face, soothing her troubled mind with tender fingers. It was taking longer than usual for the king to make his way to their meeting place,

and Amaris had the feeling that his premonition was right about future uncertainties.

“Oh, God!” she prayed, fighting back tears. “Please, please, dear God! Don’t let my father die! I don’t think I could bear to have another father taken from me!” (Her natural father had passed into the unseen realm more than a year before.)

Amaris struggled within, as if a lack of acceptance on her part would make this eventuality slower in coming.

She was startled by a soft word, in a voice that gently resounded in her ear. She turned and looked, but she was alone in the garden. Nervously clutching the wooden rail which separated the royal gardens from the steep ravine below, and gazing off towards the distant mountain range, Amaris waited quietly.

“Amaris!” She heard it again, and this time, she recognized it at once. It was the voice of her dear natural father, Edward. Many was the time that she had felt his presence with her, warming, comforting, and soothing her. But this time the impression was much more distinct, and very real.

“Father?” she whispered.

“Amaris!” The voice spoke again, and Amaris could not tell if it was an audible voice, or just one distinguishable by her heart. Whatever it was, she gave it her full attention, and the words continued. “Child, the great crossroads are nearing, and I must warn you to be prepared. The time to put away childish things is almost at hand!”

“No, Father!” The words tore out of Amaris’ mouth before she could stop them. “No! I cannot lose him! He must not die! You can’t let him die!” She dissolved into tears.

Gradually her sobs lessened, as she felt the continual comfort of the wind caressing her face.

“The fingers of the wind move by the breath of God,” Edward continued softly. “He has sent this comfort

to you—as He has sent me to you. And He has asked me to grant you your petition.”

“What petition?” Amaris looked up inquisitively.

“The king will not pass away until you let him go, until you release him in your heart, until you agree that it is the right time for him to go. Whether the time will be better or whether it will be worse—for him, for you or for the kingdom—will be for you to decide. Our God has truly given us the majesty of choice, and our prayers carry great weight with Him. Although the power to hold or release a loved one is a boon not usually granted, He has given it unto you as a sign of His love, and as a sign of His trust in you. Hold out your hand, child!”

Amaris stretched out her right hand uncertainly, the smooth whiteness of her skin contrasting with the dark ravine below her. Then a warm brightness covered her entire hand, well past the wrist.

As the light faded, Edward continued, “There! Into this frail human hand has been given the power of life and death. See that you use it wisely, for it is the first test in your maturing.”



A rustle in the forest behind Amaris gave her an instant to compose herself before the king stepped into the clearing. The servants retreated a respectful distance.

Amaris rushed forward to offer the king her arm. They moved slowly forward, and then settled on a marble bench overlooking the majestic view. King Merchal sighed wearily as they sat down, but Amaris was pleased to note that he was breathing normally and his color had fully returned.

“You look much improved, my liege,” she commented.

“Indeed, I feel somewhat more healthy,” he replied, with a contented sigh, “and for that I am truly grateful to my God. He has smiled upon me today. And what

of you, little one? You seem changed somehow.”

Amaris shrugged as if the matter were unimportant, and the king nodded wisely. He knew that some things were not meant to be shared at once, and was certain that any needed confidences would come out in due time. He cleared his throat and they moved on to the subject at hand.

“You have known that this yoke would descend upon you in due time, child, have you not?”

Amaris nodded, but could not bring herself to speak.

“I know how you feel.” The king raised his face to the horizon, and Amaris could see the memories of past struggles and triumphs dancing through his eyes. Then with a blink, he turned from the past and focused on the present.

“Yes,” he continued, “I know how you feel. I know it will not be easy, for true responsibility, as undertaken by the truly worthy, is never an easy load. In some ways, you may be grateful that you do not find it easy. For if you go into a great task with ease, you will have your initiation troubles later, and thus they are often much more difficult than if you had faced them beforehand. But those who go into their duty with great struggle will often find a smoother path later and one that they can navigate more wisely. So you may be grateful for the times of trying that will doubtless arise, for they can bring God’s future blessing.”

Amaris drank in the words of wisdom. “Oh, Father!” she burst out. “You are so wise and experienced! I wish that you could remain here forever! Our subjects love you; they need your strength to keep them strong and give them faith!”

“Our subjects need no such thing!” the old man retorted quickly. “If my bodily presence is necessary in order for them to have faith, then it would be a service to them for me to be removed as quickly as

possible. Any human who purports to make himself an object of faith—or even who does so unwittingly—is only setting up himself and others for a great fall.”

His voice then softened as he smiled and reached out to hold Amaris’ hand. “But I understand what you mean. I have ruled this land for many years, and I know that many have a special love and respect for me, even as I do for them. But their loyalty will not end with me. I believe that you can carry my crown just as graciously and wisely as I do myself—perhaps even more so!”

Amaris slowly shook her head in disbelief.

The king went on. “Yes, the time must come in every kingdom when the old must step aside to make way for the new. And may God bless those who can move along gracefully and with loving pride!”

Amaris slipped off the bench and fell to her knees before the king. “Your Highness,” she raised her eyes to him respectfully, “I promise that I shall do my very best to uphold the honor of the crown, and carry the standard as I have seen it carried. But you must show me what to do and which way to go!”

“That I will, little one. That I will!” The king reached forward and hugged the precious child he loved so dearly.

But even while she returned the warm embrace, Amaris kept her right hand tightly shut—in her own way signifying she was not ready to relinquish the king or accept his departure from this life. “Now,” the king said, pulling her back up to sit next to him, “let us talk of things to come!”

## THE SCIMITAR AND THE ROSE

It was late evening when Jordan’s customary tap sounded on the door of Amaris’ chambers. As he entered, she was reclining in a low chair, and Jordan sank into one near her. She seemed deep in thought.

“You have spoken with His Majesty,” Jordan spoke at last.

“Yes,” Amaris said. “He thinks that we need to explain my true origin to all the inhabitants of the kingdom.”

That remark brought Jordan up on his elbows. “Is that not a rather rash move?” he questioned.

“I would say the same myself,” Amaris said. “But yet, there is wisdom in his recommendation.” Then she laughed. “What a foolish thing to say! Is there not *always* wisdom in His Majesty’s words? Of course, he has left the decision to me, but he thinks it would be for the best.”

“Tell me more about it.”

“Well,” Amaris began, “in the many years that I have lived here I have had to be careful and walk very circumspectly. I have always been closely guarded, never letting the slightest strand of my hair—which would be my greatest identifying quality—be seen...”

Jordan touched the honey-colored curls that he

loved so dearly, as Amaris continued. “It is a complicated process. The main thing that father feels is that if I inherit the kingdom when he ... that is, if I eventually inherit the kingdom, it would be good to have things out in the open so that the people and everyone know what sort of ruler they are dealing with. If my identity were to be made known at a later time, the people may feel they were mistrusted or even deceived. That could cause problems.”

“I also concur with the wisdom of your gracious father,” Jordan said regretfully, “although I shudder in anticipation of such an announcement. I fear the repercussions it could have.”

“Repercussions or not,” Amaris looked serious, “I would rather face them at the start—and while my father is still here to help me deal with them!”

Jordan nodded his agreement, and then said, “So how is this going to take place?”

“We have only discussed it briefly,” Amaris mused, “but I have been thinking of the summer festival which will take place in several weeks’ time. This always culminates with the great days of festivities here on the palace grounds, with all the subjects of the realm invited. At eventide on the next-to-last day, Father gives his yearly speech. Perhaps that would be an ideal time. It could be properly explained and all would hear it from his own mouth.”

Amaris rolled over and buried her head in a pillow. “Oh, Jordan!” she moaned softly. “I am afraid of what shall come of this!”

Jordan moved closer to her and placed his strong hand on her shoulder, stroking her arm softly. He brushed his lips gently on her forearm, then noiselessly arose, and said in a voice barely above a whisper. “My love, I believe that there is another One who wishes to be alone with you at this time, that He may offer His own personal guidance in the matter. I will therefore take my leave from you till the morrow.”

He slipped out of the room, leaving Amaris to soak in the light of her Lord. She wanted to absorb His radiance and purity into every pore of her being, and with it the strength needed for the difficult times ahead.



The next morning dawned rosy and bright, with an exceptional glow to the pink sky. From the small tear-shaped window in his quarters which overlooked the vast countryside as well as the east wing of the palace, Jordan enjoyed the sweeping view. In these early-morning moments, when no other creatures were astir and he could view the entire scene in its beauty, he liked to think of what it must be like to look down from the clouds of Heaven upon Earth. He reflected on how the Creator can see all the world and all time in one moment, and understand how all of life is to unfold.

*Our view from down here, on the other hand, Jordan now mused, is much more faulty.* He slipped into his clothes and reached for the small ivory basin with a jug of fresh water that had been placed inside his room. As he shut his eyes and drew the refreshing water over his face, he struggled within himself somewhat. *What is the future to bring? What will come of this proclamation?*

It was then that he saw it. His eyes were still shut, so he knew that there wasn’t an actual person in the room, but he could have sworn that he felt a presence. It was dark, a tall shadowy figure, looming over him, creeping up stealthily behind him with a large curved scimitar in its hand. He could see the hand clearly, holding the menacing weapon. It was deep brown, and had a peculiarly shaped ring with a ruby setting, and an inlaid pearl-white crescent moon and star. As the scimitar descended, Jordan jumped up, opening his eyes wide and springing around to look behind him.



The room was empty, and still as a tomb.

Jordan's eyes moved to the floor where he had been standing and he saw a single rose of purest ivory-white, on a long, deep-green stem. The stem was broken in half and the rose lay on the floor, its petals drooping.

Almost in unbelief, Jordan reached for the flower. As he had expected, his hand closed on nothing but thin air. The apparition was gone.

Shaking his head at the realization of just how little he knew about what was really going on, Jordan left his room as quickly as possible. This was obviously not the place for him to spend much time at the moment.

He turned the corner into the long, narrow hallway. It was only dimly lit, as house servants hurried to light the lamps that lined the corridor, and their task was not yet complete. Seeing the well-built figure of the king's counselor approach, they hastened in their task even more. Jordan bid them a courteous good morning as he was wont to do, being very conscious of the position from whence he had come not long before.



Amaris looked up with a smile as Jordan entered her room, but her pretty face quickly mirrored his rather perturbed look.

"What troubles you, Jordan?" she asked. "You seem greatly distressed."

"That I am, my beautiful one." Jordan walked right over to her reclining chair and seated himself upon it. "Though in truth, I know not the reason for it myself! I have had two visions this morning, and I do not understand them. I do know that they do not give me a good feeling in the pit of my stomach, and that is enough to make me troubled on any day."

"What visions do you speak of?" Amaris came and sat down at Jordan's feet, resting her uncovered head

on his knee.

"I saw a large, evil man with a remarkable ruby ring on his finger, wielding a scimitar. He meant to harm and to destroy, that was very clear. Then I saw a rose that had been plucked up and broken, lying in the dust. Now, what would you make of that?"

Amaris shook her head. "I understand no more than do you," she said helplessly. "But I know that this must have been revealed to you by our heavenly Lord, and since He has seen fit to reveal this much to you, I know that He shall complete the message in the time He sees fit." Turning herself around on her knees before him, she looked up into his face. "And so for now, I suggest that we lay it aside until we know with a certainty what it is that should cause us concern. After all," Amaris said, as a teasing smile played around the corners of her lips, "we have so many other more worthwhile things to worry about at the moment, do we not?"

"Indeed we do!" Jordan laughed. "We have many! But let us make our way to the dining chamber, for my belly tells me that the time is nigh."

"Mine likewise," said Amaris, as she jumped up and went for her headdress.



Gathered around the low table in the chamber hung with exquisite tapestries, the four made little conversation as they partook of their meal. The king's health was greatly improved, but he seemed to have much weighing on his mind. The two lovers, likewise, seemed rather weak in their conversational abilities this morning.

Pamela had made a few attempts at broaching one topic or another, but nothing much had resulted and she felt that she was not doing much more than humoring herself. So she soon conceded defeat and concentrated on the principal task at hand.

A little sigh escaped her young lips, though, as

she gazed across the table at her older sister. How she wished to be like her—so poised, confident, and beautiful. Pamela didn't think she could ever be like that. She'd always be the little baby, the rascally little girl who was always getting into trouble.

*Oh well, she thought to herself, I guess if that's my lot in life, then I'd better make the most of it! Things could be much worse, really!* She smiled, and for the moment was content.

Abruptly, the king looked up from his dish. "Today is the day that we must begin preparations!" he declared, with all the royal pomp he could muster.

"Preparations?" the three voices echoed in unison, for they were all caught off guard.

"Why, yes!" King Merchal smiled in satisfaction at the deferential response he had received. "For the great summer festival! Shall it not be upon us in just a few weeks' time? And ask me if I have given it more than a passing thought up till this time." A slight shaking of his head gave away the answer before any of the others had a chance to take him up on his offer. "Therefore, I say that it is high time that we begin all the preparations that will be necessary—and they are many!"

"Indeed they are, my lord!" Jordan replied.

"The summer festival?" Pamela's bright eyes lit up with a new excitement. "Oh, that sounds like great fun!"

"Yes, fun for many, yet also a great deal of work for many more. And you, little one," the king stared at her in mock fierceness, "happen to be in the second category!"

Pamela smiled. The king's blustery gruffness didn't rattle her one bit, for she knew that deep down he was just a lovable old grandfather. "Of course, Your Highness," she made a mock curtsy from her sitting position. "I would be honored to do all that is necessary to bring this great summer festival to pass.

And then..." she took a deep breath and rattled the rest of her sentence off as quickly as she could so that Amaris wouldn't cut her off in disapproval, "then please could I have the whole day off on the day of the festival so that I can play and go around and see everything, and maybe a little bit of spending money, too?"

Her eyes were so eager, so hopeful, that even Amaris had to laugh.

The king threw back his head and laughed loud and long. "Come over here, you little weasel!" he roared playfully. "Come here and sit on my lap, and let us discuss this business proposition in greater detail." He then lifted his head towards the other two, saying, "As for the rest of us, let us adjourn to the White Room, where we may sit in greater comfort to discuss the particulars. Jordan, would you summon the chief servants of all the respective areas, and we shall all gather together shortly."

Jordan nodded and took his leave.

## PREPARATIONS

From his stately position in his thronelike chair, King Merchal looked around the White Room. Most of those who stood at attention were gazing fixedly at the ground, and others were fidgeting nervously.

“You may look up, my dear subjects,” the king said kindly. “I know that it is unusual for me to attend what seems like a routine planning session. But it has come to my attention from a most reliable Source” (most smiled, as they knew who was being referred to—King Merchal’s divine Ruler from On High) “that this great summer festival is to be one of exceeding great importance. Therefore, the instruction I have received is that I am to be intricately involved in the working and planning for it. I hope you will not be inconvenienced by this.”

A hasty murmur arose from the lips of all present, each reassuring the great monarch of just how little inconvenience it would pose to have his assistance, and indeed, how honored and grateful they were to have his participation.

The king silenced them with a movement of his hand. “Let us dispense with these formalities for the moment, shall we? I see you respect and reverence me, but if we are to work well together during this

time, we shall need to be able to speak and address each other without too much stateliness getting in the way. So you may feel free to speak your mind regarding any subject, without fear that I shall be offended.”

The subjects all nodded rather timidly. Jordan, sitting in the far corner, looked over at Amaris and grinned, remembering a somewhat similar request of some time before, which had resulted in such amazing consequences for the two of them.

“This is what I have determined,” the king continued. “I suppose that you all have begun on the routine preparations which take place yearly, such as the preparing and ordering of goods, and so on. I would like to divide the planning committee into three main sections. The first will be the preparation of the interior of the palace and all related matters. This will be headed by Princess Amaris. The second group will be headed by my counselor Jordan, and will be responsible for the preparation of the grounds and the outside of the palace. And the third and final section will be headed by the young Princess Pamela—with a little assistance from her elderly grandfather—and that will be the festivities, food, and other amusements. What do *you* say to that, little princess?”

Pamela had abruptly turned a very bright red, and at that moment could not say a word, so Amaris stepped in on her behalf. “She is very pleased and grateful, Your Highness.” Pamela nodded her agreement and squeezed her sister’s hand tightly.

The rest of the official meeting was brief and informal. The king finished his introductory speech, and before long, those in the room began scurrying around to place themselves in their appropriate group. Their minds were filled with wonderment, for this royal involvement was indeed a rare and noteworthy occurrence!

The preparations were many and detailed, and would have been quite enough to keep a small army occupied until and past the time appointed. Speed

and concentration were therefore the order of the day in the remaining hours of the planning meeting.



Busy as they were, the weeks sped by. Nights were restful, as the quiet darkness smothered all thoughts and worries with its soothing balm. Morning dawn, with its refreshing, likewise kissed away any fears that raised their heads. Thus the days passed, full of the blessing of hearty labor, which took much out of the body but in return gave much to the soul.

Now only two more days remained before the great event, and the time had arrived when the king requested that all work be completed. Aside from those last-minute duties which would need to be taken care of the night before the start of the festival, the remaining hours until the festivities were to be spent in rest, bathing and beautification. And also, the king had hastened to add, of even greater importance was the time to be spent in inner beautification.

“For as you well know...” he had said, and it was a good thing that he had, for though they all did know, many of them were wont to forget this important principle, “as you well know, the special balm from Above which smoothes over rough edges during a time of intense work and preparation is often rudely lifted when that time is over. If sufficient time of inner rest and communion with the One Above is not taken with exceeding promptness after the tasks are completed, the transition may prove to be fraught with difficulty and trial. So take heed, all of you, to tend to the nourishing of your souls during these days of preparation!”

Before the workers were officially dismissed, the king made a royal inspection tour, his eyes aglow and his chest swelling with satisfaction at all that he saw. Truly, this was to be a memorable festival!

The interior workers had outdone themselves. Every room—and within each room, every surface—

in the palace had been brushed and polished to a high sheen, until even the king grew weary of seeing constant reflections of himself mirrored everywhere he looked.

“It is a good thing,” he joked, “that the palace does not always look like this, or I should need to have a footman run before me holding a thin piece of gauze between myself and these surfaces, lest my vanity get the better of me!”

Ornate flowerpots had been placed upon every tabletop, ready to be filled at the time appointed, and all the rugs and carpets had been swept and scrubbed with regenerative soaps which brought out each of the colors in all the richness of their original beauty. Every corner of each room had been carefully dusted, and all small creatures compassionately consigned to the great outdoors—“where indeed they should have been to begin with!” Amaris had exclaimed in utter disgust.

“Amaris, my child,” the king said, pausing with pride as he reached the front of the palace, finishing his tour of the palace interior, “you have done well. Your work greatly pleases me. I have seen that you have taken great care and pride in these small tasks that I have assigned unto you. Every detail, however minor and seemingly insignificant, has been tended to with the utmost diligence and thoughtfulness. Thus I am confident that you shall be just as careful in the great and weighty matters of state which shall someday fall on your lovely shoulders.”

Amaris bowed her head in humble appreciation. “I am grateful to all those who made this task possible, and who helped me to make you proud. Your appreciation is more than enough reward for me.”

With a smile, the king stepped through the open door and descended the high marble staircase to the palace grounds. And what a sight greeted his eyes! In just two weeks, it seemed that summer had taken

seed and come to birth with all of her children. Every tree in the orchards that grew on both sides of the large palace courtyard were blooming in a riot of color.

Jordan confided to the king, “Even those trees that do not naturally flower have been ‘helped out’ a little this year, Your Highness!”

The usually dusty courtyard had been strewn with gravel made of glittering and colorful stones. It all made for a smooth walk and a very pleasing view. Large smooth slabs of marble had been laid down amidst the gravel to form a type of walkway, which led through the center of the courtyard and up to the base of the palace steps. On either side of this walkway the booths were to be arranged.

Within the orchards, every fallen leaf and piece of rotten fruit had been meticulously gathered and stowed away in a giant pile far from the palace, to attract rodents and creepers of all types so that they might keep their distance during this time of festivity. There was to be nothing impure in His Majesty’s sight during this time.

The color-laden branches of the fruit trees contrasted splendidly against the dark forests behind. Against it all, the cream-colored exterior walls of the palace itself had been scrubbed and polished, and now glistened in the late morning sun, seeming almost to glow with unearthly light.

“Jordan!” The king raised his hand and the young man drew near to him. “You also have done well. I will be proud to one day call you my son. You have been blessed in each task you have put your hand to, and that is not a gift that is given lightly by the Almighty God, but only unto those deserving souls whom He sees fit. I am honored to have your talents within the confines of my realm.”

Jordan bowed, trying to hide the uncharacteristic swell of emotion that he felt surging within him. This was an unusual commendation to receive from the

great monarch, and Jordan felt undeserving, but exceedingly thankful.



King Merchal dismissed the rest of his subjects, bidding them tend to their personal preparations, aside from those who would be tending in shifts to the immediate care of the royal family. He then motioned to Jordan and the girls to draw close to him. The four linked arms—Pamela with some difficulty due to her smaller stature—and strolled around the courtyard, finally coming to rest on a couple of ornate benches which bordered the orchards.

“This will be our last evening of peace and quiet for a while,” the king said. He chuckled slightly as Pamela’s excited gaze indicated that she did not take that as a cause for remorse, but rather something to be grateful for. “By dawn tomorrow, the entertainers and the marketers we have approved will have arrived to begin their preparation, and on the following day will begin the great event.”

“The invitations and notices have been posted throughout the realm,” Jordan said. “We are expecting a great amount of people.”

“Yes,” said Amaris. “The courtyard is usually very full on normal years, but word seems to have gotten out that this is to be a particularly special festival, and I believe we should expect numbers as never before. I have heard that some who live far away intend to tarry at night with relatives and friends in nearby towns, that they may stay for the entire time. Others who regularly attend only for short periods, as their work allows, have called off other plans and arrangements. They do not want to miss a thing.”

“Yes, indeed,” the king mused thoughtfully, “it does portend to be a most unusual and eventful week ahead! With that thought, let us make haste now to begin our own private preparations.”

## THE WEB OF TEMPTATION

The rest of the day passed in a bustle of sweet-smelling preparations—especially so for the young ladies involved. This was Pam’s first year to fully participate as a young woman, as the previous year’s festival had taken place not long after her arrival to the palace, and she had been too timid to venture out much.

That early bashfulness, however, had all but vanished, leaving in its place an eagerness and curiosity that was delightful to behold. She now hovered around the outskirts of the great beautification room, watching as several maidservants toiled laboriously, helping Amaris prepare her personal beautification, her clothing, and her other adornments. Pamela was to be next, and was savoring the anticipation of every moment as though it were a costly sweet.

A swarthy, dark-skinned youth, with a smoothly shaved head and skillful fingers, was laboring on Amaris’ dainty toes and fingers. Her nails had been smoothed and trimmed, and the soak in pure rose water accomplished. They looked and felt as soft as those of a newborn.

The palace seamstress was placing the last few

stitches into Amaris' gown, which had been specially ordered for the great occasion. The others were running around doing this and that—busy with sweet-smelling fragrances, body lotions, and other such things.

Pamela, sitting a little aside from the busy throng, paused and let out a quiet sigh. She cast a sidelong glance at her sister, who was oblivious to the thoughts running through Pam's young mind. These were not conscious thoughts, but as Pam gazed out the window, it suddenly seemed that a large cloud had moved in front of the sun. Those sweet-tasting moments of anticipation suddenly seemed dread-filled and gloomy.

Abruptly, Pam got up and slipped out of the room. Absorbed as she was in all the activity around her, Amaris did not notice.



Pamela walked down the long, curved marble staircase that led to the main palace entrance. Nodding to the guards at the front, she passed through the door that they opened for her, and out into the late afternoon heat.

She breathed deeply, enjoying the pungent scents that permeated the air. So many and varied—a veritable garden of delights! But somehow, it now seemed hollow and inadequate.

Pam lifted up her skirt a little and looked at her legs. How awkward and ungainly they seemed!—Not smooth and soft and slender like Amaris'! She was passing one of the clear crystal ponds now, and her reflection shouted out at her as she went by. Pam covered her eyes with her hands and ran through the orchard and into the forest beyond.

She ran and ran for some time, until, breathless, she threw herself down under a large, leafy tree. It took her several minutes to regain her composure, and it was not until then that she paused to look

around.

When she did, she noticed that just a stone's throw away was the back side of a tent of some sort. It was a nondescript color that blended in so well with the surroundings that Pam had not noticed it at first. But now that she was sitting quietly, she could hear the low murmur of voices coming from within. Though she didn't see them, she heard the quiet breathing and occasional neigh of horses.

*Who could be camping in the royal forest? Pam wondered in astonishment. Surely the guards will find them and send them hastily on their way, for such a thing is just not done!*

Her instincts urged her strongly to depart in great haste, and she stood up with that intent. Then she hesitated. The tent was so close, and even from where she stood she could hear the voices muttering inside. Perhaps if she crept a little closer—ever so quietly—she could hear a few words and find out who these mysterious intruders were. How brave she would then appear to all! Everyone would know what a clever thing she had done.

The temptation was too great, and Pamela began taking a few cautious steps towards the edge of the tent. All too soon, though, a large twig snapped loudly beneath her inexperienced tread. Pam's heart sank as the voices inside stopped abruptly, and the sound of rustling indicated that someone was stepping outside of the tent.

Pam turned to run, but froze with fear. She stood paralyzed, rooted to the spot. A noise sounded on the other side of the tent, and she suddenly stood face to face with a tall, gaunt man. His eyes were small and close together, and his nose long and hook-shaped. His cruel demeanor took on an odd aspect as his lips curved into a curious smile.

"Why," he said, in a voice that was smooth and silky, "if it is not the little lady from the palace. I have

heard a great deal of her, but never have been privileged to see her in person. What a great honor!" The man knelt on one knee, grasped Pam's ice-cold hand with his own dark, thin one, and brought it coyly to his lips.

He stood up again, and Pam's eyes were drawn to a curious-looking ring featured prominently on the second finger of his right hand—a ring with a ruby set in it, and a pearl-white crescent moon and star.

The man's eyes followed Pam's gaze to the ring. "It's lovely, isn't it?" he said. "Would you like to hold it?"

Pam could not say a word, torn between intense fear and a sort of attraction that was luring her. She could not express why, but somehow she felt curiously drawn to this dark stranger.

Accepting her silence as consent, the man took off the ring and placed it in her hand, closing her fingers around it.

She pulled her hand up and closely examined the ring. It was delicately wrought, and obviously made of the finest materials.

"It's lovely," she finally said.

"Why don't you keep it for a while," the man said.

Pam's eyes opened wide, as all her worry and suspicion flooded back suddenly. What was this stranger up to?

The man laughed at her response. "Let me explain," he said. "You're probably wondering what I am doing, camped here in the royal forest. I have traveled so far, you see, and am going to be hosting one of the booths tomorrow. I wanted to come as near as possible so that we could begin promptly at sunrise, for there is much to prepare. All the inns in the village are full ... what was I to do?" His eyebrows lifted skyward with a forlorn look, and he closed his eyes wearily.

"Oh," Pam's soft heart melted. "I'm sure it will be all right. I can just let His Majesty know, and I'm

sure he'll understand."

"Oh, no no!" the man burst out, a little too hastily. "You see, I was going to ask you to keep this meeting a little secret between us. His Majesty King Merchal is a close ... friend of mine, and I wish for my visit to be a surprise. I would not want him to know of my presence in advance of the festival, as it would ruin the secret. You understand my problem..." he queried, stroking his chin pensively.

Pam struggled within, somehow knowing that what she was doing was not right, but at the moment, not caring much.

"And you say that I can keep this ring?" she said.

"Well, consider it a loan," the man said. "You can keep it until the end of the festival, and then return it to me before I go. I would just give it to you, but," he sighed, "it was a gift from my dear mother, and she has since passed away."

"Of course. I understand," Pam smiled. "Well, it's very kind of you to let me keep it. I won't mention anything to the king about you being here," she said, as she read the unwritten request in his eyes, "or anyone else, I guess."

"That's a good girl. Well, you'd better run along now, or you'll be missed."

Pamela took one more look at the dark, swarthy figure, and then, clenching the ring tightly in her hand, she bolted back towards the palace.

Her hopes of a quiet and unobtrusive return to the palace were thoroughly dashed as she came out of the orchard and saw a small group of servants by the door. Jordan was with them.

"Oh, thank heavens, you're here!" he said. "The guards at the door said they'd seen you go out, but no one knew where to. Amaris has been looking everywhere for you. It's time for you to get fixed up!"

"I'm sorry that I ran off without saying anything." Pam spoke the words she knew she ought, but her



heart was leaden and held no feeling. Something seemed changed inside, although she herself was not fully aware of it.

Her tread was heavy as she climbed the long staircase. Yet as soon as she came to the beautification room, all other thoughts vanished. Within moments she began to feel the wonder and joy of being waited on hand and foot. *Ah!* she thought with a smile, *this is the life!*



The next day dawned clear and bright. The morning sun seemed as excited as the rest of the realm, and showed its anticipation by rising from its bed with glowing rays unobscured by any cloud. The many travelers who had arrived couldn't have been happier, as the early sunshine helped them perfect their stalls and booths before the appointed time of the king's inspection. Each one wanted his display to be the very best that it could be.

There was also a great deal of competition for the cherished prize, which was awarded every year at the festival for the best display. The prize was a bag of gold and a personal tour of the palace chambers, which was highly coveted. Sometimes, or so the word went, winners even got to share a few words in person with His Majesty! This competition, therefore, heightened the intensity of each participant's preparation of his small area for the great week ahead.



In all the excitement and buzz of activity, Pamela scarcely remembered her curious encounter from the day before. Most of her day was spent on the front balcony, discreetly concealed behind a large trellis, watching all the action below with eager curiosity. There was plenty to see, and she was able to stay up there for hours, just taking it all in.

By and by, a servant came by with a list of the booths and participants. "There is a gentleman who

says he has an appointment with you," the servant said, in a voice of surprise.

"With me?" Pam echoed.

"He said something about getting late permission for a booth. I suggested that he speak with His Majesty, but he said that you had already spoken to him and pre-arranged it, or something of the sort...."

"I guess I'd better go speak to him," Pam said, trying to sound very grown up, but feeling very frightened. What exactly had she gotten herself into?

With the servant leading the way, she walked through the hustle and bustle to a small corner on the far side of the courtyard. There stood the tall stranger she had encountered the day before.

"You may go now," Pam said to the servant, who retreated hastily.

"I see you got my request," said the man.

"I did," Pam said. "But I can't give you permission to have a booth! I don't understand why you don't just talk to the king! I'm sure he'd be happy to see you."

"Oh dear!" the man sighed. "I was so looking forward to setting up and having it all ready when he came around. It would have been such a lovely surprise... But yes, you are probably right. I suppose I had better just ask him. Oh, by the way ... do you still have that ring?" As Pam nodded, he continued. "All right then, let's go see His Majesty."

Put at ease by his willingness to comply, Pam hesitated. "Well, I guess His Majesty will see you soon enough when he comes around this evening. I suppose it's all right for you to stay. He did say that I was in charge of this area, so I'm sure it's all right for me to let you stay." With that, Pam motioned him towards the last bare booth that was not yet occupied.

"You are too kind." Again he kissed her hand, and Pam blushed. "I promise you, you will not regret this."

With those words, he turned and walked away.

## SUSPICIONS

Pamela shivered slightly as she made her way through the friendly crowds, towards the palace entrance. She squinted up at the sun. It still shone as bright as ever, but she felt that there was some sort of invisible shadow between her and it, which prevented any of its light and warmth from reaching her.

*My Lord, what is wrong with me?* Pam wondered, pulling her soft cloak more tightly around her shoulders.

Bolting up the marble steps, she disappeared inside the entrance and then into her private chambers, where she dissolved in a pile of sobs on her bed.

Gradually, her sobs quieted, and Pam sat up on her bed. She gazed thoughtfully into the reflecting glass that hung near her bed, wondering how much damage she had done to her carefully prepared face. The palace beautifiers would not be happy to see her now!

At the same time, she could not shake the impression that a small Voice was sounding in her heart. She could not hear its words clearly, but as she gazed steadfastly at her reflection, all of a sudden she thought she saw a dark, evil face looming behind

her. She turned quickly, but she was alone.

Pam felt an indescribable foreboding, a strange sense of danger that she could not understand. Or rather, that she did not want to understand.

Brushing aside the persistent Voice that was trying to come through to her heart, she pulled out the curious-looking ring from her pocket and gazed at it lovingly. Never had she possessed something so intricate, so beautiful. The more she looked upon it, the more the warning Voice within her seemed to fade.

“That was all I needed,” Pam thought to herself, not entirely believing it but feeling reassured to at least put her thoughts into words, “just a little time to relax. I feel better already.”

“Pamela, dear?” Amaris’ voice at the entrance of Pam’s room made her jump, and in her surprise, the ring fell from her hands and clattered to the floor, sliding to rest under her bed.

“What was that?” Amaris asked, noting that Pam’s face had flushed suddenly.

“What was what?” Pam could not think of anything to say.

“I don’t know. You just look so unusual.” Amaris was puzzled at Pam’s strange reaction. “Did you drop something? I think it went under the bed. ... I can get it for you, if you like.”

Amaris moved towards the bed, but Pam stepped hastily in front of it. “It’s all right,” she said. “It’s just a rock I was looking at. I’ll get it later.”

“All right then,” Amaris sat down on a large round cushion and leaned back against the wall. “How are you, little sister? I have not seen much of you the past little while. Things have been so busy; I’m afraid I have been neglecting you.”

Pam didn’t say anything, but looked down at the floor.

After a few moments of silence, Amaris stood up. “Well, let’s be sure to do something together during

the festival, okay?”

Pam nodded, and Amaris stepped out into the hallway, with a very puzzled look on her face. What was the matter with dear little sister?



The first days of the festival passed in a delirious whirl of excitement and escapism. Not only was there entertainment, but merchants from far and near had brought their finest wares to display, and it was a fascinating experience to walk through such rich diversities of culture, all assembled in one place.

Glassblowers were plying their trade with expert ease, and curious onlookers were invited to try themselves (for a small fee) to shape a small bit of molten glass into an object foolish or fine.

Chefs of all types had filled booths to the brim with mouth-watering morsels which brought tears to the eyes and tingles to the tummies of passers-by. Tantalizing bite-sized dainties were often placed on outlying tables, daring the passing tasters to resist rushing over to the main booth for more. And indeed, not many could resist such temptation!

Skilful rug-weavers sat in their shady nooks, spinning and working their looms. Rugs of all shapes and patterns were hung delicately and tastefully for the feasting of all eyes.

The flower booths were among the most bright and colorful, with fragrant blooms from far and near tended and brought to blossoming perfection. Large pots and small were arranged in such eye-catching glory as to make that one booth a small world in itself.

Such was the feast of the senses that greeted Jordan and Amaris as they made their way through the market on this, the third day of the festival. So far, everything had been going splendidly. The king’s inspection on the eve of the first day had gone excellently, and the scribes who walked with him noted several comments the king had made

concerning certain booths.—For the great prize would not be awarded until the final day.

Each evening, special games and competitions were held in the part of the field which had been reserved for that purpose. Fires were often lit, around which joyful dancing could be seen. Once the energy was spent and the activities had died down, hours of talking and storytelling carried on around the fire, while all kinds of tasty morsels were roasted on long sticks.

There were still another two days of regular festivities, and on the morning of the sixth day of the festival, the king's great speech would take place. All the booths were to be shut for that entire morning, and Amaris shuddered slightly as she thought about that day soon to come. This year there would be no full sense of pleasure for her until she knew for certain the people's reaction to knowing the truth about her past and her future.

Amaris pulled her thoughts back to the present, determined not to allow the dubious future to color too much of her present happiness. As she did, her eyes settled on a curious-looking booth. Behind it was a large, greenish-brown tent, and all its flaps and entranceways were down. In front was a small but lavishly decorated booth which held an assortment of jewels, precious stones, various types of rings, bracelets and other jewelry.

Amaris cocked her head slightly and wondered about her initial feeling of curiosity when looking at the booth. It seemed rather ordinary; nothing particularly unusual. Perhaps it was the wide tent that drew her attention, as most of the others had only small adjoining tents, and all were spread open—which indeed seemed a necessity in the sultry afternoon heat.

*What a fool I am, trying to read strangeness of all sorts into the most ordinary of circumstances!* She finally laughed to herself, and followed Jordan, who

was going up to look at the wares that were displayed. He was fingering an exquisite diamond and sapphire ring, and Amaris obligingly looked away, as though she had no idea why he was looking at it.

Just as she looked up, the tent flap directly beside her opened, and a tall man stepped out. His eyes were dark and curiously menacing, but it was what Amaris saw behind him that made her catch her breath.

The tent flap went down immediately, and the man disappeared back inside the tent. Amaris tapped Jordan's arm.

"That man, Jordan! Did you see him?"

"What man?" Jordan's mind was pulled from the realm of precious stones by the urgency in Amaris' voice.

"A tall, strangely evil-looking man. He just peered out of the tent, and then went back in. I could have sworn he retreated as soon as he saw me."

"No, I didn't see him."

"I wonder if it was that man that you saw in your vision," Amaris began, and then laughed at the foolishness of what she was saying. "How silly of me!" she corrected herself quickly. "That vision probably wasn't even anything specific. I'll bet it was just a general warning."

Then she frowned and looked over at the tent again. "Still," she said, "I did notice, when he lifted up the flap ... I could have sworn I saw a large pile of objects that were glittering curiously. At first I thought they were..." She hesitated, "At first I thought they were weapons of some sort."

Jordan looked serious, but did not know what to say. It did sound rather preposterous, especially when discussed in the warm afternoon sunshine.

"How foolish of me! I really am getting jumpy!" Amaris finally laughed, as they moved away from the intriguing booth.

After they had walked a couple of minutes, though,

she cast an uneasy glance over her shoulder, and sure enough, from the half-open door of the tent, a sinister-looking man was eyeing their retreat.



Back at the palace, Jordan and Amaris discussed whether they should bother King Merchal with these seemingly trivial occurrences.

“It all seems so foolish,” Amaris said. “I know I keep saying that, but that’s the only word I can think of to describe it accurately. I am worried about nothing, yet my worry persists! All I can think of is that for some reason I am being gently prodded, repeatedly, and I can only assume that it must be for some reason.”

“Perhaps we should ask the Most High for His wisdom. Certainly He could make known to us the answers to all things hidden and known, if we were to ask!” Jordan offered.

“You are right,” Amaris agreed. “I had forgotten that obvious course of action. That is of course what we must do—”

Amaris’ words were cut short by a piercing scream that sounded directly outside the walls. They heard it clearly. It sounded above them ... or was it below?

The two locked eyes, and one word flew from their mouths in unison: “Pamela!”

Jordan dashed madly up the stairs while Amaris ran outside. It didn’t take her long to see the small huddle of people gathered near the palace wall. She pushed her way through roughly, and there, lying motionless on the ground, lay Pamela. Her hand was clenched tightly. When Amaris pried it open, her eyes widened in horror.

Jordan had just walked up behind her, and he gasped in alarm. What Pamela was clutching for dear life was a large silver ring, with a setting of ruby and pearl—a crescent moon and a star.

- 6 -

## THE SPELL OF THE RING

The palace was in turmoil. Servants rushed hither and thither carrying pillows, potions, and generally trying to turn their great distress to some useful purpose. Some resorted to scrubbing the already-shining floors or dusting the spotless surfaces, as some outlet for their anxious energy.

Pamela had been transported with great haste and secrecy—at least as much as could be afforded with such an occurrence right in the middle of the festival—into her chambers, and the king’s physician arrived only seconds later. He immediately emptied the chamber of all but his assistant and Amaris, who insisted on remaining by her sister’s side. Gently she held the limp little hand, alternately stroking and kissing it, and never ceasing to utter prayers, fervent and impassioned, for the life and health of her most precious little sister.

Jordan, meanwhile, had approached the king and requested to speak to him in private. Once the two of them stood alone in the room, Jordan turned gravely and held out his fist to the king, slowly turning and opening it to reveal the offending piece of jewelry.

Jordan opened his mouth to explain, but stopped short when he saw the expression of utter shock that

came across King Merchal's face. He muttered something below his breath and turned so pale that Jordan grew alarmed.

"Your Majesty!" he cried urgently. "Are you well? I did not mean to bring a great shock upon you!"

The king's eyes were transfixed and strangely glazed. It seemed as if the sight of that ring had suddenly propelled him into another dimension, and his sudden lack of coherence filled Jordan with alarm.

Hastily hiding the ring in the folds of his garment, Jordan called aloud for a manservant. Together the two strong men supported the king as they helped him to the privacy of his own chamber.



The physician had done all he could do, and now motioned for Amaris to step outside of the chamber.

"How is she?" Amaris cried out. Her face suddenly seemed to have aged by years, and the kindly physician was pained to see the signs of deep grief mirrored there. Every pore in her young body seemed to cry out, "It is my fault!"

The old gentleman put his arm around her, and spoke softly. "Do not berate yourself, Your Highness," he said. "She will come through fine. She has a strong fighting spirit. She just..." he hesitated, and Amaris filled in the remainder of his sentence.

"She just needs to use it?" she asked.

"Yes, that is it. I have treated her before, in previous illnesses, and she would almost be out of the bed before she had landed in it. A fine, spunky young thing if ever I saw one." The man wiped his brow. "But this time ... I don't know how to explain it. It's as though she has no will to fight. It's almost as if there is some spell over her. I don't understand it."

"The spell of the ring!" Amaris murmured below her breath, not even knowing why she was saying it.

Before she knew it, she had left the physician far behind and was storming up the stairs toward

Jordan's chambers. What was the mysterious spell woven by that sinister ring? From whence came its power, and ... oh, most dear question of all, what, what in the Heavens and on the Earth, could be done to *break* it?

She collided violently with Jordan, who was headed furiously in the opposite direction. So vehement was the force of the passion propelling them that they careened off each other and both hit the opposite sides of the passageway. It would have been funny if their distress had not been so keen.

Jordan, whose fall had been considerably softer due to his size advantage, hastened to help Amaris up. "I'm so sorry!" he remonstrated. "I wasn't looking where I was going!"

"Nor was I," Amaris returned. "But come aside, Jordan, I must speak with you urgently."

"And I with you," said Jordan grimly.

They ducked into a nearby doorway, and Amaris grieved as she remembered her beloved sister rushing rapturously through those halls, fully whole and well as she had been so recently. Determined to put her efforts into betterment of the present instead of remorse over the past, she turned her eyes to Jordan.

Only then did she notice the stricken look in his eyes.

"What is the matter?" she said. "Are you so distressed over my dear sister?" she gulped hastily, as her comment had not quite come out as she had intended. "I mean, I just meant to say that usually you are the one who is controlled and quite together, but you seem to be even more distressed at this moment than I am."

"Distressed I am!" Jordan said, as if words could not express the anguish that festered in his soul. "Take a seat, dear one, for I fear that what I have to say shall come as a blow to you."

Amaris did as she was told, all the while marveling

as to what could be the cause of so astonishing a statement from her normally reserved husband-to-be.

“You know that His Majesty has not been altogether well of late,” Jordan began hesitantly.

Amaris nodded, and her face turned a ghastly white.

“No, no!” Jordan said quickly. “He has not passed on.” Amaris heaved a sigh of relief. “But he is acting very strangely, and I think—rather, I *know*—it has something to do with that foul ring.”

“Why, Jordan!” Amaris leaped to her feet. “I was coming to tell you the exact same thing of my little sister, and I fully expected you to rebuke me for my foolishness and womanly whims! But what makes you say this? Is His Majesty ill?”

“I took him aside when you went into the room with Pamela, for I wanted to show him the ring and tell him of the strange apparition I had seen, to see if he could make any sense of it. But no sooner had I placed the ring before his eyes than he seemed to go into a sort of trance. His eyes became glassy and he began muttering unintelligible words. He has not uttered another articulate word after the appearance of that loathsome article.”

Amaris placed both hands over her face.

“He is in his room now, in bed,” Jordan continued, “but I fear he is no better than he was. I do not know what to do. It’s as if he’s under some sort of a spell or something. I am at a loss as to where to proceed from here.”

“And with Pamela likewise,” Amaris said. “The physician has made her comfortable, and he said that the physical damage is not great, but there is something further that is wrong, and she is not responding to her body’s efforts at healing. And he, too, used those words: ‘It’s as though she’s under a spell.’”

“There must be something to it, but I’ll be hanged if I know what it is!” Jordan clenched his hands together violently, restraining himself from plunging

his swarthy fist through the solid wooden door.

“Surely there is some help for us!” Amaris threw herself to her knees and thrust her hands Heavenward. “Surely there is some guidance! Surely there is an answer!” She bent over, breaking down into heaving sobs. Jordan knelt beside her, placing his strong arms comfortingly around her slender frame.

“There is,” he said gently, kissing her smooth white neck. “There is, dearest love, and we shall avail ourselves of it now, together.”



Jordan and Amaris slipped out of one of the side doors of the palace into the cool, damp evening air. The sun had newly set, and a strange mist engulfed the palace and surrounding area. A mist in itself was not unusual, but occurring at this time and season, with this density, was indeed notable. That, along with the unsettling events of the day, had placed a considerable damper on the evening’s festivities. Most of the revelers had contented themselves with an early bed, or had retreated to their chambers.

Passing through the orchard, Amaris clung tightly to Jordan’s hand. The usually familiar place seemed so strange, shrouded as it was in ghostly grayish-white. Amaris fancied she saw shadows lurking at every turn, only to find they were her friends, the trees and shrubs that she knew so well.

“Perhaps coming outdoors was not the best of ideas at this time,” she whispered hesitantly to Jordan.

“We are almost there now,” Jordan replied. “It will help us to get out of the busy surroundings and into our special, private spot.”

They had now reached a small clearing, and off to the side was the barest hint of a path, which seemed to lead into the middle of a bush. Jordan confidently pushed into it, and in a few moments the two found themselves in their own secluded little haven.

Not even the mist had made its way into their little

spot. The air was as clear and clean as could be. It was a small natural bower, where trees, bushes and vines entwined to make a perfect little closed-in circular chamber. In there, several delicate wooden articles had been set up—an exquisitely carved bench, and a little table.

Amaris now sat on the bench, and breathed deeply of the healing fragrances that permeated the enclosure. “I always feel better when I come here,” she sighed.

“And we will feel better still when we have accomplished our purpose!” said Jordan.

“Yes,” Amaris agreed. “But Jordan, my heart is heavy. I don’t know if I can come before the Lord, as sad as I feel.”

“What do you mean, dearest one?”

“Do you remember some weeks ago, how in a spell of foolishness I danced along the balcony wall?”

Jordan smiled a little as he remembered that day. “What of that?” he asked. “Surely you cannot feel guilt for something so long ago?”

“No, don’t you see?” she cried out. “Pamela was on the ground watching me! She saw the whole thing, and probably thought that was a sign of bravery or something. Today when she fell—it was from that same balcony! She was trying to do what I did. It’s my fault!” Amaris dissolved into sobs.

Jordan put his arm around her. “I think that this is all the more reason that you must come before the Lord now,” he said. “Perhaps you have had something to do with this terrible situation, but I know that because our God has led us until now, He will not leave us forsaken, nor will He fail to reveal unto us His will, if we will only ask Him.”

“You are right,” Amaris said, wiping her eyes. “Let us do so now.”

The two bowed their heads and each prayed with sincerity and love for their Savior to guide them and

speak to them. The air around them, already silent, suddenly grew still in a supernatural sort of way. Amaris was accustomed to this by now, and knew what was coming. She squeezed Jordan’s hand tightly. “It is my father, Edward!” she whispered.

Jordan had heard much about these encounters, but had never partaken of one himself, and now he looked intently around, with keen anticipation.

In the corner of the bower he saw him, pale and motionless at first, then slowly seeming to come to life. So natural, and yet entirely supernatural.

Edward walked over and sat next to Amaris. Unconscious of the impossibility of what she was doing, Amaris lay her head on his shoulder, and found that it fully supported her. She could feel the warmth of his breath upon her head, and heard the familiar beating of his heart. She had never before felt him this close since the time of his passing.

In answer to her unspoken question, Edward spoke. “You were in need of great comforting, my little one,” he said, “and I have been commissioned by our Lord, in answer to your prayers, to give that to you. And also,” he said, now lifting her head gently with his hand, and addressing the two, “I’ve come to make you understand what is coming to pass, that you may be well equipped to confront it.”

Jordan and Amaris scarcely breathed, for all their attentiveness to the words from this heavenly messenger. Edward now continued.

“You must know this first of all. There is only so much that I can reveal to you, for I am bound by time and the will of God. There are certain things that can only be known as they take place. But I can give you the groundwork and the weapons to fight with, and I can teach you to understand and discern the things that you have already seen. There are already some pieces to the puzzle that you know, and it only remains for them to be put together.”



“First tell me of Pamela,” Amaris begged.

“Your little sister is undergoing a time of great personal turmoil,” Edward explained. “She needs you greatly, big sister, and I’m afraid that you haven’t been there for her to the extent that you ought. You have been busy with important things, and perhaps you have been waiting for her to reach out and ask for you. But she is young, and does not even know herself what she wants, except that she wants to be with you and to be like you. Not having found the security and reassurance she needed, through time spent with you, she has turned to other, deceitful company.”

“The owner of the ring!” said Jordan.

Edward nodded. “Yet it is not too late for her, but you must fight earnestly in prayer for her soul, as her body will follow where her spirit leads.”

“What is this mysterious ring’s spell, and how can we break it?” Jordan asked. “It seems to have cast a strange shadow over both His Majesty and little sister. How exactly may we go about to crush its hold on our loved ones?”

“Ah,” said Edward softly, and the two noticed with alarm that he was beginning to grow faint before their eyes. “This is something that I cannot reveal to you, but it must be discovered by trial and error. Only know this much: There is no single cure for the spell of the ring. For each victim a cure is tailor-made, and only by careful seeking and prayerful search shall each solution be found.”

He was standing now, just a whisper of a vision before their eyes. “But now I must go, for there is much for you to talk about together—many pieces to join, many strings to unsnarl, and much ground to cover, before the dawn breaks and all is confusion.”

With those words of faith and foreboding, he was gone, and the bower was again plunged into silence.

- 7 -

## THE CONFUSION

Dawn lifted its haggard face over the distant mountains, as though disdaining the time at which it was called upon to appear. Jordan and Amaris, making their way through the remaining tendrils of the mist that still hung in the orchard, looked up in surprise to realize that they had passed the entire night there.

“I had no idea that time was speeding by with such haste!” Jordan exclaimed, and Amaris nodded her surprise as well.

“But it was time well spent,” she said firmly, and indeed, a new purpose and resolution now shone in both their eyes.

Over and over they had discussed, prayed, remembered, pictured—anything they could to try to piece together bits of the web that they now found entrapping them and their loved ones.

“It’s like this mist,” Amaris said, reaching out her hand as though to grasp it, only to see it slip right through her fingers, “permeating our garden, yet so intangible. It covers everything with its subtle evil, yet when you try to take hold on it to root it out, you find nothing in your hand.”

“But at least we have some leads now,” Jordan

said, setting his chin with determination, “and I think we should go and check on that dark stranger first thing. I’m sure that he has something to do with all this.”

“I may be wrong about that hunch,” Amaris said doubtfully. “I only saw his face for a moment.”

“But was he not connected with the jewelry booth?” Jordan asked.

“Well, yes, but anyone could have a ring.”

“Of course you are right, but still, you got an eerie feeling about him, and that is something that not everybody has. If there is nothing to it, then it will not be time wasted—it will have been time spent setting our minds at ease. What have we to lose?”

“Of course you are right, as always,” Amaris smiled, grabbing Jordan around the waist. “Shall we go right away?”

“We have been gone all night; perhaps we should check on the sick ones first, and then we shall not be concerned with thoughts of them. We may also find that they have improved without our assistance.”



They had come through the orchard by now, and stepped quietly through the corner of the fairground, then up the palace steps.

As they reached the front entrance, Amaris glanced behind her at the courtyard that would soon begin to stir. What was that her father had said the dawn would bring? Confusion. What could he have meant? All seemed fairly peaceful and quiet—strangely quiet, come to think of it. Well, they would know soon enough. Just a few moments to check on the ones upstairs.

Amaris pushed through the door and the guards shut it securely behind her. Jordan was already on his way upstairs towards the king’s bedchamber, and Amaris hastened to her little sister’s side.

There lay Pamela, still and white as the moment

Amaris had left, many hours earlier.

“Has she even moved this whole time?” Amaris asked the nurse who sat wearily by her bedside.

“I have not seen her stir, Your Highness,” the woman murmured. “Not so much as a sigh or a toss. It is very unusual! But she is still breathing, so all seems well.”

Amaris shook her head, baffled, and stepped back outside the room to make her way up the hallway.

She entered the king’s chamber just a few moments after Jordan, who was exchanging a few words with the servants who stood at attendance. Amaris walked to the king’s bedside and knelt down beside him, grasping his cold and motionless hand with her two warm ones.

“You may leave us now,” Jordan said to the servants. “Please wait outside until we call you again.”

The servants respectfully retreated.

Amaris buried her face in the bedcovers. “What can we do, Jordan? What can we do? For all our speculating and piecing together of the puzzle, we are no closer to a solution! Look at him! And Pamela is just the same—motionless, as if the spirits are gone and being held captive somewhere. Why couldn’t my father just tell us what to do?”

“Apparently it is something that we must understand and discern ourselves,” Jordan said. “But he did say that there was a cure, and that is the important thing.”

“Oh, my father! My father!” she wailed, squeezing his hand tightly in hers. “Show me what I must do! I need your wisdom!”

With only silence and rhythmic breathing as her answer, Amaris stood up with a sigh while looking down at the king. “We will save you, Father,” she said firmly. “Come, Jordan! We must confront the evil stranger!”



The two stepped outside the palace doors, and again were struck by the strange stillness that hung over the whole area. Usually at this time there would have been much activity, hustle and bustle, but there seemed to be no one around.

Added to that, the mist still hung lightly over the courtyard, bringing a spectral quality to the desolate environment.

“Do you remember the way to that tent?” Amaris asked.

“Yes, it is right this way,” Jordan said, as they moved past the various deserted booths. “Everyone must have had a very long night last night; I don’t see anyone around!”

“Look, over there! I hear some noise!”

“It is the same tent—and look at the crowd gathered. Dear God! I pray that we are not too late!”

The two hurried quickly to the back of the crowd, and, straining to see past the throngs of people, they could faintly make out a figure standing at the front of the group—a figure dark and swarthy, with cruel black eyes and an evil smile. He was tall and thin, and high above his head he held a large, curved scimitar, which he was waving menacingly.

“My God! What is going on here?” Jordan fairly shouted.

Upon hearing this, several onlookers turned to face them, and Amaris felt someone grab her by the arms. “It is her!” she heard people begin to yell. “She is here! We’ve got her!”

Several strong men grabbed Jordan and restrained him, while Amaris was pushed through the crowd until she stood at the front, just a slight figure before the menacing giant.

“Well, well,” he said, slyly and smoothly. “If it is not the impostor herself!” He grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her roughly around to face the crowd. “Have any of you not believed me until this

point? Then believe *this*!” With a triumphant gesture, he snatched Amaris’ headdress and threw it to the ground, flooding her shoulders and back with the long golden hair that she had successfully hidden for so many years.

“You see? All that I have been telling you is true!” The man shoved Amaris aside, where she was snatched up by two of his henchmen. They tied a scarf about her mouth and started to bind her around the arms and skirt. “King Merchal has deceived you all these years, and now he planned to take a foreigner and a heathen, and make her your ruler!”

The crowd was in an uproar by now—seething, shouting, shaking their fists ... and more! Amaris, who felt as though she could hardly stand another shock at this moment, nearly fainted at what her eyes fell on next.

From within the tent behind her, several servants came out carrying giant trays laden with glistening scimitars.

“There’s one for every one of you!” the man was crying out. “Come forward and claim your weapon! We will rid our kingdom of these impostors once and for all. The king is dead, and the true heir should now be placed on the throne!”

“The king is not dead!” Jordan’s voice pierced the din like a lightning bolt. “He is not dead; he lives! He is only ill—under a trance caused by *this* man!”

The effort was futile, and was ended for Jordan by the handle of one of the scimitars. Jordan slumped to the ground, unconscious.

“Gather ’round! Gather ’round!” the man was saying now, and then in a lower voice, to one of his henchmen. “Take the two prisoners and keep them in my tent, then return swiftly. We must make our attack while things hold well, as they are now. We shall decide the fate of these later, but see that for the time being they are not harmed.”

With a nod, the burly, bald-headed oaf strode towards where Jordan lay in an unconscious heap. After binding Jordan's hands behind his back, the huge man, leering, picked Jordan up and threw him over his back. Striding over to Amaris, he also picked her up, tucked her under the opposite arm, and so made his way to the large tent which stood a few paces back.

Throwing them both to the floor of the tent, and checking that the ropes that bound them were still securely fastened, the man then made his exit, and headed back towards the tumultuous group.

Amaris was frantic. She was bound and gagged, and only God knew how long Jordan would remain unconscious. *By the time he comes around enough for us to attempt an escape, it may be too late. We must act quickly!* Amaris thought.

"Dear God," she prayed silently, "what can I do? How shall we be rescued from this evil situation? Surely nothing, not our wildest fears or imaginations, could have prepared us for such a cruel turn of events!" She leaned on Jordan as the tears flowed down her face, soaking the band that held her mouth tightly shut, and splashing onto Jordan. "Yet I do know that Thou art the God of all flesh, the true Worker of miracles, the One unto whom we cry and plead, and the One who doth hear and answer. Not once hast Thou failed us who trust in Thee, and this dire situation is a trifle compared with Your great power. Redeem us, O Lord God, and show Thyself strong on our behalf."

Amaris was startled to feel Jordan move, and looking down, noticed that his face was wet with the water of her tears. His eyes opened, as he let out a barrage of coughs, brought on by the salt water that had trickled into his mouth.

As he fully came to, he sat up with a start, only to sink back down again with a grimace of pain. Amaris

wriggled over to get at a better view of the lump on his head, which was still growing in size.

"I feel rather faint," Jordan said weakly.

Amaris bobbed her eyebrows sympathetically, as she could not say a word.

"Turn around," Jordan said. "Let me try to undo your band with my teeth."

Amaris turned her head away from Jordan, and he began gnawing away at the cloth. The scarf was very tightly wound, but desperation added its strengthening virtue, and many lengthy minutes of toil were finally rewarded as the shreds fell to the ground.

Jordan rubbed his rugged cheek against the red welts that remained on Amaris' face from the tightness of the bind. "They'll be gone in no time," he said reassuringly, knowing how she took care of her blemish-free skin.

"My priorities at this time have been somewhat readjusted," Amaris said with a smile. "I may say with all honesty that at present, that is the very least of my worries."

They both managed a feeble laugh, surprised at their own audacity in making jokes in such dire circumstances.

"What shall we do, Jordan?" Amaris asked. "Time is so short, and we must act immediately!"

"Dear God!" Jordan prayed in reply. "We know not what to do! Speak to us now, and make Thy voice known to our ears, for in this time Thou art greatly needed!"

Against the blackness of her closed eyelids, Amaris saw a picture slowly forming. At the same time, Jordan began to speak. "The bound are bound by Me, for what is done in the stillness is mightier and shall conquer that which is wrought by the sword."

As he finished forming the words, Jordan shook his head slowly. "I do not understand what I have

spoken,” he said remorsefully.

“But I do!” said Amaris jubilantly. “For the same instant that you spoke, I saw illustrations in the eye of my mind. I saw you and I, here as we are now—bound! And then I saw my father rising from his bed, and Pamela likewise. I believe that God has placed us here, apart, where we may not intervene in the flesh, that we may intervene through the power of the world beyond.”

“You mean that we may break the spell of the ring from this distance?”

“That must be it! The only thing that can stop this from turning into a massacre and a horrible defeat would be for the king to rise and put an end to it all. He is the only one who can make things straight now, for the people will listen to him. Somehow, this man knew that the ring would have that effect on him—or perhaps he just heard about his illness and seized his opportunity. Either way, there must be a solution, and we have been placed here that we may find it.”

“So, how shall we go about doing so?” Jordan voiced the question which now echoed in both their minds.

“Let us begin with Pamela,” Amaris said, still wanting to make amends for whatever part she may have played in the drama involving her beloved little sister.

“With her, then,” Jordan agreed.

Not knowing what further to say, the two shut their eyes and concentrated quietly in prayer. After a few minutes of silence, Amaris let out a sigh of exasperation. Apparently results were slow in coming, and that did not altogether fulfill her vision or what she had expected to happen. Then Jordan began to hum, quietly, almost under his breath. Amaris turned from her own frustration to give him attention, half-imagining that this must be his own way of dealing with the difficulty of not knowing what to do.

But after a minute or two, Jordan continued to hum, and Amaris grew curious. “What are you singing?” she asked softly. “I do not recognize the tune. And, now that I think about it, I do not recall having heard you sing before. It seems to me that the Jordan I know would make specific efforts to not sing when at all possible. How is it that you now bring forth such a sweet melody?”

Jordan answered not a word, but continued to hum softly. Then he began adding words to the haunting melody.

Listen, little ones, and you shall hear!  
Come close, everyone, and gather near.  
For this so great a mystery that falls on your ear—  
Give thanks, give praise!

Today great deliverance shall come to your land!  
Against all the odds, victory shall be in hand.  
You just need to follow, and not to understand—  
Give thanks, give praise!

And again the evocative words sounded in the stillness: “Give thanks! Give praise!”

Breaking the tender threads of silence that followed, Amaris began to whisper words of praise. “We thank You, dear Lord, for the victory that we do not see, but that we do know awaits us just around the corner, just out of sight. We thank You for Thy care and safekeeping of my little sister, and for how even now You have Your hand on her, and are keeping her safe until she shall be fully restored to us.”

“Her key...” Jordan startled Amaris as he spoke suddenly, apparently still hearing the sounds of the supernatural, “her key lies in your commitment. Say the words and she shall be released. Her spirit is waiting for you to gently unlatch the door and bring her forth.”

Tears welled up in Amaris' eyes. "I do!" she cried. "I do! I beg you, little sister, come forth from your sleep, for I promise with all my heart to give myself to you, as you need me, in care and in love and tenderness, from this time forth until the day when time is no more!"

Jordan and Amaris looked into each other's eyes, and neither needed to say a word. They knew with utmost certainty that at that very moment, deep within the palace walls, the feisty little redhead had stirred in her sleep, and opened wide her eyes.

- 8 -

## ESCAPE AND CAPTURE

No more than twenty minutes had passed from the time that Jordan and Amaris had been thrown into the tent, but for the two captives, it seemed like an eternity twice over. The last minutes had been particularly stressful, as after the exhilaration of victory in freeing Pamela, the dryness of spirit had set in again as they had found themselves starting from scratch in attempting the release of the king.

"There must be a lead somewhere. We've got to think!" Amaris wracked her brain. "Pamela was pretty easy and obvious, but I have no idea where to begin with His Majesty!"

"Ah," Jordan said suddenly. "But of course!"

"Of course what?" Amaris asked quizzically.

"But that is just it! With Pamela, in the beginning we had as little idea as we do now with the king. The solution came in our beseeching the Almighty."

Amaris looked shamefacedly at him. "Now I see the meaning of your 'of course,' and those would have been my words exactly, had I been the one who realized it." She smiled. "He makes life very easy for us, doesn't He?"

Jordan nodded, and the two shut their eyes and prayed again.

Amaris found herself curiously empty-minded, but she was reassured by Jordan's irregular breathing, which told her that he was partaking of something.

"Tell me," she whispered.

"It is so vague, so unclear!" he said hesitantly. "I keep waiting for more, but nothing comes."

"Perhaps that clue is all the starting power that we need. Tell me," she said again.

"I saw a picture; all it was, was a hand. It seemed to be a female hand, slender and dainty. It was a right hand, tightly shut into a fist. As I watched, it opened up. Now do you see my meaning in the word 'vague'?"

"On the contrary," Amaris said, as she turned a light shade of pink. "Quite on the contrary, I see great significance in your vision. And I also expect that I know the reason why my own mind was blank. Perhaps subconsciously I have known all along what I would have to do to break the spell His Majesty is under—the very thing I have been so resisting!"

"What do you mean?" Jordan asked.

"I have not wanted to let him go, to allow him to pass over to the Other Side. On the day that he took ill, my father Edward came to me..." Amaris related to Jordan her experience in the garden, and how in her right hand had been placed the power of life and death. "My keeping my right hand shut was symbolic of not letting him go. But my father said that the king would not be taken until I would agree that he should—and he said that the timing of it would be for the betterment or worsening of our lives, and of the kingdom's."

"That would make my vision most precise then," Jordan said.

"Yes," said Amaris. "But at the same time, I do not understand. How would allowing His Majesty to die help to resolve this situation? It would seem to only make matters worse!"

"That is not our decision," Jordan said. "All that we know is that we must allow it to happen, and the rest will be in the hands of God. You cannot hold back the fingers of the clock of time without controlling everything that happens from then on. If you do so, you must take full responsibility for it."

"You speak with the wisdom of my father!" Amaris almost laughed out loud. "For a moment I could have sworn I saw his crown on your head."

"I have had many strange things passing through my mind this morning," Jordan laughed also. "Sometimes I am not sure who I am anymore."

"You are a wonderful man, and I love you!" Amaris rolled over and embraced him, pressing a kiss full on the lips.

Jordan reluctantly disengaged himself from the pleasant affair. "We must make haste," he said apologetically. "For loving there is always time, but the kingdom needs us now."

"You are right. But Jordan, how shall I hold up my hand and open it to let him go when I am thus bound?"

At that moment, they were startled by a noise at the entrance of the tent. They immediately fell into silence, until they could see who the intruder was.

To their surprise, it was a young boy who could not have been more than four years old.

"Little one!" Amaris called out, making her voice very soft so as not to startle him.

The boy looked up furtively.

"It's all right!" she said, even more softly. "Could you please help us? We have our hands knotted with strong ropes. I need you to help me find something to cut them free with. Do you know where there is a knife or a sharp stone?"

The boy looked around. "A large butter knife lies here," he finally said.

"Excellent!" Jordan said. "That will do. Would you

bring it here?"

"It has butter on it," the boy said.

"It shall do fine, if you can just bring it over here."

But without another word, the boy turned and dashed out of the tent, leaving the two groaning with disappointment.

"All is not lost," Jordan said. "We know the whereabouts of the object, and it is not too far away. I can manage to get over there to fetch it."

"No, let me," Amaris said. "You must recover your strength after that blow to your head. Besides, I have less muscle to carry with me!" she quietly laughed.

Amaris scooted and rolled her way across the floor until she reached the butter knife. Grabbing it behind her back, she made her way back to Jordan, and passed it to him. It was laborious work sawing through the thick cords with that instrument, but it finally worked. Before long the two were free, and sat stretching their aching joints and rubbing their sore wrists.

"Freedom feels so sweet!" Amaris said with a smile.

"Indeed it does!" Jordan said.

"Do you think we should go somewhere else to perform the release of the king? What if the guards return?" Amaris asked.

"I think we had better stay until we accomplish the purpose for which we were sent here. Then it will be made known to us what we should do next."

So they knelt together, and, with a heartfelt prayer of acceptance, Amaris stretched her right hand upward and opened it wide, in her own personal expression of yieldedness to whatever the future would bring. "I let you go, Father dear, though it is one of the hardest things I have ever done!"



Amaris and Jordan were startled out of the brief, reverent silence that followed her words by a tumultuous noise outside the tent. The shouting and

clamor seemed to be drawing nearer, and Jordan grabbed Amaris by the arm. They had just enough time to slip into a corner of the tent and hide behind some rough furs and blankets that lay in a heap there.

An instant later, the front flap of the tent flung open, and a slew of men stormed in violently.

"Where are they?" shouted one of the guards.

"They aren't here anymore!" another called forth, rather dubiously.

He had good reason to be dubious, for a large stick came hurtling through the tent entryway in his direction, striking him smartly across the cheek. The man recoiled, but said nothing.

"Who wants to tell me what is going on?" the stick-thrower spoke—the same dark, fearsome beast who had been the cause of all the trouble till this point.

Not surprisingly, no one spoke up. Contrary to their wishes, however, their silence added to their leader's mad rage.

"What? Does no one see fit to answer me now? Tell me what we should do! What would you do? I have a crowd of people out there, eating out of my hand. I just need a way to break into the castle defenses—a little bartering power to get them to open the doors a crack so that we can fight our way in. And with all the fools that I am surrounded with, no one can give me a sound piece of advice!" His eyes blazed with violent fury, and Amaris crouched lower into the folds of her covers, shuddering to think what would happen if they were discovered.

"My lord Tariq"—it was a small, intelligent-looking man who spoke—"note this knife, with the cut ropes lying nearby. It would seem that they were able to escape."

Tariq strode over and prodded the bits of rope with his foot, as if they were not worthy of his touch. Then, angrily crushing them with his foot, he turned back to face the others.



“So it would seem,” he mused. “What is your name, son?”

“Artis, my lord,” the thin man said, reddening a bit at how he was addressed, for he was obviously much older than the first man.

“Artis ... hmmm,” Tariq said smoothly. “You have great promise, Artis. I will remember you in my new kingdom.” He threw his head up, and the rest of the company braced themselves. “All of you, spread out. I want you to search every square inch of these grounds. I want them both here by midday, or I shall begin executing one of you men every hour until they are found. Do you understand me?”

The words could not have been clearer, and the men started scrambling around, some wondering what kind of a leader they had gotten themselves messed up with.

As the room rapidly emptied, Tariq called after them: “I do not care what becomes of the boy, but I must have the girl alive!”

He strode over to the front flap of the tent, and the two stowaways prepared to heave a sigh of relief. A moment later, however, Tariq turned around and strode back over to the center of the tent, where he threw himself down on a pile of pillows, and closed his eyes.

There was nothing that Jordan and Amaris could do but wait. Their place of concealment lay only several feet from the sleeping man, and as Jordan studied Amaris closely, he noticed her eyes focusing greedily on the curved blade that lay by the man’s side.

“It would be so easy to end it right now!” she mouthed the words to him silently.

But Jordan shook his head. “It’s too risky,” he replied, though obviously the idea was not unappealing to him. “And also, we don’t want to take things into our own hands that belong in the hands of God alone.”

Amaris nodded, as she too did not feel perfectly at ease about proceeding that way. The Lord had brought them and kept them thus far, and surely He would make clear His will and give His protection in His perfect time.

Not many minutes had passed before a rustle sounded at the door. Jordan and Amaris could not see the entrance from their hiding place, but the voice that spoke was immediately known. Jordan’s hand quickly clamped Amaris’ mouth shut, stifling the scream that would have exploded from it.

It was Pamela.

“Excuse me ... sir?” she stood hesitantly in the door, blinking at the musty darkness inside the tent.

Tariq was up in an instant, but it took him a second to register what was happening.

“Why, if it is not the little princess!” he then exclaimed, in a voice so smooth that the listeners nearly became sick right in their corner. “Do come in! But how did you get here without...” his voice faded off suddenly.

“Oh, a bunch of people kept grabbing me, but I told them I was on my way to see you, and so they kept letting me go. A couple followed me here just to make sure. They are right outside the tent.”

“I see,” Tariq felt somewhat more relieved to hear of the efforts of his scouts.

“I have come to give you back this ring,” Pamela said. She stood right where she was, at the entrance of the tent, and Tariq made no move to proceed towards her, so she finally threw the thing at his feet. “I don’t want it anymore,” she said.

“Why is that, little girl?”

Jordan nervously noticed that he was fingering the curved handle that hung on his belt.

“I don’t need it!” she burst out, with fire in her eyes. “It’s all wrong, everything is wrong, and I can see it now. I was tricked by you, and flattered because

you gave me attention and you gave me this little thing that I thought was so special. I wanted to be important like my sister, but I see now that it doesn't matter, and I'm not going to take part in whatever wickedness you are involved with. I always knew there was something that wasn't right, but I just didn't want to face it. Well, I'm facing it now."

"I see," Tariq stroked his chin pensively. "Well, that is certainly your right. Goodbye then!"

"Goodbye," Pamela said, and turned to walk out of the tent.

As she stepped out of the front, Tariq called after her in a careless voice. "Guards, hold the child, would you?"

Pausing for a satisfied glance in the looking glass that hung inside the tent, and smoothing his hair and garments, he spoke to himself in a pleased voice. "Well, how nicely things have worked out! We have our little bargaining chip now, do we not? Crawled right into our hand!" With an evil chuckle, he reached for the ring and placed it back on his finger.

Stepping out into the bright sunlight he motioned to the brutes who stood nearby. "Go, gather up all the searchers. We don't need to look for the others anymore. We are ready to mount our attack. Send the word to all the army—to battle stations!"

No sooner had Tariq passed through the entryway and the sound of footsteps had died down, than Amaris and Jordan tumbled out of their hiding place. Amaris' eyes were wide with distress.

"Jordan!" she burst out frantically. "What are we to do? What can we possibly do, just the two of us?"

"If there was only some way that we could get back into the castle to see how His Majesty is doing..." Jordan shook his head. "But I fear that they will have the entire place surrounded by now."

"Well, we must do something," Amaris said firmly, "either that or die trying."

Jordan caught her hand as she headed impulsively towards the door of the tent.

"I agree, little fiery one," he said. "But in the interests of lessening the possibility of the latter, let us proceed through this back exit of the tent, and perhaps we shall not be noticed as readily."

"You are right as always, my love," Amaris reddened slightly.

Jordan cast a cautious glance outside the back of the tent, and seeing that the coast was clear, the two slipped quietly out.

"Here!" Amaris said. "I took these two cloaks from the pile in the tent. Let us put them on and then we shall not be identifiable on sight."

"What an excellent team we make," Jordan smiled, as he donned the robe hastily. "Alone we should surely have been in our grave by now, but one of us seems to have all of the ideas that the other lacks!"

Holding hands and pulling the hoods well over their heads, the two proceeded along the side of the tent, making their way towards the palace.

## CONFRONTATION

Jordan and Amaris did not find it difficult to reach the borders of the palace without being spotted, for every person that they came across seemed to be so fully occupied in what they were doing that they were oblivious to all else—certainly to two hesitant strangers in long robes making their way around.

The palace was well in sight by now, right around the corner of the small, elaborately decorated booth behind which they stood.

“How shall we proceed from here?” Amaris asked, as they stopped to catch their breath.

Jordan craned his head around the corner, surveying the scene in an instant and then returning to the safety of their hiding place.

“As far as I can see, the entire palace is surrounded—at least this whole front portion. I had no idea there were this many people attending the festival!”

“There were record numbers expected,” Amaris said sourly.

“Although, I wouldn’t be surprised if that man has brought in reinforcements of his own, for look,” he said, as Amaris also stretched her head out cautiously to take in the surroundings. “Can you see how, mixed in with the regular villagers and farmers brandishing weapons, there are also what seem to be more seasoned fighters

and soldiers? Those are no ordinary festival-goers, and they are there aplenty. Our evil Tariq has been planning this well in advance, and if I am not mistaken, he is fully intending to win this confrontation.”

“Ah, but he is so wrong!” Amaris’ eyes shone with faith. “Is he not? For has not the victory been promised into our hands?”

“That it has,” said Jordan, “and let us see to it that we do all we can to ensure that this prophecy is truly fulfilled.”

“So how are we going to get into the palace?” Amaris asked.

“I do not see a way that we can do that right now,” Jordan said, “so I think we should stay right here and wait for our time. Obviously we are here for a reason, and we just need to wait until it is made clear to us.”

At that moment, Jordan and Amaris were interrupted by a loud shout that was arising from the crowds gathered in front of the palace. Throwing caution aside, they dashed out in front of the booth, only to draw their breath in sharply.

The doors to the wide, low balcony immediately above the entrance to the palace were opening. As the shouting died down, a page stepped nervously out and began to blow a trumpet—a soft, clear sound that was as soothing to the two clandestines as it was to the crowd that was amassed.

As the trumpet notes died down, the doors opened again, and King Merchal stepped forward onto the balcony. Looking as fit and robust as ever, and glowing with health and life, the king walked very slowly, until he reached the banister, and, placing his two brown hands upon it, he looked forward at the crowds below him.

“My people,” he said, in a voice that was as soft as the wind, but that carried almost magically through

the entire crowd, and warmed the hearts of those who heard. “I have seen and heard you gathering and clamoring. I do not know what questions are on your heart, but I am here for you. Speak to me and ask me what you will, and all shall be known unto you.”

A low murmur swept through the crowd, but no one spoke. A few people were looking sheepishly at each other, and some started to throw down their weapons and turn back. But before this move could catch on, a loud shout was heard from the other end of the crowd.

Tariq had climbed on top of a low-lying booth, and now stood, brandishing his scimitar. The morning sun gleamed in his eyes, dyeing them a fiery red. His hair glistened like the black coals of a wood fire, and Amaris couldn’t help but feel a shiver of fear running through her.

“Good people,” Tariq now cried out. “Do not be so easily deceived by this one who has spoken smooth words to you before! Do not forget that this man who you call your ruler has been cleverly deceiving you for many years. Now, in his waning hours, he attempts to place a foreign heathen on *your* throne, taking away your right to be ruled by one of your own. You cannot trust this one who calls himself your monarch, for he has thrown your trust away by his lies. Shut your ears to his words now, and join with me as we return the rightful rule to this land!”

The strategically placed soldiers, loyal to Tariq, started the shout of consent, and before long the rest of the crowd took it up, shouting and clamoring. “Down with the foreigners! Down with the king! May righteousness rule our land once again!”

The king stood on the balcony, shaking his head sadly. Amaris was surprised to see how calm he looked.

“How easily they are swayed, and how quickly deceived,” he sighed. “My Father, what shall I do?”

How shall this multitude be appeased? I fear that words alone will not suffice, yet we are not prepared to face a battle, nor am I willing to bring arms against my own subjects. Speak the words and make the moves, O Most High One, for we are but sheep who move at Your behest.”

As the king was finishing his inward prayer, his attention was drawn to a scuffle taking place on Tariq’s booth. Before his startled eyes, he saw his beloved Pamela being hauled up by a guard. Grabbing her and twisting her arm firmly behind her back so that she could not move, Tariq let out a loud laugh of triumph.

“Do you see this, good sir?” he cried aloud. “Do you not see? Have not my words been truly fulfilled at last? This one that you see here before you is my entrance into your palace—and onto your throne. Open the gates, I say, and surrender to me. Call off your guards and fling wide the doors, and I shall leave her in safety. Deny me my requests, and...”

The king’s eyes burned with an inner fire. He felt like invisible ropes were being wrapped around him, binding his hands. *Ah, my God!* he cried within himself. *My heart is bound with ropes so fine that they cannot be seen, but so strong that they cannot be broken. I am powerless against this foe who knows me so well and who will stop at nothing to see me in the dirt.*

“Your Majesty!” Pamela shouted. “Please don’t listen to him! Do not surrender. Fight for your throne and don’t worry about me. This is all my fault anyway...”

Tariq, both in an attempt to silence her, and also to prove his deadly seriousness, hit her hard along the side of the head. As she fell towards the surface of the booth, one cry escaped from her lips: “My father!”

The cry tore through the air. Jordan watched the

scene with tears in his eyes. The fall echoed in his memory, and blended with a vision of days past—a small, delicate rose falling to the ground, petals drooping. And the evil, cruel, scimitar-wielding man. What could they do?

Time held its breath. A rebel cloud tore across the blue of the sky to defiantly block the sun’s rays from shedding their warmth on this saddest of all scenes. Amaris noticed that from the crowd, several people had begun to melt away. But they were the few—the vast crowd still stood, impassive as ever, waving their fists and their weapons towards the king.

He had now turned back to face the door, but had not moved to re-enter the palace.

“What do you say then?” came the taunt again.

King Merchal turned, and his face was wet. “Give me one hour,” he said, “and you will have my answer.”

The shout of denial that rose in Tariq’s throat was suddenly squelched as he surprised himself by saying, “One hour, but not a second more.” Not entirely sure why he had relented, he jumped down from his pedestal. “We gather here on the hour!” he said to the crowds. “Do not be late or you will be counted with the enemy.”

Jordan and Amaris knew that this was their moment of opportunity. They waited until the crowds had mostly dispersed, leaving just an enclave of Tariq’s soldiers who, confronting the palace guards, remained to watch the main entrance to the palace. Guarding the palace door itself stood the king’s guards, ready to fight to the death for their master should Tariq’s men attack.

“Let us go through the forest and enter through the cellar door,” Amaris said. “It is sure to be unguarded, as it is so small.”

It took them less than five minutes to break through the underbrush on the far side of the palace to where they could see the small wooden door.

“There’s a guard there!” Jordan said.

“Do you think we can get by? He’s watching the larger entrance, not that one.”

“I would not want to risk it at this point,” Jordan said. “There is too much at stake.”

“Don’t you see?” Amaris said. “We *have* to risk it for that very reason!”

“I know a better way,” Jordan said. “Follow me.”

Back into the forest they headed, and moments later they came to an area where huge trees stood, stately and inviting. “We go up here,” Jordan was standing at the base of the largest tree of all.

“What on earth are you thinking?” Amaris was incredulous.

“It is my own secret passageway,” Jordan said, slightly embarrassed. “Come on, I use it all the time. Well, that is, I used to use it all the time. Now that I am a more distinguished member of the palace I don’t need to sneak in and out so much.”

Amaris shook her head in disbelief. “I’m not going to ask,” she said laughingly.

“Let’s just say that God has found some good in some of my wayward ways,” he said apologetically. “Now come, we haven’t a moment to lose. I’ll help you get started up.”

“Wait, Jordan!” Amaris said suddenly. “What about Pamela? We can’t just leave her!”

Jordan stopped, and turned slowly to Amaris, with unborn tears shining in his eyes. “My heart is with that little rose,” he said softly. “I feel responsible for not having discerned my vision and done more to protect her.” He brushed off the hand that Amaris offered in an attempt at comfort. “No, I am fine,” he continued. “But I just think that this is our best chance of saving her. If we try to save her directly, we will only wind up captives ourselves. We must go to your father—it is our only hope.”

Amaris’ face relaxed as she looked upwards

towards the palace. “And he is waiting for us,” she said confidently.

“What did you say?” Jordan asked.

“He is waiting for us!” said Amaris, amazed herself. “I don’t know why I said that, but yet I know it is true. Let us make haste.”

Without waiting another second, the two hastened up the treacherous tree trunk. It was hard work, and Amaris’ delicate garments were none the finer by the time they reached the top. Jordan smiled a little as he helped her onto the balcony. “The widely ventilated look suits you,” he said with a grin, as he motioned towards the airy holes in various parts of her dress.

Amaris just laughed and grabbed his hand as together they stepped quietly into the palace.

## BEYOND THE HOUR

The balcony they had ascended led directly into the White Room. Once there, they were surprised to see the shutters closed, and a motionless form crouched in the semi-darkness.

“Father!” Amaris burst out, dashing towards the figure.

King Merchal looked up, with incredulous tears in his eyes. “Thank You, O my Father, O one Most High and deserving of all praise and glory!” He rose and threw his strong arms around the slender frame and held her tight for several moments. “Thank You for hearing my cry of desperation and for sending me such a speedy answer!” Then he looked up and reached out his other arm. “Jordan!” he said warmly.

“We came as soon as we could, Your Majesty,” the young man said.

“I’m so sorry that you had to face that beast alone!” said Amaris.

“I am only thankful that you are safe, and that you are here in enough time that there is hope of salvation,” the king shook his head, as though he himself had despaired of all hope.

“But hope there is!” Amaris said, and the two proceeded to recount the mysterious happenings of

the day, and how the tale tied in with Jordan's previous vision and all the other events of the week before.

By the end of their narrative, the king was scratching his head in amazement. "I am astounded!" he exclaimed. "I am truly astonished to see all that is at work here! Of a truth, the Most High is working out some plan that is incredible in our eyes. But surely His results shall surpass our most fanciful dreams."

"But tell us, Father," Amaris said suddenly. "What is it with this fellow? Do you know him from somewhere? And what is that ring? Why did it have such a strange, strong power over you?"

The king looked at her sadly. "Tariq and I go back a long way," he said softly, sitting on one of the chaise longues in the beautiful room. "Come here, and I will tell you the tale."

Amaris joined him, and the king wrapped his arm snugly around her. Jordan placed himself respectfully at the monarch's feet. When they were seated thus, the king began his tale.

"Yes, Tariq and I go back a long way," he mused again. His eyes took on a faraway look, as vivid memories flashed through his mind like darts of light. "I shall not have much time to get into all the details, but I will try to explain as much as is necessary for us to decide where to go from here.

"When I was a young man, my father groomed me long for the time that I would take on this position and authority. He was old, and knew that he would not live to see many more sunrises. Soon the time came when he took me on a long journey, which we spent, just the two of us, communing and speaking together of the matters of the realm. He revealed unto me many of his secret dreams, his worries, his thoughts, and the burdens that lay on his heart for his people. He told me of the love that he had for them and the care and tenderness with which he

viewed them. This love, he told me, was the quality that I should strive for most in my ruling.

"We were gone for a little more than a fortnight, and the time together with him strengthened me greatly. But upon our return to the palace, we found that something terrible had happened. In our absence, my father's chief counselor had taken over the realm! He had deceived the people into thinking that my father and I were dead, and therefore he was next in line to the throne. He had sent warriors after us in hopes of making this deception true, but they had never found us as we had varied from our planned route.

"My father was horrified to see what had happened, but the army and the people quickly returned to his side, and the impostors were easily defeated. If you ever wondered why I never had a chief counselor up till this point, that is the reason—I supposed this experience somewhat soured me on them; until you came along, of course." The old man faintly smiled at Jordan, and then continued his tale. "This traitor was banished to a faraway land, never again to return—he and his wife, and a young son. That son is the one who has returned unto us today, I suppose to fulfill a father's dying wish."

"Tariq!" Amaris whispered.

"Yes," King Merchal said grimly. "He is the living image of his father, and that ring belonged to his father also. It has an odd quality to it that I don't understand. It must have a peculiar curse of the Evil One on it, for it seems to magnify a person's guilt, fear or worry, and translate it into a tangible negative power that has that strange effect upon people, which you have now witnessed. The only cure I have found for it is the power of the Almighty God and His Spirit, for that is strong enough to conquer all evils."

The king sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "So the man is back to finish his father's business, and I



should say that so far, he is doing an excellent job. I am greatly encouraged by the words that you have spoken, but I must say that I have a difficult time seeing how they shall be fulfilled.”

“Oh, let us ask Him together, Father!” Amaris said, as eagerly and hopefully as she could.

“Yes, let us do that,” King Merchal said.

The three joined hands together, and the room grew silent and still while their prayers flowed upward as incense, intertwining and twirling, and bringing peace and tranquility into the atmosphere.

Then, unseen to the three mortals, ghostly white figures began filling the room in increasing numbers, until no more could be held. Then, one by one in turn, they revealed the battle plan to the waiting ones. The victory was on its way!



In the palace courtyard, formerly the scene of such happy festivities, crowds of anxious-looking people were now milling about aimlessly. Some looked less than enthusiastic about their participation in the coming events, but their fear of being noticed as absent was obviously much stronger, and so they remained.

The appointed time finally came, and Tariq did not waste a minute in shouting his challenge. “The time has come,” he bellowed arrogantly. “Let the one who calls himself king and monarch of this land come forth and face truth and justice!”

Only silence greeted his outburst, and the restless crowds muttered anxiously amongst themselves. Most were peace-loving farmers, and were not eager to join in any fighting and bloodshed.

“What? Is there no response?” Tariq was obviously annoyed, yet felt a growing sense of satisfaction at what he interpreted to be an inkling of his adversary’s defeat. “Then this must be a signal for us to proceed as we have warned—”

His words were cut short by a noise arising in the crowd. The balcony door was opening. And there, before the throngs, stood King Merchal. A gasp arose from the crowd, seeing him as he now stood—not in his royal robes, not richly dressed, but wearing the humble garments of a peasant. His long white hair hung loosely around his head and flowed down over his shoulders. His head was bare and his hands bore no rings. His feet were shod in plain brown sandals.

Not a sound could be heard from the crowd now, as they hung upon the promise of words that would flow from his mouth, waiting for the wisdom they knew would come.

“My people,” he started. To a man the crowds leaned forward, straining not to miss a word. “My people,” he said again, and tears began to flow down his cheeks. “I have done you a great wrong by deceiving you all of these years, but you must believe me—I did not do so with anything but the purest motives. In truth, on this very festival I had intended to explain the news to you in full—only it seems that another has hastened this explanation from me.”

The people cast a hesitant glance towards Tariq, who appeared to be rooted to the spot, mysteriously silent and unusually still. Some of his staunchest supporters shook their heads in disbelief, not understanding why he was making no move or sound.

“You all know of the tragic death of my beloved wife and child, which took place so many years ago. Not long after, when I had despaired of all life and hope, the God whom I love with all my heart saw fit to send me another one to take the place of the little one I had so cherished. He sent this little one from across the seas—the one you know as the Princess Amaris. She has been raised as my own child, and I have tried to instill in her the true values that I believe are important in a task such as this one—the importance of loving, understanding, helping, and

protecting those whom the kingdom is made up of. And I believe that she would make an excellent successor to me.

“Nevertheless,” he continued, “the choice is not mine alone to make. Perhaps at one time it was, but now, things have progressed in such a way that it seems a process of selection should take place. I am growing old and weak, and I shall not live to see many more sunrises. I want to leave this life knowing that I have done what I could to place the kingdom into the hands of one who will rule in uprightness, with love and fairness, justice and protection and equality for all.

“Now that I have explained my story, I would like to call our challenger to join me on this balcony.”

The crowds turned towards Tariq, who remained motionless as he had been up till that point.



Peering out from behind the heavy drapes, Amaris squeezed Jordan’s hand tightly. “It is working!” she exclaimed jubilantly.

“Of course,” Jordan said. “Our God’s plans always work!”

“It is astounding to see the power of the ring reversed upon him, just as the Lord told us. He said that a combination of pure simplicity and utter honesty would send the full power of the ring back upon his own head, and that it is doing!”

“Yes, it is time that he had a taste of the potion he has been serving out so generously,” Jordan said in disgust.

The two turned their attention back to the scene before them.



“Tariq!” the king said in a loud voice which seemed to snap the man out of his trance. “Come up here to the balcony!”

The servants hastened to open a door on the

balcony’s railing, and a staircase was lowered for the tall man to climb up.

Tariq regained his wits quickly, and despite his temporary incoherence, he seemed to have a complete grasp of what had taken place. He knew what had been done to him by the reversal of the power of the ring, and he did not like it one bit. More than ever, now, he was determined to emerge triumphant.

“So here we are,” he said smoothly, with a sly and evil smile. “The challenger and the challenged. You have proposed that we select in whose hands to place the kingdom, so speak forth, Your Highness, and tell us all what your justice shall serve us today.”

“This shall be a contest—but not of swords, so you may put down your weapons,” the king said.

“I am grateful for the gesture, but—being as I am in this rather hostile environment—I should rather prefer to retain my weapon on my person,” Tariq said disdainfully.

“As you wish,” the king said.

“Now, listen closely everyone, and I shall tell you of the contest that I have in mind. But first of all, Tariq, allow me to introduce your opponent.”

“But surely...” Tariq trailed off.

“You did not expect to confront me, did you?” the king said, with a smile. “No, I am not the contender here. I will gladly relinquish my throne—either to you, or to the Princess Amaris.”

At his side she joined him now, and the crowd gasped in awe at this sight, one their eyes had never seen. Gone for the moment were the finery and face paint, the costly oils and silks, and the jewels and the head coverings. As her father stood, so was she—plainly adorned in a simple cloth gown. Her loveliness seemed to radiate all the more for the purity and plainness that encased it. Her simple beauty, like a bolt of lightning, struck the hearts that yet resisted.

Her hair was down, and cascaded over her

shoulders like a torrent of molten gold. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and her eyes were cast down, for she was timid and unsure of herself at this moment. She felt very weak and vulnerable indeed to enter into any sort of a contest—least of all with this powerful man of intellect.

But lifting her eyes to the masses before her, she seemed to be filled with new hope and strength when she saw them as they truly were—tired, hungry and needy souls, who only yearned for someone to love them, to care for them and to be at their side. And she knew in her heart that God would give her the strength for whatever she needed to do, so that she could care for them all the days of her life.

- 11 -

## THE CHALLENGE BEGINS

“As we know, all power and true authority come from God,” King Merchal began. “So is it not natural that He should be the One to select the ruler of this land?”

“I beg to protest,” Tariq said smoothly, “for who is to say what god shall be appealed to, or which god in particular is being called into question on this day?”

“I place my belief in the God Almighty, sole Creator of the heavens and of the Earth,” King Merchal replied simply. “But you may place yours in whoever you wish. I have my personal opinions as to which god you serve, but I will leave that for our subjects to decide. For this shall be the contest.” With a wide sweep of his arm, he addressed the crowd.

“Good people, pay close attention, for you shall be our judges! By the end of this day you shall proclaim the name of the next ruler of your country. Here are the rules of the contest. First, each contender shall have one request to ask of the other, which he must fulfill in order to qualify and thus continue in the competition. These requests must fall under the boundaries of reason, of course, which I shall regulate.

“Second, each contender shall explain to you why they wish to be ruler of this land and what you may

expect of them if they are your choice. Third, each contender shall present aloud a petition to his God, and shall request a demonstration of His power. At the end of these three acts, you shall pronounce your judgment, and the one you name shall be ruler over all.”

“A word, if I may,” Tariq said.

“But of course,” the king replied.

“You are saying that after all these little demonstrations, *whoever* the people name shall be ruler? And, she—that is, the loser—will be content to leave all to the other?”

“That is so; it will be as the people wish it. And we know in our hearts that God’s will shall prevail.” The king fought off a feeling of nervousness that threatened to rise in his stomach. *What if something went wrong? What if things did not go as expected? What would happen then?* Resolutely brushing all such thoughts aside, he continued with his speech.

“Who shall then begin with the first challenge?” the king asked with firmness and authority.

“Let the lady begin.” Tariq was in no hurry, and curious to see what move Amaris would make. He was anxious to make every part of the challenge count in his favor.

Amaris stepped forward a little, and hesitated only a moment as she cast her eyes heavenward with a heartfelt though silent prayer. For a moment she flirted with the thought of asking Tariq to remove his ring—for with it, she reasoned, would also go his evil power. But somehow she felt that was not God’s plan, and she knew what was more important at this time. “I request that you release unto me my young sister, Pamela, whom you have taken captive.”

Tariq bristled a little at losing his bargaining piece, but then waved impatiently at his henchmen, who led the little girl up the balcony steps. With a little cry, Amaris rushed over to her, and the two held each

other close.

“All right, all right, enough of that,” said Tariq irritably. “It is now my turn.”

Amaris returned to her place on the balcony, and Pamela turned to go inside, but Amaris held her sister’s hand. “Please stay with me,” she whispered.

The two sisters moved forward and stood together, dwarfed alongside the menacing giant.

Tariq’s brain had been rapidly working, searching for the perfect move, when all of a sudden he became very still. A sickly grin of satisfaction expressed vileness, as though the evil deep inside him had seeped through to the surface, causing a collective shudder in the onlookers. “I have my request,” he said smoothly. “I wish for my lady Amaris to cut off her long locks, every one of them, and cast them to the ground at my feet!”

Amaris trembled, taken aback. This was a personal blow which she had not expected, for her lovely hair, which reached almost to the ground, was something she treasured. She looked to her father in her consternation, and he looked back at her sadly. “You don’t have to do it,” he whispered, “but...”

Nothing more needed to be said. Motioning to a servant to bring some shears, Amaris stepped forward. The crowd watched in fascinated horror as the boy approached, holding the instrument in his hands. Amaris flung her head forward, for the last time tossing her hair up into the air, and over. Pamela buried her face in the king’s robe. She could not bear to watch any further.

The servant hesitated. He could not bring himself to perform such a personal act.

“Come, come!” Tariq said impatiently. “Let us not make such pageantry of it. I made no hesitation in fulfilling my petition.”

“I will assist.” Amaris was startled to hear Jordan’s firm voice take control of the situation. She sighed in

relief, as feeling him near sent new strength and resolve rushing through her. He took the shears from the trembling boy and held them firmly in his hands.

Raising them up to the sky, he looked at the crowds and said loudly: “This, for the people!” Without another word, he began to cut, and did not stop until the balcony ground was covered in fine golden strands. Then he turned, and stepped back into the palace.

Amaris held her chin high. Her head felt very light without its customary burden of glory, and to the onlookers she seemed very small indeed, a great deal less stately and majestic than she had only moments before. Tariq smiled craftily. His newly devised plan seemed to be working very well thus far.

“You have the next move, sir,” the king said dryly to Tariq. “You must now begin with your explanation of why you wish to be king, and what promises you will give the people concerning your reign.”

Tariq smiled slowly. This was indeed something he had been giving much thought to. In a split second he scanned his mental notes, purging out anything that could be interpreted badly towards him, and then slowly he opened his mouth. As he did, however, he turned his head sideways, and his gaze settled on Amaris, who stood quietly in the far corner of the balcony, where the others had retreated to give Tariq center stage.

A slow smile twisted his lips as on impulse he suddenly adopted a new approach. “Many years ago,” he said slowly, “my beloved father lived and worked in this very palace, as counselor to the king—King Merchal’s father. My father served the king night and day, loyally and without a word or thought of complaint. Never once did I hear a foul word proceed from his lips. And yet, one day, my father and my mother and I found ourselves banished—sent away from our home, this land that we loved. Never again

did my father see it in his lifetime.” A couple of salty tear drops trickled effectively down Tariq’s cheek.

He continued: “My father had given the best years of his life in the king’s service, only to find himself sent away when he was too old to do any more, or even be able to protest for himself. I was too young to do anything about it at the time, but when I came of age, I swore that I would avenge this wrong. By all the powers given to me”—his right hand was high in the air now, and the sun reflected off of his ring, sending malevolent streaks of light onto the captive audience—“I determined that I would purge the kingdom of this injustice, and right the wrongs my father carried to the grave.”

Tariq regained his composure, and looked at the audience. “Look carefully at this little one who stands before you. Look how small, how feeble! Can you see this one riding before you and heading an army to fight off invaders? Can you even see her having a wise thought in her head that would help improve your lives? Ah, she was awe-inspiring when clothed with the majesty of her golden tresses, but does not reality paint a much different picture?”

“I would be a king that you could be proud of, a king that could be looked upon with glory and admiration. Rulers and statesmen would come from afar and pay honor and tribute, for they would know that he who sits upon this throne is a force to be reckoned with. So I say unto you, O people, choose this day! Choose strength instead of weakness; choose courage instead of betrayal! Choose me, and let me be your ruler!”

His words rang out in the humid air, and hung in the hush that followed. Many of the people were obviously moved, and some dabbed at their eyes. Others seemed to be pondering what he had said, while still others showed no reaction at all.

“Princess Amaris,” the king said simply.

Amaris was trembling from head to toe. She stepped forward into the spot that Tariq had just vacated, but when she opened her mouth, her teeth began to chatter uncontrollably, and not a word came forth. Not only had she no idea of what to say, but if she had had any idea, she could not have said it for the fear that gripped her like a strong vise.

She threw a desperate glance back towards her father, who smiled reassuringly. *Take your time*, he mouthed out the words noiselessly. *There is no rush. Our God will guide and strengthen you. He is in control!*

The unspoken words burned into Amaris' heart, lighting a fire that melted the icicles of fear at the core of her being. In moments, her shivering stopped, and the warmth of faith and confidence began to glow forth from her soul. She still had no idea of what she could say. Ah, if only she had been planning ahead instead of listening so much to Tariq's speech—but, knowing that God would not fail her now, she opened her mouth, and began to speak.

"My people," she began softly, "you have had a great many surprises today. If I were in your place, I would suffer as much doubt as you do in this moment, and for that I do not blame you. You have heard from my father the story of how I have come to be his daughter, so that I will not repeat. But there is something I must say, and that is that while I had my birthplace in another land, that land is home to me no more. There is no other land in my eyes nor in my heart but this one. If my God should not see fit to give me the rulership of this country, I should want to still remain near unto you, my people who I love so dearly, that I may help you in whatever way I could.

"But my greatest desire—and I believe that it is a desire placed within me by the almighty One above—is that I may serve you in the capacity for which I have been trained my whole life. The words that Tariq has spoken have this truth to them: You do see me

here, a portrait of weakness. I have not strength of body, but it has been said that gentleness of spirit can be the truest strength of all. For the Spirit of God working through the weakness of man can be one of the greatest forces the world has known.

"You see me here as I truly am. I have nothing to hide; I have no way to pretend before you. If you choose me as your ruler, you may not get a great deal of pride in representation, but you will have a ruler who loves you with all her heart, and who would gladly give her life for any one of you."

Amaris' utterances had started out barely above a whisper, but every word she spoke boosted her courage and confidence, until by the end of her speech she was glowing with radiance. Her arm was stretched forward triumphantly, and her words echoed boldly through the square.

The moment passed and her natural timidity of crowds returned. Quietly, she stepped back into her place on the balcony.

## **PROOF OF POWER**

“It is time for the third demonstration.” The king’s voice sliced through the cloud of assenting murmurs and whispers that followed Amaris’ speech. “This, perhaps, shall be the most telling of all, and it is important that it be done properly. Do either of you have any questions?”

“Ah yes, I do have a question,” said Tariq, eager to make his voice heard as often as possible. “Is there any limit to this next demonstration of power? What exactly are the rules and the boundaries—if indeed there are any?”

King Merchal fought to remain calm. He looked back to where Jordan stood, slightly inside the balcony door, and saw his hand hovering longingly around the hilt of his weapon. Sensing Jordan’s impatience and longing to end the impostor’s insolence with one blow gave the king a renewed desire for temperance, and he calmed his mind.

“The limits are simple,” he said shortly. “This is a demonstration, a display, a performance. There is not to be harm done, or any other such problems incurred. The type of demonstration you choose, of course, will also be a factor to note and consider. So, for this third and last trial, who shall begin?”

“Why, I do believe the lady would be the one to start,” Tariq said nonchalantly.

“I would prefer to be last,” Amaris said quietly.

“Let us toss for it then,” said Tariq, “and may your God decide for you.”

A gold coin was brought out, and the king tossed it into the air, as each named their choice of side. All eyes were glued intensely on the golden glitter that flashed in the air, then landed on the marble floor with a noise that resonated loudly throughout the courtyard.

“Our Lord has chosen,” the king said. “And Amaris shall be the one to begin.”

Tariq smiled in satisfaction. He felt sure that he was in full control of the proceedings, and this only served as a confirmation to him. Things were progressing in a spectacular way, and this last demonstration would be the crowning achievement of glory.

Amaris moved forward once more on the balcony, and swallowed hard as she looked out at the sea of people before her. Then, slowly and reverently, she dropped to her knees, clasping her hands in prayer. Her eyes were shut as she communed with her Source of power on high, begging Him to do the impossible.

*Oh, Most High One, she prayed fervently and silently, I know that You are not One to be called forth as a genie and ordered here or there. You are not a trick that one pulls out to amuse the masses, nor One that is brought forth on display. You are the Most High above all Heaven and Earth, and there is no limit to Your greatness and majesty.*

*But this is an exceptional situation, and we need to feel Your presence here today in such a way that will wipe away all doubts that You are the One real, true and only God of all the Earth.*

Then, opening her mouth, she proclaimed loudly and clearly. “Show Thy power now, O Almighty One

above all, that these here today may see and believe.”

Her words faded and she remained still and quiet, not wanting to open her eyes as she was unsure of what she would see in answer to her prayer. Five or more long seconds passed like this, and finally she opened her eyes. It was not until then that anything began to take place.

*I see, she thought to herself. I suppose that opening my eyes is an act of belief which activates the power.*

As she watched, thick white clouds began to gather directly above the square, as though jostling one another in the deep blue sky. They converged to form a teeming mass, then slowly, the center of the clouds began to churn. From that center, a flash of brilliant light suddenly burst forth, sending a thick beam of light radiating down to the ground where the crowds stood.

The people scurried out of the way of the light, and there it stood, like a glowing pillar bridging the heavens and the earth. Then down through the radiant column came a pure white dove—spreading its wings and fluttering this way and that, but never leaving the beam of light.

All who saw were moved, and Amaris noticed with awe the orange sun glowing on the distant horizon. Its shine did not even come near to that beam of light!

As quickly as it had begun, the demonstration abruptly ended, and conversation buzzed through the crowds as the onlookers discussed what they had just seen.

Tariq brushed Amaris aside as he took his place. He did not want to allow a minute more than necessary for the people to contemplate what they had just seen. He must have their full concentration.

He drew himself up tall, and glowered menacingly at the people below. His robes were a deep purple, but at that moment they looked as black as night, silhouetted as he was against the glowing sky. He



raised his right hand in a dramatic gesture, and began to roll his eyes around in their sockets. A string of words began to pour from his mouth, but no one standing around could understand a single one of them.

Pamela shuddered, and moved closer to the king, who placed his arms protectively around her shoulders. Now Tariq's other hand was rising, effortlessly, almost as if it was moving by a separate power, while his lips and eyes continued to move incessantly.

With no prior warning, there was the clap of an enormous thunderbolt, which struck directly at the center of the small place that had been cleared in the courtyard after Amaris' demonstration. At the spot the lightning hit, a thick black cloud formed.

A few seconds passed and nothing more seemed to be happening, so the king began to move forward, assuming that the demonstration was over. But seeing his motion, Tariq turned suddenly towards him.

"Stay where you are," he hissed vehemently. Amaris, looking on, drew back in shock to see the contortions that had transformed his face. His eyes glowed with an evil fire, and at that moment it was obvious that it was not the time for further discussion.

Tariq moved back into place, and the rest watched as they could now see that things were continuing to happen. The thick black cloud seemed to be growing in size and volume, and it was moving upward. Steadily it grew, and before many minutes, the entire palace was completely engulfed. The only remaining visible area was the middle portion of the front balcony, where Tariq stood in all his glory.

"Now, O people!" he cried out with a loud voice. "Now all has been made clear to you! Surely now you can see who has the greater power! This cloud has been formed by the breath of my god, and it shall not move from here until the time that I sit on this throne

as ruler of all. The choice is clear, and now is your time to choose!"

"What are we to do?" Amaris whispered to her father. "He is winning the people over! We have no way to fight against him now. We shall lose the throne!"

"Patience, little one," the king said wisely. "For it has occurred to me that perhaps our demonstration of power is also not completed."

"What do you mean?" Pamela asked.

"Only that I do not think that our God will so willingly give up, without a good fight. And as we all know, when our God fights, He intends on winning!"

The girls smiled at each other, and the level of their hopefulness was raised a few notches.

Tariq was still working over the crowd. "Say forth now, O people!" he called out. "Who still holds out for the little hairless wench? Who would make her ruler over them? Can you not see the power and greatness of my god? Speak the word, my people, and the spell shall be broken!"

The people were looking at each other, tempted by the awesome show of power, yet hesitant about the obvious evil undertones that most of them felt. Tariq's men, who were strategically placed throughout the people, did their best to start a rallying shout, and various calls of Tariq for king were heard. But these cries seemed rather slow in catching on.

A moment later, the crowd was thrown into confusion. From the cloudless skies above came a lightning bolt several times as large as the one called down by Tariq. It was accompanied by a light so blinding that all those who didn't cover their eyes could see little for several minutes afterwards.

When the flash faded, standing at its center was a man. Even to the very youngest and most ignorant onlooker, it was instantly clear that this was no ordinary man. He was very tall—perhaps seven feet,

at least, and of an excellent physique. His body was lean and strong, with every muscle perfectly toned and crying out to be put to the test. His hair was a rich chestnut color, and fell to the middle of his back with a slight wave. It hung loose and waved in the breeze that now swept through, on this otherwise still afternoon. A thin leather band went around his forehead, and his only garment was an ivory-yellow loincloth, also held in place by a leather band around his waist.

“Who are you?” Tariq’s voice thundered out across the courtyard. “And where have you come from?”

“I am Challenger,” the man responded, in a voice so defiant it sent shudders to the core of Tariq’s being, though he would not have dreamed of letting his fear show.

The man continued, “And I have come to challenge you. The power of your god has been proved in this way. Now let it be proved on the field of battle. Send forth your emissary, and may the best man win all.”

“This is foolish,” Tariq said with a little laugh. “The rules of the game were clear—three competitions, and then a choice. I was simply presenting the people with a choice, and once they choose, it is over. I am sorry, my friend,” he said patronizingly. “I understand that you were hoping to fight, but it seems that you’re just out of luck today, I’m afraid.”

“Luck is something I don’t need,” Challenger said icily. “Bring forth your adversary, or come and face me yourself.”

Tariq turned to King Merchal. “What is this trick you are pulling?” he said.

The king shrugged his shoulders, suppressing the immense joy that was surging through him. “I know nothing of it,” he said. “The lightning bolt came from the sky, and the man came from the lightning bolt. I can only assume he must be a messenger of some sort. Perhaps your god could send one too, that they

may do battle together. I am a monarch, but not one to argue with the powers supreme.”

Tariq fumed. He had not come so close to be defeated in this manner. He looked suspiciously up into the sky, as if he might find there some clue of whence the lightning bolt had come. Finally he called out, “Damen! Come forth and do battle!”

The crowds parted hastily, and at the end of the formed pathway stood a huge, brutish man. His face was well-shaped, but had been twisted by so many years of evil that it now bore little resemblance to any fairness it may have boasted in its youth. His hair was as black as the night sky, and his eyes mirrored the same color. His skin was fair and a short tunic covered his muscular body.

Slowly, arrogantly, he began to walk the path toward the center of the courtyard, sizing up his opponent with every step. He had never set eyes on such perfection of form, but his confidence was not shaken, for it was deeply rooted in the knowledge of his own superiority. He had never met a man who could equal him, and he knew that the day he did would be his last, so he lost little time in worry.

The two men began to circle each other, silently assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their opponent. They refused weapons that were offered them, choosing instead for this to be a test of physical strength. In a flash, Challenger—true to his name—darted across the open space and leaped upon Damen. The other was ready, and threw him backward. Challenger landed on his feet, and began circling again.

Then Damen lunged for Challenger’s ankles, and the two rolled to the ground. Seizing his advantage, Damen set hold upon Challenger’s legs, attempting to break them. But one powerful thrust sent him reeling again, and then Challenger was on top of him.

Damen bucked and tried to throw him over, but

only succeeded in rolling over with him. For several minutes the courtyard dust engulfed the fighters, and there was nothing the onlookers could do but pray and wait.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the scuffle ended. As the dust settled, a figure rose to his feet. It was Challenger, and as he emerged from the dust, he slowly raised his foot and placed it upon the lifeless back of his opponent. “Victory!” he cried aloud. “Victory for the servants of the Almighty God and those whom He loves!”

He then turned around to face the palace, which stood as it had been, still engulfed in the opaque black cloud. Slowly, he raised his right arm until his index finger pointed at the highest pinnacle of the palace, cloaked though it was. Before the amazed onlookers (who indeed had had their fill of astonishments this day), he let out a loud cry, and a beam of blue fire proceeded from his hand. In a second, the fire had engulfed the entire cloud. It seemed to feast upon it, and wear it all away.

The last glow faded with the black cloud, and not a trace of it remained. When Amaris looked around, she suddenly realized that not a trace of Tariq remained either.

“But where is Tariq?” she cried out to Challenger.

“Tariq is no more,” was the only answer she received, and she knew that the subject was closed.

Amaris ran down the balcony steps and threw herself down at Challenger’s feet. “Thank you, my lord,” she said tearfully, “for you have saved all of our lives, and the throne as well.”

“The throne—and your lives—have not been saved by me,” Challenger said gently, as he picked her up off the ground, “but the power to save and deliver has come from above, in answer to the cry within your own hearts. I am only the embodiment of the power of the Lord brought nigh by your prayers, and

I am thankful for the opportunity to serve.” He turned and faced the king. “I must be gone, for my Lord shall have need of me shortly. But know this,” he looked Amaris squarely in the eye, “that if you shall ever need my assistance at any time—you have but to call, and I shall be there.”

He then faced the crowd. “You may not see me, you may not feel my touch,” his gaze lingered on a lovely, soft-eyed maiden, who blushed under his gaze, “but I will be there. You have but to say my name, and I will come to you in your hour of need, and grant you deliverance from whatever evil may be arrayed against you.”

With those words, Challenger faded from their view.

## **NOT GOODBYE**

The great day had finally come, and the palace was in a flurry of excitement. Today was the long-awaited wedding of Jordan and Amaris, and it was also to be the day of their coronation as queen and king of the realm. Guests had been called in from far and wide, and it seemed that even King Merchal would be present to see it.

Ever since the great day of battle, many months before, the king's health had been steadily worsening, but his spirits had never flickered. He had made good use of his remaining days, giving plenty of instruction and encouragement to the monarchs-to-be. He had also found plenty of time to spend with his youngest one, and Pamela had passed her time between the king and her older sister, who always seemed to have time for her these days, no matter what else she was in the middle of. Pamela would not have admitted it aloud, but she was very grateful for it all.

She burst through the orchard now, fresh from the flowerbeds and laden with the proof of it. She was anxious to ensure that every spare corner of the palace was filled with as many fragrant blooms as she would have time to install.

The wedding was to begin at ten o'clock, and there was less than an hour to go. Amaris had not been

seen since the night before, and one could only imagine what was taking place inside the hubbub of her chambers. Jordan had disappeared several days earlier, having hastily conjectured something about needing to go out for a few days, and had not been heard from since. Aside from these minor details, however, the preparations for the wedding were complete, and everything seemed to be coming along smoothly.

The wedding was to take place out of doors, in the great courtyard which now held such special significance for them all. It seemed that this was also the only way to accommodate all the guests that would be attending, as the king had sent a general invitation to all of his subjects by proclamation, and had requested that as many as possible come. After all the stories that had been told of the last royal invitation, not many wanted to miss this opportunity.

The front balcony of the palace had been remodeled especially for the wedding. The row of stairs that normally lowered itself from the side of the balcony had been refitted and moved to the front. On the balcony had been placed two elaborate, specially made thrones (for of course, a new throne had to be made for each new monarch, and Amaris and Jordan deserved no less).

A plush red carpet followed the staircase down to its end, and continued along through the heart of the courtyard. A slender branch of tables encircled the courtyard, upon which lavish dainties of all types were now beginning to be laid out by the palace chefs. The arrival of the first guests was only minutes away, and the excitement was reaching a happy peak.

Through this tingling aura of anticipation stepped the king, as he made his way feebly yet proudly down the carpeted staircase. How fine it all looked! Once again he raised his eyes in praise to God for allowing him to partake of this day in the flesh. He knew that

it was to be his last celebration, and he was savoring every moment of it.

“Have you seen Jordan yet?” Pamela dashed up, anxious worries painted all over her face.

“I have not,” the king replied, “but I am certain that he will be here. He knows the time that we are beginning. He will not be late.”

Not satisfied with that response, but realizing that it would have to do, Pamela dashed off again in the direction of the flower gardens.

By ten o'clock, the courtyard was well over half full, and more people were arriving with every passing heartbeat. At length the king stood and called for the attention of his guests. “My friends,” he said, “welcome to this joyous event on this memorable day. Please enjoy yourselves, partake of the refreshments, and at half-past eleven we will begin the ceremony.”

The cluster of musicians in the far corner of the courtyard caught their cue and began to play lively music, as the guests began to mingle comfortably. Time passed like this in a regretfully speedy fashion, and before long the appointed time for the ceremony had arrived.

The king called for attention, and a hush spread over the entire courtyard. Then someone's eyes were drawn to the far end of the courtyard, and the movement was infectious. To a man the courtyard turned—and their eyes widened in awe. It was Amaris, looking as she had never looked before.

“It is the garment of love that adorns her,” said one woman onlooker to another. “I have seen it on many a bride.”

Amaris was dressed in a dress of deep red, which complemented her milk-white complexion beautifully. The rich cloth gathered on her shoulders and hung down loosely in between. See-through sleeves fell gracefully over her arms. The dress was drawn into a tiny waist and then exploded into a huge, billowing

skirt. Her hair had grown miraculously over the last months (due in part to prayer and desire, and in part to a special diet that Jordan had taught her), and it now reached halfway down her back, glowing in golden ripples, shining as never before.

Her eyes radiated excitement, and although she noticed that the place near the front of the courtyard which should have held her husband-to-be still stood vacant, she showed not a tremor of worry.

And she had trusted right. For at that moment, there was a rustling in the orchard and a figure made his way through the crowds toward the center of the courtyard. Before long he reached it. Amaris saw his face out of the corner of her eye and held the picture fast. How different he looked! Amaris had no idea what he had been up to for the past days—he had talked of needing to be alone with his Creator, to live off the land and return to his roots as he prepared his heart for this commitment to come—but she knew that he had returned a changed man.

She appraised him now in her heart—his long hair was windswept and obviously still wild with the pleasures of the distant mountain peaks; his face even more rugged and handsome than she had remembered it last; his hands were rough and bore scratches, but they trembled with excitement and she could sense their warmth even from where she stood.

The bridal music called Amaris from her reverie, and she reached out her hand for the king's arm. With a smile, they began to move forward together.

Then a gasp rippled through the crowd again, and Amaris turned to her other side. To her surprise, there stood Edward—and he seemed to be visible to all.

"May I have the pleasure of escorting you?" he asked.

"Why, of course!" Amaris said in delight. "I am so glad you could come!"

"I wouldn't have missed this day for the world!"

Edward said warmly.

King Merchal hesitated, unsure of what he was to do.

"It is your place as much as it is mine," Edward said. "We will go forward together."

And so they did—the beautiful princess, with a royal man on either side of her: a fading monarch on the right, and a prince of the World Beyond on the left.

They reached the front, and the fathers stepped back as Amaris stretched out her hand to place it inside Jordan's strong one. At the foot of the stairs they stood—in the same hallowed spot which had been struck by the lightning bolt that had been their salvation. There they spoke their words of endearment, there they kissed, and their love was sealed for all time.

As their lips slowly broke free, the crowd burst forth into wild cheers. Amaris turned to face Edward and the king, but they were not where they had been standing. Anxiously, her eyes scanned the crowd, and finally she saw them. They were nearing the end of the courtyard, with their backs turned, walking arm in arm. The king was walking strong, tall and youthful, as he had not walked in a long time. Amaris knew they were on their way Home.

Her eyes filled with tears as she grabbed Jordan's arm. Slowly she raised her hand in their direction, and as she did, they both turned.

"Not goodbye," the king whispered, and the words echoed in Amaris' heart, "for we shall always be near you."

And with those words, the men faded from view.

The tears spilled from Amaris' eyes, and she could not tear her gaze away from that spot. Jordan gently took her hand. "Come, my love," he said tenderly, "let us go forth unto our kingdom." Together they began up the staircase, never more to look back—for the happiness and love that was their future would take all the time there was.

## Other titles available from



**The Mountain Calls**

**The Perfect Ones**

**Abraham: Two Tests and a Wish**

**Amaris II: Jordan's Quest / The Dark Kingdom**

**Journey to Tricon**

**Apocalyne**

**In Armageddon's Wake**

**Coming soon:**

**The Return of the Seven Keys**

**The Saga of Cormac**

**... and more!**

**Vist us on the WEB at:**

[www.auroraproduction.com](http://www.auroraproduction.com)

**Order online via our WEB site, or via postal mail at:**

Activated Ministries

P.O. Box 4307

Orange, CA 92863-4307

USA

e-mail: [activatedUSA@activated.org](mailto:activatedUSA@activated.org)