

Here is the third excerpt from *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Price of Freedom*. This excerpt doesn't feature Jack, Cutler Beckett, or any of the characters from the films, but, rather, introduces one of the original characters I created, a Princess of Kerma who has the ability to weave magical spells. Her name is Amenirdis...

Chapter 5: **THE LOST PRINCESS**

Amenirdis, lost princess of Zerzura, was dreaming of the day she lost her name, and herself.

She lay curled on her woven mat in the building reserved for the female house slaves, her ugly gray shawl wrapped around her, despite the muggy heat of the rainy African night. The dream was so real, so detailed, it was as if she were reliving those awful moments, just as they had unfolded. She stirred in her sleep, her hands curling into fists, clutching folds of her shawl as the dream unfolded. . . .

She was back on the seemingly endless savannah of the land their native guides had called Ethiopia, part of her small caravan, walking with her face toward the descending sun, full of silent despair. She had led a caravan of her people on what had proven to be a useless and heartbreaking pilgrimage to their ancient homeland of Kush, the country men now called Nubia. She'd been so sure that if she went to the ancient homeland, that the gods would help her find her missing father and brother!

The princess's father, the Pharaoh Taharka, had left their hidden island five years ago, seeking a remedy to cure her little brother, Prince Aniba, who had died three months after the king's departure. Taharka had never returned. A year later, her fourteen-year-old brother, Prince

Shabako, had vanished, leaving a note that he had gone to seek his missing father. He had not returned, either.

Amenirdis grieved for her missing brother every day, until one morning she had awakened with a vision of their ancient homeland as it was portrayed in their record scrolls. There had been no contact between the Western exiles and those who had remained in Kush, no contact for more than three thousand years. Perhaps it was time to heal old wounds, to reunite with their distant cousins. Her mind filled with her vision, the princess became convinced that if she went to Apedemak's most ancient temple and prayed there, the god would grant her knowledge of her brother and father's fate. She felt certain Shabako still lived. Surely if he had died, she would have known. They had been close . . . so close.

And now her dreams lay broken. She walked across the seemingly endless savannah, ignoring the aching of her tired feet. At least the savannah was better than the Great Desert they had crossed to reach the Great River, the Nile. Amenirdis tried to tell herself that all was not lost. She had gambled with this mission, and she had lost, but at least now she was on her way home, and the desert was behind them. She would go home to the Shining City, to fair Zerzura, where her mother, Queen Tiyy, waited anxiously for her return.

Catching the toe of her sandal on a rock, the princess stumbled, and her eunuch bodyguard, Tarek, quickly steadied her. The princess flashed him a weary smile of thanks. He was so faithful, always at her side...with him she felt completely safe. Tarek was the tallest, broadest male in the party. Amenirdis was tall, for a woman of Kerma, but his massive form towered over her.

The princess sighed. They had all had such great hopes for this expedition, only to see them dashed. Their journey from the West Coast had taken long, weary months. First they'd had

to go inland, to get away from the coastal cities their scouts reported. Then the native guides they'd hired had taken them south, in order to avoid as much of the Great Desert as possible.

Finally, they'd traveled north, skirting the Nile, to reach the third cataract. They knew that their destination, the city of Kerma, lay just south of the third cataract. They'd been filled with anticipation and joy as they walked those final few miles, excitedly waiting for their first glimpse of the legendary city of their forebears. Amenirdis had pictured the bustling city depicted in their ancient scrolls... the massive *deffufas* built of mud-brick, towering like man-made, flat-topped mountains, the pharaoh's palace, the temples, the municipal buildings, the round dwelling places of the populace, and, on the outskirts, the massive circular mounds marking the burial sites of the pharaohs who had passed on to the Next Life... all the grandeur that that was part of their ancient heritage.. The high priest, old Piye, could scarcely contain his excitement. For the first time since their exodus nearly more than three thousand years ago, the descendants of Kerma were returning, eager for the sight of their Eastern brethren.

Instead of palaces, temples, and throngs of people, they had found nothing but a long-deserted ruin.

Amenirdis sighed again, realizing her pace had slowed, and thus, everyone had slowed to accommodate her. Determinedly, she lengthened and quickened her stride, and the group picked up the pace. Two of the warrior-priests preceded her, and the other two walked behind her. Her two maids flanked her. Behind the priests trudged the baggage slaves. The princess's personal contingent of guardsmen surrounded the party, their bows held ready, arrows nocked, swords loose in their sheaths. As they walked, their trained eyes scanned every clump of vegetation, every stand of trees or rock outcropping for possible enemies.

Amenirdis could smell the vegetation beneath their feet as they walked, and the pungent

odor of sweat-soaked humanity. She'd wrapped a scarf around her head to protect her from the sun, but even with it across her forehead, droplets still collected, dripping down her dark skin. Every time she moistened her lips, she tasted salt. The party had stopped to rest when the sun was overhead, at its strongest, but even now, with it mercifully low in the sky, she still felt as though she were wrapped in a woolen cloak, lying before a roaring fire. All of them were sweating, not just the baggage slaves.

They had no warning. None.

One moment they were walking over the rich sward of the savannah, the next, a strange sound like a sharp crack of thunder split the air. One of her guardsmen went down like a sacrificial animal before the knife of a priest. He lay sprawled, silent, unmoving. Amenirdis stopped, staring, unable for a second to connect the two events—the sound, then the guard's death. Amenemhet, commander of the guards, shouted an order. His men moved into defensive positions, lances and bows ready.

Another thunder-sound smote the air...another guard dropped.

“Down!” shouted the Commander. “Everyone down!”

Amenirdis froze, unable to move. Tarek grabbed her and flung her to the ground. She gasped, her wind knocked out by the force of her landing. The eunuch rested his huge hand between her shoulder blades, holding her motionless, though after finally drawing breath, she regained her wits enough not to struggle. Cautiously, she raised her head a tiny bit, realizing that the entire group lay prone, the tall grasses waving with the disturbance caused by their bodies. *What just happened?* she wondered, dazedly. *Two men, dead—and no sign of a weapon! Are the gods angry with us? Did they send invisible lightning to strike us down?*

For a moment she wondered whether she should stand up, offer herself to the angry god,

or goddess, and beg him or her to spare her people. She would explain that the responsibility for their journey to the original Kerma had been hers. If the gods were angry that the descendants of ancient Kerma had trodden on once-sacred ground, let them vent their fury on her, and her alone.

But that didn't make sense, she realized a moment later. Her party had offered all the correct prayers, made the proper sacrifice, and in all ways been reverent, even though the once-mighty city was now nothing but dirt, sand, and rock, studded with pottery shards and ruins. The massive *deffufas*, the ancient temples, still rose as huge piles of mud-brick rubble above the plain, victims of erosion and wind. In places it had been possible for the eye to trace the outline of the city wall, or some of the larger buildings, but mostly it was only the littered ground that hinted that once humans had lived there. The enormous burial tumuli of the long-dead kings still showed as swellings above the ground, but unless one knew what they were, they were easy to overlook.

Time had reduced the capital city of Kerma, heart and soul of the empire of Kush, to rubble and memories—nothing more. There were no gods there to anger.

Besides, if there was power being used here, either by gods or humans, her bracelet would tell her. Amenirdis touched the wristlet, the sacred band bearing the stylized image of a lion picked out in green gems, stones that were slivers of the Heart of Zerzura itself. The bracelet assured her that whatever had caused the deaths of those guards, it had not been magical in origin.

So if the gods were not dealing death out of thin air, who was?

Lying on the savannah, Amenirdis cautiously parted the grasses with her hands, trying to peer through them. Her heart stopped, then raced like a panicked horse when she heard a human voice shouting something in a language she did not understand.

Men? Men have this power, to slay from a distance like gods?

Turning her head, she exchanged a look with Tarek. He stared at her, then pointed with his chin to her right, and whispered, “Crawl,” in a voice pitched for her ears alone.

For answer, she shook her head, her heavy golden earrings swinging against her dark cheeks, then drew her dagger. *I will not desert my people*, she thought fiercely. Tarek’s expression darkened as he read her resolve, then he jerked his head emphatically, repeating the command. Again the princess shook her head. Something touched her ankle, and it was all she could do not to shriek and jump. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw the high priest, grizzled old Piye, frowning urgently at her. When her eyes met his, he nodded emphatically, and jerked his head to the right, mouthing, “Go.”

“No,” she mouthed back.

Piye squeezed her ankle again, then his finger moved, spelling out symbols in their language on her skin, one at a time. She squeezed her eyes shut, concentrating, trying to visualize the message.

“THE GOD COMMANDS.”

Amenirdis blinked, then gave Piye a glance, and a reluctant nod. She began crawling through the tall savannah grass, heading to her right.

It was hard. Tarek came behind her, guiding her with light taps on the soles of her sandals to turn right or left. She did not dare raise herself to her hands and knees, because only when she lay flat was the grass high enough to hide her. The grass stems tickled and were alive with insect life. Dirt clung to her sweaty body, and the effort of pulling herself forward, sliding over the ground on her belly, soon left her drenched in sweat. She itched until she thought she would go mad, but could not stop. Her bruised body cried out for rest, but she knew the Tarek and the

others were behind her, and they were looking to her to lead them, so she kept moving.

When she reached the outer perimeter of their group, she had to crawl between two of her guardsmen. They nodded respectfully at her, but did not move, and it was then that the princess realized that they intended to stay behind, to cover her retreat. *No, she thought. They should be trying to escape, too!* But there was no way to give orders or to argue. All she could do was to keep inching forward, making as little stir in the grass as possible.

Any second she dreaded to hear that terrible thunder-sound again, but it did not come.

The sun was very low now, turning the stems of some of the waving grasses to gold. Amenirdis kept crawling, wondering whether the whole party might be able to escape under cover of night.

Finally, after what seemed hours of sliding forward on her belly, something besides more stalks of grass entered her very narrow view. Rock thrust up before her. As she continued to crawl, it widened, visible through the stalks of grass like the wedge of a plow. Amenirdis dared to roll slightly onto her side, so she could gain some idea of how high the rocky extrusion was.

It was an outcrop of sandstone, a good-sized one. She could see the leaves of small trees waving in the faint breeze, some of them growing up from cracks in the rocks. There were also clumps of brush. It offered concealment, refuge.

We made it! she thought, feeling a surge of relief. *We can all hide among the rocks until the sun goes down, then we can try to get away from the men that are out there, these men who can kill from a distance.*

Her mind raced, planning her strategy for the remainder of the journey. They would travel only at night, hiding during the day. They should be able to retrace their path to the coast, if they were careful. Their boats would be waiting for them, because they were carefully hidden

by illusion and spell-protected. They would—

Sound erupted behind them. Thunder-cracks shattered the stillness. She heard war cries, shouts, then screams.

Tarek surged forward, bent almost double, and grabbed her up beneath one massive arm as he raced for the rocks. A bare moment later she was flung into concealment behind a screen of bush and a large rock, with her back against another rock, this one the size of a small dwelling. Almost immediately two other bodies crowded into the recessed niche with her.. Tarek and Piye, the high priest.

Amenirdis drew her dagger, expecting any moment to be hauled out of the little refuge, but seconds turned into minutes, and no one appeared. The thunder-cracks had ceased. She crouched with her two protectors, unable to see out, listening as hard as she could. Shouts in a language she did not know filled the air, mixed with wailing, screams, and moaning. Four more thunder-cracks, and the screams stopped abruptly.

“Are we the only ones to escape?” Her voice was weak, barely more than a breath.

Tarek nodded grimly. “Yes, Highness. I fear so.” The eunuch’s eyes held fear, not for himself, she knew, but for her. “I believe our escape is only temporary. Sooner or later they will search this area, and they will find us.” He glanced up at the sky. “When night falls, it might be possible to climb these rocks and get away, but I hold little hope for that.”

The princess knew he spoke the truth. “We must pray,” she said, softly. “Piye, will you guide us in a prayer to Apedemak?”

“Highness,” the old priest said, “rather than praying right now, I feel we should do what we can to strengthen ourselves.” He held up a pack. Amenirdis recognized it. It was not large, and she had last seen it carried by Amanimalel, one of her maids. “I grabbed the strap to help her

along, but she tripped and fell, and suddenly I was holding only the pack,” he explained, his dark eyes full of regret. “Perhaps I should have dropped it, but I was running so quickly I couldn’t summon the wit to do so.”

Quickly, he opened the little pack. There was a ceramic water container, stoppered and full. Piye held it out to Amenirdis. “Here, Highness.”

She drew back. “No,” she said. “I will drink only if we share equally.”

Each of them passed it around and took a few quick, grateful swallows. Even though the water was nearly as warm as bathwater, Amenirdis thought that no drink had ever tasted as good. Piye searched further, and pulled out a round of griddle bread, which they broke into pieces and shared. Even the two bites that were her share helped restore the princess’s energy.

The priest searched the rest of the contents, finding a wrinkled skirt, an old, patched tunic, some hair beads, a gray shawl, and a spare pair of sandals. All were equally worn.

The three of them regarded each other in dismay. “It was too much to hope for a weapon.” Tarek said, finally. “We still have our daggers.”

“Yes,” Piye said, abstractedly, glancing at the sky. “Not long till sunset.”

Smells of cooking, laughter, and conversation reached them. Evidently the captors and slayers were setting up camp. “How many do you think survived?” Amenirdis asked.

“No way to know,” Tarek said.

A woman screamed, then screamed again. It was a shriek of outrage and pain, and then a new voice echoed it. Amenirdis recognized those cries. “Amanimalel,” she whispered. “And Pennut. I know their voices.”

Piye exchanged a glance with Tarek. “Highness,” he said, urgently, “You are in grave danger, worse than Tarek and I. All they are likely to do is kill us. But you . . .”

Amenirdis knew what the old man was trying to say. “You need not be so delicate,” she said. “I am twenty years old, Holy One. I know what men do to captive women.”

The old man’s dark skin darkened even more as he blushed. The princess had to fight back the hysterical urge to laugh. Instinctively, she knew if she started, she wouldn’t stop. Sternly, she ordered herself to stop trembling and show courage.

“Highness,” Piye, said urgently, “I believe you must disguise yourself. If they realize you are of royal blood, they may target you all the more.”

“What should I do?”

“To begin with, give us your jewelry,” Tarek said. “Let them not find it on you. And put on your maid’s clothes. I will hide your own clothing down the crevice behind me. Perhaps they will not find it.”

She nodded, and the men politely dropped their faces onto their drawn up knees. It was not easy to pull on the worn skirt and tunic, and the battered old sandals without standing, but she was young and agile, and she managed. When she was finished changing her garments, she stripped off her matching lapis and gold armlets, her golden earrings, and the heavy necklace made up of three strings of lapis, gold, copper, white and pink coral, and emerald beads. The only jewelry she kept was Apedemak’s sacred wristlet.

Tarek, as promised, stuffed her discarded clothing and gold-beaded sandals down the crevice, then he and the priest concealed the jewelry in the pack.

Piye regarded her. “And now, Highness, you and I must work together to weave a spell. Your wristlet is a source of power, and that will help strengthen us. We need to disguise you, make you into someone who will not be perceived as a vessel to incite . . .”

“Lust,” Amenirdis finished briskly, when he trailed off. She straightened her shoulders.

“Very well. I have no wish to face what my poor maids are undergoing. How shall we do this?”

“I believe we can create an illusion that will hold faithfully. You have an affinity with fabrics, woven things,” Piye said. The old priest picked up the gray shawl and shook it out, gazing at it thoughtfully. “This should do. We will center our illusion on it. While you are wearing it, or even touching it, you will appear as we envision you in our spell.”

“What shall we try for?” the princess asked.

The old man shook his head. “Something . . . off-putting. I fear this is not something I know much about. Standards for female beauty are not something I . . . I have not the experience to . . .” he floundered to a halt, shrugging helplessly.

“Give her a squint,” Tarek said, suddenly, surprising both of them, miming crossed eyes with his fingers. “Thin, lank graying hair. Protruding, snagged teeth. Some strategically placed warts . . . hairy ones. Wrinkled, blotchy skin. A bit of a hunch to her back, so she can’t stand straight. Make her shorter, so everyone will look down on her. Make her thin up top, and fat below. That should do it.”

Amenirdis, hearing all this, shuddered. “I’ll be hideous,” she said, faintly.

“Yes,” Tarek said. “And that will be all to the good.”

Another female shriek split the air. The three gazed at each other in the fading light. Amenirdis swallowed. “Let us begin.”

Spreading the shawl between them, the priest and the princess centered themselves, then began their spell. Amenirdis held the fabric in her right hand, draped over her forearm so it lay against her bracelet. Raising her left hand, she began weaving patterns in the air. Piye raised the other end of the gray fabric with both hands and breathed upon it, lending her spell-weaving his strength.

As the spell began to build, the princess closed her eyes, concentrating, holding an image of herself within her mind. Then, slowly, feature by feature, she altered that image, doing all the things Tarek had suggested. Weaving the spell was as exhausting as doing manual labor in the fields, beneath the full glare of the sun. Amenirdis had to fight fatigue. She made herself concentrate, forced her left hand to move as it wove the spell in the air, creating the illusion. With the illusion formed, the power of the bracelet helped her transfer it into the fabric of the shawl. Her fingers gripped the shawl as she let the spell flow through her.

Piye's strength reached her, entered her, strengthening her power.

Her eyes were closed, so she did not see what caused Tarek to suddenly draw in his breath. She could not spare the time to look at the shawl, see the faint glow of magic that was flowing into it. But she knew it was there.

After what felt like hours, she finished with her image, seeing in her mind's eye the distorted, pitiful creature Tarek had described so vividly. Amenirdis gave the spell one final surge of power, then dropped both hands into her lap. Her head sagged forward as exhaustion swept over her like an ocean wave, dragging her down. Did she sleep, or lose consciousness? Amenirdis couldn't be sure, but when she finally opened her eyes, it was to darkness. A quarter moon traveled the sky, and as her eyes adjusted, she could see Piye and Tarek as dark blurs against the *lighter* color of the rocks. The spell had exhausted Piye as much as it had her; the old man sagged against the rock, every muscle and sinew gone limp.

Gathering the shawl into her hands, the princess turned to Tarek. "How do I look?" she asked, her voice rough with weariness. She felt as though she had moved a mountain with her bare hands.

Tarek opened his mouth, but he never got the chance to reply.

Sudden light shone into their little hiding place. They blinked at the brightness, drawing back. A voice called out words they did not know, as the man holding the torch stepped forward. *I must transform my bracelet*, the princess thought. She shrank back, clutching the gray shawl around her, hiding the golden wristlet beneath a fold of the fabric. Quickly, she touched it, willing it to transform. A moment later, when she pulled her arm out from beneath the shawl, Apedemak's talisman appeared to be naught but a scrap of rough-woven fabric encircling her wrist. She stared up as a dark shape loomed menacingly over her, feeling fear twist inside her. Had the illusion worked?

Rough hands seized her.

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