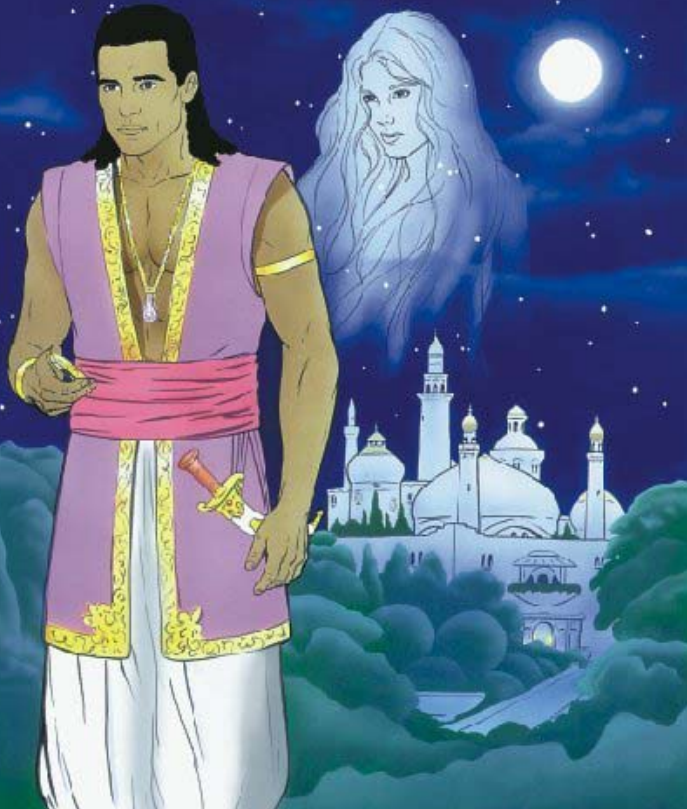


amaris II



The mystical adventures of Amaris continue in this book with:

JORDAN'S QUEST

Armed only with his sword and a small, mysterious bottle, Jordan's Quest will lead him into a mysterious forest where no man has been before. Surrounded by unexplainable and supernatural phenomena, will he be strong enough to pass through the six trials of peril upon which his life - and the life of his love - depend?

the dark kingdom

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amarís II

JASMINE ST. CLAIR

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The tale of Amaris begins when she is a small child, separated from her parents in a foreign Eastern country. By a chain of supernaturally guided events, she comes to be adopted by the kind but aging ruler of that nation, King Merchal.

Raised as King Merchal's daughter to eventually become the appointed heir to the throne, Amaris falls in love with Jordan, a trusted servant and loyal subject of the king. After a string of adventures that include finding her long-lost father, Edward, and her young sister, Pamela, Jordan and Amaris are wed.

After the death of her father and of the king, Amaris and Jordan sit upon the thrones of this nation. This book continues the tale of their adventures.

JORDAN'S
quest

heavy responsibility and the title of queen, and this she was even now still growing accustomed to.

Jordan, who had inherited the title of prince consort (as was the custom for the chosen husband of the sovereign queen), had also felt the weight of his royal title pressing more heavily on his shoulders. But his objective remained as it had always been: to stand by his love, to protect and care for her to the best of his ability, and to see to it that he was by her side whenever she would need him.

All things considered, life at the palace was good, and Amaris was enjoying it to the full. She felt that she was just beginning to get her feet on the ground, and the audiences that she and Jordan held several times a week—hearing requests from various nobles of other lands, or the plight of the poor of the country—were reinforcing her desire to do more for her people.

Amaris looked up suddenly from her reverie as Jordan entered the room. She moved over on the bed to make more room for him. “And how is my consort this day?” she asked, puckering up her lips into a kiss, which the light breeze gently delivered for her.

“Always the better for a sight of you,” he whispered softly, reclining on the soft bed with a sigh.

“And what then is the reason for this sigh?” Amaris asked.

“Did I sigh?” Jordan said absently. “So I did. I expect it was just a bit of trapped air after the evening meal. Let it not trouble your pretty head, which has so many better things to trouble it.”

Amaris lifted an eyebrow suspiciously, and rolled over to plant her slender elbows firmly on either side of his midsection, with her chin resting on his taut abdomen. “Jordan, what troubles you? You cannot hope to fool me thus, for I fear I know you better than you know yourself!”

“That being the case then,” Jordan smiled, “instruct me, my love, in the art of interpreting my

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THE WIND AND THE MOONLIGHT

The wind swept carelessly through the wide-open spaces surrounding the palace, caressing the smooth pillars and tossing up stray petals and leaves that lay lightly along the ground. Nearly a year had elapsed since King Merchal had passed away, and the kingdom had already begun to see many subtle changes that had come with the new young rulers—changes that echoed the fresh approach of their reign, even as they continued in the footsteps of their predecessor by seeking God earnestly for His help in their governing.

Amaris and Jordan had soon learned that no matter how much you observe and are close to monarchy, and no matter how prepared you think you are for the task of ruling, there is nothing quite like the moment when the full realization hits and the crown descends.

Thinking back now to that awesome coronation day, Amaris smiled wistfully. Nothing would bring her to wish herself back to those fancy-free days of innocence, yet there was a certain carefree joy that she had had to forfeit when she had accepted the

feelings and the thoughts of my heart. Tell me what ails me within, and I shall bestow upon you the most humble respect.”

“I say not that I can read your mind as to what troubles you, only that I know when something does,” Amaris rejoined. “And now you have confirmed that for me. Tell me, Jordan, what is the matter?”

Jordan propped himself half up on his elbows and twirled the end of Amaris’ long braid. “I hesitated to tell you of it because I do not myself fully understand my own thoughts. I do know that I have been struggling with some sort of inner turmoil of late....”

“I think that perhaps since the festival of the harvest you have been troubled,” Amaris said pensively. “I did not give it much notice at the time, but now that I think back with renewed awareness, I see that you have been restless and troubled since then. But what then could be the cause of such inner turmoil?”

“I do not know,” Jordan said again. “I can only think that perhaps I am discontent with myself. I feel most inadequate ruling alongside you. You are the heir of King Merchal, chosen by him, and ordained by the powers of the Almighty to be queen over this land. And I ... who am I? I am but a slave-turned-royal-husband who came by the throne in this roundabout way—not even honorably fighting for it but sliding in like a snake!”

Amaris couldn’t help but burst out in a full, girlish giggle, and poked Jordan in the ribs as an encouragement to laugh at his own silliness.

“I know,” he grinned. “It does sound foolish. Yet in my innermost heart of hearts, this is the truth of the way I feel. I see the anointing of the Most High upon you, and upon myself I see nothing more than a cloud of dust.”

“But Jordan, I am no more worthy of my crown than you are of yours!” Amaris said earnestly.

“That matters not,” Jordan shrugged. “You are doubtless the queen, but I am no figure for royalty—just a worthless husband. And sometimes I fall short even in that.”

Amaris moved over to be closer to him, throwing her arms around his neck. “Oh, my dearest one! Do not speak thus! Only let us beseech the Most High together and see if He may not somehow clarify your place in your own mind. For in my mind and surely in the minds of the people there is no doubt, but be you anything less than convinced, it would do no good for all the world to proclaim your excellence. If you know it not in your own heart, that your power mixed with that of the Most High God above is what is truly needed by this realm, then you are indeed worthless.”

“I will ask Him along with you,” Jordan said earnestly, though his voice lacked confidence.



That night, Amaris tossed and turned on her bed. Finally resigning herself to her sleeplessness, and supposing perchance that this was a skillfully disguised boon from above to offer her some peace of mind, if not of body, at length she arose from her bed and wrapped a long silken gown about her slender frame. Moving quietly so as to not awake Jordan, she slipped through the semitransparent curtains that veiled their bed, through the outer chamber and out towards the balcony.

Standing still in the semidarkness of the chamber, she stretched a leg onto the balcony, reaching her bare toes out for the moonlight and watching with pleasure as it froze them with its silvery hue. She smiled as she could almost feel the sparkling power flowing up through her leg and soothing her troubled soul. Suddenly she looked at her foot, which was now entirely bathed in moonlight. How curiously immobile, how stonelike it appeared! The sight of it gave her a strange feeling she could not explain ... a

premonition? She looked up at the moon; full and serene it smiled down on her, offering to allay any inconsequential fear that may have floated through the dusky skies.

Amaris sighed. "Perhaps our days of peace and quiet will once again give way to dramatic joy," she whispered to herself.

And even then she thought she heard a whisper, speaking in words too low to hear, of unspeakable things to come ... but when she strained her ears to know them, she could hear only the whispers of the wind, echoing through the empty places of the palace.

"Yet something is afoot," she whispered again, then dropped to her knees on the cool marble floor. "Something strange begins to brew, and it takes not the mind of a seer to acquire that knowledge. This only I pray, dear God and my fathers: may we have the strength to face it as You would have us do, for no less of an honor could we request of You."

She remained in that position for several minutes more, feeling as though tears were welling up below her half-shut eyelids. But they went no further.

No tears, she thought to herself. Only the premonition of them.

She cast her blue-gray eyes upwards, resting them once again upon that silvery object that floated serenely in the indigo sky.

"Ah, Moon!" she whispered, rising slowly to her feet without taking her eyes from it. "Answer me this: Do you live as do we mortals, bound firmly to this present time and moment, without release or height of perspective? Or do you, perchance, also look down upon this same place, yet from a different time altogether ... some time in the future perhaps? Do you look down, O Moon, upon this palace and cry tears for what is yet to come? Are these your tears that you are sending down with the moonbeams?"

It was not a serious request, but Amaris felt the

question earnestly, and thereafter she could not attest firmly to the answer. But for less than a moment, Amaris felt as though she—though herself she was not, and what she was, she also knew not—but being as she was, she viewed the palace from an entirely different perspective. As though from above, she looked down upon that selfsame balcony whereupon her feet rested in the bounds of normal time. But the balcony was bare. Her eyes peered through the thick marble walls, and the sight of emptiness chilled her heart and filled her with apprehension.

It was only a fraction of a moment in time, then Amaris was herself again, but the rapid beating of her heart attested to what she had seen, and she dashed back through the chamber, wishing that she could brush away the memory as easily as she pushed aside the thin bed-curtains.

"Jordan!" she whispered breathlessly, throwing herself down on the floor, near where his head lay turned. "Jordan, please! Please speak to me!"

Jordan stirred, then opened his eyes, startled at the intensity in her voice. Seeing confirmation in her eyes that all was not as it should be, he rose instantly on his elbow. "What troubles and alarms you so, dearest one?" he said quickly, as all thoughts of sleep vanished from his mind. "Your eyes are wild and full of fear. Come close to me and tell me all."

He moved over and Amaris crawled into bed next to him. A light shiver passed continuously through her body, though the evening was not overly cool.

"I could not sleep," she whispered, as though to speak louder would compound the problem. "I ventured out onto the balcony, and..." she paused and would have laughed had she not been so frightened. "I spoke to the moon and somehow wished to see things from such a detached perspective. Perhaps I asked to know the future, for I felt premonitions of sadness coming to me."

“And what came of this request?” Jordan asked, though he knew the answer in part.

“I say not that I understand or that I know how,” Amaris continued softly, “but for less than a moment I was the moon, and what I saw filled me with dread and foreboding. I saw an empty palace, Jordan,” she fairly sobbed out the words. “There was no life to be found within it, and walls and surfaces were thick with dust and cobwebs. Such a thing is not good for anyone to have premonitions about. And now I fear lest it be the truth!”

Jordan hesitated, unsure of what to say. When at last he spoke, the words were not his own, but he voiced the whispers from Beyond as they echoed in his heart. “Do not be afraid for the things which are to come. I sent a glimpse into the future not to court fear but to nourish preparation. For there is much preparation to be done for the days which are to come, so tend ye to it well. Dark days shall come upon the palace, but never shall the light of My presence leave your sides, or the sides of those that you love. Always remember this.” The words brought a hush upon the troubled souls of the two present.

“Of course,” Amaris whispered. “Of course, my Lord. How very nearly had I forgotten Thee as I wallowed in my fear and anxiety. Of course You are great above all things, and how very clearly are things understood by You.”

“Perhaps next time you should beseech your Creator above the moon,” Jordan risked a joke, and was relieved when Amaris joined with him in a quiet laugh.

“I think you may be right, my love,” she smiled. “And you may rest assured that such a thing will not be done by me once more for a great length of time.”

“Yet now that we are awake,” Jordan offered, rolling over to face her. “What say you that we turn our attentions to matters more intimate?”

Amaris giggled and raised her eyebrows saucily, then burrowed her head down under the silken covers.



Amaris did not awake the following morning until the sun was high in the sky. Attempting to regain her full consciousness, she took a moment to look around her. She smiled at Jordan's still-sleeping form and the pleasant and suggestive memories of the night before that lingered with him. She deposited a feathered kiss on his muscular back.

He rolled over, then sat up instantly. “The hour is late!” He squinted at the sun, which filtered through the curtains.

“So I have also deduced,” Amaris agreed. “And how different life appears from this honey-colored perspective!”

“You feel better than last night, then,” Jordan said with a smile.

“That I do,” she said. “For how could anything appear fearful or dreadful when basked in the glow of the late-morning sun? But come now, my love,” she jumped up, gathering up the bedcovering and tucking it carefully around herself. “For I shall surely arrive in the bathing chamber before you!”



“Tell me, Jordan,” Amaris said seriously, as she splashed the cool water over her porcelain skin. “What stock do you give the events of last night?”

“I find it hard to judge,” Jordan replied, “for I was not in great depth a partaker of them. Only I know that at the time they troubled the deepest regions of your soul, and for that reason I saw them as greatly important.”

“The whispers last night foretold of great sadness, emptiness, loss ... yet I feel nothing of that on this bright morning.”

“Then that must be what we are to feel for the time being,” Jordan said practically. “For I suspect

that if this forespoken time should indeed come upon us, there would then be sorrow enough that we should not want to have used up a moment of it ahead of time when the need was not present.”

“How wise you are, my Jordan!” Amaris said admiringly. “Truly I believe that you have inherited the wisdom of my noble father. He was always one to speak forth sparkling gems of truth without the slightest effort. How I miss his presence at times!”

“And yet he is not far off, and we see manifestations of that frequently,” Jordan reminded her.

“That is the truth,” Amaris agreed. “For although he is not seen, yet at times I feel he is almost closer to me than he was when I could hold him near to my flesh. In that respect, we are truly blessed. But Jordan, what of your own trials of yesternight? For all the fright that I received quite put it out of my mind that the original reason for my own sleeplessness was concern over your well-being.”

“Mine?” Jordan opened his eyes wide. “And how so?”

“You appeared so perplexed yesterday, as though you were wearied with life as it was, doubting your place—which place truly has been ordained to you by God.”

“I doubt not my error in that,” Jordan confessed. “Although I will not hesitate to admit that this thought rides with me to trouble me yet. But we have placed it upon the altar of the Almighty, and there is no safer place than that. There I am content to leave the matter until it is brought before my face again, holding the answer out before it.”

thought as she rose from her seat and moved closer to the window.

Jordan stood up also and came behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders. Pamela scurried up and squeezed in near her sister, to get a better view out of the window.

"Like I said," Pamela said again, "quite a wind we've got going out there. Seems to be quite a storm brewing."

"I see nothing strikingly out of the ordinary," Jordan said, though he did not sound entirely convinced.

"Perhaps you do not recognize what you see," Amaris said. "But I have one distinct memory from when I was quite small, of being in a huge, billowing storm—what are those called?"

"Cyclones!" Pamela said with satisfaction. "I've never been in one before, but Father told me all about them one time. He had a big book with all kinds of pictures. But he said they don't have them around here."

"My point precisely," Amaris said. "These types of storms do not occur in this part of the world. It would be a strange phenomenon."

"Such things do happen," Jordan offered.

"Perhaps, but *why* do they happen?" Amaris turned suddenly to face him. "Do you not get a peculiar feeling off of this?"

"That I do, my love," Jordan finally conceded, "and perhaps that comprises most of the reason why I attempted to dissuade you of your nervousness. Sometimes acknowledging a fear can augment its reality in a frightening way. And if for some reason there is no basis to it, then I would rather avoid that possibility."

"But it is precisely this acknowledging which makes it possible to face the fear head-on and then, whether it has basis or no, to overcome it, and come

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TO CONQUER FEAR

"The wind seems to have picked up overnight," Pamela observed, as the trio sat gathered around the midday meal.

Amaris glanced towards the window. "Indeed it has," she said in surprise, looking at the billowing trees. "I had not given it much thought."

"Well, I have," said Pamela. "It's been one of those mornings, you know—no one around, not much else to do but think."

"What of your tutor?" Jordan asked.

"He has come down sick with the fever. They've isolated him in some far-removed wing of the palace, and I've not been given other instructions. I've been making the most of my time of freedom."

Amaris was still gazing out the window. "Strange, is it not?" she murmured, barely above a whisper.

"Did you speak, dearest?" Jordan noticed the puzzled look on her face.

"I remarked only with surprise at the gale that I see brewing outside," Amaris now had no further interest in the flat bread and herb-laden goat cheese that still nearly filled her plate, but appeared deep in

through triumphphant,” Amaris said with a smile.

“And your ability to do that is something that I love and greatly admire,” Jordan said. “For truly your life has been lived thus. I regret that I cannot say the same for myself, although if I could conquer my fear of fear, I should be more of a man than I am now, and would be none the sorer on that account.”

“Perhaps you shall,” Amaris mused thoughtfully. “Perhaps, my dearest Jordan, before this moon has waned ... perhaps you shall!”

Pamela looked up quizzically, sensing that she was missing a great deal of the meaning behind this exchange, but as neither Amaris nor Jordan seemed a great deal more enlightened as to Amaris’ cryptic comment, Pamela figured she was not missing out on much, and headed back towards her plate.

Jordan looked doubtfully at Amaris, who was staring at the floor with a rather confused look on her face. “I’m sorry, Jordan,” she whispered. “I don’t know why I said that.”

“Do not apologize, dearest one,” he said. “For I know that we cannot always control the voices of our hearts, or yet sometimes the voices of the spirit, which burst forth from us with utterances of knowledge that we knew not that we possessed. When such mystical speculation is spoken as a predetermined fact, we mortals would be wise to bow our heads in reverence and give it due heed; for as certain as the brewing wind indicates a storm,” Jordan nodded his head towards the window, “they shall come to pass.”

“And perhaps you have spoken in that same certainty yourself,” Amaris said while looking up at Jordan, filling the big pools of her eyes with his rugged strength. “I only pray that we shall all be strong enough to weather the storm that most surely is ahead.”

“Whoa!” Pamela burst out suddenly. “Did you see that?”

Jordan and Amaris turned their gaze quickly back to the window, where they saw a large branch being violently torn from a tree in the orchard.

“It’s a storm, all right!” Pamela said gleefully. “Just listen to that wind! What a thrill!”

“It is rather thrilling, isn’t it?” Amaris snuggled into Jordan’s arms.

“So it is,” Jordan said, as he turned his face towards the window. “Let us then face the wind, whatever it brings our way, for of a truth it cannot conquer us if we will not give in to it.”



Throughout the afternoon, the wind continued to pick up speed, as it thrashed around like a wild thing let loose from its cage, and wreaked havoc on anything that was unprepared for its fierce and unexpected arrival.

“It’s not letting up, is it?” Amaris said rather anxiously, as she stood again at the window. She strained to make out the sunset that she knew was taking place at that moment, but she could hardly even see the sky for the thick black clouds that crowded angrily in the patch of sky visible above the palace.

She had spoken to herself, but Jordan was passing by at that moment and caught her question in midair.

“This is certainly like nothing I have seen before,” he said soberly. “Of a truth I do begin to wonder if there is not something much deeper brewing here than just the wind and the rain. For as you so aptly pointed out this morning, such peculiar things do not often happen of their own volition. Are they not therefore orchestrated by the hand of God for some specific purpose known to Him?”

“Do you think we should inquire of Him about this?” Amaris wondered aloud. “Or perchance He may reply that we ought to wait until the future unfolds before He reveals its hidden meaning to us?”

“I suppose that no harm would be done by requesting,” Jordan said. “Let us do so now, for I confess that I am not a little troubled by this situation.”

And so the two closed their eyes, and earnestly offered up all of the worries and concerns that they felt mounting in their hearts.

“O God of the heavens and the earth,” Amaris said, concluding their request, “Thou alone hast made all things. Thy breath and power have brought them into being, and without Thy thought surely they would not exist. Now that this fierce wind is wreaking havoc upon this place, we beseech Thee to tell us the meaning of this calamity, if perchance there is something that may be spoken to us concerning these things.”

In the silence that followed, punctuated by the loud rumblings and crashing outside, Jordan and Amaris found perfect peace restored unto their hearts; when the words from above flowed through, they were clear and sweet, reassuring and satisfying in every way. Amaris and Jordan were not alone; they had not been forgotten. The hand of God was upon them as surely in this time of trouble as it had been through their former peaceful days.

“And yet,” the message continued, “the storm shall not abate before it greatly increases. And the fury that you see now is nothing to that which is yet to come before all shall be past. Yet there is a specific reason for all this, one which I cannot reveal unto you now. But I say unto you, take shelter while you may, for this is required for My purpose to be accomplished.”

Jordan and Amaris opened their eyes, puzzled by this admonition.

“Take shelter?” Amaris wondered aloud. “Is there shelter to be taken in this place so unprepared for such events?”

Jordan protected his lack of additional knowledge with silence.

Just then, noises were heard in the hallway and Pamela dashed in the door. “I just had a thought!” she said brightly. “You know the old wine cellar? Why don’t we look into it and see how many of us could fit in it if we need to take shelter from the storm ... you know, if it gets a lot worse?”

Jordan and Amaris looked at each other, their eyes lighting up with realization. “The wine cellar!” they both exclaimed in unison.

Pamela raised an eyebrow. “Yes, uhm ... did I say something significant?”

“You are most wonderful, little sister,” Amaris said, further silencing her question with a kiss. “Now run quickly to the west wing and begin to tell the servants there that we will be adjourning immediately to the wine cellar. Jordan?” She looked in his direction.

“I will take the north and south sides,” he said quickly, and the three dashed off in separate directions.



The darkness in the wine cellar was broken only by the faint flickering of a fat candle which had been lit to maintain some light in the small, underground room where all the inhabitants of the palace now were sitting and laying in various degrees of comfort. Unable as they were to tell the passage of time—and perhaps for additional reasons as yet unknown to them—each one sank into a deep, dreamless sleep.

After some hours, Amaris started suddenly. She sat up, curiously straining her ears as she sought for the sound that had awakened her. Surely something was not as it had been. Then she realized that there was no noise coming from above. The storm must have passed!

She moved to shake Jordan into wakefulness, then paused with a smile, seeing how peacefully he

slumbered. *Surely he deserves a night of unbroken rest*, she thought to herself. *For the anxiety we have felt this day has been enough for several days combined.*

She herself, however, felt no tiredness, and above all sensed a deep curiosity to view the remnants of the storm, and how it had left her beloved palace and the surrounding area. Moving quietly so as not to disturb any of those who were yet heavy with sleep, Amaris rose and began climbing the long flight of stairs.

She lifted the heavy trap door with no little effort, and paused when it dropped from her grasp and clattered open on the marble floor. She glanced back down the steep staircase to where she could barely make out the sleeping forms, but could sense no movement.

They do sleep soundly, she thought in amusement. Then stepping carefully up the remainder of the stairs, she came up into the palace.

There was a strange stillness about the place. Not a breath of wind stirred, not a sound could be heard. Only the light of the wall torches (which had been left lit in the haste of departure) illuminated the darkened and empty halls. It was almost as though Amaris had passed into a realm of unreality, as though things that appeared to be were not, and things that did not appear at all were lurking just out of sight in the shadows behind every corner. Amaris did not feel frightened, but something deep inside told her that everything was not as it seemed.

Still, inside the palace things seemed normal enough, and the strong hand of curiosity propelled Amaris firmly towards the main door, anxious for a peek at the devastation that was sure to have been wreaked upon the grounds. She unlatched the heavy wooden door and stepped outside. The sky was dark, but by the clear light of the moon Amaris could see

that the ground was strewn with broken branches, flowers, small trees, bushes and fruit. Amaris had to step over a large branch to get past the staircase and make her way into the front courtyard.

A few more steps and she was almost to what seemed to be a small clearing in the devastation—a little patch of clear ground amidst all the rubble that lay piled up. For some reason that spot grabbed her fancy, and she headed directly for it. Arriving therein, she flung her head backward and feasted her eyes on the silver moon and sparkling stars, hardly noticing the still swirling mass of dark clouds that lay on the barely visible horizon all around her.

Defenseless as she thus was, she was no match for the hand of destiny, and when the winds began suddenly to blow again in their full, violent fury, there was nothing that Amaris could do but hold her ground as best she could and pray to God that His will be accomplished.

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AFTER THE CYCLONE

As swiftly and silently as it had come, the invisible blanket of deep slumber was lifted from those who remained in the wine cellar. One by one, they began to stir and awake, as their body clocks valiantly attempted to inform them of the late hour.

Opening his eyes with his characteristic instant alertness, Jordan looked around for Amaris, and was surprised to see no trace of her. When he received no satisfactory answer from the others nearby, he set off up the stairs, with Pamela close behind him.

"The trap door is open!" he called down behind him. "She must have come up already."

"Is the storm over?" Pamela shouted up.

"It seems to be calming down," he replied, stepping up into the palace, and pulling Pamela up by the hand. "I can still hear the wind, but it seems to be a very feeble remnant, compared to what we heard earlier. We must have slept for a great deal of time, although there is no way of telling with the sun still out of sight behind that blanket of clouds."

"Why would Amaris have gone out of the wine cellar if the storm was still blowing?" Pamela wondered

curiously.

Jordan did not answer, but only smiled to himself as though to infer that he personally could think of several reasons. Pamela saw the look and giggled. Then she said, "Are you gonna look around down here? I'll go upstairs."

But some minutes later, the redhead breathlessly barreled down the staircase, colliding with Jordan at the foot of it. He absently picked her up off the floor, and one look into the other's worried face confirmed the mysterious disappearance for both of them. Then suddenly Jordan's eyes brightened.

"She must be outside!" he said, trying to sound relieved. "Of course she would have gone out to see how the storm had left things." Glancing out a nearby window, he noted with satisfaction that the wind had now died down altogether. Then he looked at a couple of the servants who were still stumbling out of the wine cellar.

"Poplus," he addressed the chief steward urgently, "please gather together a team to search the grounds for Her Majesty! It would appear that she came up from the cellar while we all slept, and we have not been able to locate her since."

Poplus—a burly, kind-faced man—jumped instantly into motion, while Jordan and Pamela dashed out of the front door of the palace to continue the search themselves. Pamela ran quickly in the direction of the orchard—or what was left of it—but Jordan's eyes were instantly riveted on something else.

Climbing easily over the strewn piles of natural debris that cluttered the courtyard, he moved as though in a trance, never taking his eyes from the small object which had somehow leaped into the center of his focus the instant he had stepped out of doors. He came to a small, circular clearing in the mayhem, and quietly stepped inside it. As he did so,

he almost felt as though he were entering another dimension, and the world around him—trash, people, light and sound—all seemed to fade into a swirling mass of oblivion. He was alone. Yet in that tangible aloneness, he could feel Amaris' presence, and he knew that a portion of her spirit rested in that spot—though for what reason he knew not yet.

He bent down now and saw—incredibly—two small, dainty footprints, carefully formed and somehow intact in the dust and gravel of the courtyard. And directly in the center of those footprints lay the round golden medallion that Amaris was never seen without. Jordan picked up the trinket that had not long ago adorned the bosom of his love, and dropped one knee to the ground, as tears began to stream down his face. Then he lifted his face to the heavens, and thrust his arm violently up towards it, holding the medallion tightly and crushing it into his palm.

“Why?” his shout rent the ethereal silence of his hallowed portion of the courtyard. “Where has she gone? What has been done with my love, and how may I redeem her? Tell me, O mighty God above all gods, ruler of the heavens and One unequaled in majesty and strength! Tell me what I must do, and I swear by my life that I shall not fail to perform it, should I face death thrice over in my attempt!”

His words echoed through the silence, and for several moments after, all was still.

Then, just as he opened his mouth to repeat his entreaty, something happened. Out of the swirling clouds that seemed to surround his hallowed spot, Jordan began to see a figure materializing. He squinted, and waited for his eyes to take in the magnitude of what he was seeing; for it was obvious that his finite pupils were straining under the pressure of such an unearthly sight. His eyes began to burn uncontrollably, and Jordan fought to keep

his composure, determined not to move a muscle to save himself—no, not if his eyes should burn up and fall to the ground before him. That would seem a small punishment compared to what he had not prevented from happening to the love of his life.

Then he felt something covering his eyes—a cool balm, as a soft, caressing hand brushed lightly over them. When the moment passed and his vision was restored, the pain was gone and he could see clearly into the face of the presence that stood near him. He drew his breath in sharply. There before him stood the most perfect picture of unearthly beauty that he had ever seen in his entire life.

She was tall, stately, and projected a queenly strength and majesty such as Jordan had never witnessed before. Her long, copper-colored hair was streaked with blonde and auburn, and cascaded down her back like a triumphant mane of glory. Her skin was a warm tan color, rich and lustrous, and her eyes burned with an inner flame of blue. She was strangely clad in such a way that Jordan could scarcely make out what she was wearing—if anything at all. Yet she was not uncovered, but wore her virtuous beauty with a charm that seemed to emanate from the very core of her being. On the top of her head was a swirling crown that appeared to be made of jewels of light, which turned, scintillated, and fluctuated with every step she took and every word she uttered—even with every breath that came from her body.

“Who are you?” Jordan finally whispered.

“I am the Queen of Heaven,” came her voice, and once again, it was all Jordan could do to keep from bringing his hands to his ears for the terrible pressure that coursed through them at experiencing such raw power.

Then once again, that touch upon his ears ... and all returned to normal. He could hear her voice, as

sweet as honey, but no longer threatening to shatter his inner makeup.

“It is the power from above,” she explained simply, answering his unspoken question. “Direct and in its most pure form, it is too concentrated for the human mind to comprehend, and for the human body to assimilate. You have been given a taste of the powers beyond not normally afforded to mortal man, that you might appreciate the extent of that power, and trust in its ability to guide you whithersoever you will go.”

“Where am I to go?” Jordan shook his head in disbelief. “And why have you come to me?”

“Did you not raise your voice to Heaven in a shout, not many moments ago? I have come in answer to your plea. You seek a loved one lost, do you not?” the woman asked.

“Amaris!” Jordan pronounced the name almost reverently. “What has become of her?”

“She is safe,” the Queen of Heaven replied. “Yet she has been taken from you for a while, that you may be tried and tested.”

“Where has she been taken?” Jordan stood up in dismay.

“That is not for you to know at this present time,” came the reply. “Only know that she is safe and at peace, and when the time is right, when your inner gold has been purified, you shall again be reunited with her.” She came forward and stroked his head softly. “Do not despair, my strong one, for you shall come through this testing a man even more full of strength and power than ever you were before. Your unspoken prayers shall be answered, though in a way quite unexpected and unforeseen by you. Yet this is the best way and the truest of all by which you shall prove to all—and to yourself most of all—the worth by which you inherit this throne.”

“So what do I need to do?” Jordan knelt again, and bowed his head low, almost to his knee.

“You must go forth on a quest,” she answered. “Go out on the morrow; set forth your foot, not knowing whither it shall go, and you shall be guided step by step. This quest of yours will lead you to all the things that you are seeking, and not one of them will be lost to you so long as you do not fail in any of the tasks to which you are assigned.”

Jordan shook his head. “I am not worthy,” he answered, “that you should appear to me; you, from the powers most powerful in the heavens above.”

“Speak not thus,” came the reply, as she gently touched his chin and lifted his face to look into her eyes. “You both are very precious ones in the sight of Heaven, and no expense has been spared in your training. So do not be dismayed, but rejoice, for there is much power and strength fighting on your side. Although much will be required of you, it will never be too much to handle if you shall remember your true source of strength. Remember that,” she said slowly and deliberately, “for it is very important. Now open your right hand.”

Jordan looked down at his hand, which he realized was still grasping Amaris’ medallion so tightly that he feared it would have been crushed out of shape. He opened his hand slowly, and as he did, his eyes grew wide with wonder. For through the pressure he had placed upon it—and doubtless through some doing of the powers presently at work in this strange reality—the circular imprint of the medallion, with the figure of the sun and the lone bird in flight, had been engraved into the center of his palm. Even some of its golden color could lightly be seen reflecting off his swarthy skin.

“This is the mark of your love,” the Queen of Heaven said with a smile. “Thus it has been manifested, and has come forth the sweeter through crushing. This is the first clause of the promise which shall be fulfilled in your life no less than it has been

fulfilled in this imprint. Let this mark give you the faith and courage which you shall need to face the tasks ahead of you.”

With those cryptic closing words, the vision was gone, and so also dissolved the protective bubble that had hallowed the special circular spot in the courtyard. Jordan stood again in a world filled with people, with rubble, with light and with sound.

“Jordan!” a voice echoed across the courtyard, and he turned to see Pamela running toward him, wide-eyed, dodging branches and heaps of rubble. “Where have you been? We have been looking everywhere for you!”

Jordan opened his mouth to reply, then paused, and simply said, “I have not been far. But how goes the search?”

“Nothing,” Pamela shook her head. “They’ve scoured every inch of the grounds. She’s gone, Jordan.” She lowered her head and began to cry. “She’s gone! What are we going to do?”

“Do not be afraid, little princess,” Jordan said as he put his big arm around her, and held her close. “For I have had a vision, and I have heard from above that all is well with the one we love so dearly.”

“You have?” Pamela stood back and opened her eyes wide. “So where is she?”

“That I do not know,” Jordan said. “But I intend to discover it at the very soonest possible moment. Tomorrow morning at dawn I must set out upon a journey which I know not the final destination of, nor do I know when I shall return. But when I do, I will bring our queen with me, nevermore to depart.”

Pamela’s eyes widened yet further. “A quest?” she burst out in fascinated delight. “Oh, Jordan! Take me with you! I could be so useful! I could carry your armor and do things...”

“Little princess,” Jordan laughed, “this is not a journey of pleasure, and it is no light thing upon which

I embark.”

“I am ready, Jordan! I can do it!” she begged.

Jordan shook his head firmly. “It is not for me to decide, for I have been called to this task, and as much as I would find solace and strength from your company, I fear that it is something which I must perform alone. Yet you must remain near me in your prayers, and I think you shall find that that will provide you with adventure such as you cannot begin to know.” He smiled into her sad eyes. “Besides,” he added, “who should then tend to the keeping of the castle should we all be gone to faraway lands?”

This struck Pamela as an entirely new thought. “Oh yes!” she said. “I would need to be the mistress of the house with both you and Amaris gone. Someone will certainly need to keep things running.” She lifted her chin and looked resolutely up at Jordan. “All right then, my Prince Jordan,” she said with a smile. “I will see to it that your property is tended to and that all things run smoothly as they must.”

“Excellent,” Jordan said, grabbing her hand. “Let us be off then, for there are many preparations to be made before the morrow.”

such, of a certainty she had communicated those thoughts to him in a manner most clear. Or perhaps she was doing so even now...

Having exhausted his mind upon these matters, Jordan had moved wearily towards his bed, for the strain of the day had taken its toll upon his strong frame. Yet being faced with an empty bed, inhabited only by the specters of a missing love, a perilous journey ahead, and the memory of a mysterious beauty who somehow held the key to the entire quest ... Jordan dared not even so much as lay his head upon the pillow. Thus he had retreated to the balcony, there to spend the remaining hours of darkness meditating and communing with the powers above, preparing his spirit for the arduous journey it was soon to face.

He sighed now as he trod lightly down the steps, marveling once again at the physical strength he felt, and murmuring a silent prayer of gratitude for it, recognizing it as a valuable and treasured commodity that he doubtless would hold little of in the days to come. He had just walked off of the steps onto the gravel of the courtyard when forceful comotion could be heard from the inside of the great palace door. Jordan turned and waited, and presently Pamela, with her face almost as red as her hair after the exertion of wrestling with the locks and bolts, came dashing down the steps and leaped into his arms.

"Oh, Jordan!" she exclaimed. "You weren't going to leave without saying goodbye, were you?"

"I did not wish to wake you, dearest little one," he said apologetically. "But I am glad that you are here to see me off."

"You will be careful, won't you?" she pleaded. "And you will bring back Amaris?"

"These things and more will I do, so long as Providence continues to smile as sweetly upon me as you do now," he said, a little more wholeheartedly

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THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The sun had not yet fully risen over the distant mountains before Jordan stood upon the marble steps that led up to what he had come to know as home. He marveled that he felt no tiredness; he knew he ought to, for the night had been a long and sleepless one. Having completed the instructing of the palace servants and the writing of official letters to court representatives excusing Amaris and him from engagements in the near future, Jordan had found himself rather lost in attempting to begin his own preparations. For how was he to know what to take upon such a journey, of which he knew less of the beginning than he did of the end?

Musing upon the words of his heavenly instructor that morning, he had determined at last to set forth with nothing at all but his weapon and the clothes upon his back. For had she not said that it was to be a quest, and that he was to step forth as one who possessed nothing and knew not whither he went? He could not remember her exact words, but somehow this was the impression left in his mind. While those words may or may not have been spoken out loud as

than he felt at the moment.

“I know you will,” Pamela said confidently, and strangely, Jordan found himself drawing strength from her simple faith. “You’re on the side of the good, and so you can be sure of success.”

Jordan suppressed the expression of several counterarguments to this more simplistic view of life, and contented himself to nod his head and kiss her hand. “Of a truth, that thought bears me great encouragement,” he smiled. “And now, I regret that I must take my leave.”

Pamela nodded, then suddenly began groping within the folds of her garment, as though remembering something. “Here,” she said at last, holding out her hand to Jordan. “Take this with you. It will likely be of some great usefulness and importance later on.”

Jordan took the small object from her, and looked it over carefully. It was a tiny, delicately shaped bottle that seemed to be made of almost clear crystal. It was topped with a fine little cork, and hung on a heavy gold chain. “What is it?” he asked.

“It’s some rare, priceless treasure, I think,” Pamela said casually, as though it were the most common thing in the world. “Father and I came across it while we were exploring in the woods one day—many years ago, of course! He seemed to know what it was, and told me that it was a special gift I had been given, and I should keep it carefully until the day the use of it was revealed to me. He said when I was in great danger, it would be just what I needed. But I should never use it until the right time came.”

“But why give me this special treasure of yours?” Jordan was moved by her unselfish kindness.

“I think you shall be in more danger on this journey than I should ever dream of being in myself, by day or by night,” Pamela said seriously. “And I wonder if maybe it was for you that I found this treasure to

begin with. At any rate,” she said with a shrug, “if it’s never revealed to you that you should, then you needn’t use it, and you can just return it to me when you get back. But if you ever need to, you are welcome to put it to whatever use it was intended. I’ll be happy to find out what its purpose has been, after all these years. For I must admit that I have been tempted with strong curiosity many times to open that tenacious little cork!”

Jordan grinned as he pictured Pamela fidgeting with curiosity over the tiny item.

“I accept this gift then,” Jordan acquiesced, “with great and humble gratitude. And now, fair princess, I must take my leave.”

With a final kiss and a hearty wave, he carefully put the chain over his head and tucked the precious bottle inside his shirt. Then, turning his back on all that he knew, he set his face towards the unknown—and one step closer to his lost love.



Not knowing exactly where to begin his journey, Jordan set his face toward the east. He soon found that his energy and thirst for adventure, coupled with the inability to predict even a supposed scenario of how the day’s events would unfold, seemed to give him a zest and zeal for his journey that he had never found within himself in times past. His step was light and springing, and by early nightfall he had made his way through much of the forest that he was familiar with.

“Truly, I have never covered this much territory in a day’s journey before,” he remarked aloud to himself, finding consolation in the sound of his own voice after the hollow silence he had carried as his only companion all day.

Strangely, his voice seemed to spark off some sort of chain reaction amongst the forest inhabitants, for the eerie stillness he had endured up till that time

was now broken by a ferment of sound and movement. Narrowing his eyes and looking around carefully, Jordan could sense nothing out of the ordinary—here a cluster of gaily singing birds, there a deer tripping lightly across his path, to the side the soft padded rear of a frightened bunny making its way home—no doubt to a parental scolding at being out alone after sunset.

No, nothing appeared out of the ordinary. All was very commonplace. Yet ... all of this most ordinary and commonplace matter had been most notably missing for as much of the day as Jordan could recollect. This change therefore piqued his curiosity, and he determined to keep his eyes open for any further abnormalities as his journey progressed.

The forest was growing notably dim as the evening neared, and the sparse patches of golden sunlight that had burst through the foliage at odd intervals throughout the day became increasingly infrequent. At length Jordan realized that he would not make much further progress until the morning's light, and resolved to settle down to sleep and regain his strength.

Spotting a large oak tree with a spreading foliage and roots that protruded from the earth in such a manner as to bond with the soft grassy earth and form a comfortable resting place, Jordan threw himself down beneath it, resting his head upon the springy root. He gazed up into the boughs above him, though the light was dimming so rapidly that he could scarcely make out any object further away than the length of his body. Aided thus by the accommodating conditions, it was not long before Jordan fell into a deep and restful sleep.

If his sleep was restful, however, the nocturnal journeys of his spirit were far from being so. Strange visions passed behind the closed lids of his eyes—flashes and visions of things which Jordan hoped were

not yet to come to pass. The crackling of fire ... rushing, roaring waves of a height beyond description ... the clashing of swords ... a large, fiercely gleaming eye, appearing to belong to some unspeakable beast, which looked upon him with a malice unconceivable for a dumb creature...

Awaking the next morning, Jordan felt rested in body, but quite heavy in spirit. Sitting up and placing his arms upon his raised knees, he ran his hands through his long hair.

"Ah," he whispered, as though to himself, "what is this journey upon which I have embarked? For if dreams are the messengers of the Most High, surely my experiences of the night seasons have been sent to offer my spirit some sort of preparation. And if such is the case, I fear that the harm done has been worse than the good my spirit may have derived! For I find my mind sore troubled and perplexed beyond words."

This he spoke not expecting response, but when he began to feel a warm glow forming nearby him, he realized that his words had been heard. He was not alone; *she* was back.

"Do not let the visions of the night affright you, Jordan," came the soft, rushing voice, although no vision accompanied it. "For strength is given on the day appointed. Let your spirit draw the preparation that it needs from these glimpses, and then shut the door upon your remembrance of them. For sorrows partaken of before the day prepared are bitter indeed unto body and spirit. But when the day comes, they who partake often find that they have been sweetened with the honey of faith and courage, and thus are more palatable than could ever have been supposed.

"Take heart therefore, and throw not away your courage now, so early into your journey. For you have much ground to cover, and much to do. You must not waste a moment in idleness that should be spent upon your quest. Now go, and may all the spirits of

good be with you!”

Renewed by these words, Jordan stood up, set his bearings once again to the east, and continued forward.

He had been walking for more than an hour when a strange thought struck him. He had not eaten or drunk a single thing since two nights previous, before his departure from the palace. He marveled at how his body did not seem to have been made aware of this fact.

“Nonetheless,” he reasoned, “I should certainly experience these cravings in full force sometime soon, if I do not do something to prevent them before they occur.”

He stopped walking and began to look around. As if on cue, he suddenly heard the rushing of water, and began to follow a wooded pathway off to the side, where he presently came upon a clear, sparkling stream of water that looked as fresh and inviting as any water he had ever seen. He was also pleased to note a variety of fruit-laden trees on the other side of the river, and he could see the ground was thick with fallen nuts, and berry bushes dotted the way further into the forest on the other side.

“I see that all my needs and wants have been provided for,” he said in gratitude, as he bent down to the stream. But just as he cupped his hands and reached towards the clear surface, he watched with surprise as his own reflection began to swirl and churn.

In a moment he was gazing into the stern face of the Queen of Heaven, and the words she spoke resonated in his mind. “Take great care what you do, Jordan,” the words were clear and ringing. “So quickly you forget the words that I spoke to you this morning—that not a moment should be spent in idleness that would deter you from your quest.”

“Is this then idleness?” Jordan was genuinely

surprised at this turn of events. “For must I not nourish my body if I am to continue this quest in good health?”

“All your needs are being filled and provided as you go, and anything that will take you off of the straight path upon which you are being led will only cause you greater trouble later on.”

“Very well,” Jordan agreed. “I shall stray from my way no more. But let me first drink some of this clear water, for my throat parches almost just to look upon it. I have already come out this way, and surely it would be no harm to drink before I return to the path? I will then endeavor to eat and drink only from what is placed directly before me.”

“See that you do it not!” The words were stern. “For the moment that earthly food or drink enters your mouth, the dew of Heaven with which you are now being fed and nourished will evaporate and be no more. From that moment forth you shall return to your full mortal frailty and needs. Beware of this temptation, for it shall only hinder you in your quest!”

With those ominous words, the vision faded, and Jordan was left alone with his reflection.

It was with great difficulty that he pulled himself away from the stream, for the longer he gazed upon it, the cooler and more refreshing it appeared, and the more his own thirst—while scarcely existent before—seemed to push its own will upon him. Determining what he had to do, however, Jordan rose quickly from the bank and turned back to the path he had first taken.

He found it without further trouble, and marveled to find that as his feet touched upon it once again, his throat was no longer parched and his stomach was full and satisfied. His legs regained their spring and lightness of step, and his head was light and clear.

The dew of Heaven, he mused to himself. This

indeed would be a profitable merchandise, if man should ever come upon it in such a way as to profit thereby! For what would not a man give to have all his physical needs satisfied in such a complete and pleasant way!

He laughed aloud as he journeyed forward, and noticed again with increasing pleasure how the sound produced a ripple of wildlife rushing through the forest.

There must be some connection to noise and the activity of these creatures, he thought to himself. And I determine that before this journey is over I shall discover what that is.

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SECRETS OF THE FOREST

Days blended into nights and then into further days as Jordan journeyed deeper and deeper into the interminable forest.

"I wonder if any man has ever journeyed such a distance into these parts?" he wondered aloud one day, as he paused to rest beneath a leafy tree. This he did not out of tiredness or any other physical necessity, but more as a natural pause, to appreciate the beauty of his surroundings and to meditate upon his journey thus far.

He glanced down at his leather wristband, upon which he had been scratching a mark at every sundown. The marks showed nine days of traveling, and there was no end in sight.

"A journey indeed this is," he said again, shaking his head. "But when shall it end? And of greater interest to me, where am I being led?"

For being led indeed he was; that fact was quite clear to him. There was never any doubt or hesitation in his mind as to the path he was to take, for it was as though he already knew it before he was to take it. For the most part, the path he trod led straight

through the forest, without turns or interruptions. However, when there was an occasional fork or option of routes, Jordan always seemed to know which way to turn, and was able to pursue the right course without the slightest hesitation.

That it was right, of course, he was taking purely by belief in his divine guidance, for as yet he had seen no great fruits that pointed to his having been led to the correct spot. Confident that this moment would come in its own good time, however, Jordan was content to continue his journey in the manner simplest and most convenient to him—one step at a time.

Having given his fill of rest to a body obviously in better health and strength than it had ever been in the comparatively leisurely life of his past, Jordan stood up and set his face once again to resume his tread. As he turned, however, a flash of color caught his eye far in the corner, and he turned quickly to see what it was.

Amongst the leafy greenery, a deep green bush seemed to lean forward and pronounce itself loudly, thrusting anxiously forth a single, dark red blossom of such texture, form and beauty as Jordan had never before set eyes upon. He shut his eyes for a moment, imagining the bloom adorning Amaris' long, flowing hair; then he sighed and shook such thoughts of distraction from his mind. Indulging in time spent missing his love would only weaken his strength and resolve to go forward—which, paradoxically, was the only factor which it seemed could hasten her return to him at this present time.

Impassioned by his attraction to this strange and lovely plant, however, Jordan moved slowly towards it, strangely feeling almost as though he was in a trance. As he paused within a foot or so of it, he became acutely aware of the strange silence that once again held sway over the forest.

What a strange place this is! He shook his head in dismay. *Of a surety there is something quite peculiar about this whole place, for all things are not as they seem in the normal and ordinary world. There is something quite mysterious, almost magical about the air...*

He dropped his eyes once again to look upon the flower, and before his fixed gaze, he clearly thought he could see it gently swaying and tossing in the stillness. There was no breeze to provoke it to such actions, but ever so gently and almost imperceptibly it turned, and as it turned, it seemed to give forth a slight sparkle and scintillation.

I don't suppose another man in my shoes would be able to see a single thing other than this magnificent flower, sitting upon a bush, Jordan sighed. I fear that these days of solitude and lack of physical nourishment have heightened my senses to such a degree that were I amongst common men I should be considered quite mad. Fortunately, however, I am not, and it appears that such a thing may work to my advantage being as I am; therefore I will not despise it but send heavenward my gratitude for whatever boon it may prove to be in the future.

Having given the flower all the scrutiny that he could afford it, Jordan prepared to turn away, but as he began this task—which he found strangely effortful and laborious—he heard the sweet, familiar voice he was now accustomed to hear echoing in his mind.

“Reach out your hand, Jordan, and pluck the blossom from its stem,” came the strange command.

Jordan hesitated; he knew that the Queen of Heaven must know best, but he felt grieved at the thought of depriving such an exquisitely beautiful creation of the obvious life of its own that it seemed to possess.

“Do not fear on that account.” The voice apparently was not only within his thoughts, but a part of them

as well, and could partake freely of his own as well as return more of hers. “For this blossom has been created for you, and shall be of great use to you in a day to come. Now pluck it and heed carefully my words.”

Jordan needed no further coaxing, and stretching out his hand, he carefully broke off the stem a short way below the flower. It came off easily in his hand—almost willingly, he would have said, had he thought the flower capable of such an emotion.

“Now uncork the bottle that hangs around your neck, and place the flower within,” came his next instruction.

Now this was yet more fantastical than the first, and Jordan smiled to himself, nonetheless deciding to humor this angelic being who apparently had no sense whatsoever of earthly proportion. The tiny bottle was scarcely bigger than his thumb, and the beautiful flower would be crushed lifeless should any attempt be made to place it therein.

Nonetheless, Jordan uncorked the flask (a task which took a little more effort than he might have imagined, as the cork was small, and tightly set), and slid the stem of the flower into the bottle. He opened his mouth to utter an explanation of the obvious size deficiency, when to his surprise, the flower seemed to continue the task that he found so improbable, gently slipping itself all the rest of the way in. The beautiful red petals obediently folded themselves in tightly together, and carefully slid down until the clear inside of the bottle showed through in a majestic red, and all that was left in Jordan's hand were a couple of tiny droplets of clear liquid.

Remnants of morning dew, he explained to himself, though still feeling somewhat uneasy about how the flower—*of its own accord*—had slipped so meekly into that tiny flask. And then he knew that they were tiny teardrops. Though as soon as the thought came, he

brushed it aside as pure foolishness.

“Thus you see,” the heavenly voice concluded, growing fainter with each word, “and in seeing, take heed to remember, that all is not as it seems, and things that are impossible to man are possible with God...”

As I have previously concluded, Jordan concluded in his mind. He shook his head as he corked the bottle and firmly turned back towards the way ahead. This strange place is making me quite mad. I hope I shall be fit to greet Amaris whenever it is that I shall find her.— And that she shall not come across some long-bearded lunatic, grown old and demented from years of solitary search.

That thought produced a new worry for Jordan. He had left in a certain haste from the palace. What if Amaris had journeyed out for a day or two, and had now returned to find him departed? The thought stopped him in his tracks altogether and nearly made him turn to retrace his steps in the speediest haste. But then he remembered the Queen of Heaven and her admonitions. Surely they were not fantasy, and surely he could not be led astray if he followed thus as he was.

Settled in this fact, he journeyed forward once more, content that wherever his destination was, he would arrive in God's good time, and—he hoped—he would also be sane enough to reap the results of his blind obedience.



Jordan could tell from the way the shadows were deepening that nightfall was approaching once again. He noticed, however, that the foliage seemed to be changing somewhat, and that he was coming to what seemed to be a large clearing. He moved more quickly through the remainder of the forested portion that led to the new territory, and before long he stepped out into the open air.

He blinked a little at the contrast, for though the light was waning, still it was quite a bit brighter than he had been accustomed to for the past days. He breathed deeply. The air was clear and pure, and a great deal fresher than the musty—though pleasant—smell of the forest tapestry.

Stepping out of the forest altogether, Jordan surveyed the wide open space in front of him. The clearing appeared to form a sort of circular imprint in the midst of the forest's dense growth.

Judging that the clearing would not take more than an hour to traverse, Jordan determined to set across it and thus be back under the shelter of the trees before nightfall had descended in earnest. Therefore, he stepped forward at a brisk pace, humming a tune softly to himself as he went. He was pleased with the change of scenery and the fresh air that flowed through him—descending as it were straight from the heavenlies.

Yet before he had reached the midway point of the clearing, Jordan was dismayed to see the sun disappear behind the distant rim of the forest, and the dusky shadows deepened by the moment. He was disturbed at the thought that he might need to spend the night entirely in the open air, with no refuge whatsoever from any rains or winds that might choose to visit on such an auspicious night.

He contemplated returning to the forest from whence he had come, to wait out the night there and begin afresh the following morning. But he loathed the thought of having to later retrace his steps, and determined therefore to continue walking for so long as he could see a step before him, and when this ceased being possible, he would stop and rest for the night.

It was in the midst of this train of thought that Jordan noticed a faint glow coming from not far away. His curiosity aroused, he moved all the more quickly,

and soon came to a gradual decline of the hillside, which upon following, he presently arrived in front of a small pool. The pool appeared to be perfectly circular in shape. A soft golden glow was emanating from it.

The sky was quite dark by now, and the light that the pool gave forth was curious and strangely comforting. Jordan moved forward to it, pleased at the thought of being able to refresh himself with a wash, for he had not come across many natural waterways directly in his path, and he had kept to his vow to not again go out of his way for a necessity of the flesh.

He paused a moment at the border of the pool, with the fleeting thought dancing through his head that this strange glow might prove some cause for hesitation as to the authenticity of the water, and that perhaps to plunge headlong therein might not be wise. But Jordan chose to throw aside his normal mantle of caution. After all, his main cause for concern had generally been the safety of his one true love, as the safety of his own head he certainly held not greatly dear. He was also quite caught up in the thrill of adventure, and a mystery such as this piqued his curiosity in a manner that demanded full satisfaction.

Tossing aside his clothes, therefore, he waded out towards the center of the pool—taking care not to bring any of the water to his mouth, for he was anxious to not break the spell of the dew of Heaven, as he had been instructed.

He knelt down and splashed the water over his head, reveling in the soothing warmth and refreshing texture of it. It felt unlike any other water in which he had bathed in the past, and he savored the feel of every drop of it.

The slight humming sound that began faintly and gradually filled his ears more and more was not entirely surprising. By this time he had come to have entirely new expectations of the supernatural, and

had in fact vowed several hours earlier that he would no longer be surprised at anything that he would encounter upon his journey. (It was a vow that he was yet to greatly recant—for truly, he had not even begun to see the wonders that were to befall him. But at this present time he was sufficiently able to maintain his apparent lack of astonishment.)

The low hum slowly increased in volume and intensity, and Jordan could feel it vibrating throughout his entire body. He took several steps backwards, and noticed that the water suddenly began to churn. Lightly around the edges of the pool it began, but increased in speed and rhythm, until the entire outer edge of the pool was swirling around like a large whirlpool. Standing near the center of the pool, Jordan stood his ground easily, for the water was not deep, and reached only partway above his waist.

Judging from the proportions of the pool, Jordan guessed that he was just a few paces away from the direct center of it, and it was in that precise spot that he expectantly rested his eyes. For what reason he knew not, but he had a feeling that something important was to happen there.

And he was not disappointed, for the surface of the water in that place began to churn further, and then came forth a voice—clear, resonating and reverberating through his entire being. It sliced through the hum that had preceded it and cut it off entirely, leaving in the wake of its words a booming echo that gave way to the silent stillness of the night.

“Ask what you will! Speak the questions of your heart, for the Oracle of God is open to your requests this night. Make what use of me you will, for unto mortal man such a charge is not oft delivered, and you will be judged by what use you make of it.”

Jordan instantly knew this was no human voice; something much more powerful and spectacular was

at work. Awestruck, Jordan could not think of a word to say. As he paused, the voice came again.

“Speak now and do not spurn the hand of God that delivers unto you this treasure. Ask what you will, and all shall be revealed unto you.”

Jordan’s mind began to race, and he drew both hands up to his head, as though that would help him to marshal his scattered thoughts and form them into some sort of cohesive regiment. He closed his eyes for a brief second, and sent out a silent prayer for help and direction. Then he felt the needed peace and calmness, and thus refreshed, he opened his eyes again to face the swirling mass.

“Tell me the secret of the forest,” he said clearly. “For did not the sound of my voice set off some strange cycle of life, which was not apparent in the silence? There is something very strange about this whole place, and so I pray, instruct me what that may be.”

There was a strange sort of pause, as the world in the clearing seemed to hold its breath in protracted suspense. Then the booming voice spoke again: “The secret of the forest is the secret of life. The ripple of life that followed you in your journey through the forest is but an analogy of the ripple that surrounds you in your everyday life. This forest is not entirely out of the ordinary, but upon this journey, *you* are not ordinary. And thus you will find many unordinary things surrounding you. This was not the first, nor shall it be the last.

“You must not seek to understand everything around you; yet your curiosity is also good, for it causes you to question and to inquire and to seek. And when a question is asked—be it ever so faintly uttered—the answer will doubtless come.”

Jordan waited until he was sure that the Oracle was finished, then attempted to garner a further clarification of the statement that had only served to exacerbate his confusion. “So the strange effect

produced by my voice was just a symbolic happening?” he asked, in a puzzled voice.

“That is so,” the Oracle continued. “You think to yourself that this is not possible; yet you yourself have not touched food or drink in ten days. For our God of the heavens is a mysterious God, above all things and beyond all form of reasoning and comprehension. He does not judge His actions by their feasibility, but by the results that they will bear. If something will be of benefit to one of His Own, He will not hesitate in His time to perform it, however unlikely or unrealistic it may appear to others—or to them.”

“So what message am I supposed to gather from this?”

“It is simply a sign, an encouragement. It speaks unto you many things. It tells you that you are not alone; you are always surrounded by many of those who are not seen to you at the present time. But at the time that you would ask of them, they will be there. It tells you that you have influence; that when you speak, act or do, others are affected, and things happen. These are the secrets of the forest—the ones that may be revealed to you now. And I say not that there are no more, but this is all you need to know at present.”

Jordan pondered this for a while, then lifted his head again. “What of this journey I am embarked upon?”

A low, gurgling sort of noise proceeded from the Oracle, and Jordan looked curiously at the rippling surface of the water. Was that laughter? Certainly he had not expected the Oracle of God to have a sense of humor! Before Jordan could adequately assess his thoughts, however, the Oracle had regained its composure and was speaking again.

“You have asked at last,” came the reply. “You have indeed been blessed with the virtue of patience, and the ability to follow along in blind faith, more than

many would. Such a gift is of great blessing and honor, and is most pleasing to Him on High. For this you shall be given greatly enhanced strength and power, so know that it is not in vain.

“As for this journey that you face, you have come a long way. With the entering of this great clearing—beyond which lie regions which no man has seen before, nor have been placed upon any chart of human making—you are now nearing the second phase of your quest. But know that what lies ahead of you will not be easy. Your faith, your strength, even your very life, shall be tested to the limit. But this is needed in order to prove your worthiness for the task for which you have been chosen and called.

“Thus you shall go through six trials, the details of which I may not reveal to you at this time, but they shall be known of you as they appear. Each one shall be more difficult than the last, and each one shall test your endurance to the limit in its own way. But know that God does not punish you; He but tests you with full confidence that you shall come through victoriously, and prove to all of Heaven and earth the rightfulness by which you hold your crown.”

The rippling grew more intense along the surface of the water, and Jordan took a couple of steps backward.

“Now go forth from this place, Jordan,” boomed the Oracle. “For your questions have been answered, and your time is fulfilled. Sleep now and take your rest, for on the morrow the trials shall begin.”

Feeling quite speechless, Jordan stepped back yet further, until the water reached only to his knees. The water began to swirl once again, more and more rapidly, and Jordan quickly stepped out of the pool altogether for fear that he should be caught up in its now tumultuous flow. Faster and faster the whirlpool spun, until it began to raise itself up high, with the appearance of the funnel of a tornado. It waved this

way and that in the breeze for several moments, then shot up to Heaven in a cloud and with a mighty rushing sound.

Jordan watched, his eyes transfixed with fascination. For a moment before it arose into the heavens, Jordan almost thought that he could see through the cone of swirling water, and ever so faintly therein he thought he saw a face so angelic, so powerful and majestic, that even the blurred and faint image of it caused him to tremble where he stood, and drop to his knees.

Truly I have been in contact with a great power of the universe, he marveled to himself when all was over and he knelt in what was now pitch darkness. He groped around for his garments, and dressed himself awkwardly in the inky blackness. Then he settled down upon the soft, grassy knoll.

He gazed up into the starless sky, and though he could not so much as see his own feet for the thick darkness that compassed the place, he felt no desire for any type of sleep or rest, so great was his anticipation of the day following. Nonetheless, Jordan soon found the bland surroundings getting the better of him. When he felt as if an unseen being was passing a soft, cool hand over his eyes, he obediently shut his lids and left his earthly body to take its sleep, while his dream-spirit sat up to take the now-proffered hand, and they made their way off together.

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THE FIRST TRIAL

Jordan awoke with a start to find the morning sun already great and glowing, shining high over his head. He blinked several times, as his foggy mind struggled to gather together the recollections of the previous night. Having been used to waking up to the forest greenery, this large open expanse was an interesting change.

In a few moments the events of the night all came back, and Jordan rose quickly. He looked around to see a large, dried-out crater of sorts. He had hoped to find the mystical pool still present, but every trace of moisture seemed to have long since vanished, leaving only a hollow, empty basin, the ground furrowed with dried circular marks—obviously the effects of the final whirlpool that had drained it of its spirit.

As Jordan turned to depart, his attention was suddenly caught by a sparkle of light in the dirt. He walked across the dry bed and stooped down to pick up a sparkling purple gem of some sort. It was smooth and soft in texture, and when Jordan held it up to the light, it seemed that he could see infinity through its borders.

He turned it this way and that, marveling over every aspect of it, then wondering what he was meant to do with it. In no time, the answer flashed into his mind, and he looked down at the small bottle which hung around his neck.

Wasting no time in idle questions or trivial explanations of impossibility, he uncorked the flask and held the gem up to the narrow rim of the bottle. Inexplicably, the stone's surface seemed to soften, and then poured from his hand like liquid into the bottle.

Jordan replaced the cork and then held up the tiny bottle to look at it. The clear surface now showed through a swirl of purple and deep red—a sight beauteous to behold. Releasing the chain with a suppressed sigh of wonder at what would be the final use for all these treasures that he was gathering, Jordan stepped out of the shallow crater and began walking up the opposite hillside.



It took the better part of an hour before Jordan reached the unknown and uncharted forest on the other side of the clearing, but he was glad to do so, for the sun seemed to drain every drop of moisture in his body. He began to have a strange feeling, but before he had time to ponder its significance, he had passed under the leafy green expanse, and entered into that mysterious forested place the Oracle had spoken of.

When his eyes adjusted to the dimmer lighting, he was surprised to find a figure standing next to him.

“Who are you?” Jordan asked warily, though relieved at finding another being that he could communicate with face to face.

“I am a messenger,” said the stout man. He was somewhat rotund and had a friendly face, and a short, puffy white beard. “I have come to introduce you to your first trial. It shall be the trial by want. I am to

first give you three gifts, which shall aid you in this, your first trial and therefore the most difficult in some ways. Here, take them.”

The messenger held out his hand to Jordan, who reached out his own somewhat warily, and was surprised to see three small round pebbles placed into it.

“One: the gift of encouragement. Two: the gift of faith. Three: the gift of endurance.” The messenger closed Jordan’s hand around the stones. “Do not let them go by any means, for should they fall to the ground, their power will be gone and wasted. But at the time when you are most desperate for their help, throw one high into the air above you, and that gift shall come upon you in that moment.”

Jordan looked down at his hand in speechless wonder. Then he looked up at the messenger again. “These stones are each the same as the other,” he said. “How shall I recognize the first from the second, and the second from the third?”

The messenger smiled full and broadly. “These are special stones, stones from the ground upon which tread the feet of God and His heavenly hosts. It does not matter which one you choose first; the power will be there when it is needed. Your part is but to hold them securely until such a time as you shall find necessity to use them as a cry for help.”

Turning to go, the messenger paused again, and looked at Jordan sympathetically. “Keep faith, young man,” he said. “And do not forget that these things come, and likewise they will pass. Endure the moment, for afterwards is the great reward. Do not be weary in well doing, for you shall overcome if you do not faint.”

With those words, the messenger stepped into the foliage, and Jordan knew that he was gone.

“The trial by want,” Jordan mused aloud to himself. “I feel nothing unusual at the present. Although

perhaps it has not yet begun. Never mind, I must keep myself busy as I wait.” And thus he continued upon his trek through the forest.

Not many minutes had passed, however, before things began to happen. Jordan passed his hand up before his face as he felt his throat becoming drier. His stomach also began to growl like a fearsome creature deprived of vital nourishment. After several more paces, he could walk no further, and stumbled to the ground.

“Alas,” he whispered softly to himself, “so this is the trial of want! I feel as though all the hunger and thirst which I have not felt these past days has now come upon me like a flood; I fear lest they shall engulf me altogether!”

For some time he lay sprawled under a tree, his throat parched and panting for strength. Then a thought occurred to him. *If I remain here thus, I shall most surely die!* He did not know how he was aware of this fact, but at that moment, no fact had ever seemed more certain. No matter what it took, he must continue on with his journey.

Reaching up his hand to grab a knobby stub of bark that jutted out from the tree under which he lay, Jordan pulled himself up to a standing position. He felt his face and was surprised to find that a ten-day beard had made its abrupt appearance. He also smelt a foul odor, and had a strong suspicion that he was the source of it.

Alas, he thought to himself again, quite unable to speak aloud by this time, *what tragedies do occur when the dew of Heaven is lifted!* And then he lifted his eyes in thanks for the blessings that he had received all this time, and that his entire journey had not had to be made in this state.

Surely, he thought, *I am in all things most richly blessed.*

Moving one foot painfully before the other, he

slowly continued his journey. The hours dragged by. Every now and then, snatches of memories would come back into his mind, and he would repeat the words of comfort that he had received from the Queen of Heaven and the mysterious messenger.

At length the night came, and Jordan sank into a fitful sleep, haunted by taunting dreams of appetizing delights, and streams of thirst-quenching water. From each of these episodes he would wake every hour or so, drier and hungrier than before. By the morning he knew not if he could travel further, but he thanked Heaven that one day had passed and that he had stayed true to his quest.

He forced words to his mouth. "If this is all it is," he said slowly and very softly, but with all the spirit and arrogance that he could muster, "then I shall most certainly be able to endure this trial!"

But his brave words fell upon the empty silence of the forest. Even the ripple effect of his voice seemed to have been lifted. Jordan felt quite alone.

Some hours later, as the sun seeped through the treetops and momentarily blurred his vision, Jordan tripped over a wayward root and fell headlong into the dust.

He lay there for several minutes, having neither the strength nor the desire to move a muscle.

I am finished, he finally determined, *for of a certainty I can go no further, and this trial seems not to be complete as yet. I am not the man that I was thought to be. I can go on no more.*

The words rang again through his mind: *Do not be weary in well doing, for in due season you shall overcome if you do not faint.*

But they offered him little consolation, for his heart had accepted despair. Then, in his final moment of defeat, he suddenly remembered the three stones that he had been given. Painstakingly, he dragged himself to a sitting position, and opened his left hand carefully

to study the three, identical stones.

He struggled to remember the name of the first gift. *Encouragement*. He smiled to himself, though to do so required great effort. *That is one thing that I could use at this time.*

Mustering all his strength, he threw the stone into the air, and it passed easily through the tree branches above him and did not come down.

Jordan looked around himself and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Then he was startled by a voice next to him.

"Hullo, friend!"

He turned quickly to find the same portly messenger, who had earlier given him the pebbles, now sitting on a rock not a stone's throw from him.

"Are you the gift of encouragement?" Jordan asked wearily, as though he should have known.

"In this case, I guess I am," the messenger said with a hearty smile, "for is it not so that there is nothing more encouraging than a true friend in time of need?"

"To me there would be nothing more encouraging than a speedy end to this test," Jordan mumbled gloomily, although he already felt better having someone to talk with.

"That would be relief, not encouragement," the man said, getting up and offering Jordan his arm. "Come, let us be on our way."

"You're coming with me?" Jordan asked.

"For a while, yes," he said. "But I have not yet introduced myself. Forgive me. My name is Percival—Percy to my friends."

"Percy it is, then," Jordan said. "I must confess that I was not overeager upon sight of you, but now that you are here and we are walking side by side, I feel a great deal stronger than when I had to face this trial alone."

"That is the thing with trials," Percy said con-

versationally. “They very rarely have to be endured in the manner which one thinks. Often men try to struggle through them entirely on their own—taking in a sense the most difficult route, because they feel that it will earn them more merit to do so.” Percy chuckled and shook his head. “But true strength is to avail yourself of all that is available—strength from above and strength from others—such as you have done this day. That is the only way to truly overcome.”

“Perhaps that is why the trial had to be so severe—so that I would be forced to accept help,” Jordan mused.

“And so it is,” Percy agreed. “For passing a test entirely on one’s own may at times have the opposite effect than the one desired. Instead of humility and compassion it may give rise to pride and arrogance towards others who would then be considered weaker, but who in reality are simply more aware of their own limitations, and therefore acknowledge their need of their God and gratefully accept His help.”

“I think that you have a lot that you could teach me,” Jordan said humbly. “I wish that I were in a better state to learn. At this time I feel it is all I can do to keep myself alive and place one foot before the other.”

“You shall do fine,” Percy smiled, and reached out to pat Jordan’s back in a friendly manner. “I shall remain with you until nightfall, and when morning dawns, you may make use of one of your other gifts. Thus you shall find that this time of trial will speed by, and before you know it, you shall be the victor.”

As true as he had been instructed, Jordan’s day did pass—not as quickly as he would have liked, perhaps, but it was bearable, and for that his gratitude knew no bounds. As evening came and he lay down to rest under an overhanging bush, he silently prayed for inner strength and fortitude, that he might make it through the remainder of his trial.

He slept soundly that night, and was awakened by the chattering of small creatures, anxious to let him know that the day had already begun and was rapidly passing him by.

Dragging himself wearily out of his makeshift resting place, Jordan set his feet once again to the path he was to tread. Not wanting to endure his trial alone any more than he had to, he threw the second stone into the air almost before he was fully standing.

The gift of faith, he thought to himself. *I wonder how this shall be manifested.*

He waited several moments, and strangely, noticed nothing different. *Perhaps this gift was not to be used today*, he thought. But the answer came, like a ray of hope piercing through the gloom of his despair. *Faith: the ability to see that which is not seen. Therefore if faith is not seen, perhaps this gift is not seen either. Perhaps the gift of faith is simply an invisible gift; the faith to carry on.*

And remarkably, Jordan did feel more hopeful and strengthened, despite having no outward manifestation to prove it. So he painstakingly continued on his journey—not speedily, but steadfastly, which he concluded was perhaps of greater importance.

By the time the sun was high in the sky, Jordan had reached a clearing in the midst of the forest, through which he knew he must pass. At this sight he threw himself to the ground, for he knew that he would not be able to make it across. From the shaded woods in which he stood, he could see the intense midday sun, and he almost thought his throat would catch fire for the parched thirst he felt—which at this time almost eclipsed his own raging hunger.

Even that blessed gift of faith seems to have worn thin for me at this moment, Jordan mourned.

And then came the words in his mind: *You have yet one more gift. Do not hesitate to use it at this time when you need it most. And do not be weary in well*

doing, for you shall be victorious if you do not faint.

“No!” Jordan stood up again, though the effortful task took him the better part of a minute. “I shall *not* faint.”

With his last bit of strength, he threw his remaining stone into the air. *The gift of endurance*, he thought. *And when could I have needed it more than now?*

He waited expectantly, and then ... he bent his head a little to the side, straining to see what he thought he saw in the shimmering sunlight of a small clearing directly before him.

It was quite obviously a phantom of some sort, but ... it took him several moments before he realized it.—It was Amaris! Yet in his heart he knew that this was not actually her, but a vision of her, designed to give him the endurance—for her sake—to carry on yet longer.

He could walk no more for loss of strength, but determined not to lose hope, he continued forward on his hands and knees. And the apparition stayed before him—never out of his eyesight, yet never close enough that he might rest his hands upon it. As his hands groped the rough ground beneath him, and the loose stones tore at the knees of his pants, his eyes were fully fixed on that vision. And thus he endured.

The dusk brought Jordan its own welcome relief as he reached at last the end of the clearing, and crawled back into the forest on the other side. Looking around for his muse, he realized that she was gone. But then another figure caught his eye.

“Percy!” Jordan whispered hoarsely. “You’re back!”

“Yes,” Percy said, and even Jordan, in his pitiful state, could not help but recognize the admiration that came through in Percy’s voice. “And I am here to welcome you to the end of your first trial. You *have* come through victorious!”

“Do you mean to say that it is over?” Jordan could

scarcely believe his ears.

“It is done,” Percy confirmed. “Now come, and receive the rewards that are afforded you after your time of intense testing. This test is but the first of many, but you have come this far and that is worth celebrating! Our Lord has instructed that you be blessed with everything your heart and body could want, for not an hour less than the time that you spent in trial. This shall replenish unto you the measure of the dew of Heaven, which will then tarry with you for the remainder of your quest.”

“There is yet much to do,” Jordan said quietly.

“Yes, and this is only a brief respite, but as this time has been a strengthening unto your spirit, now it is the turn of your body to partake of that same strengthening. So come with me, and let us go to the garden of delights.”

Grasping Percy’s outstretched hand, Jordan was able to rise to his feet, and slowly followed Percy through a shimmering portal that opened up directly before them.

“Come, and enjoy the pleasures of the garden of God for a season,” Percy smiled. And Jordan knew that his days of want were over.

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TRIAL BY SWORD

By the time Jordan realized where he was and what he was doing, he was back on the forest pathway, continuing on his journey. Stopping for a moment in surprise, he attempted to recollect the events that had brought him there. Slowly, the memories began to return ... passing through that mysterious, shining portal, into what must certainly have been a small portion of Heaven—delights beyond description he had been laden with ... celestial fruits, delicate pastries, wine such as he had never tasted, the very fragrance of which made his head swim (a task not easily accomplished by any earthly beverage!).

Jordan sighed now in remembrance of the many further pleasures that he had experienced, each of which had ministered to and renewed his weak and weary mortal body. As his time had come to a close, he could see, through the sort of bubble in which this garden of delights was encased, that the morning sun had begun to dawn. He knew that he must be on his way again.

Bidding farewell to the many new friends he had made, Jordan had—with some regret—stepped back

into the forest, and thus he had come to be trudging along his path again—again, yet not as before, for in many ways he was an entirely new man. He had not only been strengthened in body, but renewed in spirit, and was fully ready, he told himself, for whatever would be this second trial that he was to face.

He was almost anticipating it, so renewed did he feel. He narrowed his eyes now and again, looking astutely to the right and then to the left, if perchance the timid trial cowered behind some bush, needing only to be chased out into the open.

Finding nothing which he could make out as a trial, however, he journeyed on. At length he began to get an uneasy feeling of being watched. He stopped and looked cautiously every way, but found nothing that would serve to justify his anxiety.

Alas! My mind doth play foul tricks upon me these days! he thought to himself with a wry smile.

Then, quite abruptly, a series of words flashed through his mind, searing through it with an almost unbearable burning and heat, which Jordan recognized as the trademark of the heavenly beings, when their form was pure and unadulterated. “Be sober, be vigilant!” came the words again. “For your adversary as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him steadfastly, lest you be overcome by him.”

“But I see no enemy.” Jordan said the words aloud, but they only fell upon the emptiness of the forest. “Show him to me, that I may fight and overcome him!”

All of a sudden, Jordan realized that Percy was walking alongside him once again.

“Percy!” he exclaimed. “What brings you to me again? Are you the herald of my second trial? I was told to expect six in all, but hard as I have been seeking the next one, I have found no resemblance of it.”

“My dear, intrepid warrior,” Percy spoke with the

wisdom of knowledge, “you are zealous and eager for the fight, but know this, that no truly wise man ever wished for the battle to come. A true warrior will brace himself for it, will hone his skills and prepare his wits, but never will he weary of peacetime, or wish to rush along God’s timetable until the moment that he be allowed to fight.”

“Yet many times I find within myself the desire for conflict,” Jordan said, shaking his head. “I suppose I have not attained to such wisdom yet.”

“That is quite so,” Percy smiled. “It is the folly of youth to be rash, but it is also through youthful zeal and passion that they have the strength to overcome. For it is fully in God’s power to use whatever He has given you, and I perceive that unto you has been afforded the lion’s share of gifts in many ways.”

“Of my own gifts I see precious little,” Jordan said. “But for those that I see, I truly thank God daily.”

“And is not that the reason for these trials then?” Percy smiled again. “To make you see your true worth and fully appreciate what you *have* been given—for it is much. But I tarry from my main purpose. I am to instruct you of your next trial. It is the trial by sword.”

“By sword?” Jordan exclaimed. “Ah, now that is a relief! For with the sword I am well acquainted, and feel quite confident to be able to beat back most any enemy with this trusted weapon that hangs here at my side.” Jordan smiled in remembrance of the weeks and months that he had spent training in the arts of war, before he had been accepted into the position of bodyguard for then Princess Amaris.

“Confidence is good,” Percy said. “But see that you do not lean upon it too heavily, to the neglect of other strengths, and that from on High above all. As for your trial, more shall be revealed to you as you proceed, but always remember: You have already overcome one trial, and nothing can ever be quite as difficult as that moment when you were not sure if

you could come through it. Now you have, and therefore you know that you can do it again. Trials may be easy or trials may be difficult, but all are meant to be overcome—and can be with God’s strength and almighty power!”

With those words of promise, Percy turned and passed into his own dimension, leaving Jordan to proceed alone.

The moments passed more slowly than he would have desired, and as they did so, Jordan’s feeling of being stalked intensified. He could almost have described the beast that he felt, but no matter how suddenly he turned, he saw nothing.

With a sigh, he resolved at last to put aside all thoughts of inquisitive anticipation and continue on without looking to the right or to the left. *For much searching hath not delivered this enemy unto me, but perhaps if I make haste to be upon my journey he shall overtake me by his own desire—and then I shall make a quick end of him.*

This he firmly resolved in his mind and therefore set about doing without delay. And his reasoning proved true, for he had not walked more than a dozen paces before he heard a deafening roar behind him. Whipping out his sword, he whirled around to face a huge, bounding, tigerlike animal, who had just commenced a huge, springing leap and would have been upon Jordan’s back within seconds.

Jordan thrust his sword out, and the leaping cat, unable to stop itself, was impaled directly through the middle, falling down lifeless at Jordan’s feet.

Panting and somewhat out of breath—though more from anxiety than exertion—Jordan plucked several large, porous leaves from a nearby tree and proceeded to wipe off his sword.

“Was that the second trial then, in its entirety?” he mused aloud, thoughtfully. “For deep within the heart of me I feel as though that would have been too

easy to have encased all that I had assumed would come upon me in a trial of this nature. I will therefore continue upon my journey, yet employing twice as much vigilance as I have thus far, lest I should be caught unawares."

Setting his face once again to his path, Jordan continued on for more than ten minutes in relative peace and quiet, stopping every now and then to breathe deeply and enjoy the refreshing sounds and smells of nature that surrounded him.

Yet it was not long before a low snarl came to his ears. He was instantly on his guard, and his sword fairly leaped into his hand. His eyes narrowed as he edged a little closer to the thick bush from which he thought he had heard the noise.

"Come out!" he shouted boldly. "Come out, you cowardly adversary, that we may fight face to face!"

Yet nothing returned his greeting but the sound of silence, which seemed to be laughing at him from behind every bush and beyond every treetop.

"All right then," he said finally. "If you come not forward for me, then I shall make haste to continue my journey. But know this—that I am ready to fight and defeat you whenever you should choose to take that opportunity!"

With those bold words, Jordan—still holding his sword out in front of him—turned back towards his onward path, and continued circumspectly on his way.

As he rounded a bend in his path, however, a sudden premonition took violent hold of him. He took a deep breath, resolving to be ready for whatever it was that awaited him just out of sight. And he was not disappointed, for no sooner had he come through the curve than he came face to face with a creature identical in all but size to the one that had sprung towards his back some minutes earlier. Indeed, this beast was perhaps two-and-a-half times the size of

the other. Jordan himself in all of his stature reached barely to the neck of this wild, ravenous animal.

Raising himself up to his full height—only several inches more than his natural, slouching walk, though it seemed to make all the difference so far as appearance was concerned—and spanning with his eyes the gulf between him and his adversary, Jordan met the animal's gaze.

What a magnificent creature! He thought to himself. *Never in my life have I seen a beast of this size or proportion!*

The animal's orange-and-black striped coat glistened in the midday sun that shone through the branches above, and now he took one step forward, then he hunched his shoulders down and crouched low, as though preparing to pounce.

"Creature," Jordan called out, "I would do you no harm for the world, but I sense that you are part of this great trial of mine, and therefore you are created to be overcome. That put quite aside, you also stand directly in the path whereupon I must tread, with no apparent intention of allowing me safe passage. That in itself would provide ample reason for me to make my way around or through you by whatever means necessary."

The creature's only response to this challenge was to open his mouth in a roar that shook the very foundations of the forest, causing several small furry creatures to tumble out of nearby trees, only to make a hasty retreat back into the foliage.

Jordan stood his ground, resolved to let the animal make the first move, and he did not have long to wait. Finishing his crouch, the fearsome creature leaped high into the air. Jordan moved quickly to the side and dodged the jump, ending up in the spot where the creature had been moments earlier.

Then the creature turned around and broke out into a run, and this time Jordan stood his ground

firmly. As soon as the beast approached him, he swung his sword skillfully, cutting a large gash on the animal's right shoulder. Blood began to gush forth, and the creature let out a snarl of rage. Moving his great paw swiftly, he hit Jordan along the full length of his body and threw him to the ground.

Before he was quite down, Jordan reached out again for his sword and steadied himself as he fell, knowing that only seconds of immobility would likely cost him his life. Jordan, his face still to the ground, could sense the creature's form towering high above him, blocking out the little light that came through the tapestry of leaves above. Then the creature lunged again.

Gathering all his strength, Jordan gripped his sword in both hands and with a loud cry, turned around to face the beast, pointing his sword upwards with all the firmness of hand he could muster. At the same time as the creature's sharp claws closed upon his midsection, the blade of Jordan's sword drove up under the creature's chin and came through the top of his head. It was over in an instant, and the razor-sharp claws went limp and fell harmlessly from Jordan's sides.

With a heave, and the sudden infusion of energy such as becomes a warrior who has just defeated a formidable foe, Jordan rolled the bulky creature off of him. Breathing heavily, he sat down upon the ground to steady himself. When he looked himself over, he found to his surprise that he had only sustained several light scratches.

"Truly I have been led and protected by the forces of the Almighty," he marveled aloud. But even as he spoke the words, he was struck with a strange sense of urgency that bade him be gone with haste from the place. And so he continued along his way.

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THE FLOWER AND THE FLAME

As the day wore on, Jordan could not shake the sense of uneasiness that had come upon him after his battle with the tigerlike creature.

Could it be that I am approaching the third trial? He wondered to himself. Or perhaps the second is not quite over yet. Whichever of the two may be the cause for my concern, my hopes and aspirations would be towards the former. For the sooner I may pass through these trials, the sooner they shall be no more, and the sooner I may be reunited with my beloved.

To his surprise, he smelt a sweet fragrance, in marked contrast to the usual smell of the forest greenery.

"It is the Queen of Heaven." He recognized the smell instantly, and looked around.

She was nowhere to be seen, but her words echoed clearly through the surrounding trees and bushes: "Do not despise these trials, Jordan!" she said sweetly but firmly. "For looking forward to the day when trials shall be no more is like wishing for the sun not to rise, or the moon to lay low in her bed all the night long. *These trials shall pass for you, yes, and in times*

to come shall be only a distant memory in your mind. But there shall be still others for you to face in the future. And remember, all is not always as it seems! So be constantly vigilant!"

"I stand corrected," Jordan said humbly. "Though I must say that these times of trial have not been among my most pleasant moments, neither have they been insurmountable. Of a certainty I shall continue, and I shall overcome in the end."

Even as he was speaking those words, he heard a rustling in the bushes to his left, and turned quickly to see a fairly small, weasel-like creature coming towards him at a rapid pace. It was covered in fur, but instead of the usual friendly face, this creature's nose pointed up into a snout, and its mouth was bared to reveal a set of thin but very sharp, jagged teeth.

"You obviously do not come in peace," Jordan said, pulling out his sword. Then he noticed the creature had a friend, for there were two of them coming from that same bush. In a moment of sudden dread, he turned quickly to look behind him, and saw another three coming from that angle. Then he saw that many more of these vicious-looking creatures were approaching from all sides—perhaps two dozen or more in total, and each one crouching but a little higher than his ankles.

"Alas!" Jordan cried aloud. "One monster I can face willingly, but an army of small predators I face with much-increased dread! O Queen of Heaven, give me strength now to fight this battle and to come through as I have till now!"

No answer could be heard save the occasional snarl of the ever-approaching creatures. Determined to get ahead in any way that he could, Jordan lunged quickly at the one nearest him, but to his dismay, the creature deftly dodged the point of his sword, and continued its approach. The others increased their speed.

They all settled in a perfect circle around Jordan, not more than two strides from him, then—apparently at some sort of signal amongst them—they all began to run towards him. Jordan was alone, and had one sword, and in this moment was paralyzed with fright. For what could he do against so many? He began furiously lashing out with his sword, dodging, running and jumping to keep out of the way of the snarling, biting creatures, who soon began to get in quick nips at his legs and calves.

I shall not overcome! the realization came upon him like a sickening wave. *These creatures are much too quick for me—not to mention too numerous. I am powerless against them.*

He continued lashing his sword and never stopped moving, but his mind was racing in desperation. It was only a matter of time before he would become tired or lose his footing, and the creatures would have their way.

Yet are not all trials meant to be overcome? he thought suddenly. *There must then be a solution. O Almighty God above, send Thy Word, or one of Thy messengers to speak to my heart and give me the solution to this trial that is now upon me!*

In that moment, his eyes fell upon the glass bottle that hung around his neck. Even as he thought of it, one of the creatures leaped up. Jordan jumped to the side again, but the creature's head bumped the little bottle. Quite impossibly—as Jordan knew from having twice fastened the cork in securely—the tiny bottle tipped and the cork fell to the ground. The cork was followed, only a second later, by that deep red flower that had allowed Jordan to place it in the bottle some days before.

Jordan caught the flower as it came into the air, and even as it did, the creatures seemed to freeze in their tracks, one with his teeth settled around Jordan's ankle. Jordan shook the beast off his leg

and looked at the flower. Whatever it was he was supposed to do, it would need to be accomplished quickly.

Crush me! he suddenly felt the flower say. *Crush me and feed me to these wild beasts, and I shall do the fighting for you!*

Not stopping to think if what he was doing was right or wrong, Jordan rubbed both his hands together vigorously, and to his surprise, the still-fresh flower easily ground into a fine red powder. This powder Jordan held up in both his hands and then threw around so that it fell upon each of the beasts in a fine layer.

Immediately the creatures started to yelp and screech in their own way, then to churn upon the ground in obvious pain and great distress. For some minutes this agonizing spectacle continued, until the last of the small monsters lay still around Jordan's feet.

Stepping carefully out of their midst, Jordan sheathed his sword again. He warily retrieved the small cork from where it had fallen amongst the now dead creatures, and fixed it firmly back in its place on the bottle. Then he moved back towards his path. He was somewhat surprised, and quite pleased, to see that Percy awaited him upon the narrow pathway.

"You have done well, brother," Percy said heartily, clasping Jordan's still-trembling arm. "Many forces of good were near you, upholding you in our prayers!"

"Why then did you not intervene, if you were so intent upon helping me?" Jordan questioned. "For I was quite nearly a source of nourishment to those awful monsters."

"A man should never be rescued prematurely," Percy said. "We knew—we *hoped*—that you would make the right choices, and remember to call out to our God. And you did—and thus you came through. If we had come in and robbed you of that victory by

saving you ourselves, what gratitude could have been afforded us then?"

"Yes, but if I hadn't...?"

"That did not happen, and therefore, it is a useless prospect to meditate upon. Our God has a plan, and in this He is quite specific. He will allow the forces of evil to torment and distress up to a point, but they are not allowed to go too far, or to such an extent that it will cause harm to His plan. I am sure that if you had not come through as you needed to, some other plan would have been launched. But you see, all things have worked out for good."

"That they have," Jordan agreed, with a smile of relief. "And I suppose that was the second trial."

"You are correct," Percy said. "For our adversaries take on many forms, and it is important that you experience them all. That was the trial by combat, and you have seen what differing shapes these trials may take. For some are quick and come upon you unsuspecting; these are often routed with a general ease, and not necessarily such a lengthy battle. Others are heralded first by a strong premonition, and sometimes take a while to surface. When they do at last, they require great skill and strength to overcome. Yet other trials are seemingly smaller, but they are of such a quantity and such a ferocity that to overcome them alone is well-nigh an impossibility! In those times when natural strength and skill fail, the only true and possible recourse is to call out to Heaven for the simple solution which can make all those monsters melt away. Once you saw that you could not rest in your own strength and confidence, you found the source of the power. This I believe you have learned on this day."

"I do believe I have," said Jordan with a smile. "And now, Percy ... I wonder if you have any more of those heavenly helpers such as you introduced me to upon the close of my last trial? For you can see how

my legs are bruised and bleeding, and I could make use of some heavenly succor and consolation."

Percy laughed. "You are a true man at heart," he laughed. "No, I fear I have no such shining portal available to me at this time. At the end of your first test, your strength and spirits were revived, and that heavenly dew which was taken from you was restored to you again. It remains with you even to this moment. But let me do something about your wounds." Reaching down, he touched each of Jordan's gashes and bites with the full palm of his hand, and Jordan felt a flow of heat—so much so that it almost burned him, and he gritted his teeth to hold back from pulling away.

When Percy removed his hands altogether, Jordan was amazed to see that the skin on his legs looked as fresh and smooth as the day he was born.

"Truly you have worked a miracle!" Jordan thanked him.

"The hair shall grow back in due time," Percy laughed. "But the wounds are gone, and that is what is important now. And now you must make haste in moving along; I have kept you long enough. Your third trial awaits."

"Ah yes, the third trial," Jordan said, rather dismally. "I had almost forgotten—this third, then yet three more to go. Percy, I must confess I begin to weary of all this trying."

"Weary not, my good man," Percy said. "For indeed that is time spent in futility. It accomplishes nothing but to rob the soul of its strength. Go forth holding that strength before you as a beacon, for you have overcome thus far and truly you will not fail until you have completed that unto which you have been sent."

"I pray your words may be found true, Percy," Jordan said. "Thus I shall go."

"Go then," Percy smiled. "And may God's blessing

go with you as you enter this next step—the trial by fire.”



Several hours more remained to Jordan's day, and he made good use of them by covering a considerable distance on his trek.

I certainly must continue to make haste, he reasoned, for I have been deprived of much time in these two trials I have come through, and I doubt not that there shall be much more yet to come.

Yet one thought kept striking him rather persistently: Where exactly was his journey taking him? *Am I just a wanderer, journeying hither and thither, collecting trials as I would tributes of civilizations gone by? Or am I actually making my way to a specific destination, and simply being besieged by dangers and tribulations, each hoping to deter me?*

This thought troubled him, for to know that he was fighting valiantly towards a goal would have been a noble recourse indeed. But the blankness of uncertainty sank upon him like a weight, and troubled his mind. Yet unlike other questions which had been readily answered him, this one remained hanging. Jordan finally decided that no answer was coming to him—at least not before nightfall, which was rapidly descending. Therefore, in the best interests of his happiness and good humor, he resolved to put it aside until such a time as it would be revealed—which it seemed that up till now most everything *eventually* was. Patience until that moment was therefore the requirement of choice.

The forest was fully dark by this time, and Jordan reluctantly settled down upon a large heap of fallen leaves which he had hastily gathered together. He wished that he could continue his journey, seeing as he felt the strength yet flowing strong within him. But having no light wherewith to accommodate this wish, he settled for a night of rest in its stead, with

the resolve to arise again at sunup and continue on.

It seemed not long after Jordan had first shut his eyes, however—although in reality some hours had gone by—that he awoke with a troubled feeling weighing upon his chest. The exact reason he could not ascertain ... at least not until he opened his eyes. And when he did, he sat up in pronounced astonishment.

“The trial by fire!” he cried aloud. Why he was surprised he did not know; he had surely been forewarned. But the trial by fire had indeed arrived, and its entrance was grand and glorious.

The forest that Jordan had so easily dismissed with the shutting of his eyes some hours earlier had now been fully transformed into an inferno of blazing proportions! Jordan could see little beyond where he stood, but where he lay and an area of perhaps three or four paces in a circle around him seemed to be the only place in the near vicinity as yet untouched by the ravages of the wildly burning flame.

“What am I to do?” Jordan exclaimed aloud. He looked quickly around for some way of escape, and saw, behind him and to his left, that a very narrow, winding pathway of some sort, miraculously untouched by the fire, stretched out through and into the firestorm.

As though right on cue with Jordan's noticing the way of escape, the hungry flames began to move forward, steadily eating into the circle of ground where he yet stood, and licking at his bed of fallen leaves. The way was being made quite clear to him, and Jordan saw that he did not have much choice but to proceed into uncertainty. For how long the path would last, where it would take him—and indeed, if he could even traverse it in such close proximity to the intense, burning heat—these and countless other questions filled his mind.

Smoothing his hair down as flat as he could, he

tied it firmly in a tight knot at the nape of his neck and tucked the end inside the flap of his shirt. If he could not only survive, but also do so without emerging in the appearance of his great-grandfather, all the better that would be.

And thus Jordan placed one foot within the narrow strip as yet untouched by the fire, and made his way into the heart of the third trial.

anyway, but somehow the knowledge that the fire was closing in behind him was enough to strongly disconcert him, and to cause his mind to waver greatly.

“My God!” he cried aloud. “Where have You led me, into the very bed of Hell? Is that where I have been placed, that I may die here, as a ready-prepared meal for some hungry beast who shall survive this inferno and come by at a later date to clean up my carcass?”

Even as he spoke, he felt the answer resounding within the depths of his heart: *Do not fear, and do not look behind you. For looking back saps your heart of its strength and spirit; only by keeping your eyes fixed ahead can you have the courage to walk through the fiery flame, and come through unscathed. That shall be the key to bring you through the third trial.*

“The key to the third trial,” Jordan thoughtfully repeated the words aloud. As he continued on his way, the flames seemed to be getting denser and thicker, and wisps of thick, black smoke blew across his way from time to time. But he brushed them resolutely aside, keeping his arm up partly over his face when the fire seemed too dense. And thus he pushed on.

Faintly silhouetted through the billowing flames, Jordan could see the outline of trees and wild growth on both sides of him, and he wondered how the forest was faring through the flames. He thought of all the small creatures and birds, and wondered what would become of them.

Just as these thoughts were forming, he looked up in consternation, and realized that after another several paces his narrow pathway died out altogether! Could this be? He walked the last few steps rather uncertainly, but his eyes had not been deceiving him. He came to the end of the path, and before him was only a seething, fiery inferno.

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“WHEN THOU WALKEST THROUGH...”

The thin, winding pathway whereupon Jordan's feet trod was barely wider than the breadth of his shoulders, and the heat that he felt on either side of him was nearly unbearable. Yet he pushed onward, confident in the knowledge that the One who had led him thus far had certainly not done so to bring about his death, but instead to accomplish some higher purpose.

With Thy strength, O God, I shall come through this fire unscathed, he resolved, gritting his teeth in determination. I am determined that with all the power that has been given unto me, I shall come through.

Only just then a curious thought came into his mind, and to verify its accuracy, Jordan allowed himself a careful glance over his shoulder. No sooner had he done so than he realized that to do so had been a mistake. For he saw that as steadily as the pace that he walked, even so increased the fire behind him—completely engulfing the narrow pathway over which had just passed. The only way to go was forward.

Indeed, this was the way that Jordan was heading

"What must I do now?" he questioned aloud to the flames above him. He had now been walking within the flames for hardly more than fifteen minutes, and was beginning to feel somewhat faint and giddy in his head. But he knew that he could not stop, for that would mean certain death.

You must go forward—ever forward! came the reply once again.

"Go forward?" Jordan echoed. "It is not enough that I brush alongside the raging fire, now I must plunge within the very depths of Hell itself?"

No further answer came, and Jordan knew that it remained to him only to do, or to give up and die in defeat. The latter option was unimaginable—for if Jordan was ever to die, he knew that it should be with the spirit of the fight in his heart, and his body in full motion. To sit down and wait for death was not written into his character.

"Therefore, forward I shall go," he said resolutely, though not with the same certainty that he would have preferred to be saying it. For to speak and to read of courage and valiant deeds is one thing, but to actually take that first step out into the unknown to do those deeds brave and heroic ... that is altogether another thing. This requires strength such as the timid soul of man is scarce required to exercise, but which—somehow, through that gift of God's almighty grace—is often bestowed upon the same humble and yielded soul in that very moment when the need arrives.

So it was with Jordan in this moment, who may never have thought of himself as the bravest of men, but who now took a deep breath and set one foot directly inside the raging flame. As he did, he remembered something.

The key! he thought. *I've got to know and remember the key. What was it? Keeping my eyes fixed ahead. But there was more to it, there was something else...*

What it was he could not place his finger on, but he knew there was something missing, something more that would be needed to guide him through this next trial.

As he hesitated, the answer came. It was a whisper so slight that he scarcely heard it at first, but as soon as he acknowledged its presence and reached out his mind for understanding, the words came through with astounding clarity: "When thou walkest through the fire, I will be with thee..." It was clearly a word spoken directly from the mouth of God, and the power that it brought with it was tremendous. As Jordan repeated the words with his own lips, it was almost as though they flowed out as a refreshing, cooling mist which cascaded upward and then down upon him, bathing him in its strengthening dew.

Into the fire went his second foot, and to his surprise (although what he had expected he was not sure), he found that the flames did not light upon him, but that the mist which now hung over him shielded his body from any effect the flames might have had. Even the temperature was quite bearable, and he found himself well able to continue going forward.

"What power is contained in these words of Almighty God!" Jordan marveled once again.

And so, one foot after the other, he continued his journey through the fire, and somehow, each step that he took forward came with greater ease, and a greater refreshing. Before long, he seemed to sense the flames thinning around him, for though his personal fountain of mist had stopped flowing, he did not feel the same intense heat that he had gradually become accustomed to.

"Is it my imagination, now all warped and burned, which deceives me thus?" he wondered. "Or could it be that the fire does indeed abate?"

He continued moving forward, when suddenly he

happened to look down at the ground. His eyes grew round with surprise and he bent down quickly. The ground was scorched black, and thickly crusted with ash and carbon. Thick flames still burned over the mossy ground and scattered branches. And somehow, there amongst all the blackness of Hell itself, lay a small, pure white lily, as if it had been plucked up and left there, clean and quite unharmed.

Convinced that it had grown there especially for his benefit, Jordan reached down and picked it up, sheltering it with both of his hands. He turned his eyes again to the fire raging all around him, and this time he knew for a certainty that his eyes did not deceive him.—The flames were lessening!

For a moment he held the flower, wondering what he was meant to do with it. One thing he knew for sure—he was to carry it with him. For why else would such an object of beauty have been thrown so clearly into his path? Then he remembered the previous gifts he had been given, and how they had so strangely yet perfectly nestled themselves into his magical flask. He quickly uncorked the bottle, and placed the stem of the lily into it as he had done with the red flower. However, the lily made no forward motion at all, but resolutely remained quite immobile in his hand. Thus determining that this course of events was not to be, Jordan replaced the cork and, with the strange, beautiful flower in his hand, stood up and set his face forward once again.

With a renewed vigor and a quickened step, Jordan moved quickly onward. In no more than two or three minutes, he found himself stepping out onto the fresh grass and lush green tapestry of the forest ground.

Dropping onto his hands and knees, Jordan buried his face in the grass, breathing deeply of its fragrance and fairly kissing it with joy. Never before had the world seemed so blue, so green and so brown, never the colors so vivid, never the air so fresh, never so

sweet the sound of the wind rustling through the trees. All was strangely ... normal.

He turned his gaze quickly back to the fiery bed out of which he had just stepped, and it was there, as real and menacing as it had ever been. It was not moving forward, neither did it seem to be retreating. It just remained, burning as it had been—a wall of fire contrasting sharply with the fresh cleanness of the rest of the forest.

"How strange are the ways of our Lord, how past comprehension." Jordan shook his head with a smile. He threw both of his hands up into the air and praised the Most High who had brought him through—without a singe or a burn upon any part of his body, his hair, or even his clothing.

Then he looked down at the small white flower which he had rescued from within the burning flame, and could not suppress his curiosity at this treasure which now lay between his two hands, having been rescued from so strange a predicament.

"What do you have to teach me, little flower?" he formed the words half-aloud, with an amused smile. His life and travels of late had taken on somewhat the form of a fairy tale, and Jordan was beginning to wonder if he would ever be capable again of expressing surprise at something that would befall him. Nevertheless, he was fascinated with all that was taking place around him. He thrilled at how he felt his spirit growing and waxing strong—not only through the rigors of the body which he was daily facing, but equally through the challenging spiritual situations, and the parallels that were drawn from them by his friends and mentors.

Perhaps I could attempt to draw my own lessons this time, he pondered to himself, as he continued along his way at a leisurely pace. Looking around, he could see no one else in sight, so he resolved to do the best he could until such a time as he was deemed

utterly laughable and someone was sent to his aid.

"I have passed through the dungeons of Hell," he began hesitantly, realizing that his words lacked the same poetic ring that he loved to hear from Percy, or even more so from the Queen of Heaven, "and within its breast I have found a small flower, pure and white, which I have rescued and brought forth into the light of salvation."

He smiled; it was a little smile of satisfaction, yet he felt that there was more.

"And more there is," came the familiar voice, and Jordan turned to see Percy walking alongside him.

"My good friend!" Jordan exclaimed, clasping the other's arm heartily. "How it refreshes my soul to see you, after such a time of anguish as I have undergone."

"You have come through in a most exemplary fashion," Percy said, with hearty admiration. "And your trials are halfway over. You may have found that first half to be the most difficult of all, for now I sense that you are filled with an unspeakable eagerness to learn more at the hand of your Almighty tutor, and that is an excellent quality to precede a time of trial and test."

"Indeed it is," Jordan agreed, "and thus and more I do feel strongly within myself. But tell me, Percy, more of this flower which I have been led to. What must I do with it?"

"It has to do with your next mission," Percy said. "And for this mission to come I must give you a due word of preparation, for it shall be intense and very concentrated. This shall be an unbroken time wherein you shall face your fourth and fifth trials consecutively. I may only reveal to you at this time the name of the first: It is the trial of the mind."

"The trial of the mind? What trial is that?" Jordan questioned.

"You shall know well enough in due time," Percy

said, "and any time that I shall spend elaborating upon it now shall be time ill-spent, for there shall be trial enough to last you in all sufficiency without it seeping into these precious moments that we have remaining here together. But I must give you a word to guide you as you embark upon this test. The thoughts and perceptions of man are very elusive, transient things, and most often things are not as they seem. Remember this, and your trial shall be much easier. Keep your focus; keep your eyes fixed. Find the key to sustain you, and keep your eyes upon it. That shall be one salvation."

"And the other?"

"The other will be your purpose. Hold out that flower," Percy instructed.

Jordan reached out his hand, whereupon lay nestled the small white lily.

"Your mission is that you must take this gentle flower safely unto the place which shall be made clear to you when you see it. Only when you have come through every hardship and have been able to plant this flower in the soil where it was intended—and again, you shall know this place clearly once you set eyes upon it—only then shall your trial be over. Do not lose your focus, for this shall be the thing that shall give you strength to make it through the trial of the mind."

was, did not notice that anything untoward was happening until he was well-engulfed by subtle complexities in the scene that surrounded him.

He first noticed something unusual when he broke through the surface of his thoughts for a moment and paused to look at the nature that surrounded him. He stopped and tilted his head to the side for a moment, contemplating the formidable trees and bushes that lined his narrow pathway. Was it only his mind playing the subtle deceiver, or was the forest somehow larger, the trees taller, and even the rocks somehow more immense?

He shook his head briskly, hoping to dislodge some of the eerie feeling that he felt creeping up on him. Turning his head back to the ground, he moved along his way the more speedily. Yet when he looked again over his shoulder—somewhat uneasily—only a few moments later, he knew that something rather sinister was afoot. The normally waist-high bushes that he had been passing steadily for some time now reached well above his shoulders, and when he stopped to look closely at the trees, he found that every trunk was wider than he could span with both his arms outstretched.

Something exceeding strange is taking place, he mused to himself. Either I myself am shrinking, or else I am making my way into a forest of increasing size and stature.

Nevertheless, all oddity aside, these things did not interfere with his forward progress at all. So Jordan pushed onward, making his way the more quickly along the ever-widening pathway. Every few minutes he would look up again, measuring the size difference and how his surroundings had changed since his last look. He had never been a great one for mental calculations in the mathematical arts, but he was astute enough to notice the ever-increasing size difference.

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IN THE POWER OF THE MIND

Percy having made his exit some time earlier, Jordan continued his journey alone, deep in thought. He was puzzled at the somewhat hazy explanation he had received of his fourth and coming trial, which apparently involved his mission of delivering this flower to some particular planting-ground. Jordan could not see what sort of trial could lurk within this commission. Yet even that thought did not bring with it much cause for worry, for Jordan was certain that—as Percy had so aptly explained—the trial would soon be upon him in full force, and at that time he would understand only too well. For the time being, therefore, he contented himself with continuing upon his journey in as great a haste as he could, trusting that he would be overtaken in due time.

It all started rather slowly, so much so that in looking back later, Jordan could not be sure when it was that the fourth trial actually started. For there are hazy moments when time seems to blend within itself and become turned about in such a way that the latter appears to be the former, and the former the latter. Jordan, being in the state of mind that he

By the time the bushes were perhaps two times his height, Jordan could stand the curiosity no longer, and stopped his journey altogether. He now found his path strewn with many stones large enough to act as a comfortable seating-place—former large pebbles, he supposed. He trusted his weary limbs to one of them, and he sat down in great puzzlement.

I suppose that if I am indeed as small as I appear to be in relation to the world around me, then I am not making much forward progress anyway, and therefore, it is not of much worth to continue on my journey for the time being, he resolved. Perhaps I should wait until this phenomenon rearranges itself, as I shall surely make greater headway at that time.

Having resolved this, he next determined to put this strange transformation to the test. “I shall find an object,” he spoke the words aloud to himself, “and fix my eyes resolutely upon it. As I look upon it thus, I shall certainly see this strange increase of size happening before my own eyes.”

He scanned his surroundings until his eyes lighted upon a blue flower. This had undoubtedly been amongst the tiniest of all the blooms of the forest, but was now nearly the size of Jordan’s fist. He marveled at its exquisite beauty and perfect form, being able to clearly see and fully appreciate every part of its intricate design. Deeming it at last worthy of his undivided scrutiny, Jordan came to sit directly in front of the flower, and gazed at it without blinking for several minutes.

After some time had gone by, he resolved that there had been no size change whatsoever.

“And I find that most peculiar,” he muttered to himself. Then looking up and around again, he saw that the remainder of the world had continued to grow. Yet the flower upon which he had gazed so intently had not.

“Perhaps this enigma is not meant to be under-

stood,” he sighed, and shrugged his shoulders. He hardly even bothered to show surprise when he glanced back at the flower and saw that since his eyes had left it, its proportions had increased to match the growth of the rest of the environment. “But I determine that I shall not move from this rock until such a time as my surroundings shall normalize. For this is altogether too strange for me to comprehend, and I dare not venture yet further into something that I cannot see or explain.”

And so he remained, but after some minutes had passed, he began to feel quite uncomfortable. At length he was ashamed, and bowed his head slightly. “Instruct me, O God of the heavens,” he murmured humbly, “for I venture to speculate that I have acted foolishly, and perhaps not according to the plan intended for this journey of mine. Speak to me, therefore, and show me how I should view this strange scenario that I find myself a part of. Show me how I should behave myself within it.”

The answer did not waste any time in arriving, for as clear as a bell the words flashed through his mind: *To go forth into the unknown is a brave, though unenviable task. It requires fortitude of mind and of spirit such as can only be given at the hand of the Almighty God. Yet go forward you must, for there is no sitting still. One either moves forward or backward, and when a soul comes to a point in his journey when he does not understand the plan that surrounds him, and then resolves to simply stop and do nothing until he can comprehend the full reason thereof—that man is doomed to defeat by his very immobility. Lack of movement and action when the path has been shown—though it may not fully be seen or understood—robs the heart of strength and the spirit of courage. It weakens the mind and robs faith blind. Yet if you go forward when you scarce can see, and do not understand what little you do see, you will soon find your*

faith rewarded with sight, your curiosity rewarded with understanding, and your perseverance rewarded with victory.

Spurred to motion by the truth that poured through the channels of his mind, Jordan lost no further time in idleness, and set his face to the now vast highway upon which he trod. He found his journey increasingly difficult, however, for the path was strewn with thick, gravel-like dust particles, tall plants were on every side, and rocks of increasingly large proportion needed to be scaled or circumvented. All told, it was a most arduous task.

Some time later, Jordan looked down at the small flower that lay within his hand. A funny thought struck him, and being of an inquisitive mind, he resolved to experiment upon it. *It would seem that all attached or connected with me would cease to grow,* he thought. *I wonder therefore if I were to lay this flower upon the ground, if it would also take on larger proportions?*

Leaving the matter to wonder about no further, Jordan carefully set the flower down upon a stone, and stood by curiously to see what fate would befall it. No sooner had it left his hands than the lily began to grow. Only this time, Jordan could see the growth with his own eyes. And it was startlingly fast. By the time a minute had passed, the flower was as large as his hand, perhaps two or three times its former size.

Jordan laughed a little, satisfied that he had discovered yet another curiosity of the forest, if not actually unraveled its mystery. He picked the flower up again, not wishing to waste any further time that he could be using to move forward. Not many minutes had passed, however, before he realized that something was not quite right. *The flower had not stopped growing!* Within his very grasp it was now the size of a loaf of bread, and did not appear to be pausing to catch its breath.

Only then did a slight moment of doubt come upon Jordan. *What have I done?* he thought in some dismay. *If this flower should grow to the size of a tree in the next hour, I shall be hard pressed to carry it along with me. And I most certainly shall not be able to leave it, for it is the purpose of my journey and the only way that this trial shall come to an end! But perhaps if I move more quickly, I may reach my destination before it becomes too large to carry.*

Jordan broke into a run, still dodging the large objects in his way, but with such renewed intensity that he found himself making an incredible amount of progress in a very short amount of time. His hope of finding that magical spot, however, soon settled into the realm of the present impossibility, as before long he found himself supporting the bloom with his two hands and resting the weight upon his shoulders, the long, thick stem trailing down behind him.

Arriving now in front of a rock significantly larger than the others, Jordan knew that he would not be able to traverse it with the flower, and so he put it down rather hesitantly upon the ground. Helplessly watching it grow larger as the minutes passed, Jordan for the first time in this trial found himself on the verge of despair.

Before he could give much thought as to what form that despair should take, however, he found a new cause for worry. Hearing a suspicious rustling sound, he whirled around to see a small cluster of fearsome-looking creatures approaching. It didn't take him long to realize that they were honey beetles, but at this particular moment they matched his own height, and were several times his width. Each of their vicious little legs was the size of one of his own, and the nasty pincers the beetles sported at their fronts were intimidating enough to have caused any man to cower.

Jordan took one step to the side before he realized that the beetles were not after him, but instead

seemed quite drawn to the flower. Jordan uttered a sigh of relief, but just as the first beetle was nearing the flower, he was suddenly jolted back into reality.

If those beetles eat up the flower, my test shall end in failure! He looked helplessly at the first menacing-looking creature. Had there been but one of them, Jordan might have willingly risked his own health in confronting it. But for a small, comparatively frail human to take on a half-dozen armor-clad crawling creatures seemed like a direct call for death.

“But what shall I do?” he questioned the heavens once again.

And just as surely, his reply came: *Remember your test: You are in the power of your own mind! These things that you see, that surround you—they are not real! This beetle is only your own size so much as that belief is held firm upon you. If you are able to disregard the way things appear to your five senses, in favor of how you know them to be within your trusting mind, then there is no creature or object that can have power against you. Use your inner senses—the same ones that attune you to the whispers: the touch of faith, the sight of belief, and that sensation of nearness to the Power beyond—and they shall guide you through this test.*

Jordan was puzzled, but he had no time to analyze what he had just heard. If he were to put it to use before it was too late, he had to act on it without the thinking-through that he customarily chose to first enact. Looking down at his hands, he noticed with renewed interest the medallion-shaped brand that had been burned into his hand by the Queen of Heaven—the lone bird flying towards the ever-present sun.

“Surely this is as real as anything is,” he resolved. “I shall keep my eyes fixed upon this imprint, and it shall guide me through this.”

Walking quickly over to where the beetle was

preparing to sink his teeth into the flower's petals, Jordan kept his eyes always on his hand. The other beetles gathered around him, not fierce but curious, though with enough casual interest to inflict him a deadly blow should his own mind allow them to do so.

Taking a deep breath, Jordan reached out his hand for the stem of the lily—which was now as thick as his own arm—and closed his hand around as much of the stem as he could grasp. He used his other hand to shoo away the beetle, waving it precariously close to the large pincers.

Unable to handle the reality that he faced with his eyes, Jordan shut them and visualized himself picking up the flower. He opened his eyes, amazed to find the normal-sized lily in his hands, and a handful of small beetles crawling around his feet, scurrying in dismay at the retraction of their prize.

Jordan let out an exclamation of joy and praise, but resolved to waste no time in idle observance, for time was quickly passing and he was anxious to be out of this trial as soon as possible. He turned his gaze to his surroundings, which strangely enough had not returned to their normal size, but remained as large as they had been, as if the little area where he stood was surrounded by some giant and intangible lens. The large rock still stood directly in front of him, and, holding his marked hand out before him, Jordan walked straight for it.

A momentary hesitation almost overtook him, but he brushed it aside and walked straight for the rock, with a speed such that if his faith were suddenly proven to be doubt, he would surely have knocked himself out with a mighty blow to the head. His faith, however, did not abandon him, and before his eyes the rock returned to its normal size, becoming once again a pebble in his way.

Now getting into the practice of it a little more,

Jordan turned his gaze to his surroundings. He gazed fiercely at the giant trees and bushes that lined the path, and before him, the entire landscape melted back, repainting itself in the proper proportions.

“How good God is!” Jordan lost no time in breaking out into a run, overjoyed to be able to see the ground that he was covering, and judging accurately its speed and distance. “And how good it is to be able to see with one’s own eyes the reality that one has believed on blind faith alone! Truly, the truth need not be limited by what the eyes can see, the hands can touch, and the human mind perceive.”

He slowed down again now, for he was anxious that he should not miss the special, hallowed spot where he was to plant the lily. He would know it when he saw it, his guide had said. Well then, see it he must, and Jordan was determined not to miss it for lack of scrutiny.

Engrossed as he was in scanning the landscape ahead of him, Jordan did not notice the smell of sulfur and smoke that should have warned his wary nostrils if he had been allowing them to perform their duties. He likewise did not notice the huge crevasse that opened up very suddenly at his feet until it was too late, and the next step sent him hurling downward.

Startled into alertness, Jordan instinctively reached out and grabbed what was nearest to him, managing to latch on to the side of the ground just in time to save himself from plummeting to greater depths.

“What is this?” he managed to burst out. Apparently the ground before him had opened as a result of some sort of underground volcanic activity. Engaged as he was with his search for his flower’s resting place, Jordan had not noticed until it was too late.

Too late! The words held new meaning for Jordan as a sickening thought struck him. Turning his head

to look over his shoulder, he could see far below him flowing rivers of molten lava—and there, also, far below and caught in the boiling pool, he could see the precious white lily, the object of his current quest, which had fallen from his grasp as he strove to save his own life.

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THE FACE OF DEATH

Jordan could feel the ground within his grasp beginning to crumble, and his hold to loosen. Desperately he fought to hold on. "My quest is lost," he gritted his teeth, "but at least I may retain my own life! For there is surely a way of redemption even in the worst of times."

The answer to his unspoken question came once more into his mind: *That there is, my son—there is always a way of redemption; but often it is not as it seems. The path to the heights oft has its beginnings in the deepest depths, and there are times when a man must give his own life in order to save that of another, or to fulfill the mission that God has laid before him.*

"Are you asking me to let go, and drop into this fiery mass?" The very thought made Jordan's heart nearly stop. For to face death in a fight, or in defense of his lady—that was different, that was noble and valiant and worthy of admiration. But to die alone, and in such an ignoble and inglorious way, by the hand of his own mistake—surely this was not to be his fate!

"And what good would it accomplish, anyway?"

he questioned, still fighting to hang on.

You have learned much about the value of obeying even though to your sight it is impossible; this is the final test of that. The choice is yours, but this is where your quest has brought you, and this is the only way you are able to continue along this path—if you wish to do so. This is the fifth trial.

Jordan looked down again at the sea of fire below him, and sighed wearily. "I suppose I deserve to die," he muttered. "I have failed the fourth test; I have let go of the flower, and thus I see not how I shall be able to rescue Amaris. How then should I refuse to offer my life if that may help in some way to make up for my failure?"

On the verge of loosening his grasp, he was again shocked by the response he received: *No! the voice rang in his heart. No! You must not let go with that thought in your mind. Defeat is incurred at the hand of the warrior in battle, and if you fall with those thoughts, you shall surely perish. Your mission is not to die, but to face death, should it come your way. You have erred in not keeping your eyes focused on the path before you. So intent were you in completing the work of God that you neglected your main commission of constant vigilance, and thus you face this impasse. But even that was engineered by God, for He knows your frame and what choices you are to make before you make them. So trust that He is well able to compensate for your weaknesses and to help you to rise above them—if you should choose to!*

"I do!" Jordan fairly shouted. "I do choose to! Just tell me what to do and I will do it!"

You must retrieve the flower, come death or life, came the command. *And fear for nothing that you shall face or endure until you once again hold that flower in your grasp!*

"That I do ... or will give my life trying!" Jordan flung the words into the air as he dramatically opened

both of his hands wide and let go.

Strangely, Jordan felt as though he were falling for several minutes, although he was sure that he had not been that far from the surface. He could tell by the rising heat and steam that he felt searing along the length of his body, however, that he was not far from impact. And that was the case.

The first plunge into the sea of molten fire was like nothing Jordan had ever experienced before. He sank down for nearly a full minute, and felt as though he were covered all over in boiling liquid that clung to him and would not be gone. At first he almost felt paralyzed by the heat and the thickness, though strangely enough it did not harm his body in any way. Through his failing mind flashed again his instructions: *You must retrieve the flower!*

I must! he thought as he struggled to reach the surface. Before long his face broke through to the open air. But the conditions above the surface were hardly better, as he was engulfed by the steam and the choking, sulfuric smell that permeated the environment of his underground cavern.

Using his arms and legs to keep himself afloat, Jordan scanned the surface of the fiery liquid in search of the lily. At length he saw it, a good distance away. Somehow it, too, had been spared from the heat of the flames, and rested calmly on top of the swirling mass into which it had fallen, as if enshrouded by some magical shield. Fixing his eyes upon the lily, Jordan gave no thought to the fact that he himself had not yet been consumed by the juices of this seething monster. Only one thought remained firmly fixed in his consciousness: to retrieve his precious lily and fulfill the charge he had been given. He tried to swim but could not make much forward progress in the porridgelike thickness.

"I shall walk upon this surface!" he resolved suddenly. "So help me God, I shall walk upon it!"

The fact that it would be impossible did not seem to present a problem, for the very fact that he was alive in the midst of such a landscape was in itself an impossibility—so what of one more? Using the powers of faith in a reality which he saw not—which Jordan was thankful to have learned throughout the fourth trial—he placed his hands flat upon the surface of the fiery matter. Closing his eyes and picturing it as a solid surface, he pushed hard upon it and lifted himself up and out, arising to stand with both feet upon the yet steaming and seething mass.

"Aha!" he raised both of his hands above his head and clenched them in triumph. "Our God has come through once again! Faith doth always triumph over sight!"

Then setting himself quickly into motion—lest his faith should at some point weaken before he reached his final destination—Jordan moved in the direction of the flower, which lay some distance away.

It took no more than a few minutes to reach it, and he knelt down and reached his hand towards the flower, which looked as fresh and clean as the moment he had plucked it from the ground. Picking it up, he brushed from off its delicate petals every last bit of the odious residue, and smiled to himself at having accomplished his mission.

Accomplished, yes! But ... what now? Jordan lifted his eyes and could scarcely make out, through the thick black fumes and steamy mists, the crack in the ground, far above, through which he had fallen—and yet higher above that, a narrow strip of blue sky, which contrasted sharply with the vivid red and black patterns of his present surroundings.

Seeing there was quite obviously no way out in the direction from which he had come, Jordan studied his new environment. As far as he could tell, the narrow strip of this red-hot, bubbling mass was surrounded on all sides by high walls of sheer cliff

that formed the borders of the crack into which he had stumbled.

Before he had a chance to think any further upon his future, however, he suddenly felt the flower begin to grow in size again, and become heavier and heavier. By the time the petals stretched across both his arms, the weight of it began to push Jordan down through the surface of the fiery mass.

No! No! Jordan struggled with his mind, trying to keep his ground. But it was no use; the choice was either to let go of the flower, or to be dragged down with it.

Once again, like a beacon in the midst of the darkness and confusion of his mind, he remembered the words that had instructed him earlier: *Are you willing to give your own life to save that of another?*

“So this is it,” Jordan gritted his teeth as he clung firmly to the flower, and slowly sank into the pool of melted rock and fire. “After all that I have gone through in pursuit of this quest, I shall most certainly not abandon my charge now. Yet, somehow, I despair at the thought of such an inglorious ending. Nevertheless,” he offered a saying that he had often heard repeated, and which was attributed as having come from the very lips of his beloved Lord, “not my will, but Thine be done.”

With those words he sank yet further, and slowly felt his head pass beneath the surface of the murky, steaming flow. The heat was not unbearable, but he knew that shut under the surface without being able to breathe, he could not remain alive for more than a few minutes. Those were precious minutes for him, as he reviewed his life and reflected upon all the steps that had led him thus far. There was much he saw that he wished he could now change, but his overall feeling was one of peace; he had done what he could, and the present was out of his hands.

He felt the blackness around him thickening, as

his body continued to sink deeper and deeper down. Then suddenly, pure white sparkles of light began shimmering all around him. He heard a voice: “Open your eyes, Jordan!”

Jordan did as he was told, and to his surprise, he opened his eyes to find that he was lying on a soft bed of fresh green grass—gazing up into the fair, glorious face of the Queen of Heaven. He started to leap to his feet, but she stopped him with a firm, kind hand.

“Be at peace,” she said, her voice flowing over him like a wave of sweetest honey. He savored every note of it. “For you have earned your rest. You have come through one of the greatest tests of all—you have looked full into the face of death, and have come through victorious. For this you shall no doubt see your reward. Your mission is not yet over, but you need a time of rest and healing before you go on. Take up your flask.”

She pointed to the little bottle that yet hung around his neck, and he fingered it curiously, holding it up to look at the majestic purple color that was visible through the clear glass. He remembered the remarkable gem that had melted its way inside the little bottle.

She took the bottle from his hand and uncorked it, then held it up to his lips. “Drink,” she said softly, “for you shall find this to be as strengthening to your spirit as it is to your body.” She smiled, so full of love and purity that it was all Jordan could do to keep from prostrating himself at her feet. “And then you shall be on your way,” she continued. “Your journey is nearing its end, but the most important part is yet to come. Be strong, my good soldier, for a great and glorious crown awaits you, most worthy of subjects!”

Then she was gone, and Jordan was left holding the bottle to his lips. He tilted it further, and allowed a drop of the precious purple liquid to spill out onto

his tongue. The taste was overwhelming—and quite indescribable. It had a fruity quality to it, yet at the same time a rich, creamy texture, that clung to his tongue and seemed to expand into a frothy, foaming mass that coated the entire inside of his mouth. He drank further, and the liquid crystal poured into him, covering his throat, and hurrying along on its mission of healing. Jordan could feel the health and strength pouring through every part of his body. He could almost see the little particles moving along with his bloodstream, as it ministered the healing tonic to every cell in his body.

Before many minutes had gone by, Jordan felt like a new man. He looked down at the empty bottle and marveled. The Queen of Heaven was right, for not only did his body feel like that of a celestial warrior, but his spirit felt renewed and revitalized in a way such as he had never experienced before. He felt he could take on the world and come through with victory in hand.

“How sweet are the fruits of Heaven!” he said, smiling. “I look forward to the day when I may partake of them again!”

But as of now, he had a job to do, and he wanted not a second more to be wasted in idleness. Carefully picking up the lily, which lay near his side, Jordan suddenly realized that he had not taken much notice of his surroundings. He did so now, scrutinizing the landscape with a curious eye.

Where he was he had no idea, but everything seemed to be fair, pure and beautiful. He was in the center of a large pasture of almost unearthly green, dotted with tiny yellow flowers. There was not a tree or mountain to be seen, or any structure of any type so far as he could tell.

Then he saw it ... and it was as he had been told. He knew it on sight—that small, inconspicuous-looking, heaped mound of freshly turned earth. That

was where he was headed. That was his goal, the place which had been foretold him. That was where he was to place his prized treasure. Jordan set off in that direction at once.

The mound was not more than a few minutes' walk away, and Jordan reached it easily. He dropped to his knees and carefully carved out a little hole in the soft, rich ground, and then held up the beautiful white flower.

He placed the end of the stem inside the hole that he had dug, and carefully supported it with his hand, scooping up the dirt around it and patting it firmly into place until the flower stood up straight on its own. As he gently let go and sat back on his heels, he smiled with satisfaction.

The flower, too, seemed content, for it almost seemed to wiggle ever so slightly from side to side, positioning itself just so in the manner that it found most comfortable. Jordan could almost see tiny little roots already growing out from the bottom of the stem just under the surface of the ground, latching onto the nourishing earth and drawing fresh nutrients which it must surely have needed after the days of adventure that had befallen it.

His duty was now fulfilled, but Jordan felt a strange, sad loss at leaving behind this fragrant plant for which he had risked his life. Somehow it seemed unfair that he now had to turn his back upon it and leave it behind, as it had become rooted so deeply in his own heart.

“When one gives his life for something, that object—or person—certainly grows in importance, and it is not without much tears and regret that farewells may be made.” He sighed as the words left his lips, for he knew that it was inevitable.

With a token glance of acknowledgement, he tore his gaze away and turned his back to the flower. His face now to the wide open plain, he wondered where

his journey would lead him next.

“I have yet one more trial to go through,” he mused. “And of this one I have as yet had no forewarning, although if my senses do me justice, I would venture to guess that this may be the fiercest and greatest of them all.”

Just then he noticed wisps of smoke coming from the horizon on the far left of the field, and he began to move quickly in that direction. Almost unconsciously, his hand moved to the hilt of his weapon, for he wished to be prepared for whatever would come his way.

He suddenly slowed his step, and no sooner had he done so than he drew his breath in sharply. For there before him, the grassy field dropped off into a jagged precipice ... and there below—he recognized it on sight—lay the sixth trial.

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THE EYES OF ANOTHER

Jordan silently stood on the crag, overlooking the spectacle that lay sprawled below him. As much as the scene upon the bluff where he now stood brought to mind the words *purity, freshness, beauty, love* and *peace*, the landscape below would have conjured up the exact opposite of each description—and more! It was as though some huge creature of the netherworld had come upon the grassy landscape and taken a huge bite out of it, leaving a circular graveyard of ashes, decay and the charred remains of former beauty.

The ground below was rough and uneven, dotted with boulders and crevasses of varying sizes, and filled with steaming liquid. There seemed to be some sort of hot springs just below the ground's surface, for every now and then one of the huge puddles would burst into a boil, or a large geyser would spew a shower of dirt-stained water over its personal corner of the arid landscape.

Aside from these pockets of comparative refreshment, the remainder of the place was as dry and dusty as any desert. On the far side was the opening to a

huge cave, which jutted out of the side of a mountain—the very far side of which was as beautiful as the rest of the world around seemed to be, but the front of which had apparently been involved in whatever horrendous situation had caused the formation of this hellish circle.

Jordan wondered what it was that compelled him toward this scene. Yet without having to be told so, he knew that this was where he was to face his final challenge, and in the interest of performing his duty as quickly as possible and thus having it behind him, he began looking for a way down the cliff.

At length he discovered a rough-hewn trail of sorts, a winding path that led along the side of the cliff, which deposited him at the bottom just opposite—though at the far end of the crater—from the yawning mouth of the cave.

Trusting again his inner senses that that cave held the next plan for his near future, Jordan set out towards it at once. The ground—whether dry and dusty, or gooey with mud—was scalding, and the strange and pockmarked formations served to make forward progress extremely difficult. A stench wafted through the air in the form of visible clouds of odorous gas that were also nearly unbearable, and Jordan found that he made easier progress with one hand muffling most of his senses.

He had completed nearly half of his intended trek when a low, rumbling noise alerted him that something was happening. Jordan quickly climbed upon a large rock (glad for a little respite from the heat, which was making his feet to ache quite uncomfortably) and scanned the filthy horizon uneasily.

Nothing was immediately apparent, but as Jordan continued to stand quietly in wait, his patience at last was rewarded. It was just a little tremor of motion at first—something was moving around the mouth of

the cave. Jordan's attention was riveted to the spot, and before long he was horrified to see something very large and scaly begin to slither out.

"Dear Lord!" Jordan uttered the exclamation before he quite knew what prompted it. "What is this final battle that I have come unto?"

Within several moments, the creature—for that was apparently what it was—had dragged its full body out into the open, and Jordan drew back in disgust. For this was without a doubt the most revolting—and terrifying—creature that he had ever laid eyes upon. It was over ten times Jordan's height—nearly the size of the cliff it had proceeded from, and its skin seemed to be made up of thick, leathery, yet almost metallic-looking scales, which shone a raspy gray-green in the sunlight.

"If I did not know better that such creatures do not exist, I would have said that this is a dragon," Jordan muttered to himself, realizing of course that it did not really matter whether or not such a creature could exist, seeing as it apparently did, and also quite apparently was intending on participating in a confrontation with him.

The creature had two thick front legs (each one the size of the trunk of a well-developed oak tree), but had no hind legs that could be seen. Instead, its torso narrowed off into a huge, thick tail, which thinned out gradually and with length to peak in a sharp, anchor-shaped point. Its head was large, as were its eyes, which seemed somehow capable of peering in all directions at the same time. Despite its rather grotesque anatomy, the creature seemed very agile, and was rapidly slithering its way towards the rock where Jordan yet stood perched, unsure of what he was to do against this fearsome foe.

Jordan felt as though he were paralyzed where he stood. It was not a conscious fear that gripped him, but rather an almost stonelike quality which riveted

him with fascinated horror to the approaching spectacle, to where he had no desire to move an inch, and felt almost content to remain there and meet his fate at the jaws of such a terrible predator. The monster was rapidly moving closer, and it was almost as though through a fog that Jordan finally heard a voice—oh, how faint was that voice! But he shook his mind vigorously, straining his inner ears to recapture the words that he could almost make out.

Arise, move yourself from this spot! The insistent call came through more clearly as he concentrated his mind upon it. You have great power to fight and defeat this foe! You have come this far; do not be defeated now through fascination with the evil that comes against you. Gird yourself up, for today you will do battle with this creature—and by God's strength, you shall overcome!

Those words jolted Jordan into an acute and active awareness, and without a moment's hesitation he leaped off his rocky perch, unsheathing his sword as he did so.

The great beast was no more than several bounds from him, and Jordan braced himself into a fighting position—wondering all the while how he could possibly defeat such a monstrous creature with a weapon so small as his now appeared by contrast.

"Nevertheless," he muttered through gritted teeth, "this is the mission to which I have been called, and so I shall perform it to the best of my ability—or give my life in the attempt!"

The words were valiant, and he hoped that giving them life through expression would somehow infuse his own flagging spirit with some of their energy.

The creature took another slithering bound towards him, and now Jordan could feel the heat of its breath, which—coupled with the heat he still felt rising from the ground beneath his feet—made him feel as though he were trapped inside a potter's kiln,

with no visible way of escape.

It was then that the truth was suddenly very clear to Jordan. Perhaps it was getting a closer look at the thick texture of the monster's scaly skin; perhaps it was just the sheer proximity of the enormous body. But whatever it was, the truth washed over Jordan's head in a sickening wave, threatening to drag him down to the depths along with it: *There is no way that my sword is going to be able to do so much as scratch a hair off of this creature's kneecap! There is no earthly way that I can defeat this giant.*

No earthly way ... ah, the key! Once again, Jordan realized just in time that his strength did not require the backing of possibility and earthly means of normality.

Thrusting his sword upward into the sky, Jordan threw his voice up with it into a trumpeting shout: "Lord God of the heavens and the earth, You are the One who has brought me thus far, and surely You will not leave me deserted and alone in this hour when I have the most dire need of Thy saving grace. Show therefore now Thy strength and might unto me, and unto whatever invisible observers I may have alongside me, that all may know that the battle and victory is this day delivered through the power of Thy hand into mine."

No sooner had the final word left his lips than Jordan's faith was rewarded. Before his astonished eyes, a single bolt of lightning descended from the clear blue sky above him, and struck his sword right on the very tip. The sword instantly began to tremble and twitch, moving almost as though it had a life of its own. Jordan drew his left hand up to steady it, and as he drew the sword down, he was amazed to see that the entire blade was aglow with a white-hot, fiery flame so that he could not even gaze into the surface without flinching.

He had no further time for inspection, however,

for his foe was now upon him, and the moment of truth had arrived. Never was that sword needed so much as at that very moment. The creature's eyes were flashing, bright green with fiery specks of red in the huge pupils, and wisps of smoke arose from his nostrils. Jordan could wait no longer, and holding the sword out in front of him, he broke into a run to cover the remainder of the distance that divided them.

Jordan's head did not even reach so high as the creature's knees, but being anxious to make a first wound, he was headed for whatever was the quickest and most convenient place to reach. As he came within several inches of the beast, however, he found that the sword in his hand began to vibrate even more uncontrollably, and it was all that he could do to hold it steady.

At length the sword broke free from his control (though not from his grasp), and seemed to begin fighting with a life of its own. Jordan seemed to be merely following it, while giving it the force to move from one place to the other. The sword skirted the creature's legs altogether, going around to the side and plunging straight into the side of its belly.

Caught somewhat off guard, the monster turned around, with a terrifying shriek of pain, and lunged for Jordan, who sunk his sword in a second time.

An inspiration now struck him, and he saw his opportunity as the huge tail came thrashing to the ground in a cloud of dust. Seizing the moment while the animal was yet blinded in pain, Jordan grabbed ahold of the slimy scales where the monster's tail was low along the ground, and climbed quickly up along its back.

As he neared the base of the monster's head, the great beast reared itself up upon its tail with a mighty, earth-rending roar. Jordan desperately grasped the scales with his free hand. As they began the free-fall towards the earth (the monster's feet plunging back

towards the ground), Jordan seized his chance. With all his strength, he swung his sword sideways—somehow, he knew that one clean blow would slice all the way through the creature's neck. He was right.

The force of the blow threw Jordan to the ground, but because he landed up to his shoulders in thick, steaming mud, he was unhurt, and flung his gaze quickly upward to see what had become of the monster. A great relief came over him as he saw the great monster's head lying upon the ground.

But no greater was his dismay as he saw what happened next. For the creature was far from dead, and before his eyes, a yet more terrifying display was taking place. Something very unusual was happening to this fearsome creature.

First, a shimmering cloak of sickly green glowing particles assembled and hung around it. From within this protective boundary, the great beast's body began to twitch. It appeared to be ... shrinking. Yes, it was definitely getting smaller.

Jordan drew himself slowly out of the mud, standing with mouth agape at what he was witnessing. Then the green mist thickened so that the interior was no longer visible. It was some minutes before Jordan could again tell what had taken place, but when the blanket gradually dissipated, Jordan found himself standing face to face with a man—a man he instantly recognized as ... *himself!*

"What is the meaning of this?" he cried aloud.

He rubbed his eyes briskly and looked again, but there was no mistaking—the form that had now replaced the huge monster was an identical mirror image of his own self, down to the very articles of clothing which he was wearing. The only difference was in the weaponry, for this impostor had not the white-hot sword of power which Jordan had been given. But in every other detail, he could have been his very twin—or even his own self.

"Must I now do battle against my own self?" Jordan mourned. But he knew without needing an answer that there would be no peace in his soul, nor would he be returned the life of his love, until this impostor was completely destroyed, no matter what his form or shape.

With a great shout, Jordan put his sword out in front of him and broke into a run. At that moment it was almost as though the world froze and hung still on its track. The surroundings seemed to blend into a hazy, inconspicuous mass and all that remained in the living, breathing world was Jordan and his familiar adversary.

Gazing fiercely forward as he covered the ground in giant, slow-motion leaps, Jordan locked eyes with the man that faced him. The brown eyes were steely, and yet at once recognizable as his own. He found it somewhat disconcerting to gaze at this likeness of himself, while at the same time possessing the knowledge that it was his enemy, and a thing to be overcome. Reaching within several paces of this foe, he slowed to a halt. Jordan was breathing heavily from his exertion, and he noticed with some perturbation that the other was breathing normally—and wore an unpleasant smirk around the corners of his mouth.

"We have come face to face at last," the stranger said, and Jordan shuddered at hearing as it were the sound of his own voice.

But he forcibly crushed his fear and anxiety and spoke in a loud, stern voice. "Prepare for defeat, you cunning impostor, for though you be wily and treacherous in the ways of deceit, the ways and the power of my God are more than enough to defeat you even without my help."

The other simply laughed—a deep, rumbling sound that echoed off the barren, cavernous walls that surrounded them. "Is that what you think?" His eyes

flashed suddenly, but quickly returned to a look of almost amused innocence. “Am I to be defeated? Do you think that the purpose of this test? Is that what God would have you believe? Nay, but truly you speak in haste. Why should we kill one another, when there is no reason to do so?”

“Do not be too sure of that,” Jordan gritted his teeth, “for I have been sent to overcome you, therefore overcome you I shall.”

“Don’t you see?” the stranger put his own weapon point down for a moment, and leaned forward on the hilt in a conversational manner. “You *cannot* kill me, for *I am you.*”

Jordan put his hands over his ears and shouted, “I will not hear you! I am not here to converse, but to do battle.”

“No, no! This you must hearken unto,” continued the other, motioning to Jordan in a somewhat more friendly gesture. “I would have thought this was knowledge that you already possessed, but seeing that it has been withheld from you, it would certainly be in your interest to possess it.”

Jordan hesitated. He was still a safe distance from the other, and he reasoned that there could be no harm in hearing the man’s foolish tale, whatever it might be. “All right then,” he conceded, “tell me this foolishness that you regard as knowledge.”

“I am you,” the other said again. “I am your spirit, your soul, your other self. The moment you slay me, you yourself shall cease to exist, wherefore I said there is no reason for us to kill one another. Indeed, slay me you may, for that weapon looks fierce and powerful, but you should know that it will also consume your last breath.”

Jordan looked confused. *What am I to believe? He thought to himself. For my God has led me thus far, and certainly not to an end like this. But yet, these words ring within my ears with a certain truthfulness.*

Then he spoke almost as though to himself. “I wonder if there may be another way...”

“But of course,” his adversary said, instantly latching on to this small step of “progress.” “There is always another way to accomplish the goal. What appears to you as this apparition of yourself is as the false reality you experienced before, except that it is now your own self you are facing. This strange world we find ourselves in has separated us one from the other, and only in being reconciled together do we have any hope of surviving this ordeal, and returning to that normal life we both know and cherish. Come, and I will show you that my hand bears the same mark of your beloved as your own.”

Still feeling rather wary of this whole situation, Jordan took several steps towards this strange impostor. As he cleared the final space between them, however, all of a sudden he threw his mind upward and begged for a moment of clarity. *Show me the truth*, he prayed silently. And in that moment all was clear. He gazed again into the eyes that he knew as his own, and saw the reflection of the same horrendous monster that he had just finished defeating. It was all deceit—and it had nearly cost him his life.

He could see now the other’s hand that held his sword moving swiftly and noiselessly behind his back. Jordan quickly lifted his own white-hot sword and swung around violently, plunging it deeply into the center of the other’s body. The strange apparition fell to the ground in a crumpled heap.

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REVELATION

Having withdrawn his sword from his opponent's body, Jordan remained where he stood, breathing heavily and unsure of what to do next. His eyes scanned the desert landscape for a clue that would indicate the path that he was to follow, but at first he saw nothing. Just then, Percy appeared at his side.

"Percy!" Jordan said, with a sigh of relief. "Thank God you are here! I have been alone too long, and am in sore need of companionship." He looked up quickly, noticing Percy's lack of comment, and was surprised to see that the man's eyes were filled with tears.

"What has taken place?" Jordan asked quickly. "Have I done wrong?"

"You have not," Percy said, as he threw his big arm around Jordan's shoulders. "I am simply overwhelmed with joy and pride in you this day. My son—you have come through! You have conquered, you have overcome, and with the help of the Almighty, you have completed your mission."

"But my mission is not yet complete," Jordan reminded him. "For I have yet to find and to free Amaris."

"And the time for that has come as well," Percy said. "Come, let us go hence."

They turned and began walking together towards the rock-hewn staircase that Jordan had come down some time earlier.

"Explain to me this battle from whence I have just come," Jordan asked as they moved along.

"Gladly," Percy said, with a nod and a smile. "What would you know?"

"Tell me of my new weapon." Jordan motioned with his head towards the still fiery blade, which now hung loosely through his belt.

"This sword is yours to keep," Percy said. "You have earned it. As you have seen, it is a special weapon—a product of the mouth of God. It contains His very breath, and as you have seen, it has a life of its own. Used by the might of man it would be a powerful tool, but not much more extraordinary than a regular sword. However, when it is coupled with a yielded mind and a valiant heart, it takes on a life of its own, and then you must only hold it out before you and you shall see it defeat the foe of its own might."

"Such is the power of the words of God," Jordan said in awe.

"Such, and far greater," Percy agreed. "He has seen fit to bestow upon you this infinitesimal fraction of His might, and it is more than enough to aid you in any trouble."

"I shall wear it with pride and employ it with humility," Jordan said. "And now tell me of the strange final foe which I came against. What were those words spoken by this one who had so much of my own appearance?"

"That evil one spoke some truth," Percy replied, "though twisted about in such a way that you would not have realized. While that one was not you, yet it was you."

"This confuses me greatly," Jordan said with a laugh.

"You have fought many battles and passed through many tests since your departure from the palace, have you not?" Percy asked.

"That I have," said Jordan.

"And in all of these, what would you say has been your greatest foe, the one adversary that came against you repeatedly, was the most persistent in struggle and the last to give in?"

Jordan was silent for a moment, pondering this riddle. Then he knew. "That undeterrable foe was me, was it not? For the greatest struggles I did face were those of my own making—my fears, my mind, my hesitation."

"You have hit upon the answer," Percy smiled, "and in doing so, have answered your own question. This enemy that you saw was the embodiment of your own evil nature, and the only way you could truly defeat him was by using this sword with its God given power."

"You tell me that I have now defeated all the evil within myself," Jordan laughed, "and that therefore I am good and pure from henceforth and forevermore?"

Percy laughed too. "That I say not," he said. "For truly our Lord hath instructed us, 'there is none righteous upon the earth,' and that is certainly a word of truth. But you have set out to conquer fear, doubt and your own mind, and these you have found buried within yourself, and they have been overcome."

"I do not fully understand, but I take great pleasure in the confident knowledge of it."

"And now," Percy said with a nod, "we have reached the top of the cliff again, and your final task remains before you. Go now, for we must take our leave of each other."

"Shall we see one another no more?" Jordan asked rather sorrowfully.

"I say not that," Percy said as he grasped Jordan's hand warmly. "For to those who are in God, there is never a final farewell. You may certainly call upon me any time you are in need."

"You have been a true friend to me, Percy," Jordan said, "and you shall always remain close to my heart."

"And you to mine," Percy said. "But go now, for your final work awaits you, and you will not want to tarry."

Jordan hesitated uncertainly for a moment, looking at the green fields before him.

"You shall know what to do," Percy said again. "Go then! And may God's power be with you."

With those words, Percy was gone, and Jordan set his face in the direction they had been walking, and began moving forward.

He had not been walking more than a couple of minutes when he began drawing near the little mound of earth where he had earlier planted the white lily. He smiled to see it again, but as he did so, a curious glint caught his eye—something that he had not noticed when he was here last time. Something—he could not tell what—was shining and glinting around the base of the stem in the glow of the setting sun.

Dropping to his knees in the soft earth, he moved closer to see what it was, and then his eyes widened in disbelief. For there, carefully wrapped around the base of the flower's stem, was *Amaris' golden medallion*.

Jordan unfastened the latch and picked up the piece of jewelry, examining it carefully. There was no doubt that it was the same one, for the design and stone combination were identical, and so was the brief inscription on the rear side. He ran his eyes over the familiar words, ending with the classic line: "I go in search of my destiny, for with it I will find my God." How true the message seemed of his own recent adventures!

But how had the medallion come to be here? Jordan himself could not remember when he had last seen it. A sudden thought struck him, and he moved his face closer to the flower.

Could it be...? He tried to dismiss the foolish notion with a laugh, but the many experiences with the supernatural that he had had of late had apparently dulled his disbelief in impossibility, and he found himself venturing the expression that not much more he could possibly witness in this life would give him great cause for surprise.

He turned his head carefully this way and then that, scanning every bit of the landscape. There was no sign of Amaris anywhere. In fact, there was no sign of *anything* anywhere on this plain, aside from the thick, lush grass and this mysterious flower that had accompanied him through such a great portion of his testing times.

“What am I to do?” he said aloud. But there was only the silence to answer him, and the echo of the wind cooing softly in the emptiness of his ears.

The sun had by now fully descended behind the mountains, and darkness was rapidly spreading its dusky blanket over the wide sky above. Seeing no other course of action, Jordan determined to drown his questions in sleep, trusting that all would surely be made plain in the morning light. The evening air was warm and pleasant, so Jordan rolled onto his side and gazed wordlessly at the beautiful flower, until sleep relieved him of his burdens.



A soft, fluttering feeling gradually coaxed Jordan from the heavy sleep that he was in. He knew that he should be awake, but felt unable to control his now-leaden limbs and numb faculties. It wasn't until he felt the unmistakable touch of warm flesh upon his cheek that he was catapulted into instant wakefulness.

“Amaris?” The words were out of his mouth as he sat bolt upright before he even had opened his eyes.

“Jordan, you're awake!” It was Amaris—and never had she looked more lovely than she did at this moment. To see her like this, so directly and sharply contrasting with the weeks of agony that he had endured, robbed him of all speech and coherence. All he could do was throw his head down into her lap and break into a torrent of noiseless sobs of rejoicing.

After some moments he sat up and held her face in both of his hands. “I feel as though I never want to remove my hands from you again,” he said, still unbelieving that it was really she who sat near him.

She smiled—a beautiful smile, that held all the radiance of Heaven's glory, and all the love that flowed from her heart like a raging waterfall. “My love,” she said, “I hope that we shall never be apart again. But I have not been far from you.”

Jordan turned quickly to look at the mound of earth ... the flower was gone. He opened his mouth in a question, but Amaris quickly put her hand over it. Suddenly the purpose of the test to rescue the flower from the volcano's lava was made clear: His willingness to give his life for his loved one had been the means of her restoration to him.

Amaris smiled. “The ways of our God are above our own,” she said softly. “All is not meant for us to understand. But the past is past, and the present is ours to share and to mold into the object of our own personal delight. Let us make it glorious.”

“That would give me more pleasure than anything in the world,” Jordan said. He threw himself back upon the grass, one hand behind his head, and the other still grasping her hand tightly.

Amaris came to lie alongside him, burying her forehead in his hair. “Your hair smells of all the fresh goodness of God's glorious world,” she smiled. “I could drink it in forever.”

"I should take care of too much smelling of me at this time," Jordan laughed. "For I have been doing much fighting and sweating, and I would not care to speculate upon my chances of being generally sweet-smelling."

"Your appearance does not give me that impression," Amaris said, with a lift of her eyebrows.

Jordan now looked down at his garments, and was amazed to see that they were not the ones he had gone to sleep in. These indeed were as fresh and sweet smelling as anything he had ever worn—for their scent and freshness was clearly unearthly ... straight from the hands of God.

"It would appear that I have been bathed and changed as I slept," Jordan laughed. "And for that, I am truly grateful. For I would have been quite hesitant to face my love in such a state as I appeared the night previous."

"My love," Amaris said as she slid her soft lips along his forearm, "to me you are no more radiant clothed as you are now, in the garments of God, than you were when covered in dust, sweat and blood. Your radiance comes from an inner glow—the shine of a conquering warrior, the glow of victory. You are forever my hero."

Jordan's eyes took on a faraway look of remembrance. "When this all started," he said slowly, "I remember that I expressed doubt as to my right to be ruler alongside you, and the One who launched me upon this journey said that this would be a source of proving to myself and to those around me..." His thoughts trailed off. "But I have proved nothing other than my own unworthiness, and my utter need for the power and might of God."

The two were startled then by a sudden burst of glowing light. "And that," the Queen of Heaven spoke in the chorus of birds and the rushing of waters, "is the truest worthiness of all."

The two looked up suddenly, and there she was—

the Queen of Heaven, radiant with all the glory of the celestial halls from whence she had come. At her side—and quite a contrast in appearance—stood Percy, ever stout and glowing. He was so very ordinary, so very down to earth, that Jordan immediately burst out in an unconstrained peal of laughter. He leaped to his feet and hugged his guide with all of his strength.

"I have wished for your return, that I might thank you for all that you have done for me on this journey," he said earnestly, turning then to face the Queen of Heaven. "I shall miss you both greatly when the time comes—as doubtless it shall soon enough—to return to the land of normalcy."

"Yet that time has not fully come," Percy said, with a cryptic look in his eye.

Jordan looked at Amaris, but she knew no more than he did.

"Of what do you speak?" he asked slowly. "Is there more that must transpire?"

The Queen of Heaven slowly stretched her left arm out to the side, and Jordan and Amaris watched it, transfixed, for in that simple motion was all the power of the earth and the heavens beyond, the power that sustains galaxies and sets the spheres in motion. Then her hand opened wide, and from her palm came a shining beam of light so radiant that the two mortals dropped instantly to their knees. Amaris reached out her hand for Jordan's, and they clung to each other, transfixed by the spectacle that was unfolding before them.

The Queen of Heaven brought her left hand around to the front of her, and the beam of light slowly formed into a glowing object of finest gold ... a crown. She held it forward, slightly above Jordan's head, which was bowed low now, as tears filled his eyes and raced down his cheeks.

"Jordan," she said, her voice echoing in the deepest recesses of their consciousness and filling them with

the awe of its power and majesty. “You have gone through the fire and through the water. You have proved your worth through the lowest of all times, and have shown your acceptance of your own insufficiency, and your embracing of the almighty power on High. You have been named a prince by this world, and have received a prince’s crown. Now I bestow on you the royal crown of the heavenly hosts, and with it the right—and indeed, the responsibility—to take upon yourself the title of king of your nation. Go now, King Jordan, and together with your beloved queen, take your rightful place among the worthy monarchs that have gone before you. Know that you have all the power of Heaven at your disposal, and know in this that you have nothing to fear.”

As the words echoed and faded across the landscape, she set the crown down upon Jordan’s head. There it hovered for a moment, unearthly creation that it was, then softly, gently, it shimmered and swirled back into the radiant ball of light from whence it had come, and cascaded over Jordan’s entire body in a torrent of raw energy.

In that instant, the hillside exploded in a glorious burst of life and light. The two mortals were surrounded by hundreds, thousands ... *millions* of celestial souls, each alive, each glowing, and each shouting the praise of God with all of their might.

“May this glimpse into the world beyond remain in your hearts always,” the Queen of Heaven softly placed a hand upon each of their heads, “and may it give you strength for whatever comes your way—the true strength, that is, the faith to see beyond belief and trust beyond comprehension. That is the key that will unlock the doors of the palaces on High. Go now, my children. Live in love and rule in love, and your love will be spread abroad throughout your land as never before.”

With those words she was gone, leaving Jordan and Amaris quite speechless, groping for words to

express the glories that they had seen. Resolving at last that there were none that could do justice to such an event, the two threw their arms around each other, and, twined thus together, lay back upon the soft, lush carpet of grass.

It was Amaris who broke the rather hallowed silence they had found themselves enveloped in after the departure of their celestial visitor. “King Jordan...” she whispered absently to herself, “I kind of like the sound of that.”

Jordan said nothing, staring up at the sky above him. The title of prince had once weighed heavy upon him, yet now that he had been given the title of king, he felt strangely at peace. He smiled slowly, knowing full well that the peace that he now felt within his own heart had nothing to do with his title, or with his future responsibility.

I have received an overload of impossibilities, he explained to himself. *And thus I have seen that our God is more than able to care for anything that He is fully given. And as such is the case, what cause have I to worry?*

Amaris saw his smile and gave it her own interpretation. She quickly rolled over and propped up on her elbows beside him. “I know that we must return home at length,” she said. “But I do not feel an instant urgency compelling me to arise this moment. I feel...” she paused, and looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Go on,” he whispered.

“I wish...” she hesitated again.

“Speak, my love,” Jordan murmured. “Your wish is my command.”

“I wish for my king to love me now as though there were no other mortals alive in this whole world,” her eyes flashed with unhidden passion.

Jordan sat up and slipped his arm around her waist. “And so he shall, my love ... so he shall.”

were—although undoubtedly in quite a different presentation.”

“You were safe in the hands of the Almighty, were you not?” Jordan asked curiously.

“That I was, and not for a moment did any harm come to me.”

“Indeed, His ways are past finding out,” Jordan sighed, then looked thoughtfully at Amaris. “Have you given thought to my new title of king, and how we are to explain this to the people? For it is indeed a thing most unusual.”

“I would say there are unusual things aplenty about this divinely appointed rule of ours! But who are we to question? I can certainly see many advantages to your kingship.”

“Such as?” Jordan queried, curious to hear her perspective on the situation.

“Well,” she spoke matter-of-factly, “the nations around us might think it odd that someone foreign-born such as myself sits as the ruling monarch on the throne, or may even take that as a sign of weakness. They are more likely to respect a man of noble composure such as yourself—a king who is homegrown.”

“But you yourself are as local to our people as I am—a difference of skin and of birth, but nothing else,” Jordan countered.

“Yes,” Amaris responded. “And for you and me—even for those of our own kingdom, this has become an accepted fact, for they have witnessed the leadings and the power of our God. Yet those nations around us who know us not may view it as a curious occurrence indeed.” She shrugged. “Such is the extent of my reasoning up till the present. Yet I am sure God has reasons far beyond what we could comprehend in our finite minds. Perhaps one day when we meet face to face, we shall be able to ask Him all—and in that day nothing shall remain a hidden mystery, but

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THE RETURN

“Have you given thought as to our return to the palace?” Amaris asked as the two stood on the edge of the grassy hillside, looking out over the unfamiliar landscape that surrounded them as far as their eyes could see.

“In recent moments that has been the foremost thought in my mind,” Jordan said thoughtfully, “though I fear a solution hardly seems to be forthcoming.”

Amaris made an attempt at practicality: “It would seem that we have been brought unto this place, so we should also be brought out of it.”

“So it would seem indeed,” Jordan said. “I know not much of the details of your journey, but my own was long, and fraught with great tribulation—both in time and event—and I should not wish to retrace those steps if there were any way that I could avoid doing so.”

Amaris nodded in agreement. “I cannot recall much of my own experiences over the last weeks; most of it is as a blur in my own mind. I believe that I was receiving my own instruction of spirit, even as you

all shall be plain as the light of day.”

“That day I greatly anticipate,” Jordan said, as Amaris threw her arms around him and held him close. “But now let us come before Him together, for I feel the time of our departure drawing near, and we shall doubtless not make much progress without His guiding hand to point the way.”

And so they stood, entwined in each other’s embrace, silhouetted on the lonely hillside with their shadows casting the only shade that could be seen for miles around—two lone figures on the craggy bluff ... two small, infinitely small creatures compared to the vastness that surrounded them. And yet, their spirits soared higher than the clouds and made their way into the very courts of the Almighty, there to hold with Him communion sweet, and there to learn what path their feet were to take.

It was a timeless, immortal moment, where Jordan and Amaris felt one with each other and with their Almighty Lord. Not overly great was their surprise, then, when they opened their eyes and found themselves no longer on that lonely hillside—but encircled by a dense forest of trees!

Amaris spun around, her quick gaze taking in the surroundings in one smooth turn. “We’re right behind the orchard!” she cried aloud with glee. “We’re home! Come along, Jordan! Let’s go!”

She set off in a quick run, but Jordan caught her hand and held her back.

“Wait, my love,” he said quietly. “It would not seem that we have been gone very long, but I would not wish us to rush back too rashly when we know not in fullness what to expect awaiting us.”

“But why should anything unusual await us?” she asked.

“I do not know,” he said, with a small laugh. “Perhaps I have had so many turns of fortune over the past days that I know not when to cease expecting

the worst to befall me! But as soon as I saw of our return to these whereabouts, I received a curious reminder of your strange premonition, the night before the cyclone. Do you recall it?”

Amaris cast her eyes downward and grew more serious. “That I do, Jordan,” she said softly. “For that moment I shall never forget. Do you fear then that it might come to pass as such, and that we may find the palace deserted?”

“I do not know; I only wish to be prepared should that be the case.”

“Then come, and let us make our way onward,” she grabbed his hand and began moving towards the orchard. “For I fear that all of this speculation has aroused my curiosity to such a degree that I shall be entirely consumed if it is not resolved with great haste.”

Nevertheless, her step was somewhat slower and more cautious than it had been some minutes earlier, and by the time they came to the edge of the orchard, the two were content to cast a careful glance out through the trees before stepping into the courtyard.

“I do not see any signs of life,” Amaris whispered quietly.

Jordan stepped out into the courtyard, and Amaris scurried along behind him, feeling rather nervous at this new unknown factor.

For a moment, the two paused before the foot of the great marble staircase, uncertain of what they should do. Then ... in an instant, the great door was flung open, and out from within burst a small cluster of people, with Pamela in the lead.

“Jordan! Amaris! You’re home!” she screeched above the din and clatter of all those who surrounded her. She broke into a run and covered the long staircase in three leaps, embracing the two returnees. Then she looked at them closely. “You sure don’t look like you’ve just been on a long and harrowing

journey.”

“We have been tended to and cared for in the very finest of ways, by the very finest of caretakers,” Amaris said, with a smile.

“I see that you still have my little bottle,” Pamela remarked to Jordan.

“That I do, little princess,” he said, lifting the chain from off of his neck and putting it around hers. “And it was essential to me on more than one occasion—tales which I shall be sure to acquaint you with at a later date. But first, what of your own adventures? For we have been gone I suspect nearly a full month ... and how well the courtyards and grounds look, compared to the day I saw them last!”

“We received full instructions as to what was to be our deportment while you were gone,” Pamela said. “Father came at first, and explained to me what to do. We shut down the palace a couple of days after you left, just as soon as everything was put back into order after the storm. I stayed with Father Michael, and all the servants returned to their homes or visited relatives, seeing what help they could be in restoring order to the other affected parts of our kingdom. Then, last week we got the summons again: You were soon to return, and so we were all to come back here at once and make the palace ready for that glorious occasion.”

“And that you have done marvelously,” Jordan said, smiling.

“You should have seen the palace when we first got back,” Pamela said, widening her eyes. “It was *creepy!* The place was deserted as a tomb, cobwebs everywhere and thick with dust. I have never seen it so empty or lifeless ... I just don’t have enough words to describe it.”

Amaris did not say anything, but she knew well enough from her own personal experience the impression that Pamela was trying to convey. With a

smile, she shifted her focus from the past to the present and put her arm around her little sister. “You are a sister to be proud of,” she said. “So much has taken place in each of our lives, and I see how our Lord has taken each of us and has molded us according to the plan of His choosing. And now He has seen fit to reunite us, so let us make the most of it.”

“I think this calls for a time of celebration!” Jordan shouted aloud.

“And we’re all ready for that, aren’t we?” Pamela looked around at Poplus and the other servants who stood nearby. At that cue, the front door was flung open again, and out poured a stream of people: musicians carrying instruments, others carrying tables, yet others carrying refreshments and foods of all types ... and on and on they went.

“You see...” Pamela said with a twinkle in her eye, “we *have* been waiting for you!”

“I see our God has thought of everything,” Jordan said with a smile. “Let us therefore do Him credit, and enjoy it all to the full.” Reaching out for a wine goblet, he held it high: “To life, and to victory!” he called.

Amaris gently tapped her goblet to his, repeating his words, and then joining her lips to his. “And praise be to God for the victory of love over all else,” she said softly.

Twined thus as they were in each other’s embrace, they knew that their days of trial were passed. And while there would be other trials in the future, they knew in their hearts that nothing would come their way that could ever fully rob their lives of joy, their hearts of love, or their spirits of the victory that they had received at the hands of God Himself.

**THE DARK
KINGDOM**

brighter side of the moon, for that is surely well able to far outshine the dark side.”

All of a sudden, a slight frown flickered over Pamela’s cheery face. “Amaris?” she said.

“What is it, little sister?” Amaris noticed her change in spirit and quickly drew her arm around the girl, pulling her close.

Pamela took a deep breath, and then plunged into her question headfirst. “What was it like when you first began to hear the whispers? King Merchal was always encouraging me to take time listening so that I might develop the senses to hear them. Yet I do not quite understand what it is I must be listening for.”

“That is a good question,” Amaris replied, “and one for which there is no simple answer. But I will try to explain, for I myself found these communications from beyond the realm of man mysterious when I first was introduced to them. Yet since then, and with the encouragement of our dearest father, the king, I have come to learn more about them.

“I confess that I did not quite understand them myself at first. In fact, I still do not, but I know that they are there, and that they can be heard, even sometimes felt and seen—when the heart is still, and the mind open as an empty goblet that desires only to be filled at the hand of Him who pours the wine. There are some who seem to have a natural gift of hearing these whispers. It’s as if they hear them all the time, and hardly have to try. I think that our royal father was like that. For others—such as you and I, perhaps—they do not enter our consciousness as easily. Yet I have learned to discern them, and in a manner not too entirely difficult.”

“Oh, tell me, Amaris! Please tell me,” Pamela fairly cried. “For my mind, as imaginative as it may be, has a hard time comprehending such an immaterial thing.”

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WHISPERS FROM THE NORTH

“Yet another morning in the court,” Amaris sighed with a fleeting look of mock suffering. “Wish me well, little sister, as I go about my duty.”

Pamela obediently kissed Amaris on the cheek, and offered a perky smile along with it. “Cheer up, your queenliness,” she chirped. “Things could be worse! All you’ve got to do is get decked out in finery and perch on your throne for a couple of hours. I’ve got to see to my studies and all the other stuff that these tutors think up for me to do.”

“I suppose we all have our burdens,” Amaris agreed. “For as surely as I see the need for yours, and the great good that you are accomplishing through it, I suppose you see the same for mine. And truly, I don’t mean to complain on account of my tasks, for as you said, there are a world more unpleasant things that could be falling upon me. Still, at times I become weary of attending to one problem after the other, countless situations that need resolving. Yet as you so well advised, my young counselor...”—she returned her little sister’s kiss and gave her a warm hug—“I shall strive to look upon the

“You must follow three simple steps, and I think you will find that they will guide you along the path of hearing the whispers with an ease you could not imagine. Firstly, you must let go of your own mind. Now I know—” She lifted her hand quickly to stop the flow of questions already poised to pour from Pamela’s lips. “I know that this is hard to understand, but often the key to hearing the whispers is being prepared to accept the fact that you might not understand everything they say. To put it simply, letting go of your own mind is to resolve that you are ready for anything that should come to you, even when it does not have its roots buried in the normal or understandable.

“Secondly, you must practice every day. Just as you could not learn to run or to walk or to speak this language—as you do so fluently—in one day or even one week or more, even so this practice of hearing the voices from beyond will take time. And so, resolve in your heart that you will do it and will master this skill no matter how long it takes. Set this time and adhere to it daily. Whatever business or interest would bar you from its door, you must push aside with all firmness if you wish to break through the hurdles of the natural mind that accumulate in the pursuit of such a connection.”

Pamela’s eyes were bright and eager, absorbing every word.

“And the third is simply to take what is given you, accept it, and hold it close to your heart. The whispers come unto those who treasure them, who earnestly desire and seek their company with every breath of their souls. Though you receive only the slightest wisp borne to you on the wings of the realm unseen, clasp it to you and hold it close to your heart as though you would never let it go. As you treasure and listen to and follow the little you receive at first, you will doubtless be given more and more.”

Amaris smiled at the little redhead. “But look at

me!” she laughed. “I fear I am bringing even more complexity to your problem than there was at the start of it!”

“Oh no!” Pamela shook her head vigorously. “I like your explanation. And I will do it—or at least,” she smiled shyly. “I’ll try. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to do it like you do, but I do so want to!”

“A strong desire is the foundation for all great accomplishments.” Amaris kissed her little sister and squeezed her tight. “As intensely as you desire to hear these voices, you will no doubt hear them before very long. And now I must be off to the throne room, for the great monarch awaits!”

Pamela gasped. “And my tutor is waiting! I had all but forgotten! He certainly has a strong desire for *my* accomplishments, at least when it comes to learning and study.”

“And you shall only be the wiser for it, little sister.”

“And he may be a little more fit through the pursuit of me!” Pamela added with a sly giggle. Then, with a grin and a parting squeeze, she dashed out of Amaris’ room and off down the hall, in the opposite direction from the tutor’s quarters.

With a small laugh, Amaris also exited her room, and moved quickly through the hallway towards the ornate wooden door. The door swung open for her as she approached. With her head held high and her most queenly smile on her face, Amaris moved across the largely empty hall where the audiences were to be held, and over to the two thrones at its end. Jordan was already seated upon his throne, and as soon as Amaris entered with all her regal elegance, his attention turned to his approaching queen.

“And how is my lord the king on this fine day?” Amaris inquired, as she moved up the short carpeted staircase to take her place near him. As she passed, she added a wink and a saucy lift of her eyebrow for his private benefit.

“Infinitely the better for the beauteous sight that I am honored to receive in my presence daily,” Jordan said as he smiled back, forming his lips into a kiss.

Amaris maintained her naughty mood. “Ah, you speak again of that chambermaid of whom you appear to be so fond!” She feigned an air of mock resignation to a troublesome fate. “But what it is that attracts you...” She was forced to break off as she burst into a most unqueenly set of hysterical giggles, while Jordan simply looked on in amusement at her childish outburst.

“You certainly are in a playful mood today,” he commented simply.

“I suppose that I am,” Amaris returned. “I had the pleasure of exchanging some words with my young sister as I made my gloomy preparations for the morning’s auditions, and she apparently had this somewhat dubious effect upon my sense of humor. Still, time flies along with characteristic haste, and I suppose I must settle into a more sober state of mind, for what this day will bring—be it boons or burdens—will be best handled with a wise heart and tempered cheerfulness.”

“You speak in all wisdom, my love,” Jordan said. “Let us therefore take a few moments now before our first audience, that we may put on our true anointing. Only thus shall we be worthy of these crowns that we wear.”

And so the two young monarchs bowed their heads in the silent hall, flinging their hearts above for a moment of refreshing, renewal and direction. As their words rose to the heavens, an equal flow of tangible peace streamed down as an anointing upon their heads.

Amaris lifted her head and looked Jordan full in the eyes. “These are the truest crowns that we wear,” she said, “those that we don daily at the feet of the greatest King of all.”

Jordan nodded soberly, then sighed and leaned further back in his throne, savoring the last moments of the experience. Nearly a year had passed since the proclamation had gone forth that Jordan was to be crowned king—news that was received with a notable acceptance by their subjects. Jordan himself had adapted well to his new title, though in essence it had changed little in the way of his day-to-day life as a monarch alongside his queen. Neither one considered themselves above the other, and both looked continually to the almighty powers beyond for counsel and direction, more than to their own wisdom or whims of fancy.

After several moments, Jordan turned to look at Amaris. “Do you know what audiences we face today?”

Amaris shook her head. “I have not yet met with our chief counsel,” she said, and at the same time she pulled a long, braided velvet cord which hung between the two thrones.

Several seconds later the door at the far end of the hall opened, and a servant entered, with his head held respectfully low. Amaris called out a few words of instruction, and the servant disappeared again, only to be replaced by a man, thin and spindly, whose meticulously combed gray hair was gathered together at the back of his head into a short, thin braid.

“Artichus,” Amaris said with a smile, “come closer. I apologize that we are so late in summoning you, with the first audiences now only some minutes away.”

The man bowed his head slightly in a humble acceptance of the apology, and drew near the two thrones.

“Who is on our list today?” Jordan asked.

“This being Thursday,” Artichus explained, “all of the morning slots have been given to the common folk from your kingdom, as you requested.”

“Ah, yes!” Amaris said with delight. “This will be

our first week when those who have answered our decree come forward with whatever matters concern them. I do wonder how it shall turn out.”

“Indeed,” Artichus replied, and his look indicated that he would have said a lot more if it were not for his respect for the monarchs he faced. He was obviously not entirely convinced of the effectiveness of the new idea.

“How have the people responded to this opportunity?” Jordan asked.

“Oh, there has been no shortage of requests, I can assure you of that,” Artichus said. “For whether they have a true purpose to bring or not, I suppose there is no one who would not seize an opportunity to gain a face-to-face audience with their monarchs. We have tried to ascertain and select those who seemed to have the most worthy causes, but ... I suppose it remains to be seen how well we have accomplished this feat.”

“It will be a joy to see them, whether they have matters of great urgency to bring to us or not,” Amaris said. “For matters of urgency we receive aplenty, and a time of casual conversation would be most welcome on my side.”

Again withholding his professional judgment, Artichus cleared his throat and moved on to the next subject. “The later afternoon session has then been reserved for only the most pressing matters, as you requested yesterday to have a time undisturbed between you during the early afternoon hours.”

“Excellent,” Jordan returned with a smile. “For this week and the one previous have been so unusually busy, with two or three times the number of normal audiences. Does this plan appear to be feasible?”

“I have had to turn many away,” Artichus said, “but it has been done. There are one or two dignitaries who said that their business could not wait, and so you will have one hour before the setting of the sun wherein to receive them. But all the other appoint-

ments have been moved to a later date.”

“That is wonderful!” Amaris said. “Then I look forward to our morning and all the surprises it may bring our way!”

As Artichus finished his description of the day to come, Jordan pulled the cord and then motioned for the regular entourage to settle into their places in the hall. Artichus took his place on the left of the two thrones, and a young scribe took his place on the other side. An assortment of guards and servants lined the two sides of the hallway, and in a matter of minutes all things were settled and in place for the morning’s events. Jordan nodded his head to the servant at the door, who moved quickly out to summon the first inquirer.

It was a woman who made the historic first entrance into the palace.—Not that commoners had never set foot inside the palace before, but to come in this way—almost as though on the same level as the dignitaries and emissaries of royal kingdoms near and far—did lend a certain air of awe both to those arriving and to those who stood curiously witnessing the encounter.

The woman was perhaps in her mid-thirties, and she followed two guards down the long, plush carpet until they were all several paces from the thrones. At this point the guards stood off to both sides, and motioned to the woman to continue up several more steps, until she stood at the foot of the short flight of stairs that led up to the two thrones.

For all this unusual occurrence, the woman did not seem to be too ruffled. She maintained an air of composure, which those who took notice of found great relief in. At least if the first audience went smoothly, it would lend a bit of virtue to those which followed—masking any problems that came up with the knowledge that if the first such audience had gone well, the idea was not without merit, and thus was a

good thing to pursue.

The woman curtsied low at the very base of the staircase. “Your Majesties, King Jordan and Queen Amaris, I am honored to be in your presence.”

“And we are pleased to welcome you to the palace,” Amaris said with a smile.

The woman smiled back. “It is the first time that I have come this close to you,” she confided in a voice tinged with awe. “And I fear that the experience has somewhat set me back on all that I would have desired to bring before you.”

“Do not tremble on account of our perceived estate,” Jordan reassured her. “For we are mortals just as you are, and we sit here on these thrones above you only because this is the calling for which God has ordained us—in the same way as He has ordained you for your own calling, the which is certainly of no less importance in His eyes.”

“Or in ours,” Amaris added.

“What is your name?” Jordan asked her.

“My name is Terla,” the woman said. “I have three children, and we live in Pur—a city about three days’ journey on foot from here.”

“You traveled all this way alone?” Amaris asked.

“My eldest son accompanied me,” Terla replied. “He is only thirteen, but almost full grown in appearance. But I must not trouble you with these little details of my life. I have come before you concerning a matter that I perceive to be of great importance. I have a young friend who works at the tavern in our village. ...” Terla lowered her voice and looked around at all those who were present in the room.

Jordan motioned to her. “You may come up a little closer, if you wish,” he said.

Terla mounted several steps, and lowered her voice yet further. “I fear, my lords,” she said, “for the safety of our kingdom. For things that Kaline—that is my friend—things that she has heard have troubled her

spirit greatly, and thus she came to confide them to me.”

“Of what things did she speak?” Amaris asked.

“She spoke of spies and infiltrators, of the evil kingdom to the north, which it seems is bent upon the destruction and overthrow of our peaceful country. Yet because they know that we are a loyal and close-knit people, Kaline has heard that they have sent in spies to learn as much as they can about our ways, to infiltrate positions of authority, and occupy places where they could quickly eliminate any resistance once comes the time of their attack. All of this I have heard from my friend Kaline, a waitress.”

“You speak grave words,” Jordan said seriously.

“I admit that they seem preposterous,” Terla said, then sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “I myself first met these concerns of my friend with a great deal of silent laughter. Yet,” she said as she shook her head, “I also cannot deny what I have seen.”

“What you have seen?” Amaris asked.

“Nothing in the way of evidence,” Terla said quickly, “but I know Kaline very well, and the change that I have seen come over her is undeniable. While once she was a warm, happy, carefree young woman, now she appears wracked with fear and worry. She scarcely eats anymore, and resembles more a skeleton than a human being. That these things weigh heavily upon her is unmistakable, and that to me is proof that—at the very least in her mind—they have much basis in truth.”

“Then why did your friend not come unto us herself?” Jordan wondered aloud.

“I believe that she knows more than she has been willing to confess even to me,” Terla sighed, “for her fear far surpasses that of the mere suspicion her words proclaim. In truth, she does not even know that I am here, for I fear that, if she knew, she would go quite mad with worry for my safety. And yet at the

same time, I am worried for her. And if what she has told me be true, there is ample cause to be worried for our kingdom, which is why I came.”

A loud gong at the far end of the hall interrupted their conversation, and the timekeeper made the solemn proclamation that the time of the woman’s audience had come to a close.

“Is there anything else that you wanted to say before you go?” Amaris asked.

“That was the message that I wanted to deliver,” Terla said. “I will now entrust the knowledge of it into your capable hands. For all know that you rule wisely and with the power of God, and this has filled me with great peace that the matters which I commit into your hands I commit as into the hands of the Almighty, and thus they will be well cared for.”

Amaris said quickly, “I pray you know that our greatest sympathies lie with your friend, Kaline. Beseech her that she would not withhold food from her body for her worry. If there is anything that we can do for her—or for you—do not hesitate to return unto us. And I guarantee you that we will give the greatest thought and care to the matters which you have imparted to us.”

Terla bowed low in acknowledgement, and then retreated backwards, where she was met by the two guards and escorted back along the plush carpet in the way that she had come.

head in dismay. “My mind is rent in twain,” she confessed. “For I cannot deny the ring of truth that I felt not only from that woman’s words, but from the echo of them in my own heart, and which I have come to recognize as the motioning of the Almighty’s finger in the direction He would have us go. And yet...”

Jordan took up the train of thought, “And yet to assume something so seemingly preposterous is indeed a wild leap of faith into the unknown.”

“And if it were to be the truth, what could we do?” Amaris continued. “We, two young and inexperienced monarchs—if all that is being reported is nothing less than truthful, we know that we shall be facing a formidable adversary. It is reported that this kingdom to the north is ruled by a lord of high intelligence, and his forces are not small, though we were never made aware of any such hostile intentions—at least, not until this moment. What hope have we against such a one—even in open battle, much less a deceptive one?”

“So then we fight a cunning, well-prepared enemy who is invisible to us, but apparently is slowly gathering strength to the end that he may bring our kingdom to naught.”

“And even of such we have established nothing in certainty—nothing at all, not even the slightest scrap of evidence.” Amaris sighed, “All of this is very troubling indeed.”

“It seems to me there is but one thing to do,” Jordan said with a smile, as he took Amaris’ hands in his.

Amaris nodded. “You have my agreement upon that in all certainty. For what things are dark and dim to our own limited mortal vision must certainly be most plain and clear to Him above who knows all, and who will also make all known unto His servants who would inquire of Him.”

“As He has done for us so many times before, He

- 2 - OF HIDDEN PLANS

To say that Terla’s visit had imposed an entirely new perspective and thinking upon Jordan and Amaris’ morning would have been a great understatement. In truth, the ensuing audiences passed without the benefit of the reigning monarchs’ full and undivided concentration. And while they afforded unto each one who approached them their smiles, their listening ears, and their promises of help where they could, throughout it all the preponderance of their consciousness had taken flight elsewhere—some-where far to the north.

The hours slowly crept by, but finally the granted audiences came to an end. Jordan and Amaris then found themselves bypassing the banquet hall altogether, preferring to take their noontime meal in the privacy of their personal chambers that they might further discuss the intriguing information which they had been made privy to that morning.

“What do you make of Terla’s words, my love?” Jordan asked, the first moment they were alone.

Amaris had obviously been giving that very question a great deal of thought, yet she shook her

will certainly do no less for us now,” Jordan agreed.

Jordan bowed his head, and Amaris leaned hers against his shoulder, as her words came out in a soft, steady stream, “O Lord God of the heavens and the earth, harnesser of all strength and all powers that be above and below, we come before You with our heads held low, confessing our weakness and inability to express any form of knowledge or understanding before You.”

Jordan continued, “Our peace and tranquility of mind have been shattered by this knowledge which has been presented to us; yet we alone cannot discern whether these things be so or not, and what we are to do about them if they are so. All these and more are questions which besiege us and torture our minds.”

“Speak to us, therefore, O Lord God above,” Amaris said fervently. “Speak to us and reveal to us the hidden things, the secret things as yet unknown to us mortals. If indeed this news is true, whisper in our ears these devious deeds of the wicked ones and those who would attempt to harness their forces against Your servants. Show us their plans of iniquity, and also Thine own plans of righteousness and of might, and what we must do—if anything—to counter such an evil that may be set to come upon us.”

The serenity that permeated the scented bower lay thick upon them like a blanket of refreshing, and for some minutes neither one dared speak, not desiring to end the flow of such tangible warmth and comfort. It flowed into their souls and filled them both with courage, fortitude and valor. Then came the instructions.

Jordan spoke first, echoing the words of the Spirit that he discerned in the whispers from beyond, “You two, My servants, must go forth, without the knowledge or support of any others to guide or protect you. You must go out as unknown—as common as those whom you serve. For only thus—by becoming

as equals with them—will you be able to tap into that secret source of knowledge of the plans of evil.

“But know this much: There is such an evil, and there is such an enemy, and you would do well to be prepared and gird up your loins in advance of the onslaught to come. For the evil shall come, whether you are prepared or not. But as you have come unto Me, I will lead you and guide you into the way that shall be made clear before you.”

Amaris followed the short pause with another heavenly message: “Make this journey out into your own land, and by seeing and observing you will learn much. For as you sit upon your thrones, problems and whispers of problems will doubtless come to you. But as you go forth as it were in secret, truly as one with those whom you serve, only then will you be able to behold in truth and fullness the burdens of those whom you govern. And thus will I also make clear unto you what plans you must make concerning the future—both your future and theirs.

“I know now that your hearts weigh heavy within themselves, for you wonder, ‘Why does our Lord not make more things known unto us? For surely He possesses that knowledge and that power, and if we were to go forth possessing it, would we not be the stronger?’ And yet, My children, for this question also I ask you to look unto Me and to trust Me. For in many things and at many times it does please Me to reveal unto you the secrets of things hidden. But in this case, as will happen many times throughout your lives, it pleases Me more to keep these things hidden for now. This will then require you to search for them before they are made known. For indeed, now is not the time for you to possess full knowledge. But at the time when you *must* know, you *will* know; rest assured on that account.”

Jordan and Amaris opened their eyes after another short pause, as they felt the virtue of Heaven rising

up again to the clouds. They threw themselves upon their faces and praised the name of the Most High Lord above in all earnestness, for His excellent wisdom and for the direction that He had made plain to them.

As their praises died down, Amaris looked up, and then suddenly clutched Jordan's arm. "Look over there," she spoke in tones below a whisper, as though the sound of her own voice might precipitate some unnatural crisis.

Jordan followed the direction of her gaze. His eyes also grew wide, and his spirit still and attentive. For only a few paces away from the two, a pale, shimmering light had begun to glow. Amaris and Jordan watched as it slowly grew, took shape, and stretched into two forms.

Amaris let out a little cry of recognition. "Father!" she exclaimed in delight at seeing Edward.

At the same moment Jordan recognized the other figure. "Your Majesty!" he said, almost at the same moment.

"We have come unto you," came the deep, unearthly voice of King Merchal, "to help you in your mission, to guide you and to be near your side. In truth, we have not often left your sides in spirit or in heart, but in this mission which you face we have been granted a special measure of closeness and manifestation, which we both shall treasure greatly."

"How I have missed you both!" Amaris said, and a little tear trickled down her cheek. "For since the time of my marriage celebration, our encounters and times together with you have been exceeding scarce. I am thankful to feel you near again, as it were in the flesh."

"We have never long left your side." Edward moved over and placed his arms around his beloved daughter. "And it has been our pride and joy, both of us, to watch you grow in body and in spirit. Yet our Lord has required us to remain unseen from your human eyes, that you may learn to grow and rule

while leaning upon His arm only. And in such He has been well pleased, for your spirits have grown and prospered in ways marvelous and beautiful to behold."

"And now that the time has come for you to make yet another step into the unknown," King Merchal spoke, "we are here to guide you and to stay with you. As for myself, I will remain here at the palace, to oversee and help guide the running of the kingdom by your council of advisors during your absence. The young princess will also need strength and encouragement during this time that you are away. The affairs of the kingdom must continue on, and I shall keep Pamela and your advisors company in your absence, and help them with those things that shall be required of them."

"And I," Edward said, "will accompany you on your journey. Though I shall not be visible to all, I shall be often manifest unto you, and it will be my pleasure to make this journey as your traveling companion, if you will have me."

"That we will," Jordan exclaimed, "with greatest joy and gratitude! For such a boon we certainly did not expect, and we have only grateful thanks to our Lord for sending us such heavenly companions and guides to direct us on our way."

"But of one thing our Lord did not instruct us," Amaris said suddenly, "and that is the timing of our departure. Must we make great haste to depart? Or have we much time at our disposal? For it would seem to me that we must plan to depart in great speed, but perhaps our Lord thinks otherwise?"

"There is much to plan and prepare," King Merchal said. "Yet the timing of your departure must also be made with haste. And therefore with great speed and diligence we must prepare the tending of the palace while you are gone, and set a firm plan of exactly what is to be done and what road you are to start

down for your journey.”

“Unto us has not been revealed the exact times and seasons of future events,” Edward added. “Verily, in detail we know not much more than you. Yet we do know this—time is short, and the future will not wait while we lag behind admiring the sunsets. We must therefore tackle our every waking hour with great vigilance, that we may find ourselves fully prepared for whatever adversary may await us in ambush as we travel the road ahead.”

Jordan cast his eyes out of the balcony to the sun. “We have still some hours before the sun will set, when we have one or more audiences planned. Perhaps we should convene a meeting of our key advisors, that we may set in order the running of the palace during our absence. Yet how shall we be assured of the safety of the palace during our absence, if indeed this tale of infiltrators be true?”

“Only by this,” King Merchal replied, “that the Almighty Himself has sent us to send you forth upon this mission. Therefore, whether there be infiltrators or no, the palace is to be of no concern to you at this time. Thus, make ready as if you were departing on a trip, informing those who must be informed of your departure, yet letting none know of your destination or of your purpose.”

“That shall be simple enough,” Jordan laughed. “For of these we do not yet know ourselves.”

“And that for your own safety,” King Merchal replied. “These shall be made known to you in due time. But your preparations must now be made in great haste. We ourselves shall see to other preparations, and see you again at the setting of the sun, to discuss the particulars of your departure.”

“Until sunset, then,” Jordan said.

“Until then!” Edward replied.

With a kiss on the cheek each for their beloved daughter, and a warm embrace for Jordan, the two

heavenly counselors slowly faded from view, leaving behind two young minds churning in greater turmoil than perhaps they had ever experienced before.

“What type of adventure is this upon which we are embarking?” Amaris asked, with a note of curious expectancy in her voice.

“That I know not,” Jordan replied, “but all my senses would lead me to believe that we shall witness some truly spectacular events over the next while, which shall surely shape our image of reality and life as we know it into altogether new forms!”

Amaris squeezed her husband’s hand excitedly. “I must confess that I await those times with a great deal of anticipation,” she said gleefully.

“As do I,” affirmed Jordan, “but now, let us make haste to the White Room, that we may gather together our counselors and Pamela, to discuss the future that is most speedily to come upon us.”

Andrika, the foreign minister (and only female counselor), and Tertrius, the chief advisor in matters of state. Of all these, Poplus was the only one Pamela counted amongst her acquaintances, and she was glad to be sitting on the side of the table nearest to him.

The counselors present looked from one monarch to the other, scouring their faces (albeit as unobtrusively as they were able) in hopes of finding some small clue as to the reason for this unexpected and urgent meeting. Sensing their unease, Jordan looked over at Amaris, who nodded her approval, and he began immediately.

“My noble counselors and advisors, I am pleased to be gathered with you here today. I know that you are all perplexed at the uniqueness of this hastily requested gathering. Therefore I hope to place your minds at instant rest, that they be not tormented with wondering about what your futures may hold.

“It has become suddenly apparent that Queen Amaris and myself will need to take an extended journey, to tend to some urgent and immediate business.”

This announcement was clearly unexpected, and generated a controlled hum of expectant chatter, which died down again as quickly as it started, when Amaris opened her mouth.

“Because of the great urgency of the need, we will be departing upon the first day of the week to come. This leaves us only days to prepare ourselves and leave the affairs of the palace and the state in order, and in your capable hands, for the duration of the time that we shall be gone.”

“Are there any questions?” Jordan asked.

“What kind of company will you journey forth with?” Tertrius questioned.

“We shall go forth alone,” Amaris said decisively—in a tone of firmness which surprised the counselors

- 3 -

IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER

The buzz of conversation that hovered lightly amongst those gathered at the long, oval-shaped table in the White Room slowly evaporated as the door at the far end of the room opened and Jordan, Amaris and Pamela entered. All rose to their feet and riveted their attention to the two monarchs as they took their places at opposite ends of the table. Pamela found an empty seat and settled herself in as comfortably as she was able amongst such lofty personages.

Although she knew most of those present in the room on sight, most of them did not deem it within their status to hold much fraternization with such a young person—and a female at that—and so her observations of them were usually contained from a distance. She stole a glance to her right, where was seated Artichus, the chief counsel in matters pertaining to the running of the palace. Near him was seated Poplus, the chief steward, who was largely responsible for the managing of the servants and the maintaining of order in the palace. Derek, the head of the palace guard, sat on the other side of Poplus. On the opposite side of the table from Pamela sat

present as much as the words she had said.

“But Your Majesty,” Poplus said quickly, “surely you realize the danger of traveling forth without an accompaniment of at least several armed guards! To journey thus unassisted and unaided would not only be placing yourselves at a great inconvenience, but you would be taking upon yourselves a great risk as well!”

Other counselors muttered their assent and offered various words of support for what Poplus had expressed.

“Nevertheless,” Jordan said with equal firmness, “thus it shall be. For thus are the orders that we have received from our Almighty God, and thus shall they be carried out. But I think that you need not worry for our safety, for as you all well know, the One who goes with us is vastly more powerful than any who could ever dream of opposing us.”

A slight pause heralded the close of that subject, and Andrika took up the empty moment. “How long shall your journey be?” she asked.

“Of this fact we do not know much at present,” Amaris returned. “For a great deal depends upon what shall be found when we reach our destination.”

“And now,” Jordan said, “unless there are any more questions...” He paused and scanned the room, then went on, “The queen and I shall take our leave, for we have many preparations to tend to. We will courteously request that the remainder of you—outside of our little sister, who shall aid us in our preparations—would remain in this room for the purpose of discussion and arrangement of all the many matters which must be tended to during our absence. Once you have put together a proposal, we will return and give our approval upon the plans, or offer further suggestions of our own.”

The counselors nodded in turn, and Amaris and Jordan rose from the table. Pamela also slid out of

her chair and scampered along behind them.

“One more thing...” Amaris said as she came to the door, turning slightly and looking back at the five who were still seated around the long table. “Doubtless the remainder of the staff will notice that we are not around, and rumors of our departure from the palace will likely spread as audiences are inexplicably delayed. Nevertheless, we would like to ask that you not mention any of the details—sparse though they may be—such as we have revealed to you in this room, to any others aside from yourselves. This matter should not be discussed further together, or with others not now present, but should be sealed with the blessing of your silence. May we request your word of honor in this regard?”

Each member of the council nodded solemnly, and the three passed through the heavy wooden door and out into the hallway.

“How do you think it went?” Jordan asked, as the door shut behind them.

“You’ve sure got them guessing!” Pamela grinned in her own naughty way. “But I hope you’re gonna tell me a bit more of the mysterious stuff before you both leave *again!*”

“We shall see about that, little sister,” Amaris grabbed Pamela’s hand warmly. “Now come along to our chambers, for there is much that we need to discuss.”



“You want me to do *what?*” Pamela echoed incredulously.

“To be our liaison,” Amaris repeated, “our connection within the palace.”

“But why me,” Pamela asked, “when you’ve got all those big important folks in that council chamber?”

“The reason is not of the essence right now,” Jordan said softly, “for we cannot give forth too many details at this present time. But suffice it to say that our

Lord has warned us to move with extreme caution as concerns all members of the palace outside of our own selves for right now.”

“You mean there’s some type of spy going around?” Pamela’s eyes widened, and she instinctively lowered her voice and glanced furtively from side to side. “That’s so spooky! And so exciting!”

“Well, we don’t know that for sure,” Amaris said quickly, “and should there be one, the very last thing we should hope to do would be to alert him that we are aware of his presence. Nevertheless, proceeding with caution, we would like to communicate only with you while we are away.”

“Well sure, I’m happy to do that,” Pamela said. “But what do I do? Are you gonna send me special coded messages?”

“Far less complex, I’m afraid,” Jordan laughed. “We would ask you but this: Every evening as the sun first begins to set upon the horizon, you must go to some quiet, secret place. Do you have such a place?”

“I sure do!” Pamela said, and opened her mouth to provide more details but trailed off as Jordan continued his explanation.

“Excellent,” he said. “Go to this place at that set time every day, and listen very carefully to the heavenly whispers. They will either tell you that all is well with us, and that you may go about your work with no need for worry, or they will tell you that all is not right, and that there has been some unforeseen trouble.”

“And what would I do then?”

“Then you must pray the more desperately, and the whispers will doubtless reveal to you what you are to do. Only remember this: Do not act in haste, and do not say anything to anyone that you do not receive specific permission for from above. Follow these simple guidelines and all will go well with you.”

“But wait!” Pamela said suddenly. “What if I get

there one day and nothing comes? What if there are no whispers and I hear nothing? Or what if I hear that all is well when it really isn’t? Or what if my own mind dreams up a problem when all is well?”

“Little sister...”—Amaris moved closer and circled her slender arm around the girl’s waist—“you have been practicing to hear the whispers, have you not?”

Pamela nodded slowly. “I’ve started, like you said, though it’s not been very long.”

“And?”

“Well, it’s been going good, but it hasn’t been so serious as this! And well, yes, sometimes I just sit there and I don’t hear anything.”

“Well, if nothing comes,” Jordan said, “then you must just assume that nothing was meant to come. And that would mean that all is well. You have done well at practice, little fiery friend. And now your Lord does call you to battle, to put into full usefulness those talents that you have honed so diligently. So do you think that He will fail to deliver what He has promised to such a faithful one as yourself?”

“I suppose not,” Pamela agreed, a little more cheerfully. “I will accept my mission in faith, then, knowing that He cannot fail, for the good of His work. He will surely come through no matter how weak the vessel!”

“Excellent!” Amaris smiled. “I am so proud of you, Pamela! We could not accomplish this mission without your help!”

“I wish I could know more of what your mission is!” Pamela sighed wistfully.

“In truth, little one,” Jordan replied with a smile, “we wish that we could know more ourselves! But hold tightly to your faith and your patience, for in due time all shall be revealed unto you.”

“I know.” Pamela stood up and smiled back. “And I will wait patiently until then. Now I suppose I should be off. My tutors will be looking all over for me.”

“Very well then, little sister,” Amaris said, “I shall

look forward to seeing you at the evening meal.”

With a flash of a smile, Pamela turned and darted out the door, shutting it none too quietly behind her. Jordan looked over at Amaris, who returned his grin with a shake of her own head.

“And now,” Amaris sighed, and leaned back on the comfortable sofa, “I suppose we would do well to busy ourselves with further preparations, until such a time as we are summoned to return by the council.”

Jordan nodded. “Although I confess that I scarce know where to begin,” he said, shaking his head slowly.

“Neither do I,” Amaris replied. “Perhaps we should then take the most natural course—the one way that we shall truly know what to do.”

Reaching her hand out to grasp his, the two lowered their heads slightly, and as their eyes shut, their spirits rose to become one with the hosts above, there to learn, to grow, to partake of treasures unspeakable until such a moment as it was time for them to return to earth again to continue with their daily lives.

Neither of them noticed the soft orange glow of the sunset beginning to fill the room with its golden light, yet their spirits at that same moment became aware of King Merchal and Edward being with them. And in that same moment of silent communication, the first steps of their journey were made clear to them.

the palace at nighttime,” she said.

“Indeed it has,” Jordan agreed. “But I agree with the wisdom of our Lord to leave at the onset of darkness, rather than at dawn, as we had announced. It would have been far too conspicuous a time for us to make an unobtrusive exit, whereas by leaving as we do in secrecy, the masking of our identities will be more easily maintained.”

“So how long until we reach Pur?” Amaris asked.

“It will mean heading north,” Jordan answered, “and over some rugged and mountainous terrain. But if this horse can keep a steady and swift pace, we should see the gates of the city by sunrise. Nevertheless, this horse is no royal litter, and I fear the discomfort of it will set upon you swiftly enough, and only make the ride seem longer.”

“You need spare no tears on my account,” Amaris retorted cheerfully, “for my spirit is hardier than my body, and will carry me throughout whatever unaccustomed discomforts I may face.” Then she sighed, “I do hope Pamela will be all right.”

“You need not worry for her,” Jordan assured her. “I am sure she will be more than happy to have King Merchal to watch over her. He fairly adores the little creature.”

“Oh, but of course, that is right. I had all but forgotten about him, and my dear father, Edward. He was to be *our* companion upon our travels, was he not? I wonder if he travels with us now.”

“I can only assume that he does,” Jordan said. “Although I confess that I do not sense his presence. But I suppose what type of manifestation we may expect from him will be made more plain as time marches forward.”

“There!” Amaris cried out suddenly. “There is the road! It is only a short way off this trail and up that bank. But perhaps we should don our costumes before we set foot upon this more open walkway, for

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TRAVEL BY NIGHT

Several days later, as the dusky shadows deepened and then sank into the inky pool of night, two dark-clad figures moved noiselessly through the palace halls. Passing through the White Room, they came to a small side door—invisible unless one knew that it was there. Pushing it open, they descended a narrow flight of steps. At the bottom, they unlocked a door which opened up to the back of the palace, where a cluster of trees hugged the outer walls. Once shut behind them, the door blended into the walls without a visible trace. They quietly disappeared into the adjoining forest, a short distance into which they found a worthy horse ready and waiting as they had arranged beforehand.

Quickly depositing their pouches into the horse’s saddlebags, they loosened his reins from the tree he had been tied to. Then, both mounting the ample stallion, they continued their way noiselessly through the large forest.

It was a good twenty minutes before Amaris thought to open her mouth, and even then, it was in a whisper. “It’s been a while since I’ve been far out of

we never know when we shall come across someone, and our ruse will need to be intact from the start.”

With that, they both dismounted, and pulled off the royal cloaks they had wrapped about them in case they would have been spotted by anyone as they made their way out of the castle. Then, after exchanging them for some thinner, but nonetheless sufficiently warm peasant’s cloaks, the two stood up to look each other over—at least as much as they could in the silver moonlight.

Amaris had prepared her hair earlier that evening by rinsing it several times in a thick mixture of bitter wormwood root and various barks and resins—a special combination which had rendered her golden tresses into a glorious chestnut color, though they were further hidden under the simple head-covering she wore. The mixture had been prepared to such a concentration that it would remain steadfast for some weeks before giving way to her natural hair color. As they had no idea how long they would be traveling, Amaris had brought with her a small sachet containing a second portion of the mixture, should she need to extend the life span of her anonymity.

She had also rubbed her skin with a smooth, thick cream as she was accustomed to doing, but this time had carefully tinted the cream beforehand with dark honey and particles of finely ground bark, which when applied had successfully taken the pale shine off of her skin. This process she would need to repeat almost daily to maintain the effect and thus be able to easily blend in with the rest of the darker-skinned populace, so Amaris had brought a fairly copious amount in an earthen jar which lay in the sack that was safely stowed in one of the horse’s saddlebags.

Jordan’s person had undergone a less dramatic change, consisting of a simple negligence of the manly art of shaving. He now had a fine, shadowlike stubble beginning to spread across his jaw, and Amaris

thought it suited him just fine. With time, the disguise would only increase.

They were both dressed in the costumes of local peasants, and their feet clad in the simple, coarse sandals of the workingman. Besides that, their pouches held a few changes of clothing, a few basic foodstuffs to last them to their first destination, and the royal cloaks they had just taken off. Aside from that, and the small bag of gold coins which hung on Jordan’s belt (together with a rather old-looking sword, in case they would need to make use of one), they were free—free to follow the wind and pursue the voices that were calling them onward, and into the heart of the kingdom that they knew as their own, but with which they were scarce acquainted on an intimate basis.



The sun was just beginning to rise in the east when Jordan gently nudged Amaris, who was seated behind him. She started slightly as she opened her eyes and realized where she was, giving a little laugh. “I didn’t know that I could sleep so long on a horse whose gait is as jolting as this one’s is,” she said, and began to pat her face briskly. “I confess, though, that I hardly feel any more rested for it.”

“You are holding out well, my love,” Jordan smiled. “But look before us—there it is, in the valley below—the town of our destination: Pur!”

“And somewhere behind those gates that now shimmer so welcomingly in the early sun,” Amaris said, pausing as a deep sigh of longing passed through her body, “is a soft, warm and inviting bed—just waiting for the caress of two weary travelers.”

“Keep heart, dearest,” Jordan laughed as he squeezed her hands, which were wrapped around his waist, “for though this road leads straight to the city, it winds but slowly down the mountain. It shall be yet several hours before we set foot within the gate.”

“Then, by all means, let us proceed!” Amaris said joyfully. “I must confess that when we did not stop at the other two smaller villages on our way I nearly found cause to quail inside, for my whole being craves nothing but comfort and coddling. Oh, how my flesh is comforted to know that we are thus near to our destination!”

“At least our first destination,” Jordan interjected, “for who knows how far this adventure will take us before it is over!”

“Indeed!” Amaris shivered with glee, almost forgetting her tiredness for a moment, because of the reminder of further excitement to come. “And not only that, but I would brave all the tiredness and aching limbs in the world for this type of thrill and adventure—following our Lord step by step, and journeying into the unknown with only His hand to guide us. What a life!”

“What a life!” Jordan agreed, spurring the horse back to its steady canter.



“Oh, the feeling of the grass beneath my feet again,” Amaris breathed joyfully. They had reached a plateau near the foot of the mountains, and had stopped for a few moments of rest. Before them lay the city, beyond which they could see the plains which stretched northward to the horizon, and to the very borders of the northern kingdom.

The path they were on continued down the slope, and then onwards a short distance longer before merging with a square of sorts, which extended itself to the gates of the city.

Amaris shook her head, taking in the scene around them. “Truly, as dear a horse as we have, if the city gates were not as close as they are, I do not think I could bear one more moment aboard that creature. I see now why litters were invented. Oh, for a bed to rest my aching frame!”

“I share your feelings,” Jordan said, and Amaris looked at him in surprise.

“Why, Jordan,” she laughed teasingly, “do I detect a note of weariness coming from that tireless male frame?”

Jordan smiled back at her. “I confess that even the most hardy of men requires a certain moderate amount of common nocturnal comforts, and—placing my remarks in that context—yes, I would say that you have detected correctly.”

“Well then,” she said, “let us not waste another moment in idle chatter! This is a national crisis! Such a situation must not go unchallenged for longer than can be helped.”

“Wait,” Jordan said quickly, “there is no private stopping place from here on until we reach the city, and as you can see, the outlying square is quite filled with people. Perhaps we should once again bring our mission before our Lord, confirming that we are indeed on the right path before we make our entry.”

“You speak wisdom,” Amaris agreed. Then joining their hands tightly, the two paused for a moment of silent conference with their Heavenly Guide.

A low voice startled them from their meditation. “Hello, children!”

Amaris looked around quickly. “Father!” she cried. “You are here!”

“That I am, as real as the two of you.” He smiled his own special smile. “But since this fact is not made known to the majority of the population who may take notice of you at this time, it would be best to be discreet in your interaction with me.”

Amaris widened her eyes questioningly at that rather cryptic statement. “You are not visible to others?”

“I am not,” he confirmed. “So you can imagine that if you were to shower me with embraces at this moment, a casual observer might think you worthy

of several rather strange assumptions.”

“Can you then choose when you will be seen by people and when not?” Jordan asked curiously. “For I recall some other times when you were plainly seen by all around.”

“It is all for a purpose, my dear boy.” Edward smiled again. “For the ways of our Lord are past finding out, and what He chooses to perform one time may prove directly contrary to that which He chooses to do on another occasion. Let us therefore do the very best thing—that is to take our orders directly from Him day by day. Then we shall never go wrong, and then our full success will be assured. But come now,” he said, taking Amaris’ arm, “for we have much that we must discuss. This day shall be an important one.”

“Today?” Amaris asked weakly. “I confess I was anticipating a long sleep...” Her voice trailed off, and she added quickly, “Nevertheless, I am quite ready to follow the commands of our Lord, wherever He shall lead.”

Edward laughed, and the other two couldn’t help but laugh a little along with him, for the pure, rippling laugh of a heavenly being is a refreshing sound to the ear, and highly contagious. “My weary earth children,” he said kindly, “of course you shall have your rest. Once again, I speak as a creature of another dimension. This day is important, but importance is not always measured in length of time spent in service. Sometimes something remarkably infinitesimal may be of unaccountable importance, and another day spent in performing tasks high and lofty may appear trivial in the final outcome of life. Remember this,” he nodded wisely, “and you shall save yourself much needless toil and weariness in your lives.”

“Shall we enter at this gate?” Jordan asked.

“And what shall we do upon entering the city?” Amaris interjected. “Where shall we stay?”

“You are being led step by step,” Edward explained, “and step by step shall the path be made clear unto you. But now come, let us go through the gate together.”

“You will pass through with us?” Jordan asked in surprise.

“Remember, I am only visible to you, and only you can hear me. I can only be a help.” He smiled again, a sly little smile. “Only take care that you address me not directly as we pass in view of the guard. For he may find it a rather notable curiosity should you be seen to be communicating with incorporeal beings.”

Amaris laughed. The three then turned, with Jordan leading the trusted stallion, and together they headed towards the square.

There was a steady procession of all sorts of people thronging the entry square, passing through the main gate and into or out of the city. Old, bent-over peasants from small mountain villages nearby stumbled along under heavy baskets of produce; rich merchants inspected their and others’ caravans camped outside the city as they rode along on fine stallions; young children scampered merrily around their mothers’ skirts, without a care in the world.

Trying to blend in as much as they could, Jordan and Amaris nonchalantly joined the crowd, and made light conversation together as they approached the entrance of the gate. They were nearly past it—for the guard on duty seemed content to watch the many visitors come and go without much reason for suspicion, so long as they proceeded in an orderly fashion—when a gruff shout was heard behind them.

“You there! Step aside!” It was a gruff man who bellowed out from amongst the crowds.

Jordan turned slowly. “You called out to us?” he asked.

The burly man elbowed his way through the remainder of the crowd and moved up near Jordan.

"That I did," he answered, and motioned for them to come aside near where the chief guard sat under a large awning.

"What now, Dumar?" the guard asked the gruff man irritably.

"I have been eyeing these two for some time, sir," said the bearded man. "They stopped a while before entering the square, acting suspiciously amongst themselves. They also are not from these parts, for I have not seen them before. I say they could bear some questioning."

The guard laughed sarcastically. "Tell me, Dumar," he said, "do you know the names and faces of each of the hundreds who proceed to and from this city every hour of the day?"

"They are strangers," Dumar protested stubbornly.

"Well, I see nothing strange about them," the guard returned. It had obviously become a personal confrontation of opinions, more than a matter of the authenticity of the new arrivals. "And seeing as I am the guard on duty, and your watch does not begin until sundown, I suggest that you make better use of your time than trying to interfere with my watch." The guard turned to Jordan and Amaris and said haughtily, "You may go, friends. And have a pleasant stay in our city."

Amaris saw Dumar's eyes darken angrily, and before they could make their way off, he pushed his way through the crowd and disappeared into a narrow street.

"He is a strange man, that Dumar," the guard said with a sigh, and then shook his head in perplexity, further muttering to himself, "These northerners ... all alike!"

Jordan turned around quickly, but forced himself to ask in a calm, casual voice, "What was that?"

"Did I say something?" the guard asked.

"You were speaking of Dumar ... the man who

accosted us," Amaris added helpfully. "Is he not from these parts?"

"That he is not!" said the guard disdainfully. "No true son of this region would conduct himself in such an uncouth manner! But these days there seem to be a steady number who come from the northern cities across the border. They seem to have taken a fancy to our climate, I hear, and many have taken up residence here. They try to blend in and become part of our culture, but no"—the man shook his head with a dead certainty—"their manner betrays them every time. I can almost spot them on sight." He spat contemptuously upon the ground. "I don't trust them—nor do I like them."

Amaris opened her mouth to ask another question, but then she looked over and saw Edward motioning to them with his hand. "It is time to move on," he said softly.

"Well, thank you for your time," she said quickly. "We will not impose further upon you." They moved off into the crowded street again.

Before Amaris could question Edward about his words, he spoke in tones soft but firm, "Remember, my dear ones, that the answer to the puzzle will not come all in one large bite. And he who seeks to bite off too much at any one time may find himself with a very sore stomach! Take heed of the curiosity of strangers—and take heed that you yourselves do not fall under that category! For not only are there eyes upon you at all times, but you do not want to arouse more suspicion than is necessary even amongst those who are friendly. Remember..."—Edward's tone grew sober—"you are alone in this city, and these who plot evil against your kingdom would like nothing more than to see your lives ended, should they discover who you are. So take heed, and walk always in prayer and vigilance."

of strength were sorely depleted from the tiresome journey she had endured. She also now led the horse. Thus following along at a slightly slower pace, she tried to keep watch on Jordan as he jostled his way down the street.

Despite the crowds, Jordan had little trouble keeping up with the brown-clad woman. Only as he reached her and placed his hand on her shoulder did he suddenly realize that he had not thought about what he was going to say to her. For he could not present himself as who he was ... therefore, what was his reason for stopping her in the middle of the street?

Terla turned upon feeling his grasp, and looked right into his eyes. A seeming glimmer of recognition flickered in them for a moment, and Jordan, instantly spotting it, began to speak whatever words first came to him.

“Excuse me for coming up to you so boldly, madam,” he said apologetically, lowering his eyes in a pretense of modesty, but in reality to draw back from her scrutinizing glance. He reached out his hand for Amaris, who was just now catching up behind him. “My wife and I have newly arrived in this city, and we are looking for a reputable place to sojourn for some nights.”

It was the testing moment of their ruse, but had any thought of cognizance crossed Terla’s mind at the sight of Jordan, it quickly disappeared at the sight of Amaris, who was entirely unrecognizable. She quickly looked them both over before asking, “Why do you approach me, with all these other people around?”

“Madam,” Jordan said soberly, “the answer to that question I do not fully know. I only felt some leading of the Most High One directing me towards your person. I trust His judgment implicitly, and therefore I have faith that you are one who would treat us kindly and fairly.”

The woman smiled, and looked somewhat relieved. “Then I am glad to make your acquaintance,” she said,

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SUMMONS

“Where do we go now?” Amaris looked over at Edward, who was still walking silently alongside them as they made their way slowly through the city streets.

“Keep your eyes open and your hearts attentive,” was his only response, and so they journeyed onward in silence.

All of a sudden, Jordan caught Amaris’ arm. “Could it be...?” he said softly. “Look, ahead of us—that woman! Do you recognize her?”

“Why, she looks a great deal like that woman that first set us out upon this incredible adventure, when she came to court and told her tale. ... What was her name?”

“Terla,” Edward said. “She is the one you are being led to. Approach her, and take what she offers you. And now, I will leave you two alone for a time.” With those words, he faded before their eyes.

Jordan and Amaris had little time to ponder Edward’s sudden departure, for they needed to catch Terla before she was lost amongst the crowded street, which was bustling with midmorning activity.

Jordan moved more quickly, as Amaris’ reserves

reaching over and kissing Jordan on both cheeks. “My name is Terla!” She hesitated questioningly, waiting for them to take their turn.

Jordan hesitated, and Amaris quickly spoke up. “My name is Anna, and this is my husband Joram.”

“Very well then,” Terla smiled, “I would be glad to lead you to a reputable hostel. It is in this very direction that I am going at present. I would be glad to accompany you.”

“We are most appreciative,” Amaris said thankfully. “For we have journeyed long and hard, and would find great comfort in a roof and a soft bed.”



“There, you see?” They had walked for about ten minutes, and were winding through some of the smaller back streets. Terla now raised her arm and pointed her finger straight ahead, where a humble-looking structure stood at the corner of a street. “It is a tavern, but they run a small hostel in the upper floor, and I happen to know that they have several rooms free. It has a good name, and is known as a pleasant house to both noble and peasant who take lodging in it. You should find the accommodations comfortable and the price affordable.”

“Thank you again, Terla,” Jordan said, clasping the woman’s hand in both of his. “Your kindness to us strangers we greatly value.”

She nodded and smiled, then added, “Oh, and tell them that Terla has sent you. They will see to it that you are treated royally.”

Jordan and Amaris looked up at this rather odd statement, but quickly attributing it to a mere coincidence, they moved towards the tavern. Without a backward glance, Terla drew her skirts up a little and moved further along down the well-traveled dirt road.



Tying their horse to a hitching post just outside

the door, Jordan and Amaris stepped into the tavern. It took several moments for their eyes to adjust to the comparative darkness, which contrasted so markedly with the bright midday sun. It was a fairly small room, and nearly deserted at that time of the morning. A thin elderly man was making his way through the center of the room. He looked up at the two strangers.

“Greetings,” he said, in a rough but friendly voice. “Do you seek lodging?”

“That we do,” Jordan replied. “We hear that you rent rooms, wherein we might perhaps stay for some nights. We are passing through this city, and were directed to you by a woman named Terla.”

“Ah, Terla!” the old man’s gaze softened and he smiled. “That lovely woman! Well, if she sent you to us, then you will certainly be treated as friends. We are...”—he lowered his voice a little, and glanced around furtively—“we are somewhat cautious about the boarders that we take in these days.” He shook his head in disgust. “There are many lewd types that roam these city streets, and we do not want to defile our chambers with the stench of such creatures. But to know you were recommended by a dear friend—and seeing the honest looks in your eyes, and hearing the kind tones in your voices—we would be most happy to have you stay with us.”

At that moment, a young woman stepped into the room. She had very long brown hair, which was carefully braided and wound up in a careful mound upon her shapely head. Amaris noticed her frail, skeletonlike hands and her sunken cheeks.

“My granddaughter, Kaline,” the old man said, turning to look at her with a proud smile. Then he addressed the girl, “Kaline, would you show our guests up to the corner room?”

Kaline nodded obediently, and then turned to Jordan and Amaris, “Please come this way.”

“We have a horse, as well,” Jordan mentioned. “He

is tied outside, laden with our saddlebags.”

“Ah, worry not for that,” the old man answered. “My stable hand shall take care of stabling it and bringing it provender. Your bags shall be taken to your room.”

“Thank you kindly,” Jordan answered, “but I shall fetch those bags myself. My lady shall need some items presently.”

“But of course,” the old man replied obligingly. “As you wish.”

With that, Jordan quickly made his way out to retrieve their items from the horse, slinging the pouches over his shoulders and returning inside.

“Would you be interested in anything to eat? We otherwise do not serve anything until the midday meal,” the old man said to Amaris as Jordan walked back into the tavern.

“In truth, I crave a bed more than food at this moment,” Amaris answered, “and would be more than content to wait upon eating until the midday meal.”

“Indeed,” Jordan added, “we shall be content to rest till noon, and then partake of whatever moderately priced meal you should have to offer.”

“Very well.” With that, the old man motioned towards Kaline, and she led Jordan and Amaris, who hardly felt like questioning anything further at this point, up a narrow, winding staircase. This opened into a yet more narrow corridor lined with various doors on either side. Kaline led them all the way to the end of the hall and pulled an old, heavy key chain from within the folds of her skirt. Removing a key, she unlocked the door and flung it wide open. Jordan and Amaris smiled in delight. The room had two large windows on the two far corners, both of which presently faced the bright sunshine and bathed the room in a comfortable golden glow.

“I hope this will do for you,” Kaline smiled, noting the pleased expressions on their faces.

“It is perfect,” Amaris replied. “Thank you again.”

Kaline took the key from the lock and placed it on the low table in the center of the room. “Please make yourselves comfortable. We will sound the bell when the noon meal is ready.”

Then she turned on her heels and went out, closing the door behind her.

Without another moment’s hesitation, Amaris dashed over and threw herself on the bed, pulling off her thick headdress as she did. “Ah!” she breathed aloud. “To feel the soft comfort of a bed under me! I swear I shall not move from this place for days!”

“Swear not, my love,” Jordan laughed, as he lay down near her. “Although I must confess that this bed does indeed tempt me to sink to such depths. But one never knows what the next moment may hold. ...”

His voice trailed off as a knock sounded on the door. “You see?” he smiled at her. Then he called aloud, “Who goes there?”

“But a humble messenger,” came a youthful voice from the other side of the door.

“Enter,” Amaris replied.

The door opened and a tall, young-looking lad stood in the doorway, holding a small, rolled-up parchment. “A delivery for you, sir and madam,” he said, holding the item out before him.

Jordan moved quickly over to him, and took the scroll. “Thank you, lad,” he said with a smile.

The boy simply nodded and moved back out of the door as quickly as he had come, shutting it carefully behind him.

“There, you see?” Jordan turned to Amaris with a curious grin. “We are receiving our first instructions already! How quickly our Lord moves!”

“What does it say?” Amaris asked. “For I am being eaten up by curiosity!”

Jordan broke the seal and sat down on the bed so

that he and Amaris could read the missive together. Slowly they took in the simple words inscribed therein.

My new friends:

I trust you are finding your accommodations satisfactory. If you would, I would meet with you presently, for I have taken interest in some of the things that you have said. I feel that there are ways that we may benefit each other. If you will, then join me at the noon hour of the morrow. Walk to the end of the marketplace and you will see a certain stall with a bright blue scarf tied around the far left pole. Go into the door of the house immediately behind that stall, and there we shall meet. Until then.

“The letter is not signed!” Amaris said in wonder. “But who could it be from?”

Jordan shook his head. “I know no more than you, nor do I care to indulge in idle speculation.”

“As I see it...”—Amaris apparently did not have the same aversion to idle speculation—“it must be from one of the ones that we have made acquaintance with today. For as we have just entered the city,” she said, pausing to laugh at her own foolishness, “there is no reason to believe that it could be any other.”

Jordan joined her in a little laugh. “So then, we have Dumar, the crusty man who gave us trouble at the gate; the friendly gatekeeper; our first connection, Terla; our elderly host who owns this establishment; or the young and mysterious Kaline.”

“Yes, it should doubtless be one of these,” Amaris agreed, “unless we have been observed by yet another party but have not been made privy to that fact.” A thought suddenly struck her, and she looked up into Jordan’s eyes. “Do you think we should go? What if it is a trap of some sort?”

“What reason would someone have to trap us?”

“Well, if we had been recognized...” her voice trailed off. “It certainly doesn’t seem very likely, does it?”

“No, I think it is a valid concern,” Jordan replied quickly, “for in a mission of this sort, we can never be too careful. Yet it may also be the next step unto which our Lord does lead us. I would say that the only way to know for sure...” He did not finish his sentence, for Amaris herself knew the answer well.

Without another word, the two closed their eyes. As the minutes passed in two-way communication with their Lord above, Jordan and Amaris received the peace and assurance that they were seeking.—This trail was intended for them to follow. Further details than this were not given them, but more would be revealed as they went along.

“Step by step,” Amaris said with a smile, as she opened her eyes once more. “This seems to be the main method of travel these days, does it not?”

Jordan grinned back. “It is indeed a wise and prudent concept,” he agreed. “But yet more prudent at this moment I would say should be utilizing the remaining hours till noonday in restoring strength unto our bodies through the means of deep sleep.”

“Oh, that sounds as music to my ears!” Amaris agreed instantly. “Then we shall get a sound sleep tonight, and I would say we should find ourselves truly refreshed by the morning—and ready for our next unknown task.”

“Then to rest we go!” Jordan sprawled out comfortably on the bed, and Amaris curled herself up near him.

“How glad I am to be near you on such a mission of excitement and danger,” she murmured drowsily. “It adds just the right touch of romance to our already near-perfect situation.”

Jordan couldn’t help but laugh. “You are a strange woman at times.” He stroked her arm gently. “I am glad to be near you also, although I can’t say that I

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share your same craving for danger.”

Already nearly lost in sleep, Amaris just squeezed Jordan’s hand, and the two drifted off to a peaceful slumber.

Amaris agreed. She jumped up from the bed and shook her long skirts briskly, shaking her head all the while. "I should have put these aside while I rested!" she chided herself. "For now I look as though I carelessly have been sleeping in my garments!"

"Now why should they think such low thoughts of you?" Jordan teased.

Amaris picked up her head covering and wrapped it skillfully around herself. "Come then," she said, "let us make our way downstairs. I confess that the thought of a hot meal does rather tempt me at this time."



Jordan and Amaris tentatively entered the main eating area of the tavern, which was still dimly lit by the grayish city daylight that streamed in through the more than half-shut blinds. It didn't lend a very reassuring ambiance, but the delicious smell of hot food that arose from the nearby kitchen more than made up for any lack in aesthetics.

Just then, Kaline stuck her head out of the kitchen and spotted them. "Ah, you have come," she said, catching the eyes of her guests only briefly. "The meal is just ready to be served."

Jordan and Amaris moved over to the far side of the rather small room, and chose a table near a long, low window. As they comfortably arranged themselves on the soft cushions around the low table, Amaris reached over for the blind, and opened it fully. Immediately the table and their side of the room was bathed in striking golden light, which made them blink and cover their eyes for a few seconds before they grew accustomed to it.

"I see you have found yourselves a seating place," came a friendly voice beside them, and they turned to see their elderly host.

"Yes, thank you," Amaris replied, as she began to get to her feet. But the old man waved her aside.

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A TALK IN THE TAVERN

The loud and persistent ringing of the midday meal bell took some minutes to penetrate the deep blanket of sleep that enveloped Jordan and Amaris. At length Jordan opened his eyes, and then sat up suddenly, caught off guard by the unfamiliar surroundings. Startled thus from her own sleep, Amaris jumped up as well.

"What is it?" she asked.

Jordan shook his head in a relieved manner. "It is nothing," he said. "I am sorry to startle you. I did not recognize this room at first. It took a few moments to recall where we are and what is happening."

"I feel the same," Amaris said, reaching up to smooth out her rumpled hair. "And although that sleep was sweet, I feel as a famished one who has just eaten a minute appetizer, which has only the effect of causing her to crave the full meal all the more."

"As do I," Jordan agreed, "but I believe our hosts will be expecting us for the meal, and we must not keep them waiting."

"We shall rest more in the afternoon, perhaps,"

“Do not stand on account of me,” he said good-naturedly. “I am far too old for such formalities. But I will take myself a seat with you, if you will permit me.”

“We would be honored, and would greatly enjoy your company,” Jordan said with a smile. “Let us introduce ourselves, seeing as we have met, but know little of one another. I am Joram, and this is my wife, Anna.” Jordan repeated their hastily adopted names with only the barest hint of a smile.

The man bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment, and replied, “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Elder, and I am the master of this humble tavern.”

Just then, Kaline came up to the table, carrying a large dish of food, and plates for the three of them.

Elder smiled at her. “Kaline, why don’t you come and join us for a while? You look like you need a rest.”

“Thank you, Grandfather,” the girl smiled but shook her head. “But I can’t come right now. I’ve got some more washing to do. Besides,” she shrugged a little, and looked towards the floor, “I’m not very hungry today.”

With that she bustled off in the direction of the kitchen, leaving the old man shaking his head in dismay. “My word,” he sighed, as he motioned his guests to begin eating, which they heartily did. “I don’t know what to do with that girl anymore! She’s always been a headstrong child, but lately I don’t know what’s come over her. It’s almost as though she’s lost all of her zest for life. She used to be such a lively little thing, and now ... well, you’ve seen her for yourself! Barely past her sixteenth year and looking as aged and somber as an old maid!”

Jordan and Amaris listened with greater interest than they showed, glancing back and forth between each other, their meal, and the old man, who now

shook his head again, and buried his sorrow in a crust of hot bread, which he dipped in the rich, fragrant meat gravy and ate heartily.

Amaris saw the opportunity to gather a little more information on what seemed to be a confirmation of the tale that Terla had first told them. “When exactly did she begin acting like this?”

“It’s hard to say.” The old man put his bread down and looked off out the window. “These things don’t happen all at once, you know. They creep up on you slowly, and before you know it, you realize that a new sense of normality has replaced the old one, without your even having been made aware or having been properly introduced.”

“It must just be a stage she’s passing through,” Jordan said reassuringly, hoping his comment might draw out a few more specifics, while at the same time remaining vague enough to not give away what they were already aware of.

“Yes, and that’s what I have to keep telling myself, too,” Elder responded, downing a hearty swig of spiced wine. “She’s all I have left, you know. After my dear wife passed away, the same infernal plague claimed the lives of her parents and her young brother. She alone remained of our family, and we have lived together ever since.”

“I am sorry.” Amaris laid her hand reassuringly on his. “That must have been very difficult.”

“That it was.” The old man’s eyes glistened with held-back tears. “And it is yet, every day. Each day I awake to bear this burden afresh; each morning I bind it around my shoulders and each night I tuck it carefully in bed with me.”

“But why?” Amaris asked softly. “Why do you keep it so close to your heart? Would it not be better to let it go? The dead pass on to the other dimension, but they are not gone forever! You will see the ones you love again! Surely it must grieve their hearts to see

you troubled so.”

“That I cannot tell,” the old man said slowly. “All I know is that when judgment comes upon a house as surely as it did come upon mine, someone must be to blame, and I—imperfect and vile man that I am—I fear I am the most likely candidate. It would not be right to their memories to show myself too joyful, or to lay aside this weight of guilt. No,” he shook his head firmly, “this is the way that it must be.”

Seeing that his mind was firmly set upon this way of thinking, the two sensed that the subject was best left untouched further for the moment. In time, they prayed silently, perhaps there would be a way to make him see the wonderful truth. But meanwhile, they had a job to do.

Jordan returned to the subject of interest, “Your granddaughter, perhaps she is afflicted by the same sadness and loss?”

“Oh no,” Elder replied. “All of this happened more than eight years ago. She was but a child then. It was a great loss to her, yes, but youth has an amazing tolerance to pain, and has the ability to adapt and move on from it. She grieved for a while, but then she seemed to come to a certain understanding, and from that time on, she has been a pillar of strength even to me, and has put me to shame by her cheerfulness and quiet endurance.” He shook his head firmly again, “No, this new affectation is something entirely different, and very new.”

“How long has she been this way?” Amaris asked softly.

“A month maybe—or more! As I said, it’s hard to tell when such things begin to take root. But no more than three or four months at the most.” The man’s eyes narrowed. “What frightens me, though,” he continued, “is that this condition does not seem to be improving. At first note I brushed it aside. ‘Surely things will rectify themselves on their own,’ I reasoned.

Yet time passed and still more time, but nothing changes. In fact, of late it only seems to worsen by the passing day.

“Once I decided to come out and ask her about it, but there I encountered even less success, for she firmly and consistently reassured me that everything was all right, that I need not trouble myself on her behalf. Since then she has made a concerted effort to appear natural and normal around me, which pains me all the more, for I see how very hard she is trying, and what an exceeding poor job she is doing of it. And then I constantly catch her in those moments when she is not aware of my presence, and I can tell that whatever cancer is eating away at her soul, it is only thriving and growing stronger and more enslaving by the day. Ah, Kaline!” The old man’s eyes filled with tears once again. “My dear Kaline! What ails you so?” He bowed down over his arms on the table, for a moment seeming quite oblivious to his two companions.

Jordan and Amaris looked at each other awkwardly, unsure of what to do in the situation. Then Amaris reached her arm around his shoulders. “It will be all right,” she whispered softly, and under her tender touch the man ceased his trembling and became still. “We are all children of the Almighty God, are we not? And is He not thus able to care for us each in the way that we require? Our dear Kaline is a child of His love, and He will allow no harm to come to her but such as will work about His own perfect will.”

Elder lifted his head and looked from one face to the other. “You speak truth,” he said at last, with a weary smile. “Sometimes I am wont to forget such simple realities for the complexity of life that compasses me all around. But you have rekindled my tiny ember of faith, which I confess I had all but neglected the nurturing of due to life’s many

abounding problems. I shall then keep Kaline's spirit alive in my prayers, for she shall thus be compassed in such a way that our flesh could never afford her."

"We will do that along with you, every day," Jordan said emphatically. "And if there is ever any way that we can be of help or assistance, please do not hesitate to impose upon us."

"Yes," Amaris interjected, "we are more than happy to be of any service which you might require."

"Thank you, my friends." The old man took each of their hands in his and kissed them warmly. "I thank you for your friendship and your comfort. It is the very blood in my veins and restores unto me new strength and hope that I thought I had lost. I will not forget it."

Then he burst into a beaming smile. "But why sit we here so desolate? Let us speak of more cheerful matters! After all, you are my guests, and it is I who should be doing service to you." Lifting up his heavy goblet, Elder held it out towards Jordan, who raised his own and touched the rims together. With the heavy burden of the present lifted off of his shoulders—for the time being, at least—Elder seemed like an entirely new man.



By the time the meal was over, Jordan and Amaris were shocked to realize that two full hours had passed. Elder had apparently quite enjoyed their time together, and had not ceased talking of this and of that. Through him, the two had learned much about the city of Pur, and though they heard of little which would seem to help them along in their mission, still they were glad to have the foundation knowledge of the place, which they felt would be a help to them in later days as they continued along the trail that God was putting forth and leading them in.

At length Amaris leaned back and stretched her arms above her head. She looked around the long

table and surveyed all the many dishes of assorted delightful foods, all consumed to varying degrees. "We have partaken of a veritable feast!" she commented, with a little laugh.

"That is indeed the truth," Elder agreed. "I instructed our cooks to bring forth samples of all the finest of our cuisine for you, and you can see that they have outdone themselves. As for me, it has been a pleasure to share this time with you."

"But tell us," Jordan said quizzically, "what makes you look upon us with such a kind and friendly manner? For surely we to you are not any ones that you should know or recognize above any others. You say that you are very selective in your boarders ... why did you accept us to lodge with you? And why do you now shower us with such bountiful hospitality, not to mention the rich gift of your own friendship, on the sole account of us having been directed here by this woman named Terla?"

Elder just smiled a slow smile, and reached out an old, weather-beaten hand. He carefully took Jordan's hand, placed it upon Amaris', and then rested his own upon the two. "I would have taken you in with the mention of Terla's name or without it. For I have seen the glimmer in your eyes—I cannot place it, nor could I describe it if I were forced to at risk of my own life. All I know is that I have looked deeply into your eyes, and I have seen therein the reflection of my own self. With that reflection has come every knowledge and reassurance that I have needed, and I knew from the instant we met that I was to take you in as my own family, and to see to your every need."

"We are most grateful for your kindness," Amaris said quietly. "And if there is anything that we may do to repay it, by all means instruct us so, for we should like nothing more than to be able to accommodate in this way."

“I will bear that closely in mind,” Elder replied soberly. “And the time may come for me to hold you to that request.”

With that, the three stood up, and after a hearty embrace, Jordan and Amaris made their way back up the narrow staircase and into their room, where they rested for the remainder of the afternoon.

There seemed to be little else happening when they awoke, and they attended the evening meal shortly afterwards. Elder did not sit with them this time, but they were content to observe the many guests that filled the tavern at this hour, for it had been long since they had been thus among the common people, and the experience proved most interesting for both of them. They especially watched Kaline and her interaction with the various guests, at the same time seeing whether they could discern among the tables any who may have come from the northern kingdom.

After a long evening spent in such observation, they retired to their room, where their remaining hours of wakefulness after their long afternoon sleep were well expended in a manner common to husband and wife, before they drifted peacefully off into their first night's sleep in Pur.

understand that it is the woman's way."

Amaris raised her eyebrows and prepared to return a saucy remark when she stopped suddenly. "Father!" she burst out. "You have returned to us!"

"Greetings, my dear children." Edward was indeed walking alongside them. Though his countenance was sober, he had a smile on his face. "You are progressing well with your mission."

"Father," Amaris said, anxious to speak her mind without delay, lest Edward should take it upon himself to disappear abruptly, "I have had a question in mind concerning this mission of which you speak. Surely you must know how very vague is the description that has been given us of what we are to accomplish! We grope around here as little sheep under a dark cover, feeling our way around, yet not knowing what it is that we feel, or whither we are headed. I cannot help but feel that were we armed with a better plan and purpose, we might accomplish a good deal more, and with greater haste."

Edward reached out his arm and brought it tightly around Amaris' shoulders. "Peace and patience, little one," he said with a smile. "You are anxious to have a clear plan before you, but as you must know by now, the ways of God are often very different than the ways of man. Perhaps our Lord is hoping to accomplish a second purpose along with the main direction He is leading you. Perhaps this very seeking and desperate groping of yours is helping to strengthen you in other ways.

"But know this much," he said, with a smile of satisfaction, "you are progressing well, and you are following along the path that your Lord intends for you. And what's more, you have gathered some good information along the way!"

"What are we to think of this encounter that is to come?" Jordan asked. "Is there any word with which you may forewarn us of what is to be?"

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THE MEETING

Jordan and Amaris awoke quite some time after the sun had risen, though well before noon. Feeling all the better for a sound night of sleep, and having spent not a short time in communion with the Spirit of the Almighty that had led and kept them thus far, they felt ready to tackle whatever adventures the day would bring them. It was shortly before noon, then, that they made their exit into the fresh outside air, to find the stall and meet the mysterious author of the note from the day before. Attired fully in the dress of commoners, Jordan and Amaris looked as inconspicuous as any peasant couple traversing the city streets.

After making their way along the narrow alley street where their place of lodging was, they broke forth into the sunlight of a wider, more open street, which led towards the marketplace.

"Does not the air seem different here than at the palace?" Amaris asked Jordan as they walked along slowly, savoring every moment.

"That I cannot tell," Jordan smiled, "but surely you are more observant of these things than I. I

“That I may not do,” Edward said apologetically. “My mission today is but one of encouragement, and to strengthen you as you progress along the way. But you have brought this plan before our Lord, you remember, and therefore you may rest in perfect peace that He is guiding it according to His best plan.”

“Can you not at least tell us who it is that we shall meet?” Amaris said pleadingly, but Edward only laughed and shook his head. Then he brought his hand up to his forehead in a slight farewell salute, and with a smile and a little wave, he was gone again.

By this time they had reached the far end of the street they were on, and as they rounded the corner, Amaris opened her eyes wide. “The marketplace!” she breathed. “What a spectacle!”

And a spectacle it truly was. This being one of the main market days, it seemed that nearly every soul in Pur had been gathered in this one teeming mass for one reason or another. Aside from the stalls which boasted loudly of marketable goods, there was a large stage on the far side of the square whereupon had been launched some sort of bawdy entertainment. In other corners, musicians and acrobats heralded themselves before the eager crowd, which was all too pleased to soak in a little amusement on this day of festivity after their long week’s work.

All of a sudden, something caught Jordan’s eye and he grabbed Amaris’ arm. “Look over there,” he said in a raised whisper as he attempted to make himself heard to her above the crowd yet not announce his conversation to the throngs of people that now pressed around them as they made their way through the square. “Do you see that man?”

“Yes!” Amaris nodded cautiously. “It is Dumar, is it not?”

“I wonder if he is the one that we are to meet today?”

“Somehow that appears rather doubtful to me,”

Amaris said slowly, “for of all of those we have met, he seems the least likely to want to meet with us for pure motives—which is what we had gathered this meeting was, after our consultation on high. And did we not apparently conclude that he was a northern spy?”

“He certainly appeared that way,” Jordan agreed. “At any rate, let us not attract any undue attention. I doubt he would have much difficulty recognizing us as the objects of his suspicions yestermorning, and—assuming he is not somehow our friend in secret—would prefer to avoid any confrontation if it can possibly be helped.”

And so, moving rather circumspectly with one eye on the path and crowds around them, and the other discreetly on Dumar (who did not yet seem to have noticed their presence amongst the crowd), Jordan and Amaris steadily made their way across the marketplace. As they neared the far side of the square, they began to closely scan all the stalls to see which might be identified by the blue scarf, such as they were anticipating.

“There it is,” Amaris whispered suddenly to Jordan.

The two began to move steadily in that direction, but when they had arrived within several paces of it, all of a sudden a covered figure brushed past them, stopping only long enough to whisper, “Follow me, and keep your heads down.”

Jordan and Amaris looked at each other, but there didn’t seem to be much other choice than to follow the stranger’s leading. They could not tell if it was a man or woman, but the build seemed to be slight, so Jordan supposed he could easily handle the situation if it should prove to be a deterrent from their main mission.

The covered figure wove skillfully across the marketplace to the opposite side, and raised an arm towards an open doorway. “Come inside,” the figure

spoke, a little louder this time, so that the two could now recognize it as a woman's voice ... and somewhat familiar. Then she pulled back her headdress a little.

"Terla!" Amaris murmured. "It is you!"

"Hush now," the woman said, covering her face again. "And you would do well to keep yourselves covered as well while you are about. Now follow me."

She stepped inside the doorway and followed a staircase to its apex. There the corridor split two ways, and she chose the left pathway, walking briskly till they were cut off by a doorway. Upon this she knocked firmly, in a rhythmic pattern, and the door swung open.

Terla left them no time to introduce themselves to the dwellers of the home, which appeared to be her family, but motioned them to quickly move into a room on the far side of the house. Once in there, she said, "Please be seated, and I will explain everything."

A young girl came in with a tray of tea and cups for the three, then went out, carefully shutting the door behind her.

"My friends," Terla said, somewhat ashamed, "I apologize to you once again for the great secrecy. But you must understand my position. ... I fear that my own life is in danger, and I would not risk adding yours to the list of targets as well."

Both Jordan and Amaris opened their mouths to request further information about this statement, but the woman held up her hand. "One thing at a time," she said firmly. "The blue scarf was a precaution. In case someone were to have read the note that I wrote you, they would have gone to the wrong place. I have a friend who is keeping watch over that doorway, and he will inform me if anything unusual should take place there. It is always good to know, when one has enemies." She frowned grimly and gulped down some of her tea, as if to add weight to her statement.

Amaris prodded gently for more information. "You

have enemies?"

"I fear that I do," Terla sighed, "though I cannot say that I know their names or their faces—or much more than the fact that they are enemies. And even in that I cannot go by much more than an assumption—a feeling. You understand?"

"We do," Jordan said. "And we would be glad to help in any way we can. Is that why you have called us here?"

"Oh no!" Terla said in surprise. "Not at all! I have called you here that I may help you!"

"Help us?" Amaris cast a doubtful look at Jordan, and then back at Terla. "But how may you do that? We are just passing through and..."

"But surely you must know! I have received a visit from a friend of yours ... a foreigner. ..." Terla obviously could not place the name, but Jordan and Amaris looked at each other in shocked surprise. They determined to find out more before confirming that Terla was on the right track.

She continued unabashedly. "He came—very mysteriously, I thought—yesterday morning, and told me of your arrival. 'Two important people,' he said, and that you would approach me and that I should give you all due hospitality, and that I was to help you in any way I could in gathering information about the dark kingdom."

"The dark kingdom?" Amaris echoed.

"Yes," Terla continued, brushing the attached unspoken query aside for the time. "It was just shortly after that when you approached me in the street, and as he had said, I knew that you were the ones."

"And what made you trust this man? Could not he have been an impostor?"

Terla looked surprised. "Why no," she said, rather baffled at their disbelief. "He carried the royal insignia that he showed me. He was a messenger!"

"A messenger?" Jordan asked.

“Yes—from the palace. I saw the insignia and seal with my own eyes. He had been sent by the king and queen, he said, and that two of the king’s subjects would be coming to seek information on some matter I had petitioned about at the palace not many days earlier.”

Jordan and Amaris looked at each other, then Jordan said, “It seems that our way has been made even more plain than we were aware of. For your hospitality and for all of your help, we thank you.”

“It is my pleasure,” Terla said warmly. “Anything I can do to bring about the downfall of this evil empire, I am more than willing to engage in.”

“The dark kingdom!” Amaris exclaimed. “Do you speak of the kingdom to the north? Is that how it is known amongst some circles?”

“Yes,” Terla replied, “that and other names. I would say that is the more charitable of them all. Other names spoken are ‘the evil empire,’ ‘the cruel beasts,’ and many more that I do not care to repeat.”

“I see then that this appears to be a wide spread topic of discussion,” Jordan mused. “Is it much conferred about amongst the populace?”

“Only with extreme caution and care, and never with strangers,” Terla said. “So you see how unusual it is that I should bring you into such instant confidence. And were it not for the royal messenger who so specifically announced your coming, I do not know that I would have trusted you.”

“Tell me—this man, he did not leave his name, did he?” Amaris asked suddenly on a whim.

Terla knit her brow for a moment. “He did mention it, though I must say it has completely left my memory for the time. Some strange foreign name ... something like ‘Word.’ I cannot remember the full name. Although I must say that for a foreigner he had a remarkable command of our spoken tongue.”

“Edward?” Jordan whispered, almost below his

breath, and more to Amaris than to Terla.

“Yes—yes! That was it!” Terla smiled with satisfaction. “I see then that you know him as well as he professed to know you, and I am pleased Their Majesties have acted so swiftly to investigate and counter this threat from the dark kingdom.”

“Tell us more about this dark kingdom—and about your own fears, the enemies that you have referred to,” Amaris asked.

“It is all very vague.” Terla scratched her head in a puzzled manner. “We strive and we seek and dig around, we gather information, but then ... it all seems to evaporate into nothing, and we are left once again with the appearance of knowing less than when we started! It is almost as though our efforts are being monitored and deliberately thwarted at every turn. This is why I took such great care in arranging my meeting with you, for I can truly say that at this point in time I know not whom I may safely trust. And that, my friends, is a fearful thought indeed.”

“I surely understand that,” Amaris said. “When we were entering the gate, even the gatekeeper spoke with some concern about the many immigrants from the north.”

“Do you mean the main gate?” Terla asked quickly, lifting up her head.

Jordan and Amaris nodded.

She shook her head sorrowfully. “That must be Rodan. Poor man.—I suppose he had been drinking again! He will come to a sad end one of these days if he does not watch his mouth a little more carefully.” Then a sudden thought struck her, and she asked quickly, “Was there anyone else around at that time that he spoke to you?”

“When he spoke to us I don’t believe there was anyone in particular who remained, but of course, many travelers were milling around here and there.—Any number of them could have heard his words.”

"That poor man!" Terla shook her head again.

"There was one other man there earlier," Amaris said thoughtfully. "Actually, we also caught sight of him here in the marketplace on our way to meet with you. His name was Dumar; a northerner, apparently, and he took great objection to your friend allowing us to pass through the gate so easily. That same was what caused this man, Rodan, to speak to us of these things."

"Dumar?" A look of fear passed across Terla's face upon hearing that name. "And you say that you saw him in the marketplace today?"

"We do not believe that he saw us," Jordan reassured her quickly. "We caught sight of him shortly after we entered the square, and we kept a close watch on him the entire time we moved through the crowds. As far as we could tell, he did not take note of us in the slightest, though he seemed to be most intently watching the crowd."

"That is very well for us," Terla said as she stood up quickly and began fixing her headdress. "But I fear less well for Rodan. If you will come with me," she said, "I think we ought to pay him a visit."

"You fear for him?" Amaris asked as she and Jordan stood up also.

"That I do, my friends," said Terla. "If we are in time, it may be that Rodan shall supply us with some vital information—if he has not already spoken too long and too loudly so that it would have been his last time to do so!"

Terla went to the door, and Jordan and Amaris heard her speaking to the young girl who had served them earlier. "My friends and I will be speaking in here a while longer," she said. "Please see to it that we are not disturbed."

The girl nodded, and then shut the door. Then Terla moved to the far end of the room and pulled open a portion of the floor paneling. There, a crude, makeshift

hole had been bored through the wood, just large enough for one person to squeeze through at a time.

"Step inside," Terla whispered. "You will feel a ladder. Climb down that and turn to the left. This is a back way out of the house, which I have found it necessary to devise."

One by one, they made their way down through the trap door, and Terla carefully replaced the paneling above their heads. Then, following the dark wall along to the left they came to a low tunnel through which they crawled on their hands and knees for several paces until they came forth into the shaded daylight of a dark, deserted alleyway. After ensuring that no one was around, they cautiously emerged.

"Come along, now!" Terla said, setting off at a brisk pace. "We haven't a moment to lose!"

and me for a time, and I was able to find some work quite quickly—a gift of God, to be sure! And Taurus—that is, my eldest son—also has managed to bring in a little extra by several odd jobs here and there. So we have been making do—but only, as I said, by the grace of God and through His blessing.”

“That is the means by which we live also,” Jordan said, full of admiration for this courageous woman.

“I have seen that in you,” Terla returned. “In your eyes I have seen it. It cannot be disguised, you know.”

“Yes,” Amaris said thoughtfully. “So we have been told today by another person as well. I had no idea that our beliefs made us so transparent.”

Terla laughed. “In Pur, it does not take transparency for us to tell the difference between light and darkness. For we are surrounded by many dark ones, who also manifest their auras in no uncertain terms. ... Well, when a true child of light appears, he finds it difficult to remain hidden for long.”

Jordan opened his mouth to reply, but Terla suddenly laid her hand upon his arm. “Let us not speak further for the moment,” she murmured almost under her breath, “for we are setting upon the main road out of Pur, and there are eyes and ears in every place. Then we shall pass near the gate and see if our friend be still on duty.”

After they had walked a few more steps, Terla motioned to them again. “I would advise you to wait here,” she said, “out of the way a little. I see that it is not Rodan who is on duty at this time, so I shall make my way up and find out from this man when is Rodan’s next hour on duty. It may be that he is at his home, but I do not wish to visit him there, for it would draw undue suspicion. A quick meeting in this more public area should be sufficient to arrange a further time of discussion at some private meeting spot—if we can only locate him!”

Jordan and Amaris pulled their coverings a little

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RODAN

“I am surprised at what you told the girl. She is your daughter?” Jordan asked as they walked quickly through the near-deserted back streets.

“Yes, my dear Adina,” Terla replied with obvious affection. “I understand how you might be puzzled. But I did so not out of distrust, but as a simple precautionary measure. If anyone should be looking for me, I would wish everyone in my household to be truly convinced of what I wish for them to believe. It is safest that way. We are dealing with ruthless characters, you see,” she said grimly, “and the only real protection for those who are unable to defend themselves yet is total ignorance.”

“What of your husband?” Amaris asked. “Does he join you in this quest against the dark kingdom?”

“My husband...”—Terla hesitated—“is no more.” She paused for a moment, then apparently decided to lay it all out in the open. “He left me some years ago, shortly after the birth of Eldan, my youngest.—I have not heard from him since his departure. I have long since given up hope of seeing him again. I had some money set aside, which sustained my children

further over their faces and turned their backs to the main thoroughfare, which was bustling with midday traffic. Various groups of people stood here and there along the road, and the two did not stand out in any way from the ordinary.

They watched from the corner of their eyes as Terla made her way casually across the great street, then sauntered by the guard's tent. They could not make out the exchange, but in only a few moments, Terla was walking back across the street, and brushed by them with a nod of her head. They followed her after a few seconds, and moved up alongside her once they were out of the public road.

"What did you learn?" Amaris asked breathlessly.

"Not much," Terla said dismally, "except that Rodan finished his time on duty an hour or two ago, and he looked noticeably ill-tempered at the time of his replacement. The guard on duty suggested we try the nearby tavern."

Amaris raised her eyebrows quizzically.

"Rodan is greatly given over to the powers of the bottle." Terla shrugged. "If he was out of sorts, he may well have gone to drown his sorrows in such magic of intoxicating potions. Well, we shall know soon enough. The tavern he is known to frequent is just ahead, after this turn."

They arrived there in only a few minutes, and the two monarchs again waited on the step outside while Terla strolled in through the front door and swept her gaze inconspicuously across the drunken customers.

After exchanging a few words with some of the residents, she came out with a slight glimmer in her eyes. "He was here not long ago," she said hopefully. "Several of the men saw him. He got into an argument with a few of the customers and they were all thrown out. They say not more than five or ten minutes could have passed since then. They went out the back way.

Come, we can go through the tavern and see if we may follow his steps and catch up with him."

Amaris held her headdress tightly across her nose as they passed through the filthy little hovel, which reeked even more from sweat and grime than it did from the strong alcoholic beverages that numbed the senses of those who chose to spend their hours there. In a few seconds they emerged on the other side.

No sooner had they stepped into the street, however, than Terla ran forward with a little cry. "Rodan!" she said in a half-whisper, and crouched down on the ground by a figure that was doubled over at the side of the street.

Jordan and Amaris quickly caught up with her, and Jordan rolled the man over, placing his cape under his head as a pillow. Rodan seemed barely conscious, but his eyes fluttered in recognition at the sight of Terla.

"Thosh vile, shlamelshh..." His words slurred drunkenly as he tried to focus his concentration on retaining his coherency. His face was badly bruised, and the whole left side of it was nearly covered in fresh blood. With the dim light in the alley, there was no way to tell how severe his injuries were.

"We've got to do something to help him!" Amaris exclaimed. "Can we carry him to a physician? Surely there is someone who would help!"

"We certainly cannot leave him here," Terla said, but she hesitated. She glanced up towards the end of the alley, starting as though she had seen something. Then she stood up and grabbed Amaris' hand. "Come on, you two," she said. "I know what we can do."

Turning quickly, she ran back into the tavern, with Jordan and Amaris following more hesitantly behind her. "Oh help, somebody!" she called in a loud, pleading wail. "There's a man out here ... he's *bleeding!* Somebody, do something!"

Immediately most of the men in the tavern, who

had been standing around aimlessly for most of their lives waiting for any sort of mild excitement, jumped to their feet and came careening through the back door and out into the street.

Terla grabbed Amaris' hand again, and the three quietly slipped back out the front entrance of the tavern, making their way back down the street at a rapid rate.

"Why did you do that?" Amaris asked as soon as she could catch her breath. "Were you afraid that there had been some purpose to those injuries he was given?"

"I have no doubt of that," Terla said grimly. "Rodan was a quarrelsome fellow, and prone to drink, but he was not rash. He would not have taken on two men in a fight, no matter how drunk he was. No, he was doubtless provoked by some evil-intentioned minions, for the purpose of doing him harm in the end."

"Then he fought against the dark kingdom?" Jordan asked.

"Yes," Terla replied. "But he was not as wise as he ought to have been. I frequently warned him that his life could be in danger if he did not take care, but he thought he would do well enough on his own, for he was a hefty fellow. Well, I shall see what he will say to my admonitions next time we meet."

"What will happen to him now?" Amaris asked.

"They will probably bring him to the physician's home, and he will doubtless have a difficult time of it for a few days. I have no idea how bad his injuries are, but we shall probably see him back at his post in several weeks."

"Several weeks!" Amaris exclaimed. "But we will surely not be here that long! You said he may have information that could be a help to us!"

"We do not need to wait that long." Terla smiled. "We may even visit there tomorrow morning and see how he is. Once his drunkenness wears off, he may

be able to communicate more easily. And in the meanwhile, I think there is someone else whose information could be of greater interest to you."

"There is one thing I do not understand," Amaris persisted. "Why did you not take this friend of yours to the physician yourself? Jordan could easily have carried him. You almost looked afraid as you glanced up and down the street."

"You are observant," Terla said with a look of satisfaction. "That is a good quality to possess in these times. Well, I cannot be certain, but when I lifted my head suddenly, I thought I saw a couple of figures looming at the end of the alleyway, watching us intently as though they would have desired to know who we were to take such an interest in Rodan. I doubt not that they had only just completed their business when we arrived on the scene."

"Is it bad if they should recognize you?"

"That is to be sure. As I have told you earlier—my own life is not to me these days as something that may be easily preserved, but I almost hold the expectation of losing it at any time. In truth"—Terla laughed a little—"if I were not blessed with the care and love of my family, I should not mind this arrangement in the slightest." She sighed. "Sometimes I long for the carefree abandon of youth—the thrill of risking one's life for the cause, without fear of the repercussions to one's own life. When your life is your own, you can do with it as you please. But when it is multiplied in the hearts of others, then the destruction of your life often means calamity to theirs as well, and therefore risks are taken more seriously, and life is treated with a great deal more earnestness."

"Perhaps our God does well to place people of such reckless bravery in families," Jordan responded. "For it may be that He has an even greater plan for your life than you can see at this time, and therefore He has put these safeguards in place, that you might

value it with as much care as He does.”

The street now turned sharply before splitting into two, and with an abrupt halt to their conversation, the trio paused when they reached the corner. A little ways down the street a group of men was heading in their direction.

“They are the men from the tavern!” Terla whispered. “They are doubtless on their way to the physician at this time. But I am surprised that so many of the men go with him! They must be uncommonly void of necessary business today!”

“Where is Rodan?” Jordan said. “I cannot see him.”

Terla scanned the figures, then noticed that in the center of the group two men were carrying a board between them, upon which lay a motionless figure, covered over with a cape. “There he is!” she whispered.

Moments later the men passed right in front of them. Terla, careful to keep her face covered, called out in a heavily slurred, indifferent voice, “How go you today, my friends?”

“We are heavy in heart today, fair woman!” replied one of the men in a guttural voice.

“You bear a sick friend between you?” she rasped back.

“Sick he is not, madam,” the man returned. “Healthy and whole he was, just a while ago—and drinking right alongside us each. We have lost a good friend today, madam. This man is *dead!*”

There was a period of stunned silence as the three took in the man’s words.

“Rodan, dead?” Amaris said under her breath, with wide eyes. “But how could that be? Was he not still alive only minutes ago?”

Terla said nothing for a moment, then motioning to the others to stay where they were, she ran after the retreating party.

“Tell me,” she asked breathlessly, grabbing the arm of one of the men, “of what did this man die? Was he

ill?”

“Nay, madam,” said the man, “but he was a drunkard, just like us. And doubtless we too will come to this same end one day or another.” The potent spirits had obviously dulled the senses of most, and had catapulted this tragedy into a kind of time of national mourning for them.

“Does nobody know what has become of this man?” Terla cried aloud.

Several of the men stopped and stared at her. “What is that to you, woman?”

“He was a friend of mine,” she said quietly, looking at the ground and praying that this risk would not be taken in vain.

After a few moments of silence, one of the men—by far the most sober of all who had spoken till then—took a step towards her. “He was found out in the street behind the tavern,” he said quietly. “He had gotten into a fight with some quarrelsome hoodlums, who were intent on provoking him when he was in the tavern, and so they were thrown out of doors. He was in sad shape when we found him, but luckily a physician was happening by right at that time.”

“A physician?” Terla’s head shot up in suspicion.

“Yes,” the man continued, “as fate would have it, he was passing by at that very moment. He came quickly and examined our dear friend here, and then informed us that it was too late—there was nothing he could do. He tried several methods to revive him, but there was never any hope. The man was gone. There now, does that please you? That is all there is to know.”

Terla’s eyes filled with tears, and she turned away and began to walk slowly back to where Jordan and Amaris still stood, waiting. The men turned and continued on their solemn procession down the street.

Amaris threw her arms around the woman, knowing there were no words for this moment, but

wanting to share it with her in silent consolation.

“That was no physician,” Terla said hoarsely. “You know that, don’t you? It was *them!* They were there all along—and we left him there to die!” She began sobbing uncontrollably, and her sparse words grew less and less coherent.

“Come along,” Jordan said softly, taking her arm. “Let us return home.”

they were making their way up the stairs, and a worried look crossed her face. But she moved quickly in the other direction as soon as she saw she had been noticed.

Stepping into the room, Amaris quickly helped Jordan lay Terla out on the bed. Her eyes were closed but her lips were moving noiselessly. Her brow seemed hot and feverish. Amaris reached for the basin of cool water that rested on its stand near the bed, and dipped a clean cloth in it, then she slowly began to wipe Terla's hot face.

"There, there," she said soothingly, "it's going to be all right."

At that moment Amaris looked up, and noticed that Edward was standing near Jordan.

"Father!" she burst out thankfully. "You are here!"

Jordan also turned and smiled with relief at seeing their heavenly guide so near once again.

"What ails this dear woman?" Jordan asked Edward. "Is there anything we can do to help her?"

"She is strongly consumed by fear," Edward said sadly. "And this manifestation of the reality that surrounds her own life and the life of those that she loves has given her such a shock that she has been propelled into the very hands of fear itself."

"Why has she been affected thus?" Amaris wondered.

"This man was greatly loved by her," Edward said quietly, "albeit in secret. To see such a one snatched away in suddenness can be shocking and heart-breaking if you do not have your feet resting on a firm foundation. She does not fully understand the reality of the world beyond, and that she will see him again someday. But she will understand one day. And you can help her."

"How?" Amaris asked. "How can we help her? What can we do? She does not even seem coherent!"

"In truth her body is not responsive, and her mind

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KALINE'S SECRET

Upon discovering that they were not more than a few minutes' walk from Elder's inn, Jordan and Amaris decided that it would be best to take Terla there, as the woman seemed to have lapsed into some sort of a deep trance of despair.

"Do you think she'll be all right, Jordan?" Amaris said in a worried tone, as they made their way quickly through the back streets.

"I am certain that she will be quite well with time," Jordan said resolutely. "I fear that the shock has given her a nasty blow—though I am a little surprised that she has taken it so hard. It is doubtless a heart-breaking thing, but it almost seems as though this sorrow has been taken a step further in the heart of our dear friend. Perhaps there was something more to this man than she told us. At any rate, we must get her indoors at once. A little rest will doubtless revive her."

They had arrived at the door of the inn, and Amaris walked ahead of Jordan, who was supporting Terla, opening doors and making sure the way was clear for them to walk. She noticed that Kaline walked by as

is far away, but her spirit can yet be reached. You can minister unto her by the strength of your own faith."

"And how do we do that?" Amaris asked.

"It is not something that you must *do*," Edward answered cryptically. "It is simply an act of faith, of believing. Once you commit her into the hands of the Almighty, you unleash all the powers that are available to soothe and restore her. She is here, in your presence, and in the presence of all the powers that go along with you. This power will be imbibed by her spirit through association, and you will see how by and by, she will return to her senses, renewed and strengthened. For her body is also weak and in need of rest. As her flesh is strengthened, so also will be her spirit, in due time."

"Thank you, Father!" Amaris said. "We could not have known all these things without your wise counsel."

"And that is why I have been sent to help you," Edward said, acknowledging his lovely daughter with a smile and a kiss. "It is my pleasure to come to your assistance. But now I must go—for there is more for you to do!"

Before the two could answer or protest, and just as Edward was fading from their view, a knock came at the door to their room.

Jordan cautiously laid his hand on the hilt of the old sword, and then answered, "Enter."

The door cracked itself slightly open, then a little more, then finally they could see Kaline standing there, nervously fidgeting with her hands and looking very timid indeed.

"Kaline," Amaris said with relief, as Jordan released his hold on his weapon. "Please come in!"

Kaline seemed more than happy to do just that, and moved quickly inside the door, shutting it tightly behind her.

"Make yourself comfortable," Amaris continued, waving her towards a small seating area in the corner of the room, where Jordan had seated himself as well.

"Oh, no." Kaline shook her head vigorously but proceeded to sit down anyway. "I cannot stay long. I only came ... I saw ... I just wondered ... that is Terla, is it not?" Kaline strained to better see the figure that lay motionless upon the bed.

"That it is," Jordan said. "She has had a very upsetting experience this day, which has sent her into this state of strange unconsciousness."

"Perhaps somebody has been hurt?" Kaline offered nervously. "Someone she knew?"

"It is that precisely," Amaris said, looking slightly puzzled. "A certain man, a friend of hers, it seems..."

"Rodan," Kaline whispered.

"Yes," Jordan added, "he is dead. It came as a great shock to her."

At that, Kaline's head shot up, her blazing eyes riveted upon Jordan's. "Dead, you say? Surely it cannot be so!"

"But it is," Jordan said, surprised by the intensity of her tone. "We have seen him with our own eyes, not an hour before this time."

Kaline threw her arms around her knees and buried her face in her lap, as she started to moan softly, rocking ever so slightly back and forth. "Too far!" she murmured, almost under her breath. "Too far! It's too late. ..."

Jordan and Amaris quickly exchanged glances, then Amaris moved over to Kaline and put her arm around the young girl's shoulders. How small she seemed, how weak and frail! Surely whatever burden she bore was so heavy that it threatened to overwhelm her frame and would even extinguish all spark of life from her heart!

"What troubles you, Kaline?" Amaris' voice was ever so soft, ever so gentle. "We can see that you bear

a great weight within yourself. Surely it is time to open up and entrust it to someone!"

Kaline looked up, her face wet with tears. "You are those ones that Terla spoke of, are you not? The ones who were to come—that the messenger told her of—to counter the power of this dark spell that would seek to overthrow our nation?"

"She told you of our arrival?" Jordan asked.

Kaline nodded. "Yes," she said. "I think she was hoping to reassure me. I have been very distressed, and have confided in Terla some of my worries. But I have not been able to tell her everything." She shook her head vigorously. "She loves me too much—she would be too disappointed. Especially now, I will never be able to tell her!" The girl burst into quiet sobs once again.

"There, there," Amaris said, stroking her rumpled hair. "It's all right. Perhaps you should share your burden with us. Not only may there be a chance that we might be of some help, but if for no other reason than to unburden your own troubled soul, that in itself could only do you good. For burdens borne in silence are grievous to the soul, and death to the heart."

Kaline nodded. "This I have discovered over the last months," she said, seeming a little more rational. "Yes, I shall tell you all. And this I have told to no other living soul, not even one. As you have said, it has been a grievous thing to bear! I believe that this dark spell from the north that threatens to overrun our borders bodes great evil for our people, in which case I believe you shall be interested to hear of it."

She sighed a soft sigh of resignation, and then began her tale. "It all began some four months ago, when a stranger first came to our tavern. There was nothing unusual, for many people pass through the city, and many strangers therefore enter this tavern, for we are a well-known house in these parts. Yet

there was something unusual about this man. He was fascinating, and very charming. He instantly seemed to take a liking to me. ..." She lowered her eyes a little, and looked up at Amaris for reassurance.

Amaris nodded and squeezed the girl's hand tightly.

Kaline went on steadily. "He left before we had a chance to get better acquainted, but then he returned again several weeks later. This time he stayed longer, and I found myself drawn to his company more and more. During that time, we talked a lot, and sometimes would go on long walks together in the early afternoon hours when the business in the tavern was slow and my grandfather was not around. For I never told him of my friendship with this man, as I knew he would likely not approve." She hesitated for a moment. "You see, he was a northerner, and many in these parts look less than kindly upon them."

Jordan and Amaris nodded in understanding, and Kaline continued. "He was a traveling merchant—at least, so he said. Now I know it was just to explain his many comings and goings, for he left again after a little more than a week, but from that time on, continued to return and visit me at the tavern at least once every fortnight. Then one day ... something happened between us. That is ... he ... we ... we were *together*. You understand?" She looked up quizzically, and Amaris nodded that she understood.

"After that..." Kaline's voice took on a note of bitterness. "After that things seemed to change—gradually, but very steadily. It was as if I had come into his greater trust, and he began to give hints of some things—about his past, about his dreams, many things I cannot even remember now. But I remember that I became aware of a distinctly darker side of him than he had shown before. He had a mission to accomplish within this city, he said, and I was to help him do it. That he was very definite about."

"Could you not just refuse, if you did not desire to help him?" Amaris asked.

"This I tried, but when I did, to my great surprise I found that he threatened to tell my grandfather and all of my friends of our union, if I did not comply with his every wish." Kaline started to cry again. "You understand what that would do to my life—and not just me, but my grandfather ... it would kill him if he were to find out!"

"We understand," Jordan said softly. "Please go on."

"He instructed me to tell no one about our friendship, but we were to only meet in secret, clandestinely. He began to tell me more and more of his dark plans. I suppose he felt that the more I knew, the more I would be indebted to him, and the less chance there was of me breaking free. And my part in all this..." Kaline now lowered her eyes, as if she was more ashamed than ever to continue.

"Do not be afraid to speak," Amaris whispered. "To speak the truth can only be liberating."

"My part," Kaline continued hesitantly, and in a tone that bordered on tears, "seeing as I worked in this tavern, and had free access to any of the rooms, was to rifle through belongings of any magistrates or royal messengers who would chance to pass through this tavern, and bring him news of anything such as I could discover that might be of use in furthering his purpose."

"What is this evil purpose that your friend is planning?" Jordan asked.

"As I said, he is not from this country at all," Kaline said, casting her eyes downward again in shame, though her voice had now regained some self-control. "But he comes from that evil kingdom to the north—the dark kingdom, I have heard it referred to by some. And certainly I would give it a no less flattering description—if I could not think of one worse to refer

to it as! He is chief over a band of infiltrators who have come to assess our country's weaknesses."

"And all of this you have thus far felt able to tell no one," Amaris said softly.

"I did speak a little of these things to Terla. I could not tell her everything, of course, about my liaison with them, lest my words be discovered and used against me. For I fear that they have yet another set of eyes and ears about this tavern, though of this I cannot be sure. But I hinted to her of my suspicions. Yet even that gave me great cause for fear, for I feared this man would hear of it, and make good his threat, if nothing worse. Even Terla had become increasingly nervous and fearful. And now..." Kaline trailed off miserably.

"Did you know something of this man, Rodan?" Jordan asked.

"Yes," Kaline said helplessly. "I was among them when they were discussing him yesterday, and saying how they needed to get him out of the way, for he was a danger to their plans. But I had no idea they meant to kill him. ..." Her eyes filled with tears again.

But Jordan had noticed something else she had said. "They?" he said quickly. "So you have contact with the entire group of them? Perhaps..."—he hesitated—"perhaps you are trusted and accepted by them."

Kaline looked up curiously. "Why, yes—to an extent, anyway. I am a foreigner to them, and a weak young girl at that. The man who employed me in this evil is not presently within the city, but Dumar, who is as this man's eyes and ears when he is away, has continued to request my presence among them, and even services which I—out of necessity, for my heart could not be further from their purposes—have had to perform." She hesitated again, while Jordan and Amaris turned to each other at the mention of the name Dumar. "You see my self-hatred and shame! I

am a traitor within my own country, and the fact that it is through no desire of my own is no help to me whatsoever, for were I strong enough to defy them without caring what would become of me, perhaps things would be better all around."

"Never mind all that," Jordan said. "I know that you think you have done much wrong, but can you not see that God is able yet to bring bountiful good from it? Here you are—a very operator in the midst of this perverse organization! And you have come to us seeking a way to make things right ... perhaps you are in the very place where you can do just that!"

"By spying on them in return?" Kaline said slowly, the light of understanding beginning to dawn upon her tear-stained face.

"Exactly!" Jordan burst out, then quickly lowered his voice again cautiously. "Exactly. You are in the perfect position to begin to relay to us all the information that you know about this organization and its members, their strengths and weaknesses, and anything else that we can gather. With all that you can provide us, I have no doubt that we shall be able to defeat them at their own game—hopefully before they are able to bring their evil plan much further along on its path to maturation."

"That I will do, gladly and willingly—that and more," Kaline burst out, her face now aglow with hope, as if some invisible shackles of fear had suddenly fallen from her soul. A glimmer of renewed faith and purpose now shone in her eyes, replacing the shifty emptiness that had been there before. "I will do anything that you request of me, and I will do it with all my heart, for I have no greater desire than to see these evil men stopped, and stopped at once!"

"Very well then, we must think ... we must plan ... oh!" Amaris shook her head in frustrated excitement. "There is so much to do, I feel I know not where to begin!"

A sudden rustling from the bed caused the three to turn around suddenly.

"Terla!" Amaris jumped to her feet. The woman had risen, and was standing on her feet. "You are feeling better?"

But Terla was staring at Kaline, eyes transfixed. She seemed to be quite coherent and in her right mind, but fully focused on the current center of her attention. "Kaline," she breathed softly, and took several steps towards the girl.

Kaline now had stood up as well, and moved towards her friend. "Terla," she whispered, "you have heard my story? I am so sorry!"

"Do not speak so," Terla said, and threw her arms around Kaline. "It is I who must beg your apology. I should have guessed ... I should have helped!"

"You have helped me, always," Kaline wept. Then she looked around at Jordan and Amaris. "But you have heard what these two have proposed? We can turn this whole situation to our advantage! We can defeat these evil renegades without them having the slightest suspicion!"

"Do you think you can do it?" Amaris asked Kaline. "They have no reason to suspect you are turning against them?"

Kaline shook her head. "Up till now I have been so bound up by fear and worry I have not done anything that could have alerted them to any worry on my account. If I simply keep up that front, I believe all shall go well."

"Excellent," Jordan said. "And we shall certainly keep you in our most fervent prayers as you do. In the meantime, tell us what sort of folk we are dealing with."

Kaline hesitated a moment, then looked around at her three friends. "The mastermind of this plan of great evil, and the one who at first befriended me, goes by the name of Kalor," she said quietly. "I have

come to learn that he is no less than the very right hand of the dark lord of the northern kingdom. He is powerful, and no man knows when he may come or go."

Jordan nodded, as though taking mental note of each detail.

"Of Dumar I have spoken already. He is a dangerous man, and there is little that escapes his eyes or his ears, of which he has others besides his own. Already I fear that he has become aware of your presence within our city walls, though you must have escaped his more watchful gaze, for he is unaware of your abode. He would keep tabs on each stranger whose purpose or face is unknown to him, and thus has instructed that any of his men who would set eyes on you follow you and determine both the reason for and whereabouts of your stay within this city.

"The gates are watched, for Kalor has his men among the guards, and when they are not on duty, they will still stand around within the shadows of the walls, waiting and watching, that none escape their glance or knowledge."

"This we have ourselves discovered," Jordan nodded. "The man named Dumar accosted us at the gate as we came into this city, and would have badgered us with questions had not Rodan bade us ignore him and continue on our way—a kindness which came as a godsend for us, but which I fear may have been what cost him his life."

"These are evil people," Kaline murmured again. "I should have realized it from the beginning, but when I finally did, it was too late to leave them. There was too much at stake." She sighed dejectedly, and a glimmer of the fearfulness that had filled her eyes before returned.

"Never mind that now," Amaris said. "Your part in this is being turned into good, and that in itself is proof that the Almighty can take what seem to us as

terrible shortcomings and use them toward His own perfect ends."

"Yes, you are right," Kaline agreed. "I only hope there is something we can do before any more innocent lives are lost to these beasts."

Amaris about to offer the same suggestion and was anxious to bring it up first, “we do know the source of all such knowledge!”

Amaris laughed. “So we do,” she agreed. She continued after a brief pause, “A thought has just intruded upon me with some certainty. Look out of the window.”

The two turned their gaze to the city streets that they could see from their vantage point. Just above them, the late afternoon sun was creeping lazily toward its bed in the hills.

“Pamela!” Amaris whispered. “We have not yet sent her a message. Perhaps now would be a good time to do so. She may have word to relay to us.”

“An excellent idea,” Jordan agreed. “Let us do so now.”

“What may we safely say?” Amaris asked. “I suppose not much ... perhaps just that all goes well with us, our way is being made clear, and that we miss her greatly.”

“That sounds excellent,” Jordan said.

And so they did. Joining their hearts in quietness, the simple message was beamed towards Heaven, and after a few moments they received the peace of receipt and acknowledgement.

“She is well,” Jordan smiled, opening his eyes at last.

Amaris nodded. “Yes, I received the same comfort. Ah, what sweet release there is in the power of heavenly communication!”

Jordan’s voice took on a sober tone, “And now for the plotting of our own schemes!”

“It seems that the first thing to do,” Amaris suggested, almost eager for the next stage of this adventure to begin, “would be to gather up all the information available that Kaline is already privy to, and make notes of it—all the names of these subverters, and any details of their plans of which she is

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A CRY IN THE NIGHT

Kaline hesitated at remaining in their room for much longer, lest her unusually long absence from the tables of the tavern be noticed. Terla, likewise, explained that she should be returning to her family, lest they should fail to abide by her admonition of requested privacy, and realize that she had exited the house some other way than the usual.

After their brief discussion, they settled upon a midmorning meeting the following day, and the four friends broke company.

Once they were alone, Jordan looked thoughtfully at Amaris. “It is interesting, is it not, to watch the plan of our Almighty God as it unfolds?”

Amaris nodded her agreement. “What little idea or suspicion we had when we made our entrance into this town, as to just how quickly things would move along—or how elaborately!”

“And now,” Jordan continued, “we are faced with finding a way to both root out this evil from among our people and to put a stop to their plans, and I have no idea, be it ever so faint, of how this is meant to be done. And yet,” he added quickly, for he saw

aware. It would not do for her to begin asking questions as to further information, if she has not done so already. ...”

Jordan nodded his agreement, but hesitated. “That would seem the most apparent thing to do, and I see no harm coming from it, so long as we conduct ourselves in a prudent and cautious manner. Yet we must be careful not to be so eager in our planning that we risk stepping in front of the Almighty Himself in doing so. It seems we have no choice but to confront these men, whether by force or by stealth, yet to do so will undoubtedly alert the rest of the forces of darkness that we have discovered their intentions, and could bring upon us a war that I would not wish to fight if it were not the will and planning of our God.”

“Of course,” Amaris said, her eagerness checked as she turned to glance out the window again, leading to a moment of silence between them. Then she inclined her head to the side a little. “Then let us call upon our Lord above. It may well be that there is something we are missing entirely, which He is only waiting upon our request to reveal to us.” She moved easily from speaking to her earthy love to addressing her heavenly One, “O Lord God, we come before You as nothing, and pray that You would reveal unto us the secrets of hidden things. We trust that we have been following Your lead as we have moved through these various days, and now we come once again to the end of ourselves and require Your direction. Which way would You have us turn, and what would You have us do?”

The two remained in thoughtful silence for some moments, and then Amaris opened an eye hesitantly. Sure enough, there sat Edward on the bed near them.

“Father dear!” she burst out with delight. “You have returned to us!”

“We sorely need your wisdom, sir,” Jordan said

humbly. “For we are at a loss as to what to do.”

“You two have been conducting yourselves in an excellent fashion,” Edward replied, with pride in his voice. “You have acted slowly—with prayer—but determinedly, and you have been in the places where you were supposed to be at the required times. Now it remains but to continue step by step along the path our Lord would have you travel.”

“Is then our proposed meeting with Kaline and Terla for the morrow a sound one?” Jordan asked.

Edward did not answer, but smiled a slow smile. “It is a good plan, for the present,” he said. “But do not be bound to your plans, for they are as easily changed as they are made to begin with. One must not be overly enamored with his own direction, lest he adhere to it so strictly that at length he finds he has left his Lord’s plan far behind.”

“You hint that perhaps this plan shall change?” Amaris asked.

“I say nothing as of yet,” Edward returned. “I say only, be open. Plan, but do not feel bound if you should feel the Spirit of our God leading you otherwise.”



The rest of the evening passed rather uneventfully, to the slight dismay of Jordan and Amaris, who had somehow sensed that something unusual might take place after Edward’s cryptic words. Yet the evening meal came and went, and before long they found themselves back in their room, readying themselves for the night.

Amaris stated the obvious, “Nothing more has come to us, so I suppose that for now, our plan remains as it was.”

“Wait!” Jordan said suddenly. “Do you hear that?”

Amaris froze as the two strained to hear whatever sound had awakened Jordan’s curiosity. After a moment or two, she shook her head, but Jordan

strode resolutely over to the window, drawing aside the drapes, and then flinging wide the heavy shutters. The gusty wind blew in like a torrent, and Jordan's hair billowed as he strained his hearing for a return of the elusive sound.

At last he closed the shutters, returned the drapes to their original place, and returned towards the bed, upon which he threw himself with some disappointment. "I am certain that I heard something. Yet it did not make itself known unto me with the clarity required to determine its origin, nor did it repeat itself that I might offer it further investigation."

Amaris sat down near him and reached out to touch his leg. "If it is important, surely it will be repeated," she offered helpfully.

He sighed. "You are right," he said. "And yet..." He shook his head. "No, there is nothing that I can even assume or hope to surmise. I am left as blank and void as though I had heard nothing at all. And yet remains with me the persistent thought that I *did* hear something, and that its importance is unquestioned, and vital."

"Let us then—" Amaris began, but stopped abruptly as Jordan grabbed her arm.

"I hear it again," he breathed in tones barely audible. A long pause followed, during which Amaris strained to hear the elusive whisper, but heard nothing save the wind. Then he spoke again, in the same slight whisper: "It is a girl's cry ... she calls for help, she pleads. She is ... it is—" He looked up suddenly at Amaris, his eyes wide with realization. "It is Pamela!" he burst out. "She calls for our help!"

Amaris jumped up. "Are you certain of this?" she asked.

"More certain than life itself," Jordan returned firmly.

"Then we must certainly follow it, for has it not been relayed to us by our Lord's own means of

communication? The wind has brought her whispers to us, just as we told her it would. We must help her at once."

"Yet we cannot leave our post here. ..." Jordan looked searchingly at his wife.

"We must separate." She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "There is no other way. We cannot desert Pamela in what may be a time of distress, yet we also have work here that must be tended to."

"I expect that I am to return unto the palace," Jordan said quietly, his eyes low upon the ground—for the thought of leaving his love, even for a time so brief and in particular to such a dangerous situation, brought an ache to his heart. "As it was to me that her voice was transported, it would seem that you are to remain here, though I would say with all truth that my heart grieves to even think of this plan."

"I have felt the same strong conviction in my heart. Oh, my love!" Amaris dropped to her knees and buried her head in his lap. "Without a doubt our Lord will give us strength for this that He requires of us, and if we are following along in His own guided path, surely we are assured of complete safety. And we will doubtless find that our time of separation shall not be long!"

"Let us come before Him now together, one last time before I go," Jordan said in a choked-up voice. "That we may confirm our direction and receive the blessing of His guidance upon our ways. If this is indeed of His leading, then I will begin the journey home within the hour."



Amaris had a long, restless night as she tossed and turned upon the soft bed. The night was not an unusually loud one, but it seemed that the slightest murmur of anything out of the ordinary imposed itself upon her strained senses in such a way as to cause her to invariably sit up in her bed with beads of sweat

upon her worried brow. At last she could take the anxiety no longer, and poured out her woe to the Lord and Creator of all.

This task accomplished, she gratefully breathed a deep sigh of relief to feel that perfect peace descend upon her as an almost tangible blanket of rest and tranquility. At last she could trust herself to the Hands who had led her all this way, and trust also that those that she loved most would be cared for with the same watchful vigilance which was being afforded to her. Amaris turned on her side and slept deeply.

So immersed was she in this restful occupation that she did not immediately awake with the pounding on the door of her room. The insistence of it finally began to penetrate her slumbering senses, and at length she dragged herself to a sitting position. Rubbing her eyes, she was surprised to note that the sun was seeping through the drapes in such a way as to suggest that the day had long since begun.

"Who is there?" she called cautiously, rising out of bed and wrapping a large robe around her thin night garments.

"It is Kaline," came the low murmur on the other side of the door.

"Please, come in at once!" Amaris opened the door quickly and carefully shut it behind the obviously nervous girl.

"I am sorry to disturb you!" Kaline said, somewhat embarrassed to see that Amaris had just woken up.

"Not at all," Amaris said, with a blush of her own. "I fear that I have long overslept the morning sun, and it was high time that I was awoken. You have done me a fine service!"

Kaline smiled a little, but then returned to her worried frown. "Something has happened!" The words burst forth from her mouth as though she could contain them no longer, and had only thus far by the force of her own will power. "Kalor has returned. We

must speak of these matters at once. It is very important!"

Amaris looked up quickly. It was obvious that whatever was on Kaline's mind, it was above the regular meeting that they had intended for that morning. "Certainly," she replied quickly. "Do you wish to speak here, or are we to go for our planned meeting with Terla?"

Kaline hesitated, as if the remembrance of this meeting just suddenly came back to her mind. "You are right. It is now almost the time that we were to meet," Kaline said, "therefore perhaps I shall contain myself until then. I have been wrestling inside to keep calm and hold myself steady, but this night has passed so slowly I feel as though it were a lifetime."

"I understand," Amaris said softly. "I suppose we should not journey to our meeting place together, but I will prepare myself at once and make my way there, that we lose not a moment further in waiting."

Kaline smiled thankfully. Then she looked around the room curiously. "What of your husband?" she said suddenly. "He is not here this morning?"

"No," Amaris replied with a sigh. "He heard of some urgent business late last night, which required him to depart with great haste. He left in that same hour! And I am here alone!"

"So it is only us three, then," Kaline mused. "Well, we shall see what to do when we complete our discussions. I must be gone. I will finish my duties quickly that I may meet with you and Terla at the appointed time."

With those words, Kaline slipped out the door, shutting it quietly behind her.

Amaris sighed. The situation seemed to be growing increasingly complicated. With another prayer of supplication for strength and guidance to sustain her throughout the day and whatever surprises it would bring along its trail, Amaris began the task of dressing

and grooming for the day. For a brief moment, she allowed her mind the luxury of being far, far away—with the one that she loved. For in spirit, they were never far apart.



Jordan made quick progress as he raced along the dusty road that led back to the palace. He turned his worried thoughts into energy to tirelessly spur on the horse that carried him to his destination. Before dawn yet had a chance to show itself, Jordan could see the faint outline of the palace in the distance, beyond the forest, and his eagerness quickened with anticipation of his soon arrival.

Stopping only briefly along the road to don his royal cloak, which he had brought with him, he sped along the road and up to the gates of the palace grounds, which were quickly opened for him. He then made his way to the palace itself, where the guards, though surprised to see his somewhat rustic appearance, quickly moved aside. It was not long before the news was making its rounds among the few souls awake at this early hour that the king had returned.

The first order of business was for Jordan to return himself to his proper state, and this he accomplished in record time, for it held very little importance in the overall plan that was unfolding in their lives. Before many minutes had passed, Jordan—washed, shaved, and looking like the king he was—emerged from the washroom and made his way quietly up the stairs towards Pamela's room.

It seemed quiet, and there was no sign here—or elsewhere in the palace, for that matter—that anything unusual had occurred, or was occurring. Nevertheless, determined to discover the reason for the mysterious call that had been borne to his soul on the winds of the night, he knocked, first gently, and then slightly louder upon her door.

"Who goes there?" a sleepy voice finally answered.

"It is I, little sister," Jordan whispered very softly, hoping not to alarm her by his sudden appearance.

The loud crash on the other side of the door proved that his effort had been unsuccessful, and so Jordan opened the door quickly, to find Pamela jumping to her feet and running into his arms. A jug that had evidently been placed too near her bed lay in fragments on the floor as testimony to her shocked awakening.

"Oh, Jordan, Jordan! You're back!" she exclaimed, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. "Oh, how I've missed you! And where is Amaris? Is she here too?"

"Amaris could not come back right away," Jordan explained, as he sat down next to her on the low sofa. "But we heard your call, and..."

"My call?" The girl opened her eyes wide. "Did I call?"

"Why, last night, as we were getting ready to go to sleep, I heard your voice very clearly over the wailing of the wind. You were calling for help, and you sounded very desperate. Have you received our messages?"

"I have not always received specific things," Pamela confessed sheepishly. "But I did go into my secret place—at the time appointed, and at other times as well, when I've felt alone or afraid—and each time came out feeling all warm and peaceful. It really works." She smiled, and then knit her brows in a puzzled manner. "But I certainly did not call out to you, not at any time. Everything here has been going just great—a little too great for my liking, actually. I was hoping for a little more..." She paused, searching for the right word.

"Excitement?" Jordan offered.

"Yeah, excitement," Pamela grinned, "or intrigue, or danger, or something. But no," she sighed. "Everything continues on as it was. In truth—as Amaris

would so royally say—if it were not for dear Father being here I fear I should have died of boredom with both of you gone and things being so dreary.”

“His Majesty!” Jordan exclaimed, in sudden remembrance. “He has been with you all along?”

“Oh, he comes and goes,” Pamela said. “But he’s always there at just the right time, when I need him the most or I’m feeling particularly down.” She giggled—a sweet sound that brought a smile to Jordan’s lips. “We play checkers, and other games. He’s very good, you know—I think he’s gotten better since he left.”

Jordan laughed aloud. Then he grew thoughtful again, as his mind returned to the seriousness of the moment. “So you did not call. ...” He paused and shook his head. “And yet I am certain that it was you that I heard. There must be some explanation.”

“Maybe you were meant to come back here, except I didn’t quite get the message that I was supposed to call you, and so someone impersonated me. I imagine they’d be quite good at that up there, you know.” Pamela smiled helpfully.

“That is quite likely the case,” Jordan agreed. “Well, the night is not yet over, so perhaps we should get some sleep for the present, and in the morning we shall investigate our surroundings—and let us see if we do not turn up a little palace intrigue for you!”

With a giggle and goodnight kiss for her brother-in-law, Pamela saw him to the door and then leaped upon her soft, big bed, where she attempted to ensnare a few more hours of sleep.

“For it may be,” he reasoned within himself, “that while I go about performing my regular and most menial of tasks, the answer shall overtake me by force and hit me full in the face.”

As he was nearing the completion of these personal improvement tasks, the air was suddenly filled with the sound of a great commotion—one that sounded to Jordan as the clashing of swords, metal striking metal, and the shouts and screams of battle. His hand instantly closed around the hilt of his trusted sword, which was in its place on his regular costume. The ominous sound filled the hallway, and seemed to be nearing his room with each passing moment.

Jordan stood frozen for a moment, contemplating his next move—whether towards the door to meet whatever danger would face him there, or towards the balcony to attempt whatever escape might be possible. After only a moment’s hesitation he chose the former, remembering Pamela, and knowing that if trouble was at his door, it doubtless would be at hers as well, and he could not leave her to face it alone.

Having determined thus, he strode resolutely towards the door, sword drawn, and swung it open.

No sooner had he done so than he found himself face to face with Poplus—who had been standing, poised to knock, but who now quickly backed away at the sight of Jordan’s menacing sword. “Your ... Your Majesty,” Poplus managed to greet him, even as he struggled to regain his composure at this most unexpected encounter. Jordan himself looked puzzled for a moment. The hall, aside from the now-kneeling (and well-nigh quaking) figure of Poplus before him, and a few servants rushing about, was as empty as it had been before—and as silent.

“Poplus,” Jordan managed to say, trying to explain the sword in his hand for which there was now no obvious reason, “I heard a noise...”

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PALACE INTRIGUE

Jordan slept soundly, but only for an hour or two, arising soon after the break of day. He still had no clue as to why he had so suddenly been called to return to the palace—and much less still what he was to do. But whatever it was, there seemed to be a matter of some urgency to it, and Jordan did not wish to waste any time before discovering what it was.

Obviously, there was nothing that he could do more than falling upon his face before his Lord above, and waiting until the plan for the day was made clear. This he did with little pomp and ceremony, contenting himself to thrust his soul to the heavens as he waited for his intercession to be rewarded with perfect peace and a clear understanding of the path he was to take.

After a certain time of such communion, Jordan felt greatly renewed and strengthened. However, as far as a specific purpose to why he had been returned to the palace and what he was to do, he remained as empty as he had ever been. Resolving therefore that perhaps the answer was not to come to him in this manner, Jordan picked himself up and went about his morning grooming.

"It was a platter hitting the floor, Your Majesty, down the hall," Poplus answered. "When I heard you had returned, in my haste to greet you and see if you would have need of anything, I collided with a servant who was bringing breakfast to the young princess. A thousand apologies upon my life for the distress I see it brought you."

"Never mind that," Jordan said, returning his sword to its sheath with an obvious look of relief. "So all is well in the palace?"

"But for the absence of Your Majesties, and your unheralded return early this morning, the palace has seen nothing unusual these past two days."

"I see," said Jordan, satisfied with this confirmation of what he had already heard—even though he had hoped to hear otherwise, that it might prove some clue as to the necessity of his return. "Very well then," he said. "I take it the others have likewise heard the news of my return."

"I would believe so," Poplus answered, and having regained his normal composure by this time, let loose some of his inbound curiosity. "So is there any news of your expedition? Did you find whatever it was you had set out to seek?"

Not sure quite how to answer, Jordan thought for a moment before saying, "I shall inform the council of our doings at a later time, though they be far from finished. Yet it seems that we shall have several matters to discuss before this day is done. Even so, let the others know that at a time yet to be appointed, I shall call them to the council chamber, that they may be ready when I am."

"Of course, my lord," Poplus answered, then added, "Will there be anything else? Something to eat, perhaps?"

"Maybe later, Poplus," Jordan answered. "Hunger is the least of concerns on my mind at this moment."

"And yet, my lord, if I may speak frankly, perhaps

eliminating this least of your concerns will make the others easier to tend to. Surely, you have come a long way—your horse bears witness to that fact—and your countenance fairly cries out for some sustenance."

Jordan looked at the friendly and somewhat portly man and smiled. "Very well, then, I shall have something to eat."

"Excellent," Poplus beamed with delight, obviously pleased to be the first to offer such a service to His Majesty. "I shall return shortly."

With that, Poplus closed the door behind him, leaving Jordan again alone with his thoughts, and the ominous feeling of impending danger that had remained with him even after the very distinct sounds of battle had faded into nothingness. He knew there had been more to the sounds of war than the mere clattering of a platter, for he had heard them distinctly. As he stood thus, contemplating these things, words suddenly seemed to burn into his consciousness: *The battle will come. Prepare your forces, for the day of march is at hand.*

"My God," Jordan whispered, "must it indeed come to war?"

In the moments of silent communication that followed, a heaviness stole over Jordan's heart as it prepared to accept that what the words had spoken would indeed come to pass. He had no fear of battle himself, but now he was king, and would have to order men into the fray and into the jaws of death. This responsibility lay heavily upon him, and all at once he wished for Amaris' comforting presence and the wisdom of counsel that seemed so much the more powerful when it flowed between them both. But now this decision rested upon him alone, and he felt quite troubled for it.

In an attempt to accept the peace of heart he knew he should feel when such matters are directed by the One Most High, and to build up the courage within

himself to make this decision and declare it before the council, that it might be brought to pass, Jordan pushed aside any thoughts of reluctance or hesitation. Desperately he strained to find in his own relish for battle the strength he would need to bring this upon himself, and upon his kingdom and his people.

“And yet...” He paused, thoughtfully, considering again how to present these things to the council, “What of our fears of these members of the council, and that one may be an infiltrator from this very kingdom of darkness? What say You, O Lord God above, most mighty, to this dilemma? Dare I trust them out of necessity, or is there one who would prove our downfall were this information to fall into his hands?”

Just as clearly, the answer came. *Bring their names before Me, one by one, and test their veracity, if they be pure in My sight or no.*

That seemed simple enough, and so Jordan did. One at a time, he offered up a name of one of his chief counselors—Artichus, the tall, thin, gray-haired chief counsel in palace affairs; Poplus, the portly steward who tended so skillfully to maintaining the palace upkeep; Derek, the youthful captain of the guard; Andrika, the dark and swarthy minister of foreign affairs; and Tertrius, the chief advisor in state affairs. As each of these five names left his lips, a mental picture accompanied them. And after each one, Jordan paused, and waited until he heard the blessing of the Lord rest upon each of their heads. At length his heart was filled with peace—these five were all to be trusted. They could be counted on to face whatever was to come, and to side with their monarchs.



It seemed to take Amaris longer than usual to make her way through the maze of winding streets that looked even more unfamiliar to her than normal, being without the comforting presence of Jordan’s keen

sense of direction. At last the light of recognition dawned upon her, and upon noting several familiar landmarks, she made her way with renewed determination.

Before long she caught sight of a woman some ways ahead of her. She was well covered, but even from her distance, Amaris could tell that it was most likely Terla. Suddenly the figure turned and disappeared into a dark doorway. Amaris stood some minutes where she was, before proceeding to follow the woman into the same dark hole. This hallway she followed to its end, coming to a door, whereupon she repeated the designated pattern of knocks and raps. The door swung open slowly, and brought a smile to Terla’s worried face.

“You made it,” she breathed thankfully. “I know I have no cause for fear, but I have been so worried.”

“Do not worry for me, dear friend,” Amaris said, squeezing her hand tightly. “We, each of us, are safe within the grasp of our God, and He will surely let no harm come to us but that which He engineers to His best.”

Terla smiled, but did not look totally convinced. She carefully shut the door behind Amaris. “Come and sit down,” she motioned over to where Kaline was already seated. “Kaline has told me of your husband’s sudden departure. I am sorry that I did not get to say good-bye. And we shall certainly miss his strength and male perspective upon the world.” She laughed a little, despite herself. “Nevertheless, we have much to discuss, so let us make haste to begin.”

Kaline began, “Last night, just shortly after the evening meal, Kalor appeared at the tavern. He hasn’t been in Pur for over three weeks now, so his return caught me by some surprise, and I immediately suspected something was up. He instructed me to follow him, for a meeting of great importance was

about to take place. So I did, and spent many long hours in the company of those base fellows and their companions. I tell you," she shook her head grimly, "if it had not been for the strength and comfort I derived from our meeting and my new mission, I do not know if I would have had the strength to stand it as I did."

"We are grateful for you that you did," Amaris said softly.

"But tell us," Terla said quickly, "what was the purpose of this meeting? What things are taking place?"

"The time has come!" Kaline's words were barely above a whisper, but they chilled both of her listeners to the bone. "Kalor has brought word from the lord of their kingdom that their forces stand ready, and the hour to launch their attack has come!"

"When? When will it be?" Terla cried in dismay, her voice resounding on the bare walls of their room.

Amaris rested her hand gently upon Terla's arm. "Before we go any further," she said softly, "we must resolve within ourselves to remain calm. Whatever news we shall learn of shall not be helped by our frantic agitation. The only way we can accomplish the purpose for which we have been sent and brought together by God is if we remain calm and in full control of our faculties. Fear and anxious fretting are amongst the most debilitating diseases known to man, and only by fully subordinating them will we be able to rise to the challenge that is before us."

"You are right." Terla hung her head. "Forgive me, my sisters. I spoke in haste and not in prayer. May our God give us strength and courage to follow His plan, as He shall most surely lead us!"

"Please continue, Kaline," Amaris said, as the two returned their attention to her.

"The first great attack is to come a full fortnight from this morning," Kaline continued quietly, "that

they might have time to set their forces in order within Pur, and several other cities also. They talked into the small hours of the morning, and I feigned sleep for much of the time, so as not to draw suspicion to myself, or to appear that I was listening with greater intent than normal. I do not know why they continue to involve me so, but I can only thank God for His providence in their so doing, whatever their reason.

"This I have learned of their plans. Many pieces I was aware of, but could not place properly until last night, when in the multitude of their counsel, all things became clear to me. Many of Kalor's clan have already infiltrated key factions of this city. The guards who are clandestinely under his command have set up fortified defenses in each of the main city sectors. When the army begins to march on Pur, the city council will doubtless have some advance knowledge of it, and will attempt to rally their defenses. This they will be allowed to do. Then, at the moment that the army has surrounded the city and the siege would appear to begin, the forces already in place within the city will spring their attack upon the main gate, opening the way for the main force to enter. You can see how no city would be able to withstand such an unexpected onslaught."

"This is to be their first battle, then?" Amaris mused.

"Yes," Kaline nodded. "Pur is their starting point, being the first main city on this side of the border. There are others which likewise stand to be conquered, but this city lies directly on the main trade route of the northern region. Word of Pur's fall would no doubt spread like wildfire, and would terrorize other smaller cities into a speedy surrender—or should they choose to fight, they will meet the same attacking force from within and without."

"This is their plan," Amaris reminded them, "yet let us not speak with such definite somberness. It

has been revealed unto us for one reason, and one reason alone: that we may thwart it! And I may safely assume that if our Lord would take the trouble to reveal all these secret doings to us, then He must know that we *can* thwart them!—And so we shall!”



Back at the palace, the remainder of the day passed in a blur of sessions and deliberations, as Jordan briefed the five ministers on the events of the past days, and the information they had come across. Plans were quickly made to gather the troops and assemble them at the palace, that they might be readied for battle and prepared for the day of march, as the Voice had instructed.

A number of horsemen were dispatched with the greatest haste in all directions, to summon troops from the garrisons located within a day's ride of the palace. They were to make their way as speedily as possible to the palace, there to join with the royal guards that were also at this same moment was called together. The cry was also sounded for every man who possessed a weapon and any knowledge of fighting, be he peasant or noble, to likewise report to the palace, if their hearts and minds were ready for battle. All throughout that day and night the news went forth, passed on by word of mouth, and was met with an eager somberness by each of those who heard it.

It would still be some time before the first troops would begin arriving at the palace, and Jordan in the meanwhile made what preparations were necessary to take command of them, by consulting with his advisors and collecting as much intelligence as they could on the enemy they would soon be facing. But most of all he felt the need to take much time in solitary prayer before God, preparing his soul for the time that was to come, and seeking to ensure that, even as these preparations for war were now fully

underway, he was not missing anything further that would need to be done or attended to for this plan of the Almighty to come to fruition—however that fruition would be manifest.

know not many we can trust,” Terla interjected. “On horseback, and with some speed, he should be able to reach the palace within a day.”

“Very well, so it shall be,” Amaris agreed.

“If only we were not so far away!” Kaline remarked. “It would be helpful to know what they will plan to do in this case.”

“Such a thing cannot be helped now,” Amaris replied. “Yet we must do what our Lord shows us to do, and trust that He will lead those at the palace in a way that will agree with whatever steps we may take here.”

Kaline sighed. “How I wish I held your faith, Anna!” she said wistfully. “For at the moment I confess that my heart is heavily weighed down by doubt, and I see not any way that we may possibly emerge from this conflict as victors.”

“Then let me help you to see,” Amaris said, and laid a hand on a shoulder of each of the women. “Let us close our eyes for a moment, and in doing so, commit our souls into the hands of the Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and earth, until we feel His Spirit move deep within our souls. After a few moments, you tell me if you do not feel a tangible difference in your outlook and perspective upon the grave task before us.”

When the three women opened their eyes again to face each other, they were as three different women altogether—women of strength, of valor, of fortitude such as they had never dreamed themselves capable.

Amaris took one look into the eyes of the others and saw it. She smiled jubilantly. “Come now,” she said, rearranging herself in her seat. “For we have plans to make, and direction to determine! Time is flying by, so let us make the most of it.”

“I suggest,” Terla offered, “that we warn the city magistrate of these matters. Even if there is not much that can be done at this moment, we can at least

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Terla paced the floor nervously, with a troubled look on her brow.

“So what are we to do?” she wailed softly. “Ah, had we the wisdom of a man to guide us, we might see more clearly what we ought to do! For this matter of battles and waging war is certainly not a task to be determined by women alone.”

“We are not alone!” Amaris’ eyes flashed. “Now be at peace and cease your pacing, for it is running our nerves ragged! What we need now is unity and full concentration. We shall only perceive the course of action that we are to take if we are all seeking it as one mind. For our God is not limited by minds male or female, so long as they be desperate for His guidance and direction!”

Thus silenced, Terla took her seat.

“I believe that first of all, we must inform Jo—the king of these events. I shall write him a message, which we shall somehow have to convey to the palace at the greatest speed. For indeed, this matter is not one to rest in our hands alone.”

“My son, Taurus, could deliver it. Besides him, I

make him aware of who is to be trusted, and who is not. Perhaps he shall know how to deal with them.”

“But how do we know if the magistrate himself is to be trusted?” Kaline questioned. “I may know many of Kalor’s men, even some in high stations within this city, but I dare not say that I know all who have turned their allegiance to the dark kingdom.”

“He is to be trusted,” Amaris answered thoughtfully, at which the other two women looked at her curiously. “He is an old and loyal friend of King Merchal,” she continued, “that much I know. If there is anyone in this city that can be trusted, it is he. It seems a sound enough idea. The more trustworthy folk we can inform of these things, the less will be caught by surprise, and the more will be of a shrewd enough countenance to confront the evil that is before us all.”

“Even so,” Kaline mused, “who are we? We are as no one—and not even unimportant *men* are we, but unimportant *women!* There is no way that they will take in three unknown women and give full attention to everything that they are told by them.”

Amaris’ eyes opened wide. “Of course!” she exclaimed suddenly. “That is it!”

The other two women turned quickly and looked in her direction. “What are you speaking of?” Terla said warily. “You appear to have received some great revelation!”

“Tell us of it, quickly!” Kaline said in excitement. “For I do not doubt but it is the answer to all our problems!”

“It is simply this...” Amaris paused and frowned slightly, unsure of how to broach the subject. “I may tell you this, but I beg you to receive it in strictest confidence, that the matter go absolutely no further than this room. Can you swear this to me?”

The two girls nodded curiously.

“It is simply this. I who have come to you as Anna

from a nearby village am in actuality Queen Amaris; and my husband whom you met is Jordan the king.” With that, Amaris pulled off the tight head covering, and let her tresses fall freely around her shoulders. The chestnut color was already beginning to fade slightly, and Terla’s eyes immediately grew wide with recognition.

“Your Majesty,” she gasped. They both quickly bowed low to the ground, all the while mentally reviewing everything they had ever said to the pair, and praying that nothing had reflected badly upon their characters.

Amaris took them by the shoulders and lifted them up. “I hope that you do not feel betrayed by this, Kaline, but let me try and explain. When Terla first came to us in the palace and delivered the report about things as they were in your town, we were worried. When we came before our God for directions, He instructed us to go forth thus, informing no one of our plans, that we might gain information and determine what direction we should go in.”

“I do not feel at all betrayed,” Kaline smiled. “I feel rather in awe at finding out this information at such a late stage of our acquaintance—you understand, I’m sure.”

“Of course,” Amaris returned. “But one thing I would make clear: There shall be—must be—no difference in our relationship, for it is imperative that no other soul suspects such a possibility. And the only reason I mention it now is to explain why we can proceed as we shall in informing the magistrate.”

“Yet even within the magistrate’s house, how shall we know who to trust?” Terla wondered aloud. “For have we not determined that there are spies planted everywhere, even in high places?”

Kaline pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Though I admit I know not all his agents, there are many whose names I can tell you, and who would be wise to avoid.”

“Perhaps the safest would be to speak to the magistrate in person,” Terla suggested, “without any of his counselors or even his most intimates. He may then be able to offer further counsel of how we are to proceed from here, and what can be done to prepare the city. We could also supply him with the list of men whom he may distrust upon sight.”

“Excellent,” Amaris said. “I offer that we move in this direction at once, for we know how much time we have at our disposal. Though two weeks may seem ample time in our eyes, yet for the formidable task that lies before this country, it is as no time at all.”

There was a short, terse silence, as the words spoken and the events before them sank fully into the awareness of the three women. Terla was first to break the silence. “I thought of my children,” she said in a slow, thoughtful voice, slightly ashamed to express something so personally for herself.

But Amaris looked up quickly. “I received the same thought!” she exclaimed. “It must be inspired of God. I feel strongly that we must move your family from this place, Terla, somewhere that they will be safe and not risk being a target for anyone who may seek to use their safety as a weapon against you.”

“But where can they go?” Terla asked, as a thousand worries flushed her cheeks. “My friends and relatives are all here in Pur, and the children will be no safer with them than with me. I know no one outside of these walls.”

“Ah, but you do,” Amaris said suddenly. “Have you not a close friend inside the very palace walls?”

Terla looked up, her eyes wide with astonishment. “You would send my family to reside at the palace?” she asked incredulously.

“I see no other course to take,” Amaris said simply. “And I also feel that you, Kaline, should accompany them.”

Kaline opened her mouth to protest, but Terla cut

in quickly. “Kaline, I agree also. The moment we open our mouths to expose this plot, your life will be at risk, for it will be obvious who has turned on them, because of your association with us. Besides,” she smiled. “I must remain with Anna, and with Taurus gone ahead to bear the message, who will guide my children safely on the long journey to the palace if you accompany them not?”

Agreeing at last to the wisdom of the proceedings, Kaline inclined her head in submission. “Very well then, I will go,” she said. “But we must depart at once, in haste, for if you intend to go promptly to see the magistrate, it would be good if we were on our way at the same watch.”

“All right then,” Amaris nodded, “let us be on our way. And may the power of our Lord be with us!”

The three moved towards the small door, then Kaline turned back suddenly. “What of my grandfather?” she asked. “Perhaps he should come along with us? For if they seek me they will certainly not spare him in their questioning, assuming that he would doubtless know my whereabouts. I should hate to expose him to undue danger.”

“By all means, bring him along as well,” Amaris replied. “But come now, let us make haste. I will return to the inn and prepare a message for the king. Terla, prepare your children in the greatest haste. Send Taurus to the inn, and with a swift horse, that I may impart to him the message, and then meet with Elder and Kaline at the small east gate of the city, which we know is least watched by Kalor’s guards. From there you, Kaline, will take them on the road heading south, which by foot shall bring you to the palace within three days, if all goes well. I shall provide you with enough gold for the journey, and to reimburse you for our most gracious stay at your lovely tavern.”

Kaline’s face suddenly registered a second shock,

as the realization that the queen herself had lodged in one of their rooms hit her. Terla and Kaline again looked at each other with quaking nervousness, but Amaris noticed and quickly wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders and smiled in a friendly, and most unqueenly manner.

“Do not feel that you have to be any manner of person such as you feel I would expect. I am altogether a woman such as yourself,” she said with a little smile.

Terla and Kaline did not look entirely convinced, but nonetheless smiled in relief at their monarch’s friendly and unassuming manner. Without further ado, the women donned their heavy wraps and, one by one, blended slowly into the busy thronging streets outside.



Having safely seen off Elder, Kaline and the children, and with Taurus now making his way swiftly towards the palace, Terla hurried on towards the place where she was to meet with Amaris. When she was nearly there, she felt a tap on her arm. She turned, startled, then sighed in relief.

“Anna ... I mean, Your Majesty, it is you,” she said, surprised for a moment to see Amaris’ washed face looking its distinctly pale color again. “I confess you caused me a moment of great fright!”

“Forgive me that,” Amaris smiled. “But come now, let us be on our way, for I have a strange foreboding in my heart, as though our time is very short. Let us not waste a moment of it.”

The two women moved quickly through the crowded streets, keeping their eyes always downward and not looking at anyone they passed. Amaris kept her face covered almost entirely.

At length they neared the grand abode of the magistrate—the most powerful man in Pur, and by far the richest as well. Pausing around the corner from the main entrance, Amaris placed her hand upon

Terla’s arm. “I shall go in alone,” she said.

“I have remained in Pur for the purpose of accompanying you,” Terla protested.

“And you have, and you shall yet,” Amaris said firmly. “But it is too dangerous for you to come along right now. I must go myself, and there is no way to avoid the risk. Yet should anything go wrong, should the spies take note of me, I would be placing your life in danger needlessly. Not only that,” she added quickly, seeing that Terla was far from convinced, “but what if I were to be captured? If you were with me, you would only be apprehended as well—and what good would that do? By waiting here, you retain your own freedom, and with it the ability to help our cause much more greatly.”

Terla’s eyes widened at the mention of the word “captured.” It was a possibility she had not yet considered in this rather hastily devised and logically assumed course of action. “You are right,” she finally conceded. “So be it then. But I will not cease a moment in prayer for you.”

“That I will lean on heavily,” Amaris replied gratefully. “Thank you, my friend!”

Amaris turned and walked slowly towards the great entranceway. As she turned and disappeared inside the pillared gate, Terla sighed deeply, and took up her post on guard.

At first the minutes crawled by, but Terla kept her mind well-occupied with prayers and intercessions, so much so that after a while she hardly noticed the continuing passage of the time. Only after she looked up towards the sun and realized that two full hours had gone by did she rouse herself with a start. She looked both ways down the street, uneasily. It was now fully noontime, and the streets were quiet and nearly empty. In all the time that she had been there, she not seen Amaris come out, or any notable commotion take place near the entrance. But where

was Amaris now? Surely she could not still be speaking with the city father after all this time—or could she?

Terla resolved that patience should be her greatest virtue at this point, and so she continued waiting. But the hours dragged on, and after another two had expended themselves fruitlessly, Terla knew that something was wrong. But what could she do? She first determined to make her own entrance into the place, but reconsidered quickly—what good would that do? For to even approach the city lord herself, or make any inquiries, she would be subjecting herself to the same scrutiny that Amaris had doubtless received—and what help would she be to her then?

Driven by the desperation of the moment to an uncharacteristic response, Terla closed her eyes—keeping her back to the street so as to not attract undue interest in herself—and begged the heavens for the answer to the problem that she faced. And as she stood there, expectantly awaiting direction, everything became clear. Something terrible *had* happened, but it had been allowed for a reason, and it was up to Terla to help make it right. She must go—and she must go at once.



Early the next morning, and shortly after Jordan had risen, there was an urgent knock at his door. This being opened, a manservant dutifully informed him that a young man had come to the palace gates not many minutes earlier, with an urgent message to be delivered by him personally into the hand of the king.

“Who is this stranger who seeks my audience?” Jordan wondered, as he rose and made his way towards the door. For a person to arrive unannounced and present himself at the palace gates, requesting to see the king, was a most unusual occurrence indeed. “He did not give his name, Your Majesty,” the

manservant continued, ever apologetic and deferential. “We would have turned him away at once, for such things as this are not commonly done. Yet he insisted that the matter was urgent, and that you would wish to see him. He gave me this to show to you as a token of his request.” The manservant held out his hand, and placed a small object upon Jordan’s palm.

Jordan looked closely at the small item. He recognized it instantly—it was Amaris’ small broach, which she had taken on their trip.

Without further hesitation, Jordan followed the servant out to the landing. “Bid this man enter, that I may see him,” he ordered the servant, who nodded and proceeded down the staircase.

Jordan remained where he was until he saw the stranger clearly, and quickly recognized him as the young man who, only days before, had handed him the mysterious note at the tavern in Pur. Content that the bearer was a trustworthy one, Jordan nodded to the servant to show him up.

As the two arrived together, Jordan motioned for the others in the room to leave. “I will see the young man in my chamber alone.” With that, Jordan motioned to the boy to enter his chamber, which the boy nervously did, appearing to be quite in awe at all that he was beholding.

As they went inside, Jordan shut the door carefully behind him, then turned to his guest. “You have traveled a long way,” he said, observing the lad’s haggard face, tousled hair and eyes that were wide with an unpronounced desire for a long sleep.

The boy simply nodded his head. “Your Majesty, I come with a message for you,” he said, in a flat, monotone voice. “It is from the lady Anna; she sends it to you and bids you read it immediately, for it contains urgent information.” With those words, the boy dug around inside his knapsack and pulled out

a scroll, which had been carefully rolled and sealed so that not a word of its contents could be seen without upsetting the whole bundle.

"The lady Anna is safe?" Jordan asked, as he took the scroll from the boy.

"Yes, Your Majesty, she is," the boy nodded. "She and my mother—that is Terla, of course—"

"Of course." Jordan now understood the picture more clearly, and breathed a sigh of relief that any fears he may have had of this lad being a porter of evil tidings were obviously unfounded.

"They and Kaline ... all three spent the greater portion of yesterday in lengthy discussions. They seemed rather anxious, although they told me nothing of their talks. I am only a child, you know..." He shrugged his shoulders as if all that was not of high importance in his life, but that he was merely presenting them as part of the great load of facts he had been sent to deliver. "At length they called for me and sent this message to deliver to you, which I left with utmost haste to deliver. Kaline, Elder, and my brothers and sisters follow after me, though on foot. They also are on their way here. I was instructed that I should stay here to be of whatever service I may."

"Then stay you shall," Jordan smiled. "I remember your name is Taurus, right?"

"Yes, sire, Taurus," he replied, "like the bull." Despite his attempt to retain good manners in the presence of royalty, the boy was forced to let a large yawn escape from his lips.

Jordan jumped up right away. "Thank you, Taurus," he said, "and now, not a moment longer must pass before you are united with that thing you crave so desperately—your rest. Come with me."

Guiding the already half-sleeping lad to the door, Jordan delivered him into the care of the manservant, instructing him that he be given one of the guest rooms and not be disturbed until he should awake

from his own slumber fully satisfied.

With a grateful smile and a word of thanks, Taurus was escorted off down the palace hallways. In the same moment, a spritely redhead bounced through the door.

"Who was *that*?" Pamela asked with wide eyes.

Jordan looked up at the curiously girlish tone in her voice. Why of course—the lad must be about Pamela's age, only a year or more older. Jordan suppressed a laugh, and answered casually, "He is the young son of a friend, someone that Amaris and I met while on our journey."

"Oh," Pamela said, but her eyes were bursting with a thousand more questions.

"He has gone for a well-needed rest, after a long time of travel," Jordan explained. "But once he awakes, I need someone who might help to acquaint him with the portions of the palace where he shall stay. Could you do that for me?"

"Me? Oh, why yes!" Pamela was fairly bursting with girlish delight. "I would love to!" She stopped suddenly. "Stay?" she echoed. "He's going to stay here?"

"I imagine that he will be our guest for at least a couple of days," Jordan replied, now busily working on the seal of the letter from Amaris. "But I'm afraid I'll need a few moments alone, if you don't mind, as I just received an important message, and it may require my full concentration."

"Of course," Pamela said quickly, jumping up and running towards the door. "I'll go ... make sure he was shown to his room all right. Wouldn't want him to be needing anything." With that, she dashed out the door, and Jordan shut it carefully behind her.



For a long time after reading Amaris' correspondence, Jordan remained lost in thought. The day of battle was indeed at hand, though Jordan dreaded

this most undeniable evidence of it.

“Ah, Calamity!” he mused. “Though grievous you are in your brute force as you descend upon us unawares, yet verily you are our friend, for you stir us to previously unmeditated thought and the performance of those deeds that we may not otherwise have had time for. Yes, a strange, antagonistic friend you are indeed!” He sighed and ran his hand through his long hair. “But where do we go from here?”

As he pondered his options thoughtfully, the picture—once fuzzy and indistinct—gradually began to solidify into a visible form and shape, and before his waiting eyes at last became clear.



Several hours later, another knock came upon Jordan’s door.

“A woman is here to see you,” the wry-faced servant spoke. “She said to tell you her name is Terla.”

“Show her up at once,” Jordan said, then proceeded to follow the servant out into the hallway, where the man deferentially stepped aside while Jordan ran down the wide staircase ahead of him, to where Terla was standing in the entrance hall, surrounded by several guards.

He took her arm, motioning to her not to say a word until they were in the privacy of an adjoining chamber. Jordan could tell that something was not right—the look on Terla’s taut face screamed out the fact. But what it was he did not know.

“Terla,” he said when they were alone, “it is good to see you! You bring news?”

“Sire, I came as quickly as I could.” The woman breathed a deep sigh, more of nervous exhaustion than physical. “I spent a small fortune renting the fastest carriage I could find at short notice. I hope that has helped some.”

“What is it? Pray tell me without any further delay!”

“It is...” Terla paused, then blurted out the rest of

her sentence as quickly as she could, “It is the queen, sire. Anna—Amaris ... she has vanished. I do not know what has happened to her, but after telling Kaline and me her true identity, she went to speak with the magistrate, whom she assured us could be trusted. But she never returned. I fear she may have been captured, or worse. Oh, I dare not think about it. I came as soon as I could!”

thus far and had directed their every move. And as such, Amaris could be no safer than if he held her own hand at this very moment.

All of this positive thinking did pay off a little, as Jordan spoke the words to himself and attempted to convey a sense of trust and faith. All of this he did not feel in its full strength, but he resolved that for the sake of all the others whose lives depended upon him, he would do his best to at least show forth a face of strength and fortitude in this time when it was so desperately needed.

And so he found himself again before the chief council, who had assembled for another emergency discussion and were all gathered now, along with Terla, in the White Room, hanging upon his every word.

“We still have the advantage,” he repeated slowly and deliberately, “for the enemy does not know the specifics of our plans, though by token of the queen’s capture, we may assume that he is now aware that we know of his. Most likely, their spies had infiltrated the magistrate’s palace, and unbeknownst to him, have been watching and reporting on any comings and goings of significance. When they discovered the hidden identity of our queen, they no doubt saw their perfect opportunity, and abducted her.

“Obviously, even with the information we have been given, we do not know all of our enemies, for it would be foolish of us to suppose that we discovered all their collaborators. So we do not know how far we can trust the ministers of Pur. But of the magistrate himself I have no worry, for he is an old and wise man, a close friend and confidant of the late King Merchal.” The counselors all bowed their heads for a moment in respect for the passed monarch.

“So of this man’s loyalty I have no fear—if indeed he is still alive, for as with our queen, we can only surmise what has become of him. But of the others,

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THE SEAL OF GOD

“We still have the advantage.” Jordan spoke the words clearly—perhaps a little too clearly, for those who knew him best could tell that he struggled for every word that he spoke, attempting to divorce his own personal feelings and keep the best interests of the kingdom at stake. *For surely, he told himself, this is what she would have me do—and it is also the most likely way that we shall ever find her again.*

There was of course the possibility that Amaris was no longer alive, but this Jordan did not readily entertain. It did not seem that it would be in the best interests of God’s plan to cause such a futile and unnecessary passing of one who was so valued and needed in the kingdom. No, Jordan did not see this as an option at the moment. And should the path ahead take this course, he resolved, he would deal with the accompanying trauma and emotions at the time that it should be revealed to him.

For the time being, he was content to trust that wherever his beloved was, though she may be in the hands of the worst captors, she was above all in the hands of the Almighty God, the One who had led them

we know little or nothing. We have been forewarned that the battle is at hand, and the army is being gathered as we speak. Yet we now have specific information of their plans, which they may not be ready to execute upon shorter notice than they had originally planned, though we may safely assume that they will seek to use the queen's capture to their greatest advantage. So how do we proceed from here? Does anyone have any suggestions to offer?" Jordan paused and scanned the room for any helpful offers.

Andrika raised her hand thoughtfully. "I propose that we act—that is, attack—immediately."

Tertrius cleared his throat loudly, and Jordan nodded in his direction. "I agree with my esteemed colleague," Tertrius said slowly. "Seeing as we have been gathering our forces, we may assume that it is only a matter of time before the authoritative powers of our northern enemy know that we are up to something."

"And we may also assume that the relaying of this information is being done with the greatest haste," Derek interjected.

"Yes," Tertrius agreed, "but nevertheless, that gives us a certain edge of time—though small, it could prove important. Now that they are aware that we know of their plans and the timing of their proposed attack, we can only assume that they will speed up the process, in an attempt to yet catch us off our guard. Therefore, I may only conclude that the best course of action would be to deploy our troops immediately, and prepare to attack."

"Attack ... what?" Poplus offered.

A moment of silence followed. His words, though simple, rang with a profound element of truth. How could they fight an enemy which they could not see?

Tertrius spoke again, being the most learned in these matters, "I see two options. Either we secure Pur, which we understand to be their first target. This

may or may not require a fight, depending on whether their forces in the city come out into the open to fight or not. Or, we proceed to the very heart of darkness itself—that evil kingdom to the north, and try to head off their army before they enter our borders."

"A very risky option," Andrika muttered. "For we know little of them—their strength or numbers or tactics of war. Our intelligence about them is very limited, as they have never posed a threat to our kingdom before. For the most part, they have thus far been a reclusive people who showed little interest in any affairs but their own."

"Yet what do we gain by sitting here and waiting?" Tertrius countered. "Seeing as they will know that we are aware of their doings in Pur, they might decide to march on the city quickly, to hold as a bastion within our borders from which to launch further attacks. It will be much more difficult to lay siege to Pur once they have taken it. We must either secure the city now or bring them to battle first. By moving now, we have a chance to get to Pur before they do, seeing that they were not planning their attack for two more weeks."

"Yet if their infiltration has gone as deeply as it appears, how shall we know that there are not those among our own forces who would work against us?" Andrika now asked.

The question was met by silence from the other counselors, as if the precariousness of their situation was beginning to sink into them all.

Jordan was the one to break the silence. "You have spoken wisely, my advisors," he said solemnly, "and I thank you each for your words of wisdom, and the options and questions you have presented. Yet seeing we are no closer to a definite plan than we were when we started, I would propose that we bring these matters and questions before the greatest Counselor of all—that Almighty One in whom we have learned

to place our trust. For I would venture to say every one of you could attest to the infallibility that comes as a result of following His plans.”

Various mutters of assent wafted around the table. Not little was their surprise when, in the midst of the moments of silence that followed, the chamber resounded with a voice that seemed to call out from the past, and yet the sound of it was so very near.

“My dear counselors,” it spoke, and at the sound of it, each one turned in shocked surprise to see the glimmering figure of King Merchal standing next to Jordan. He looked pleased, and happy to once again address his council of trusted advisors. After several words of greeting and personal remarks to those present, he proceeded to reveal to them in perfect clarity the remainder of what was to come, and what their plan of attack was to be—a plan so simple and so pointedly straightforward that it brought awe to the astute minds of many present.



The following morning light was greeted by scores of troops, guards, nobles and peasants—men of all ages and abilities, all making their speedy way towards the palace—each wearing the same grim, determined look that clearly spoke that any effort necessary would be made to preserve their home and their king and queen.

At last the crowds were assembled in the palace courtyard, and a splendid sight it was. As Jordan stepped out on the balcony, his heart swelled with thankfulness at the tremendous showing of support his people had offered in protecting the kingdom from the invading forces. It was a sight to behold—the royal troops clad in their full and colorful battle gear mingled freely among those peasants whose rough dress and simple weaponry only made their loyalty, fortitude and inner courage the more apparent. Then there were the nobles, and also their personal guards,

clad in the colors of their respective clans, and looking at this moment every bit as ready to protect their king and country as they were to protect their own masters. These were the men Jordan would lead against the power of the dark kingdom, and he was at once proud of them.

“My friends, and citizens of our beloved kingdom,” Jordan’s voice rang out in the cool air. “We are gathered together here, a force made up of many, yet bound as one, to bring to reckoning these armies of aliens who threaten our borders and our peaceful existence. They think they are more powerful than us; they think they are more numerous; they think they exceed us in military intelligence and training. Perhaps in all of these things they are right. But we have something that *they* do not. And that one thing is able to more than make up for our perceived lack.”

Many in the crowd looked around at one another, as if wondering what it was their king spoke of.

“You ask what this one thing is,” Jordan continued his rallying cry. “It is the very Spirit and power of the Almighty God for whom we fight, and who shall Himself go before us! As some may have already heard, our beloved queen is now believed to be in the hands of our enemies, for we know not what has become of her. This, my friends, is a direct challenge to war, a challenge which, by the grace of God, we shall accept, and make our foes sorry for. For we have now been ordered into a battle which shall doubtless turn into the routing of our enemy before our eyes, that his challenge never again appear before us. Who is willing to fight with me?”

The people burst into a frenzy of shouts and whoops.

Jordan raised his hand and there was silence again. “But before we can proceed, there is one very important thing which must be done. For our enemy does not await us on our borders alone. There have

been vile infiltrators who have crept in amongst us, posing as our countrymen that they may work their deeds of evil among us, poisoning our forces from within, while sending reports of our weaknesses to the enemy without. With such spies riding alongside us we shall not have the strength of unity or the peace of mind that we shall need to truly stand strong as one against the enemy. And so these impostors must be discovered.”

A low murmur swept through the crowd.

“And how shall we do that, you may ask?” Jordan’s cry continued. “It is very simple. Unto our God, there is *nothing* hidden which shall not be revealed, and He has proposed unto us a test most simple, yet all-declaring—right here, upon this ground.”

Jordan moved quickly across the balcony and descended the ring of steps until he stood amongst the crowd. “Right here,” he cried aloud, bringing his foot down upon the dusty ground. “Stand back, my friends, for today you shall see the glory of the Lord.”

The men hastily moved back until a clear circle was formed directly below the balcony. Each man looked on with awe and astonishment. Jordan climbed back up the balcony steps to where he had a clear view of every person there assembled.

Then he lifted up his eyes to Heaven and his voice rang out unchallenged through the stillness of the square. “Now!” he burst out. “Now, O Lord our God, make known Thy marvelous and mysterious ways unto these who are assembled here today. Show unto these who are gathered together Thy mighty power and strength!”

Even as the words proceeded from his mouth, a searing beam of light flashed from the glowing sky above, striking the clear space which had been formed in front of the balcony, and exploding into a glowing cloud of light, which quickly shaped itself into an arched portal. There it remained, hovering closely

above the ground, glowing and pulsating—twice the height of the tallest man, and several steps wide.

“This, my friends, is the proving chamber of the Almighty God.” Jordan’s voice held a softer, almost reverent tone, for his awe was well nigh equal to that of any other man beholding this supernatural spectacle. Already some in the crowd were noticeably cringing and drawing back. “Through this glowing portal each man shall pass. Those who are true to our God and loyal to our nation have nothing to fear. They shall only be renewed and refreshed by their experience. But...”—he hesitated and looked up at the crowd, his dark eyes flashing in dead earnestness—“woe be unto that man whose loyalty is not as he claims, but who is from that dark kingdom and only posing as one of our own. Unto him this portal shall become a searing fire which shall burn his flesh and consume his life.”

Coming slowly down the steps again, Jordan approached the glowing cloud. “To inspire your confidence,” he said, “I shall be the first to pass through. After I do so, every man who yet wishes to join with me in the attack may follow through. All those who come through shall be given the seal of God, that everyone may know who is true to our fight and who is not. Thus you shall know, as we ride forth into battle, that every armed man that you shall see who has not this seal of God is the enemy, and should be treated as such.”

With those words, Jordan turned and moved up to the pulsing cloud. With only a slight moment’s hesitation, he drew in a deep breath, and then plunged into its center. He emerged on the other side only seconds later, and the crowd gasped to see a glowing sign of a cross on his left cheek. It was almost incandescent in appearance, and plainly visible to all around. “It is the seal of God!” he called. “And now, any of you who rightly know that you would not

pass through this cloud alive—begone from our midst! We would not constrain you, for we have no wish for your death. But rather return with haste, I say, unto that land from whence you came, and spread unto all whom you see those things which you have seen today—of the power of God which you have provoked unto anger, and who now will turn and wreak destruction upon His enemies!”

A few moments of silence followed, and then a slight rustling in the crowd. Before long, several men could be seen weaseling their way through the crowd, and scurrying off into the forest as fast as their feet could take them. After a time, all was silent again, and Jordan lifted up his arm. “Let us proceed with the sealing then,” he said. “First those numbered among regular troops, and then the conscripts. And then—we meet again, to talk of battle!”

And so it was that the sealing of the troops began. The palace guards were among the first to pass through. When the crowds saw that they had all passed unharmed and had emerged with the same seal of God in their left cheek, they took courage, and the apprehension that had filled many left, to where they awaited with full eagerness their turn to pass through the portal.

Yet it was not so for all, for in the midst of the passing of the regiments and noble guards, the cloud suddenly grew an angry orange and yellow as a man stepped into its midst. The man did not emerge, and some would have sworn that they had heard his muffled screams of agony before the cloud returned to its shimmering white color. The regiment the man had belonged to, among the guards of one of the nobles, halted in their tracks.

Jordan, who was now watching this procession from the balcony, turned to Tertrius, who stood next to him. “Who was that?” he asked in hushed tones.

“One of the guards of Eklar, my lord, a noble whose

estate lies far east of here.” Tertrius replied. “I was surprised when he came, for our messengers did not travel that far, but they are all horsemen, and were apparently able to make the journey most swiftly. I did not think to question their eagerness to join with us in battle.”

Eklar, from where he stood behind his men, could see Jordan and Tertrius whispering to each other, and his face looked most embarrassed. Yet he quickly motioned his men to continue. It was only when the second and third man had likewise been consumed that the flush on his face deepened to an angry red.

Not willing to risk any further loss to his men, he reared up on his horse, from which he had been directing his men, and shouted out for all to hear, “I know not what sort of wizardry this is, but mark my words, it will take more than some magician’s trick to hold back the forces that even now stand ready to conquer your pathetic kingdom.” With those words, the remainder of his men took to their horses, and they departed in an angry haste through the path that was quickly cleared for them.

- 14 -

TIDINGS FROM PUR

When all was said and done, over five thousand men passed safely through the cloud and came forth with the mark of God upon their left cheek. There had indeed been several others whose loyalties had been false, and who had yet been foolhardy enough to test this “wizard’s trick”—a test which they never lived to regret, so quick was their destruction as they entered that cloud from which they never came forth.

Jordan, now armed and ready—with the other council members standing by—then explained the plan of attack to the men who remained.

“As you can see, men, we have no time to lose. Even now our enemy may know of our plans, and the attacking army may at this very moment be venturing forth against our borders, and we can be sure that once they hear of our mobilizing from men such as Eklar, they shall only move the more quickly.

“However, we know more of their plans than they know of ours, and we have it on good report that they shall march on Pur. So we shall march north, to face the foe and discover what has become of our queen.” His voice faltered for a second, but he carried on

bravely. “The city of Pur has become a crawling ground for the rats of the enemy, but there they shall be weeded out from amongst our people as surely as they were revealed among us today. Yet we may expect that the enemy will not take the frustrating of his plans too lightly, and shall come against us in all his fury. So we must stand ready to defend our land, our cities and our people. Now let us go forth—for God, for our country and for our queen!”

The last words Jordan had fairly shouted out, and his resounding cry was echoed by the crowd: “For God, our country and our queen!” The crowds then cheered, and with those words spurring them to motion, coupled with the blessing and seal of God that they felt lending its glowing strength to their being, they formed ranks, and began making their way out of the palace gates, and down the road that led north, to Pur and to battle.

That evening, just as Jordan was about to step down from the balcony to mount his horse and take his place at the head of the troops, he spotted Pamela darting through a doorway. “Pamela!” he called out.

She ran up to him. “You’re leaving so soon?” she asked, a little sadly.

“We must face these evil forces immediately, before we find ourselves not knowing where they will strike next—not an appealing thought!” He smiled, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“And Amaris?” Pamela asked.

“I go for her now,” Jordan said soberly, “but I shall need all the force of your prayers to spur me on. Will you do that for me?”

“I will,” Pamela replied. “I know she’s going to be all right. Our Lord wouldn’t leave her like that—you’re going to get her back, I just know it.”

“As do I,” Jordan returned, with a deep sigh that betrayed his slight uncertainty, though he clung to faith as a drowning man to a raft. “And you will be all

right here?”

“Oh yes,” Pamela flashed a cheerful smile. “I have lots of company now, you know!”

Jordan looked up, and saw that a tall youth stood nearby. He lowered his voice, “You have gotten to know Taurus, then,” he grinned teasingly. “He is a fine friend?”

Pamela giggled and blushed a little. “He will do,” she said in a pretense of haughtiness which suited her so badly that Jordan nearly burst out into loud laughter. “And there are others here, too.”

As if on cue, Terla and Kaline came out of a nearby doorway, surrounded by several younger children. “Our prayers go with you, Your Majesty,” Kaline spoke softly.

“We will never be far from you in our hearts,” Terla added.

“For that I thank you—all of you!” Jordan stood up, and turned towards the door. Looking back for a brief moment, he flashed them a last smile. “And now—off to battle! And may we return the victors!”



The first team headed to Pur, consisting of Jordan and two thousand horsemen. They rode fast and furiously, anxious not to expend a minute in any task less vital than bringing them to their destination at the very soonest possible moment. For a moment is indeed a long and trying portion of time, and may bring with it many things, both pleasant and unpleasant. A little before sunrise, they caught their first glimpse of the city. Artichus spurred his horse on a little and reined in alongside Jordan.

“It shall be at least one full day more before the remainder of our troops, with those traveling on foot, reach the city. What shall be our plan until then?” he asked.

“I do not know the fullness of the plan of God,” Jordan said slowly. “I simply follow His leading, one

slow step at a time. This may seem a rather inefficient method of operation, but I have found that it has cared for me rather well up till this point.”

“Without a doubt, sire.” Artichus inclined his head respectfully.

“Look ahead!” came a shout from one of the soldiers who was in the lead. “There are horsemen approaching!”

As Jordan’s small team continued their forward ride, all eyes were glued upon the half-dozen horsemen who rode steadfastly up the trail towards them. Their intents were plainly obvious, for their tunics emblazoned the bright insignia of that northern kingdom that instilled such hate and dread in the hearts of all those who stood now at wait.

“Who is the leader here?” called out the front rider of the band, as soon as the groups came within earshot of each other. Directly behind the front rider, Jordan recognized Dumar. Then, eyeing the front rider rather suspiciously, Jordan suddenly started. The features of the face before him seemed to bring with them some long-forgotten memory.

“Tariq!” Jordan finally whispered in amazement, reining his horse to a full stop. “But ... but I thought you were dead!”

The front rider stopped directly in front of Jordan, as the five remaining horsemen took their place in a semicircle behind him. “Tariq is no more—you of all people should remember that,” the rider responded, which brought several puzzled looks to the riders that followed him; but he continued casually, “No, King Jordan, I am Kalor, the newly appointed emissary of the realm known among your people as the ‘dark kingdom.’ We take no offence at such demeaning terms, for they are trivial, are they not? Yet now we hear that you have marshaled your forces against us,

¹ Tariq: See “Scimitar and the Rose”

and would bring our two peaceful nations unto war. Yet, for what reason?"

"Our force is only a response to the abduction of our queen from within our own borders, and the threat of an invasion of our country," Jordan countered, still struggling with memories of the denizen of evil that now sat before him.

"Abduction? Invasion? But when have we not been at peace one with another?" the man persisted stubbornly, feigning innocence, and would have carried on had not Jordan interrupted him brusquely.

"Sir," he said loudly, "if I may even call you that—you stand upon our land, having partaken of our hospitality, and are yet even now arrayed in your garments of war. You provoke us to battle with your actions—and still you come to us with a pretense of hurt pride and wounded loyalty? What manner of uncomely behavior is this? If you would be our enemy, at the very least you should face up to it like a man!"

Kalor's face turned a dark and ugly crimson, and the whites of his eyes angrily flushed a sickly yellow. "Very well then," he said, "have it your way. But don't say you haven't been warned. If war is what you desire, war is what you shall get!" He laughed loudly and obnoxiously. "We would have sought to bring our rule upon you peaceably, without war and without much bloodshed. But no, you would choose pride over the lives of your people—even over the life of your own queen!"

With those words he reared his horse up and turned to go, but the words were no sooner out of his mouth than Jordan had ridden up alongside him and had placed the point of his sword to the man's neck. Jordan was immediately encircled by the other five horsemen, and they in turn felt in their backs the points of the horsemen accompanying Jordan. It was a series of concentric circles that appeared very strange indeed in the newly born rays of the morning

sun—and at the center of it all was Jordan, his face flushed and breathing heavily, hardly aware of anything anymore, save those last words that had proceeded from Kalor's lips.

"You have spoken one word too many," he said through clenched teeth. "Now you will reveal all to me, or I will make short order of your Adam's apple. And if you think that your men will be able to protect you, you have but to cast your eyes upon the fullness of this circle to see that you are greatly outnumbered. You shall tell me the whereabouts of Queen Amaris."

"That would be so easy, wouldn't it?" Kalor hissed, undeterred. "Do you really think I care that much for my own life that I would tell you such a vital piece of information?" He spat angrily towards Jordan, but dared not move his head any closer for fear of the blade that threatened it, and the offending secretion fell harmlessly on the dusty ground. "You may kill me—you may kill us all, but you will never know the whereabouts of your wife, nor will you ever be the victors in this battle. We are born for triumph, and we can only succeed."

Dumar cast a smirking glance Jordan's way, toying with his sword dangerously close to Jordan's ribs as he gloated at the sight of him being pushed thus into a corner.

Jordan's mind was racing, and he had begun to regret his rash impatience that had led them to such a precipitous brink. He quickly realized that killing Kalor at this point in time would have little benefit, and so he reluctantly sheathed his weapon. "Very well then," he said, in a tone barely more civil. "What are your demands? Is she still alive? For if she is, then I assume that you have some reason, and wish to propose a deal of some sort. And if she is dead, then I see no reason why you should hide that fact from us."

Kalor straightened his garments and passed his

hand tenderly over the slight scratch left by the zealous end of Jordan's blade. "Your queen is not dead," he said curtly. "But she will not be alive for long at the pace that you are going."

"What are your demands?" Jordan repeated painstakingly.

"The Queen Amaris is being treated well—for the present. But she has in her presence a seasoned captor at all times, and a contingent of heavily armed guards surrounding her dwelling place. If anything should go wrong, she will be the first to know about it."

"What do you mean by that?" Jordan gritted his teeth as he tried to retain his patience, which he felt so sorely lacking in at that moment.

"If even one of our men is killed, that will be the signal, without question, for those who guard her to end the lovely lady's life. The first of our men who dies will not go unnoticed, and his death will be accompanied by hers."

There was a silence amongst the palace contingent. Everyone looked over at Jordan to see what he would do. He did and said nothing, but appeared to be stunned and struck dumb.

Kalor reined up his horse and began moving down the road. "There, you see? Do what you will—say what you will. Gather up your army. But if you value your queen as much as I think you do, you may have a lot of thinking ahead of you."

With those words, Kalor's horse broke into a gallop and he careened back down the road towards the city, with his henchmen in close pursuit.



Jordan remained in the same position as Kalor's last words had left him. After some moments he dismounted from his horse and handed the reins to the nearest guard. "Wait here for me," he mumbled. "I must have a few moments to myself."

With those words he turned and headed straight through the clump of bushes that lined the side of the road, and plunged into the forest beyond. He walked on for some minutes before he dropped to his knees and began to sob as though his heart would break. "What am I to do, O God? What am I to do? Instruct me, for I feel as though I have no recourse of action left—no way in which I may win this war which I have perhaps too lightly begun!"

Even as he spoke, he felt a strong hand on his shoulder. He turned quickly, to see King Merchal sitting near him on an old fallen log. "Come here, my son," the old monarch said kindly.

Jordan did so. "You know what has become of Amaris?" he asked despondently.

King Merchal nodded.

"Then tell me, what should I do? What *can* I do? Should I sacrifice the life of the queen, and most of all, of my beloved one, the love of my life, for the sake of this war? Is victory that valuable in my eyes?"

"That is what you must determine in your own heart," King Merchal spoke wisely, with the depth of wisdom that was born from years of devoted service on earth, and then was given limitless rebirth upon entry into that realm beyond. "For whether Amaris will live or whether she will die is not the point of debate. The point which you must determine in your own heart is: If that be the cost, is it worth it? Can you pay the price, if that is what is best for our people?"

"How would I know this?" Jordan asked. "I would say no this instant if my heart would have its way—and yet I hesitate..."

"Then ponder this war—why are you fighting it? For if it be only for the satisfaction of the ego, the response to a challenge, the seizing of a chance to prove yourself the victor over a belligerent and antagonistic bully of an enemy ... then this may not

be reason enough to sacrifice your love, your life, your future. Yet if there is some reason more to this war than that ... then you may have cause to consider.”

“I see...” Jordan’s eyes took on a faraway look. “Perhaps I have been focused on the wrong thing in this battle—the wrong thing altogether. It is entirely as you have said. I have been incensed by these vicious heathen aliens, and have been determined to rout them from our land, but more for the purpose of proving myself the victor over them, and showing that our God was superior in power to their ill-conceived devices.”

“All those things are not wrong in themselves,” King Merchal added gently, “but they are not enough to lead such a crusade as this. To take such drastic measures you must know that you are within the will of God for your country and people.”

“But that I do know!” Jordan burst out suddenly. “For we have conferred with Him upon many occasions, and He has given not only His blessing, but His direct instruction as well.”

“And that is all a sign of His leading, and it shows that you are on the right course,” King Merchal nodded. “But it is not enough to *do* the will of God. You must also perform it with the *heart* of God—with the spirit that He would have you bear. You must have a spirit of peace while you are in the midst of war; a spirit of love while you engage in battle with those men whom you so long to hate; a spirit of quiet confidence while all around you is chaos and confusion. And perhaps our Lord has brought you to this point of decision that you may see whether you truly possess all of these qualities. For only if you go forth with them will you be able to fulfill the mission to which you are being sent, and live with the consequences.”

The forest hung silent for a long, lonely moment. At the end of it, Jordan’s last vestige of resistance let

itself out in the form of a sigh—a deep, heart-rending sigh that swept through the surrounding air and flooded it with the warmth of its surrender. “Very well then.” Jordan spoke the words barely above a whisper. “I submit all of my own will, all of my own feelings, thoughts and actions to Him Most High. May He go before me, and in me, and through me—and I will live with the results of the way He leads me, whatever they may be.”

away from those mighty hands; it simply took me some time to regain remembrance of that fact. For the time being we must set our eyes ahead of us, and follow our Lord wherever He does lead. For His work—the protection of our people, whom we serve—will take precedence, and as we tend to His business, He will doubtless tend to ours.”

With those words effectively closing any debate on the subject, Jordan spurred his horse into a fast trot and set off down the sloping incline towards the city gates, with the rest of the men close at his heels.

They passed through the city gates with a salute from the guard, and as they made their way steadily through the streets, crowds gathered to watch the unexpected procession of important visitors. Jordan motioned to Tertrius, who rode up alongside him. “Instruct the riders to travel through every street of the city. Call every man, woman and child to the town square at the soonest possible moment they are able. Then, when all are called, ride again to see if any linger behind. There is no time to lose; we must proceed with the sealing of each soul in this city, that we may know who we can trust and that we may weed out from among us any who would seek to ambush the city from within, as we battle the enemy without.”

Tertrius nodded and reined his horse around, calling out the orders quickly to the other horsemen, who then made their way through the surrounding streets and dispersed in all directions. A small contingent remained with Jordan and Tertrius.

Jordan then turned to his trusted counselor. “Tertrius,” he began, “you must attend to the sealing ceremony in the marketplace. There is no telling what kind of trouble our enemies will try to stir up in an attempt to disrupt this plan of God. And there is organization to be tended to, as well as reassuring the people that they will not be harmed in passing through the cloud. Will you tend to this for me?”

- 15 -

THE CHILD IN THE ALLEY

When Jordan came out from the forest, not more than ten minutes after he had first gone in, a slight murmur of surprise rippled through his waiting companions. Something had clearly changed in their king—normally calm and levelheaded, he now seemed to have risen to some greater height of wisdom and strength that made his former manner appear rash and childish in comparative recollection. To a man, they all bowed their heads slightly as he strode through the center of them and reclaimed the reins of his magnificent stallion.

“Thank you for waiting,” he said quietly.

Tertrius broke the moment of awkward silence that seemed to hang over Jordan like a thick cloak, “Where do we head now?”

“Forward!” Jordan looked up, and the men were relieved to see him flash his usual smile. “Ever forward! To the battle we go!”

“What of Kalor’s threat concerning the queen?” one of the captains nearby asked.

Jordan answered it for all to hear, “Our queen rests in the hands of our Almighty God. She has never been

Tertrius nodded.

“Go first to the magistrate’s palace and discover what you can, taking with you the remainder of my royal escort.” He nodded in their direction. “Tend well to this mission,” he told them all, “for it is of utmost importance. And if any would seek to leave the city, forbid them not, but escort them without the gates, sparing the lives of these fools, and hopefully thereby the life of our queen.”

“But, sir...” Tertrius bowed his head low in deference as he spoke to his king, “I must insist that the guards remain with you. If anything were to happen to your person as well...”

Jordan cut him off, “I know, Tertrius. But do as I have bidden you. There is something that I have been bidden to do, and I must do it alone. ...” Almost as an afterthought, he then added, “With only the powers of Heaven at my side.”

Having received their instructions, the remainder of the men then rode off, leaving Jordan alone on his mount in the now-deserted street.

He looked curiously around himself now, wondering what plan the Almighty had in mind by instructing him to remain thus alone in this still largely unfamiliar city. For it was one thing to wander the streets in the garb of a commoner, but quite another to be parading around fully dressed in his kingly battle attire, and riding his huge stallion! He would be a target easily recognized by any of the enemy’s men, should he come across one—or more. Nevertheless, Jordan had felt the wordless summons in his heart, and so he obeyed. He pulled gently on the reins now, and turned his horse down a narrow side street.

Onward he moved for quite some time, turning first here and then there, moving slowly but always steadily, without pausing for decision at any turn of the road. He felt as though he knew exactly where he was headed—though it was never ahead of time. Only

as he neared each choice, he felt the decision already made for him, and he chose the turns easily and smoothly.

At length he came to a stop in the middle of a row of buildings, all identical in appearance, with the same dingy, muted exterior that reeked of poverty and neglect. At this point, his unspoken instructions ceased, and Jordan was left gazing up and down the street, wondering what he was to do now.

Several men and women rushed hastily past him, obviously moving in the direction of the town square. Aside from the momentary commotion of passersby, all seemed strangely quiet.

Jordan climbed off his horse and fastened the reins to a hitching post that stood nearby. A sudden flash of movement caught his eye, and he turned quickly towards the open doorway from whence it had come. He stepped inside and as his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, he saw a young child—a little girl of no more than five years old. Her hair was long and stringy, and hung down her back in partly woven braids. Her face was dirty, but her smile was sweet—though timid.

“Are you the king?” she asked shyly.

Jordan knelt down near her. “That I am,” he replied. “And who are you?”

“I am Adina,” she whispered importantly, as though revealing a great and important secret.

“Have you already been into the square?” Jordan asked. “There is a special ceremony to take place there. You should call your mother and father, and have them bring you.”

“I do not need to go,” the girl lisped in reply, and as Jordan focused his eyes intently on her face, he was startled to see that she already bore the mark of the cross upon her left cheek.

“You say you have not been there yet?” He was somewhat surprised, but the mark was unmistakable.

Rather than questioning its origin any further (realizing that he might not get many clear answers from a child so young), he continued. "Where do you live?"

The girl just pointed her finger up the drab staircase that filled the entire lower floor of the building in which they stood. "They're up there," she said, with a winning smile. "That's where you need to go."

"Your parents would wish to see me?" Jordan grinned. "Perhaps you could show me up yourself." Wherever this strange situation was leading, it seemed to be the direction planned out for him at the moment, and Jordan's curiosity had been sufficiently aroused by this time.

"Not me," Adina shook her head. "Only you've got to go up there. Be brave!" she whispered, then turned and scampered off into the darkness of the room.

"Adina?" Jordan called out, but upon hearing no reply he turned in the direction of the staircase.

He climbed it slowly and carefully, but before he had quite reached the top, he heard a harsh voice call out, "Who goes there?"

"Just a visitor," Jordan replied warily. "I was sent by the little girl downstairs. I am to pay my respects to her parents. They live up here?" He craned his neck to see who was addressing him, but whoever he addressed was out of sight behind the curve of the staircase.

"Of what little girl do you speak?" came the voice, yet more gruffly. "And what parents are they you wish to visit?"

"Adina—that is her name, a little girl of about five. She directed me up this staircase." Jordan was quite curious by now, and started moving again up the staircase. All seemed to go strangely silent in response to his reply. "Hello?" he called. "I shall come up now, if that is all right!"

No sooner had he placed his foot around the bend of the staircase than a strong pair of arms grabbed him from behind, pinning his two arms behind his back. Jordan felt the cold edge of a steel blade lining the width of his throat. He gasped for breath. "Peace, brother," he whispered hoarsely, trying to remain calm. What exactly was taking place? Had he missed some vital piece of information that ought to have caused him to avoid this sector altogether?

"Repeat what you just said," his captor hissed in his ear.

"A little girl named Adina," Jordan panted, his throat dry and his voice beginning to crack from the unexpected turn of events. "I caught sight of her inside the door of this building, and she directed me up this staircase."

"The truth!" the man empathetically whispered into Jordan's ears with a notable hiss. "Tell me the truth now! Where did you learn this from? Who are you? Who sent you?"

The blade felt dangerously sharp, and Jordan sensed a tiny, warm trickle beginning to make its way down the side of his neck. *O my Lord on high!* he prayed silently. *Reveal to me what I may say to this madman that would cause him to reconsider his current plan! For I would hope that I have not come all this way to have my life ended by some half-witted fellow who suspects me of some foul deed.*

Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw her again. She sat on the staircase directly above them, looking on with a strange, sad look in her eyes.

"Adina!" Jordan called out aloud. The girl made no move, and so he directed his efforts to his captor. "You see? She is right there! Sitting on that stair! Adina, say something!"

The man pulled the knife from its place and turned Jordan around roughly, throwing him against the wooden paneling. "Who are you?" he hissed again.

Jordan looked his ambusher over, and was startled to see that he wore the insignia of the dark kingdom. He hesitated a moment, wondering what he should reply, and then said, "I am Jordan, the king of this land. Who are you?"

The man brushed the question aside impatiently, as if it were a bothersome pest. "How do you know of me? What do you know of my life?"

"You?" Jordan echoed incredulously. "I know nothing of you. I only tell you what I experienced, just now as I was riding by on my horse."

"Why should I believe you?" the man bellowed. "I should end your miserable life this moment!"

All at once, realization washed over Jordan. He looked quickly over to the staircase. Adina was gone. And all was clear to him—that girl was a spirit. She was not a physical presence! But apparently she was someone whom this man knew ... this was the plan of God. And in the same flash of revelation, Jordan also knew what this man did—and who was behind that door at the top of the stairs which he was obviously guarding, and to which Jordan had been so mysteriously led.

Seizing his advantage, Jordan began to speak quickly, nearly tripping over his words in his excitement to get them out. "Man, I have never seen you in my life, nor have I heard of you. I do not know your name, or anything of you. But one thing I do know—I saw that little girl as truly as I see you here right now. Only I suspect now that she was not a person in the flesh, but rather a spirit, who was sent to guide me to you. You have given your life in service to this evil kingdom, but is this really what you want to do? Is this the path that you have truly chosen for your life?"

Jordan did not quite know what to expect, for he had seen the fierce devotion of these evil men, and doubted that one little speech of his—and so clumsily

worded to boot—could possibly do anything to sway one of their men from his evil intent. His hand moved further down towards his weapon, hoping that at the very least he could try to fight his way out should the situation warrant it.

But before his shocked gaze, the huge man suddenly crumpled to the ground in a heap. "Oh," he sobbed. "I am so ashamed—so ashamed! What have I done? The ghosts of my past have returned to haunt me! I have betrayed my life, my love—and now I shall pay." Jordan still remained, speechless, with his hand on the hilt of his sword, but the stranger looked up, his eyes wild with pain and fear. "I have seen her too, you know—Adina! She haunts me! Sometimes I look around the corner, and I see her ... just a glimpse, but it is enough. She never leaves me. I know that she is there." He looked furtively over his shoulder, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "She is probably there right now, lurking in the shadow ... waiting, watching, biding her time that she may reward me with some unspeakable evil as punishment for my sins!" The man began to tremble fearfully again.

"Come," Jordan put his arm around the man's shoulders, and helped him stand up. "Let us go up into the house. It is cold and damp here in this hallway."

"No!" the man grabbed Jordan's arm, and lowered his voice dramatically again. "We cannot go in there! There are guards! They will not let us escape."

"I must rescue my queen," Jordan said firmly, knowing instinctively that she was somewhere just behind that door.

"Of course—of course," the man stammered, still slightly incoherent. "And I must help you. Don't you see? It's the least I can do ... to try to make things right. I must make amends! But how?" he started moaning again. "What can we do?"

Jordan grabbed the man by his shoulders and

shook him briskly. "There is much we can do," he said. "Pull yourself together! It is not too late! Now tell me, how many men are in there?"

The man squinted, and passed his hands over his sweaty forehead and through his matted hair. "Four," he breathed softly. He seemed to be getting ahold of himself a bit better. "Probably only two men are on duty right now—the others will be sound asleep in the back room; they were up all night. She is being held at the end of the hallway to the left. There is a very large eunuch in the room with her. He has been ordered to never leave her side."

"Will you help me to rescue the queen?" Jordan asked.

The man hesitated. "This may seem strange to you," he finally said. "I shall need to explain it someday. But I will gladly help you—or give my life in trying. It is the least I can do."

Jordan clasped his arm gratefully. "My friend, explain you shall—someday—but in the meantime, let us make haste, for our time is short. You have been placed here by God, and for you I give Him great thanks."

The man bowed his head humbly. "What do we do?" he asked.

"Come, let us plan," Jordan said, and the two began to discuss further, in hushed voices.

a hearty laugh. "I knew I'd got your attention," he chuckled. "Come along to the window."

The guard let the door slam behind him and he clomped down the stairs. He followed Rufus around the corner, and no sooner had he done so than he felt his two arms being grabbed and held firmly, just as a thick cloth was bound around his mouth so that he could not shout.

Jordan and Rufus made short order of tying the man securely, and then Jordan shoved him in a dark corner of the staircase, well out of the walkway.

"One down." Rufus rejoiced. "And now for step two."

Jordan nodded, and Rufus set off up the stairs. As the door shut behind him, Jordan could hear a lazy discussion about the absent guard and how intent he was upon making the acquaintance of this girl that Rufus had left him alone with. After a few minutes, as Rufus and the guard were laughing heartily together at whatever antics their friend might be pulling with the hapless wench, Jordan crept up towards the door and, taking a deep breath, burst through it. The two men instantly leapt to their feet. Rufus was standing slightly behind the other guard, and before he could open his mouth to shout and alert the others, he had thrown a gag over his mouth. Jordan proceeded to wrench the weapon from his hand and then bind him securely with some ropes that lay nearby.

The two then moved towards the room to the left, which held the sleeping guards. Those two were easily and silently overpowered into a sudden and very rude awakening, and found they were helpless at the mercy of their attackers. Leaving them also securely bound together, they locked the room.

"And now for the last bastion," Rufus whispered.

"May our Lord go with us," Jordan prayed earnestly. He positioned himself just outside the door

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THE FINAL SIGN

Taking a deep breath, and with a glance back to catch Jordan's reassuring gaze, the hefty guard lumbered slowly up the staircase. Arriving at the door he craned his head around it and grunted towards one of the guards who sat around on an old pile of cushions in the corner. "Come have a look at something, will you?" he grunted.

"What's up?" the man retorted lazily. "Tell me from here, I don't feel like getting up."

"Ah, it's nothing important," the man returned with a shrug of his shoulders. "There's just this amazing girl stopped right in front, and she's picking up some things that dropped from her basket. ... It's quite the view."

He shut the door and started down the stairs again. Jordan, just out of sight behind the bend in the staircase, held his breath. At length a frustrated groan could be heard from the other side of the door. "Rufus, you great oaf!" The man grinned coarsely, flinging open the door. "Now you've got me on my feet! Where is she?"

Rufus was halfway down the staircase, and let out

to the room, and Rufus strode loudly over and pounded on it.

“Garth!” he called. “There is something peculiar going on here. Where are all the others?”

The door was flung open, and no sooner had the giant of a man put his head out through it than he was grabbed and pinned to the ground, and soon found himself in the dark room across the hallway with his fellow guards.

While Rufus was finishing off this business, Jordan burst into the room where Garth had been. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the light, and just about the time that they did, a slight figure in the far corner of the room turned. Her face showed the stress of her capture and the strain of having inwardly battled with seeking a reason for the unfortunate turn of events, and—not having found one—the remorse at having been the cause of it. But at the sight of her love, Amaris jumped to her feet with a muted cry of joy. “Jordan!” she exclaimed in a hushed whisper. “How come you to be here? Are you captured also?”

“No, my love,” Jordan rushed over and took her in his arms, covering her face with kisses. “Our Lord has led me to you, and has provided us with the means of escape. But come,” he took her hand and led her gently to the door. “We have no time to spare. We must be off at once.”

As they came out of the room, they came face to face with Rufus, and Amaris shrank back timidly. “It’s all right,” Jordan said, “he’s a friend. He helped us overpower the others.”

Amaris smiled gratefully at him.

Rufus just nodded. “Sire, you’d best go back the way you came,” he said quickly. “That’s the back way. There are many more guards at the front, and they will be making their way into the building at any time.”

“What about you?” Jordan asked.

“I will need to be gone as well, but I shall have to go on foot, for our mounts are all in the stables, which can only be reached from the front.”

Jordan hesitated. “I would offer you a ride with us, but I know that three would be a load too great for my poor beast.”

“Never mind me, sire,” Rufus said gruffly, but he was obviously touched. “I will be all right.”

“Do one thing, I pray you,” Jordan said. They were now out of the apartment and moving quickly down the back stairs towards the street. “Remove at once that despicable vesture, and make your way as quickly as you can to the town square. There you will find a gathering of men loyal to this country and to our Lord. Join them, and they will receive you gladly. For the past matters not, so long as it is bathed in repentance and clothed with the garments of a fresh start.”

“I will do that.” Rufus smiled, and, as they had reached the street, they parted company. He dashed off towards a smaller side alley, while Jordan helped Amaris up onto his horse, and they rode off as quickly as they could.



It did not take long before Jordan and Amaris had reached the main square and the magistrate’s residence, which was now surrounded by his own guard, several of whom stood as sentries in front of its doors. They had hardly passed through the door when they were greeted by Tertrius.

“Thank God you’re both safe!” he exclaimed with relief.

“What of the magistrate?” Jordan asked.

“When we came, we discovered the door to the main chamber barred from the outside, and the magistrate and several elders tied and gagged inside. They apparently had suffered a fate similar to our queen, though the perpetrators are no longer among us. They must have caught wind of our coming, and fled before

we got here. But the magistrate is well, as are the other elders. They are all most thankful to have been spared a worse fate. But I am surprised how well they endured their captivity. They are hardy men, though their appearance would hide it.”

Jordan’s attention suddenly turned back to Amaris. Having bravely endured her capture, she had found herself quite weakened, and now, under the heat of the bright afternoon sun, had collapsed in Jordan’s arms. He quickly lifted her up and carried her inside, where they found a bed to put her on, that she might rest and regain her strength.



By sunset that day, the entire city of Pur was massed in the town square, completely filling up every portion of it, and extending into the streets beyond. The merchants had hastily cleared away all of their merchandise, and every extra bit of space had been made use of. Several messengers had already ridden through the gates, reporting that the remaining force from the palace would be joining them in the coming hours.

Looking out upon this teeming mass of fighting men from the large window of the magistrate’s residence, Jordan lowered his head soberly and could not repress a slight shudder.

Amaris, who had by this time awakened, came up behind him and placed her arms around his waist. “What is it, my love?” she questioned.

“I do not know,” Jordan sighed. “Perhaps we have lived peacefully for so long that I tremble at the thought of lifting arms against another nation—however vile its emissaries may have proven themselves to be.”

“And yet this is the path wherein we have been led by God, is it not?” she asked softly, but it was a question rather than a statement.

“So far as I can tell, yes,” Jordan returned. “But in

such major events as this, I cannot help but feel an occasional twinge of wonderment. What if I have misheard or misrepresented the voice of the Lord? What if this is not His plan after all? It is, after all, not a light thing to send forth so many fighting men to face possible death. Should I not be convinced beyond any doubt?”

“When worried doubt rushes upon the mind, it can never hurt to regain certainty before moving into action,” Amaris offered. “Perhaps we should ask the Lord for another sign before we set the entire army in motion. Surely if this is truly His will He would be happy to do so.”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than there was a loud knock on the door. A young page entered, and handed a scroll to Jordan. He and Amaris leaned over it eagerly, and then looked at each other.

“Let us go down at once!” he said, his eyes shining with curiosity. “For this may be the beginning of our sign!”



Jordan and Amaris made their way quickly out of the magistrate’s home with a small detachment of guards surrounding them. They pushed their way through the crowds to the front of the square. Even as they moved along, they noticed the slight commotion that was taking place ahead of them, where a group of soldiers appeared to be holding captive about a dozen men.

“We have taken hold of some of the infiltrators!” one of the men cried out. Not only were most of them wearing the uniforms of the alien kingdom, but not one of them possessed the mark of God upon their cheeks. They had evidently missed going through the portal, likely not having wanted to risk it.

Jordan and Amaris stepped up onto the platform, whereupon the restrained men were being held. Jordan noticed that amongst these men were those

who had been the guards holding Amaris.

“How came this about?” he asked one of the soldiers in a low voice.

“One of their own defected to our side, sire,” the soldier said, nodding to a man in the crowd, which Jordan saw was Rufus. “He informed us of this dwelling place of theirs, and we conducted an immediate raid. Several of them escaped, but these were apprehended. And now we need to know what to do with them. Shall they be put to death?”

Jordan turned and looked towards the men. “What say you to this? Have you any desire to renounce your evil ways and live in peace with us? Even now you may pass through the cloud, and I promise you that repentance and even the smallest grain of the desire to believe will be perceived as righteousness by our true God and judge above all, who shall certainly grant you the chance you should desire.”

He looked searchingly at the faces of the men, but not one moved so much as a muscle. Those who were not altogether hardened by hate and corruption were eaten up by the unknown fear of stepping through a supernatural cloud and putting themselves at the mercy of some unknown God.

“What then?” returned the soldier eagerly. “Shall they die here, before all?”

“No!” Amaris burst out. “Surely we should not stoop to the same barbaric depths that they would employ were our positions reversed!”

“I also am in agreement with the queen,” Jordan replied. “Bind these men yet more securely, and convey them to the prison chambers. There shall be no killing here today.”

At that moment, a commotion was heard at the far end of the square, in the direction of the north gate. A bedraggled messenger rode frantically in. His voice was hoarse and the onlookers could barely make sense of his sentences. But at last the message was

proclaimed: “The enemy approaches!” he gasped hoarsely. “They are not more than a day away, upon the northern plains, and pressing forward with all the speed they can muster. They are as the sands of the sea in number—by no means could they be counted. They shall be upon us before we know it!”

Jordan looked at Amaris, and at Tertrius, Artichus, the city magistrate and the chief of his guard, who had by now also joined them on the platform.

Jordan addressed them all in a quiet and sober voice, “My friends, we have felt somewhat hesitant to march to an attack not directly instigated by ourselves, lest we should find ourselves the author of great bloodshed and loss. But we are now being directly provoked, and we have nothing to do but to fight, strong in the power of our Lord. Do you all agree?”

To a man, the leaders on stage gave their agreement, and Jordan turned to the fighting force amassed in the square, who now offered their full and rapt attention. “My countrymen”—his voice boomed out with a mighty echo that resonated off of the walls of the buildings—“now we go forth to battle! Before us goes the fighting power of our God—and not only before us, but within the very heart of our being. He is the One who will give us strength to win this battle—and to come forth as the victors over all!”

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WAR AND PEACE

Anxious to put a little distance between the city of Pur and what would become the scene of the battle, the army set off at once. Jordan and the other leaders rode in the front, leading the way up the northern plains and towards the enemy they knew was swiftly approaching. Finding what seemed a good field for battle, they set up camp to await the invading forces. Before the even had settled, the remainder of their army, those who had marched on foot from the palace, caught up with the first group, and they all set themselves in array against the enemy to come.

It was not long before the opposing army could be seen, dressed in their crimson robes and dark turbans, their weapons glistening in the early light of the moon, which cast an eerie shadow over their hordes and banners on the horizon. The sentries and soldiers watched warily to see what their opponent would do. Would the hopefully unexpected sight of their defending army be enough to halt this intended invasion, or at least check their movement until daybreak? Or would these hordes seek open conflict even in the darkness, where all would risk slaugh-

tering friends along with foes for lack of clear vision?

The approaching army drew up within a half-mile or so of the camp, a wide dry riverbed dividing the field between them. The opposing sides stood there for some time, staring at each other with a mixture of hate and apprehension. The soft night wind blew through the ranks, stroking the rugged and war-hardened faces in a last attempt to negotiate peace between these two adversaries. But peace was a dream of the past. As the invading force showed no signs of setting up camp for the night, but rather seemed to be readying their weapons for a direct attack, there appeared to be no escape from the gruesome shedding of blood under the cover of darkness.

As a last resort, and in an attempt to stave off the attack that now seemed would inevitably follow, Jordan took advantage of the pause and called out loudly, "We have no quarrel with you! If you would leave us to live in peace, we would return the way we have come, and leave you to do the same. We wish you no harm! We are here to defend our land and our lives—that is all!"

His eyes scanned the ranks until they settled upon a tall, imposing figure at the front of the enemy lines, a little off to the left. He was obviously the leader of the band—a fact not only betrayed by his dress, but by his haughty carriage as well. Jordan strained his eyes to see the man's countenance, but he was too far away to discern with any clarity in the deepening darkness, which now seemed to brood all the darker, almost as a shadow, over the forces before them.

In response to Jordan's call, the tall man lifted up his right arm, slowly at first but finishing in a resolute and purposeful thrust into the night air. "Attack!" he bellowed aloud. The enemy soldiers dug their heels into their mounts, and the army began its approach.

"Then we shall fight as well," Jordan shouted to his men. "Go with the power of God, strong and valiant

warriors, for He shall give unto us the victory!"

With the great clashing as of a thousand jangled cymbals, the two front lines smashed into each other. The moon cast its silver light upon the noisy spectacle, though its mystic presence was all but unnoticed by the warring men. As the front lines of both armies melted into each other, there was a moment of disorientation at the fighting bodies who all looked so similar in this semidarkness. It was then that those who had passed through the portal noticed that the seal of God upon their faces shone with its incandescent glow, making it clearly visible to all who was on which side.

The enemy, true to their conniving nature, had clothed some of their men in the colors and armor of Jordan's forces. But by this dim light, it was not their armor that told the forces apart, but the unmistakable seal of God. And yet they were greatly outnumbered, and it seemed as if there was nothing they could do to prevent these heathen hordes from fulfilling their dark deeds.

In the midst of all this, Jordan pulled his horse off to the side a little, taking a moment of quiet refuge under a large tree. He watched the unfolding scene as best he could, and his thoughts pounded Heaven with a reverberating cry. "What is wrong? What more could we be doing?" Something was not quite right, and Jordan could not place what it was.

"O God of all the mighty battles of Heaven and earth," he begged fervently, "I stand here helplessly while my men are being cut down as cattle to the slaughter. Whether we win or whether we lose, we shall surely return home as helpless cripples, with half of our body—our friends and brothers—lying here motionless in the dirt. Speak to me, O God, and show me what other avenue we may take in the taming of this ruthless enemy. For they force our hand, and yet, even from that we may come forth the better, if

we would only be led of Thee!"

At that very moment, a large cracking sound reverberated through the valley. It began softly at first, but picked up volume so suddenly that many dropped their weapons and clapped their hands upon their ears in agony. Those who were not afflicted thus lifted their terrified eyes to the heavens—in which position they stood, transfixed in horror at the signs they saw in the sky. For directly above them, in a line running along the same path as the dry riverbed that split the plain in twain, the black of the night sky was being ripped apart in a thunderous way, as though by two supernatural hands. Through this split in the sky a foreboding red glow could be seen. Many of the men trembled and cowered in fright, covering their entire faces with their hands and curling up as low to the ground as they could.

Seeing this sudden and very visible answer to his prayer, Jordan quickly rode back towards the center of the field. Taking advantage of a pause in the thunderous noise, he lifted up his voice with all his strength: "See, you who would call yourselves our enemies, the forces that fight alongside us? Our God is none other than the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and it is Him against whom you lift your swords this day. We have no wish for further bloodshed. Therefore leave us in peace, and our country, and we will allow you to return the way you have come."

He addressed his last sentence to the haughty leader, who—alone amongst any of his men who could be seen—remained as straight as an arrow, towering upon his magnificent black stallion. Jordan looked deep into his eyes, and shuddered to see no spark of light whatsoever—only dark pools of black evil and hate. Right then he knew that the conflict would not resolve itself so easily.

The leader turned back to his men. "Fight on, I

say to you! Fight on! Their magicians have harnessed the power of the sky, but who are they against the power of our swords? We shall lay them all to rest this night! Fight on, I say! Fight on!”

At his side another man pulled up on his horse. Kalor sat proudly and defiantly alongside his leader—his eyes glowering at Jordan with rancor and malevolence.

But before a single one of their men could respond, the open crack in the sky began to seethe and boil, as though the glowing clouds themselves were a mass of boiling coals or a heavenly volcano ready to erupt. At that moment, a single pulsing cloud emerged from that hole in the heavens and came hurtling towards the earth. Directly towards the proud stallions it charged, splitting in twain at the last moment and colliding in no more than a second from the time it had begun, knocking the two riders completely off of their horses.

An audible gasp could be heard rippling through the valley as the proud leader of that dark kingdom—the one who had dared to defy the power of Heaven—lay in a smoldering heap on the ground, and his chief cohort alongside him.

The invading army needed no further persuading, as one and all began immediately to run for their lives—many not even stopping to mount their horses again, so frantic were they to disappear from this site of such strange and devastating celestial power.

One by one, the soldiers of Jordan’s army began to stand up from where they had fallen or dropped to the ground, and watched the last of the astounding spectacle with tears of joy in their eyes. The sky above rumbled its approval, and, satisfied that the conflict had been resolved, returned to its peaceful nighttime display.

“What shall we do now, my lord?” Artichus asked as he rode up beside Jordan. “Do we pursue?”

Jordan stared at the now-still night sky. “No!” he replied, still awestruck at the might and power of God. “No, let us camp here tonight, attend to our dead and wounded, and in the morning we shall begin the march home!”



It was a joyous day for the country—a day of celebration and rejoicing, of praising God and remembering His goodness towards them. Seven days had passed since the resounding victory against the invading northerners, and Jordan and Amaris had declared a nationwide holiday, complete with festivities of all sorts.

A handful of close friends had gathered at the palace, and amongst them were Kaline and Elder, her grandfather, Terla and her children, and others that they had met along the way.

“Elder!” Amaris said, grasping his arms warmly and kissing him on both cheeks. “You look so well. You look radiant today!”

The old man went quite immobile at the queen’s actions. “Your Majesty...” he stammered.

“Do you recognize me, Elder?” Amaris asked.

“Once we arrived at the palace I was acquainted with your true identity ... I was ashamed to have acted so inappropriately when we were together. Would I have known the truth, I would most certainly have...”

“Elder,” Amaris interrupted him, gently taking his hand in hers, “you gave us the most precious gift of all—your friendship. You opened your life to us not knowing who we were, and that to us means more than any pomp or reverence you could have afforded us had you known our true identities. And I hope that our friendship will remain now that you do know.”

“Why—why, of course!” he paused, and then burst into a great and glorious smile, which almost cancelled out the signs of age that were otherwise so

notable to his appearance. "And I have so much thanks to return unto you, as well!" He grasped Kaline closely, and looked as though his heart would burst with pride. "Look at my lovely child! Is she not a new creature? She is the lovely girl that I once knew, and I will never cease in praising God for the miracle He has done in restoring her to her former joy and simplicity."

"It is thanks to God," Kaline smiled. "And also to you, my dear friends. Truly you have been anointed rulers by Him, and His ways are marvelous and most beneficent upon those who fear and trust Him."

Amaris just smiled. "There is no calling more honorable than to be such a vessel of God," she said quietly. "And it is a position available to all—to any who would desire and pursue hard after it."

Elder lowered his voice to a confiding whisper, "I myself have also undergone a change of sorts." He smiled knowingly at Amaris. "After our talk in the tavern that day—which now seems so long ago—I resolved to follow your instructions as to the burdens that were weighing me down. After I had committed them to our Lord on high on a momentary basis, I found that He seemed able to take adequate care of them, and so I resolved to not trouble myself with them again. As you can see, not only has He rewarded me by taking away those seen burdens, but also that other burden of doubt and worry that was so faintly understood by my mortal mind. I am of all men most richly blessed!"

Jordan came up behind Amaris just then, and whispered something in her ear. Amaris turned her attention to her left side, where the two gazed curiously at a strange spectacle. Terla stood with an unexplainable look on her face. She was talking to Rufus, who was holding her hand with a very nervous look indeed.

"Rufus and Terla," Amaris mused, "it seems they

have taken a liking to each other? That was fast, was it not?"

Jordan nodded, with a slight smile. Just then Terla caught sight of them, and waved to them to come over.

"Rufus!" Amaris burst out, embracing the man warmly. "I have not thanked you enough for all that you did to assist in my escape!"

The man reddened and seemed at a loss for words.

"What is this?" Terla asked curiously. "You did not tell me this part of the story! Rufus, what did you do?"

"He was one of the soldiers guarding me," Amaris explained, still holding the man's arm warmly. "He turned his back upon them and helped to free me instead."

"I can tell you the whole story sometime," Jordan grinned. "It is certainly most astounding and amazing!"

Appearing anxious to change the subject somewhat, Rufus looked up uncomfortably. When he spoke, his voice was soft and almost reverent. "And here is the reason for it all!" he murmured.

A young girl of around nine or ten approached and clasped her arms around Terla. "Hi, Mama," she said, squeezing her tightly.

"My sweet Adina," Terla sighed.

Jordan and Amaris looked confused. At the same moment, the young girl looked up at Rufus, and her face turned white. Her lip started to tremble, and tears formed in her eyes. "Is it ... is that ..." She looked up questioningly at her mother, who nodded, also with tears in her eyes. Without a moment's hesitation, the girl flung herself into the man's arms.

Unable to restrain her curiosity any longer, Amaris pulled Terla aside a little. "What is the meaning of this?" she asked, with wide eyes.

"Rufus is my husband," Terla said, with a little

sigh, as though she herself could not believe how things had turned out. “He apparently joined forces with the northerners upon leaving me, and though he later regretted his decision, he could not leave. But he has been haunted all these years with guilt at leaving us—to certain death, he supposed, for how could we survive without him—and particularly Adina, who was his favorite child.”

“Adina!” exclaimed Jordan, who had joined the two women. “So that’s why that little ghost in the alley frightened him so!”

“But Jordan,” Amaris said, “how could the ghost of her childhood have been haunting him when she was not dead?”

Jordan shrugged in amazement. “Truly the ways of our God are past understanding,” he said, “but whatever method He employed to bring it about, the fruit is good, and that is what counts.”

The three turned back to the father and daughter, who were still clasped in one another’s embrace. “And where are your brothers?” he asked the girl.

Adina pointed her finger off to the side, where little Eldan could be seen looking up at his elder brother, Taurus—a tall, gangly youth, who, Rufus noted with some amusement, stood awkwardly conversing with a little redhead. The two seemed somewhat shy and uncomfortable together, but were obviously enjoying these first signs of adolescent attraction.

“Perhaps I will talk to them later,” Rufus smiled. “They seem busy for the moment.” He reached out his hand for Terla’s, and she smilingly took hold of his.

As the three walked off, hand in hand, Jordan turned to Amaris and smiled. He picked up a crystal goblet from a nearby stand, and turned to face the others, who obligingly turned in his direction.

“My friends,” he called, with a rich fullness in his voice that stilled even the most engrossing

conversation. “We are here to celebrate the power of our Almighty God—and the power of His love, which is the greatest conquering force on earth, able to right any wrong and mediate any difficulty. Let us therefore raise our glasses in this toast, that this day may live on in our hearts forever, and motivate us to follow Him closely in all that we shall do.” He held his glass up high. “To life—to love!”

“To life—to love!” the people chorused in unison.

Drinking deeply of the wine, Jordan turned to Amaris, who threw her arms around his neck, and they joined in a passionate embrace, while the crowds cheered wildly. And thus they sealed their adventure, with the heavenly love that had brought them to triumph once again.

The End