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Nob

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PRELUDE



In a hill, outside the gates of the village, wind hisses through rotted logs stirring putrid ponds of bubbling thick fluid as spiny little creatures scurry through piles of bones and garbage in the black. Their long slender fingers scratching and groping through the filth, their bulbous eyes dart and search for morsels of food.

No light shines.

Whomp!

A powerful bony hand strikes quickly, and then a screech and moaning, leaving one of the unsuspecting creatures oozing and helpless as the others quickly gather around for the feast.

The hand draws back under the rubble leaving red and greenish smears of entrails and blood. From beneath the mound of decayed filth and fermented flesh, two eyes, yellow and full of blood, gaze down with hate upon the village below and the crumbling castle of the slain king.

The heavy air burns and chars dripping nostrils, drool streams from decaying brown fangs.

Through a gaping mouth and a gurgling throat that breathes stench a low rumbling voice whispers.

“For now, it is only time that is saving you. But time is fleeing you. Can you hear it; don’t you feel it pulling you? Ticking.... Ever closer you come... step out of the village, come to me my little dainties. Don’t fight me, for you and I know each other so well. No, we mustn’t fight, we belong together, and we have come so far we can’t stop now. Come to me, I have so many treats for you. Do you want them? Just take them. I will have you, you will be mine!

Tick...Tick... TICK! Can’t you hear it?”

Spiny creatures resume their busy chores as the fresh bones of their devoured coworker, still garland in crimson, joins the mounds of filth...only to reclothe in flesh and die again another day.

Chapter 1

Thrown Away Things



every night Nob would lie on her small mat in the attic of the old abandoned store and stare up at the crumbling castle of the king. The castle was so still and dark now. She would imagine the beautiful dances, grand balls and parties that used to take place there, before the king went away. She would imagine herself as a princess wearing a crown and dancing all night in the ballroom of the castle. She would pretend that the king was her father and that he would watch her spin and twirl in her long flowing gown.

As Nob's eyes would slowly close on the image of that old palace, she would linger as long as possible in that in-between place of wonderful imagined things and the world of cold hard mats in attics, seeing herself laughing, spinning and dancing in the presence of her father, the king.

But that was only a fun dream to take her mind away from the hunger in her stomach. For every day, Nob would sit in the streets and sell trinkets and bobbles, trying to earn enough money to buy food. She would display whatever she could find or collect lying on the ground, or overlooked in places people didn't see. Those forgotten places were the places that the greatest treasures were found, she thought. In fact, she considered herself an expert in finding the places of "thrown away things." For some reason, the items that people didn't find important and threw away were the very things that Nob found that they would again want.

Nob had always been able to take ordinary items and make them seem wondrous to those who passed by. They would stop to look at her little table, which was really an

upside-down peach box, and purchase some of her stock for a few coppers and tins. She'd get two little coins for some pins she found—"Handy for fixing torn skirts or sticking up pictures," she would say. Or one little coin for some "Perfectly good paper, a little wrinkled, but still plenty of space for a letter or for paper dolls."

Though she was tempted by her hunger, Nob would never steal, for she knew that she shouldn't. Yet, somehow, it seemed that she was always able to get what she needed without stealing. "It is funny," she would think, "I am always able to find or earn enough food to get by, at least by the end of the day." It just took a little bit of thinking. "It never hurts to do some thinking," she would say, "but some days it takes a little more thoughtful thinking, I think." Nob made herself laugh.

She finished eating a melon she was given by a kind vendor in the market, then wrapped herself in the warmth of her thick, soft blanket and thought of her little attic home. All her life she had been poor and homeless, having little hope of gaining more than she had now. She knew she didn't have very much, but she also knew that she had so much more than many. She was grateful that she had a mat to sleep on, and a wonderful view of the village and the grand castle that looked down silently from the hill.

The castle used to be grand—that is, before the king went away. There were some in the village who still believed that the king was alive, even though he was not seen. Others in the little hamlet called this small group of people "kingdumbs," because, they said, only fools would believe a man could still be alive after so many years, especially a man who was executed in a place where everyone could see.

The kingdumbs would tell the story, around the village, of the days when the king reigned, and how different it was then. “Everyone had food and a house. No, not just a house, but a home in which to live!” they would tell her. “The king loved his subjects and he would spend most of his time in the town square talking with the people and looking after his ‘friends,’ as he would say. He would laugh and call our little village his ‘vault of treasures,’ more precious than any in his palace. And even though he was a king, he never wore his robes or crown while he was with the village folk. Many times he would help them with their shops and everyday affairs. The king would play with the children and tell them the most imaginative stories in which he would act out all the parts. That was considered a very un-kingly thing to do by some of his servants.” They would also tell of how he would again care for the village... someday.

Nob loved to hear the old stories of the king. “What a wonderful king he must have been!” Nob thought.

After listening to these kind and hopeful people that some called “kingdumbs,” Nob wondered why so many in the village thought of them as dumb. She also could not understand why the villagers had turned against a king like the one who lived in the castle so many years ago. She had so many questions, and having no one to ask for answers left her feeling empty inside. “There is nothing as empty as an unasked question,” she remembered someone telling her once.

She never even knew her real name. She named herself Nob because it seemed right—the name was short, plain and not very pretty. A lot like her, she thought.

As she looked through the bag of items that she had found that day, she thought how her attic home was the place of thrown away things, where she could turn broken,

discarded, and common items into extraordinary things. She would make wishes while looking at the golden star that capped the tallest tower on the castle. Tonight she wished that someone would have a “thrown away place” of his own. Maybe then she could be found and taken away in his bag of found things. Maybe, just maybe, she could be turned into someone other than ordinary and plain.

Nob had lived on her own for as long as she could recall. The store attic had long been her home, but she never knew what sort of store it had been. The first person who had ever cared for her, at least the first she could remember, was old Yeshu. It was Yeshu who had picked her up out of the dirt and dust in the street, only moments before she was almost run over by a fruit cart that had broken loose in the square. She was only around six, she guessed, when that happened. Nob would often think of that day at times when the mat seemed lumpier than normal, the sky looked a little grayer, and the wind seemed to whisper words she could not understand yet made her feel small and helpless anyway.

Tonight, Nob felt small and helpless. For some reason when she would remember that day when she first met her best friend, all the other things would not seem as gray, lumpy or lonely. Nob closed her eyes and let her mind go back to the market square just a few years before. Though it was warm tonight, she remembered the cold afternoon when she not only met Yeshu, but also the brightly colored, dancing stranger as well.

Chapter 2

"*Pixies!*"



The afternoon was cold and made Nob's fingers and toes feel fuzzy and throb with pain. She was hungry and tired and just wanted to go back to her mat in the attic of the abandoned store. It had not been the most fruitful of days. The cold had kept everyone in the market square and they had not walked by her box. It really didn't matter. That morning, though try as she might, she had not found any good things to sell. Her time was spent looking for something, anything, to sell. Yet no lost things were found. So, after much effort, all she could do was curl up in a ball to stay warm in the corner of the square and hope for some luck.

"I'll be safe here, no one will notice me," Nob thought. And she was ignored, with her dusty face and old dirty rags for clothes. "I will just wait here in the corner where it is safe and the wind doesn't blow...I'll just wait," she thought to herself.

The market had been full by midday with people heaping their carts and baskets with fresh hens, oil, vegetables, fruits and linens. Nob had watched the families moving slowly through the square and imagined what it would be like to be part of a family. Mommies were walking hand in hand with their daughters and sons, talking and looking at all of the different stands and carts of food. Some children rode high on their daddy's shoulders. How, she wondered, how the world looked from a daddy's shoulders?

"Why don't I have any shoulders on which to ride?" she asked to herself.

The hot stingy feeling in her stomach began growing stronger, but not because from a lack of food this time. She did not want to give in to this feeling again! But as hard as she tried she could not fight it any longer. The feeling in her stomach slowly

worked its way up to her eyes, and the cold and her numb toes made it too difficult to fight this time. Nob sat and waited. Then, looking at the ground, Nob began to count how long it took for the tears to fade into the cold, dusty ground beneath her. Eventually, her tears would no longer fade into the dust—they only made a big, muddy black spot on the ground in front of her. As the sun moved slowly overhead, Nob finally stopped crying. She did not know why, she figured that she had just grown weary of it.

Nob had learned quickly that a little girl without anyone to watch over her could be in great danger trying to get close to the carts of food and linens. She would stay in the corner of the square, stay until the sky got all purple and some of the cart people would leave for the day. She hoped that anyone would drop an apple for her rumbley stomach or even pieces of old cloth which she could use to keep her throbbing toes warmer.

On a good night, she could pick up two or three pieces of fruit and maybe some vegetables that had fallen off the carts during the day. On an even better night, she could get an old blanket that had been discarded by a family that had bought a new one. She would continue to wait even though she was cold, tired, and aching from sitting curled up to stay warm.

That's when she saw a new person in the marketplace. "He must be a new vendor," Nob thought. He wore clothes of white, with swirls and splashes of bright colors. He was beautiful! On his head was a cap that was as white as snow, and with five points hanging down across his shoulders. At the end of each point was a small twinkling charm: on one was an eye, on another was a mouth, and on the others a nose, a hand, and an ear. From the man's arms hung ribbons of purple, blue, red, yellow, and green. At the end of each ribbon were even more small charms that jingled and sparkled in the midday

sun. He was more beautiful than anyone she had ever seen in the village. He smiled and danced, and soon had everyone clapping and laughing at his joyous dancing and clever tricks. In spite of the cold, he wore no coat or cloak, yet he did not seem uncomfortable at all. He gave many of the children free candies and spinning pinwheels that sparkled and flashed and made the whole market place swirl with little dots. “Pixies!” Nob thought to herself and the thought made her giggle.

The people in the little village watched the new vendor hesitantly at first, but his stand quickly became the most popular in the square. “There has not been this much fun in the square since...since....” Nob realized she had never known the village to ever be as full of activity and excitement—at least, not as long as she could remember.

Then Nob noticed a few people were turning away and not letting their children get near the new attraction. “Kingdumbs,” Nob said to herself as she recognized the faces of those quickly leaving the square with their children safely in tow. She saw that the kingdumbs who were turning away had their carts full of the things that they needed, not the beautiful man’s trinkets and sweets. But most in the village had fully accepted the new vendor and began to pull others over enjoy the candy and beautiful pinwheels. Nob found it curious that people would spend so much money on candy and pinwheels and not for the fruit, vegetables, meat, and oil that they really needed. They would leave the square with nothing but candy and pinwheels stacked high in their carts.

Something, Nob felt, was not right with this dancing street merchant. The laughter and smiles of the people earlier in the day had slowly turned into tension and arguing. Even though a few of the patrons tried to quiet things down at first, it was not long before

people began to wrestle for a place in the vendor's line. Once the fighting started, it didn't take long for the entire square to erupt in curses and violence.

In the middle of the mob, the brightly colored figure slowly made his way to the edge of the square. No one but Nob was watching him anymore. They were just worried about getting more and more of his trinkets. He slid and slithered smoothly through the crowd in such a way that Nob could not take her eyes away. The crowd finally began to notice that he had abandoned his merchandise and brutally snatched candy and pinwheels by the handfuls, breaking the stand in the process. Children began to fall off their daddy's shoulders, and mommies let go of their children and filled their hands with candy. Some children scampered for dropped treats, while others screamed for their lost parents or seemed to lie asleep under a forest of stomping, grown-up feet.

Nob's heart jumped into her throat when the dancing jester stopped and looked directly at her in her secret little corner. Like a small animal cornered by a stalking predator, she was unable to move. The beautiful merchant stopped and held out his hand, full of candy.

"Have these," he said. "They're magic tears—sweet, not bitter." The thin graceful hands reached closer. "It's easy, Nob." He smiled. "Just take them."

"How does he know my name?" she wondered. Even though Nob did not trust the smiling figure before her, the candy looked harmless enough. "Surely," she thought, "having just one would not hurt." She began to move slowly toward the outstretched, beckoning hand that was full to overflowing of the sweet, empty pleasures. She stood and cautiously approached the tempting figure before her. As she walked on her cold feet, her toes stung with each stiff step.

She had made it almost as far as the first line of carts when the man hissed,
“Hurry!”

Nob hesitated at the harsh sound of his voice. Yet it was only a moment’s hesitation, as the thought of those sweet confections in her mouth began to overwhelm her. The desire for the candy became irresistible and once again she began moving towards the enticing treats. At first she walked slowly, but soon her aching hunger seemed to drive her legs forward. Before she knew it, she had begun to run for the tantalizing confections. As Nob drew nearer to the colorful, sparkling vendor, she did not notice that the ribbons hanging from his clothes were slowly growing longer and longer. Silently and gracefully, the ribbons began to circle behind her and surround her on every side. The ribbons fanned out around her like gigantic fingers gently gripping and capturing their prey.

Then, from the end of the square, she heard a voice yell, “Look out! Get out of the way!”

Nob also heard a low rumbling that sounded like thunder in the distance before the rain comes. But her mind stayed on the candies dancing before her eyes.

Suddenly she realized a fruit cart full of melons had broken loose during the chaos that was raging in the square. From the very end of the very first row at the very top of the hill, it was racing down upon the unsuspecting crowd. The wooden wheels creaked and popped as they picked up speed. The cart rattled and bumped on the pebbles of the old square, throwing rocks up into the air from under its wheels. Round melons bounced out of their neatly stacked piles and, if they survived the fall, seemed to race the cart down the hill. As she turned to run, Nob tripped over the beautiful vendors flashing

ribbons, now woven tight around her feet. Nob flailed and pulled at them but they seemed to grab her tighter, sticking like a giant multicolored web. The more she fought, the more trapped she became. The sound was now growing and she knew the heavy wooden cart would soon crush her. Nob reached out to the tempting stranger and held out her hand to grab his.

“Help me!” Nob shrieked, as the cart seemed to be steering itself directly for the helpless little girl entangled in the swirling ribbons. The colorful merchant was close enough now that Nob could see into his eyes, and they brought a chill unlike any that she had felt from the cold that day. The chill came from inside, somewhere deep down in her soul. His eyes were a pale green, with only a long black slit running up and down the center. Nob looked deep into his eyes—they were dull, empty...dead.

He yanked his hand back before Nob could grab it, and his smile turned to a wicked sneer. “See how easy, Nob,” he whispered. “You just have to want them!”

The sound of the charging, runaway cart now roared in her ears. She knew she could never get away in time to keep from being run over. She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable. Then, in a small voice that she could barely hear herself, she whimpered, ““Help me> Please, help me.”

She didn’t know who she was asking for help. She just knew that there had to be someone who would care, someone who could rescue her from being killed.

“Please!” she screamed in her mind, “Save me!”

The next thing she knew, two strong arms lifted her off of the ground. The ribbons tore away from her body as she was whisked to the edge of the square where she

had been safe only a few moments before. She jumped as heard the cart careen past and smash into the square wall, breaking into pieces.

As awful as that sound was, it was not as frightening as the scream she had heard just before she was rescued. It was not the scream of a person or of any animal of which she knew. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It was more of a shriek than a scream. It was cold and full of hate.

She held firmly to her rescuer's neck and continued to keep her eyes tightly shut until all the bad sounds faded away and her heart quit pounding in her ears. When her feet were again on the ground and she opened her eyes, she saw the raggedy and threadbare clothes of a peasant, and the kind old face of the man who had saved her. His hands were rough and strong and his eyes—unlike the colorful vendors—twinkled with kindness!

"Oh...pixies!" Nob whispered and this time the thought made her cry. Not a cry like before, which came somewhere from her tummy, but tears that seemed to come from deep within her chest. The man waited while Nob gazed, for what seemed like forever, into his eyes. The sparkles in his eyes were so much more beautiful than the dancing dots of the pinwheels. In this man's presence, Nob felt safe. (Later, Nob would think how he would never stop looking in her eyes. His eyes would be there as long as she looked. It would be her eyes and not his that would break the gaze.)

When Nob finally looked around, the colorful vendor was gone. The square was torn apart from the frenzy of the villagers scrambling for the stranger's sweet and sparkling trinkets, and the renegade cart's destructive plummet down the hill. Now laying broken against the square wall, it continued to spill melons onto the ground. The dust the

cart had pulled down the hill began to clear, showing the trail of damage that it had caused.

The fruit merchant came running up to the old peasant and the little girl, whom he was still protecting safely tucked under his arm. “Is everyone alright?” the fruit merchant panted.

“Yes, oh yes!” blurted Nob. “This kind old man kept me safe!” Nob stopped and thought that she may have been rude calling her rescuer “old!”

Nob looked up at the kind, old man. “What is your name?” she asked in a timid voice.

“Yeshu” replied the old man.

Nob had never heard a name like that before!

“I would hate for something to happen to the girl there,” the fruit merchant said.

“I guess I got carried away with all the excitement in the square and I quit watching my cart like I should.”

Yeshu looked at the fruit merchant and smiled.

“I’m sorry, Miss. I have never noticed you,” the merchant said.

“But now you see her” said Yeshu.

The fruit merchant looked at Yeshu with an inquisitive look that transformed into an expression of understanding, “Yes, I do see,” said the merchant as he handed Nob a melon from his surviving stock.

The fruit merchant turned and began to pick up the remains of his shattered fruit stand. His shoulders slumping as he looked at the damage to his stock.

Yeshu joined him picking up melons and cradled them in his arms carefully stacking each into what used to be a vendor cart. Now it was really just a few boards lying flat on two wheels, and one of them barely hanging on. Yeshu asked him if he had done well today in the square. “No, that dancing menace hurt everyone’s business today” he grumbled. “And now my stock is ruined and the crop is done. I don’t know how I will ever make up for all I lost. It’s hopeless” he sighed. Yeshu and Nob continued to gather up all the melons that had not fallen and broken on their ride down the hill. “Go home and count what you do have, perhaps the loss was not as great as you thought” encouraged Yeshu.

Later at home, the melon vendor would count his inventory to see how many melons he had left. Much to his surprise, he had exactly the same number that he had at the start of the day.

And so it was for everyday after that, the beginning of every morning he would push a full cart of melons to the market. Every night his stock would be the same as it was before. And everyday he would look for the little girl huddled in the corner and give her a melon.

After helping clean up the mess that the melons had made Yeshu and Nob headed back to her room at the top of the store. They slowly made their way through the narrow winding streets up the hill. They took their time, neither of them needed to reach their destination in any sort of hurry. Yeshu reached into his deep pocket and pulled out a large ripe apple.

“It’s not candy,” Yeshu said, “But it should help with your rumbley tummy” he laughed.

Nob bit into the large apple and it seemed sweeter than any she had ever eaten. Bite after bite she swallowed and yet it seemed to last for ever. When she finally felt full she was shocked to see there was plenty left over to share with her new found friend. She was so full that she was going to have to save the melon for breakfast.

“This had definitely been a good night!” she thought to herself.

Slowly they made their way back to Nob’s attic home. Yeshu stared up at the castle for a while.

“That is a great view of the castle you have” he said, and then helped her to her lumpy mat. Much to Nob’s surprise he pulled a brand new blanket from his pack. He talked with Nob as he tucked her into her warm newly made bed. Then he began to sing over her as Nob settled in for the night. She didn’t know the song, but it made her feel safe and made her heart tickle.

“Good night Little One” Yeshu whispered.

“Good night” Nob whispered back.

Just as Yeshu began to close the door and leave Nob shouted, “Yeshu!”

“What is it Nob?” the old ragged man answered.

“Thank you for grabbing me, and for the apple, and the blanket and for talking to me...”

The words seemed to stream out of her mouth like one long word.

“But most of all, thank you for letting me ride on your shoulders.”

“That’s why I’m here” Yeshu smiled as he gently closed the door to the attic.

Chapter 3

Time Before Time



ver since that cold day in the market square, Yeshu would keep an eye on Nob and drop by every now and then to sing songs and tell stories. She was so grateful for her friend. He was always there when she needed someone. When she felt very alone, he would always seem to know and come visit her. Leaning back on the mat and gazing out the window at the castle on the hill Yeshu would tell stories about the king, and how the castle would all be made perfect again, someday.

Nob loved his stories about the days so many years ago but she sometimes wondered what had really happened to the king. She had heard so many different stories from others and was not sure whom to believe. Some would say that the king had gone crazy when the village did not listen to him and he left them all to be on their own. Still others would say he was dead and that was simply that. She had also heard villagers tell her that he really wasn't the king, at least not the man who died so many years ago.

"The true king would never be able to be killed so easily" they would say. While others said, "He never really said that he was a king". And a few very loud villagers believed that people had made up the story of the king over the years to give them hope of something better than what this little village had to offer. Those were only some of the stories, there were so many more.

"It has been so long since the king was here," Nob thought, "could anyone really know?"

She would ask Yeshu these questions and he would always take the time to answer each one. Even though there were so many stories there was something about how Yeshu told them. Only his stories seemed to make any sense, if sense could be made at all, of the events so long ago.

Often Nob would ask him the same question over and over but the raggedy peasant never seemed to mind.

And so it was on this night.

Leaning against a barrel, and taking quite a bit of time to get comfortable on the mat, Yeshu pulled out a slender, but very sharp knife from his bag and sliced off a large piece from an apple that had been given to him by the fruit vendor that day. Then turning his back to Nob he began to carve something in the piece that he had sliced off. Nob tried to catch a glimpse of what he was doing but he would always turn his back to her just as she would catch a glimpse. She begged him to tell her what he was doing, but Yeshu just continued to carve barely out of sight of the curious little girl.

Suddenly Yeshu spun around and the apple slice was gone. He held out his hands showing that they were empty. Nob teased that he was being selfish eating the apple and not sharing! Yeshu just stared. “What did you do with the apple?” Nob pretended to scold him. She stood up in front of him and put her fists on her hips “Open your mouth and let me see if there is any apple in there!” Nob continued to pretend that she was angry even though she could never really stay mad at her best friend.

Slowly, very slowly Yeshu began to smile at her in the flickering light of the attic. Something looked odd about him as his teeth began to show. Nob laughed so hard her tears blurred the vision before her. There sat Yeshu with two large buckteeth that he had carved out of the apple. The skin of the apple made the teeth red and shiny and Yeshu began to chuckle at the giggling little girl rolling on the floor before him. Cutting a fresh slice, he handed it to Nob and then ate his own “teeth” and began, once again, to tell her the story of the king.

“There never was a king like this king, nor has there been one since.” Yeshu said. “The king loved, and cared for his subjects. No one could have hoped to have a kinder king. Yet, kind as he was it was the people whom he called his, ‘treasures’ that murdered him.” “Why!” Nob asked. “Why would anyone kill a king that loved them so much?” Yeshu continued the story; “To understand, you need to hear it from the beginning, Little One. In the time before there was time.”

Yeshu leaned back against the barrel and took a deep breath. His eyes seemed to glimmer in the bright moonlight coming in through the attic window. It was Yeshu’s eyes that Nob liked about him the best. They seemed to slow everything down when you looked into them. No matter how cold, or lonely, or sad Nob would become she would always feel better when she saw Yeshu’s eyes.

Staring at the old beggar’s face, Nob let herself once again get lost in the depth of his eyes. She was startled when he began to speak.

"At first the king had no laws except one." He began," It was a very simple law that was clear and easy to understand." Yeshu stood up, cleared his throat and tried to do his best "town crier" voice just like the one that read the law so many years ago in the village.

"Hear Ye, Hear Ye!

A royal decree, a law from the king enacted on this day and from this day hence.

Hear Ye, Hear Ye!"

Nob stood at attention and did her best to look serious and formal even though she could not help but giggle.

"Let it be known that all people of the village may and with all liberty have access and passage to the king's palace. Let it be known that rights have been given to all for the purpose of admittance to his house and its comforts. All may enter and leave during the day and all hours of the night. These liberties are granted equally to every citizen.

Access to the castle is complete with only one exception. No one is granted access nor given privilege to the throne room or the king's personal living quarters in any way.

These rooms are to be reserved for the king alone and for his family.

This is the word and law of our sovereign king. Hear ye, hear ye.

Long live the king!"

Nob clapped and cheered at Yeshu's performance and felt that he would have made a good town crier if he had ever wanted.

Yeshu raised a hand above his head and took a grand bow before Nob, much like the singers in the square would bow after a song.

"Bravo! Bravo" Nob shouted as she tried to sound like an entire audience.

She bounced around the room and tried different voices and phrases as Yeshu continued to bow and acknowledge the “crowd”.

Eventually they began laugh uncontrollably and together ended up collapsing on the floor flat on their backs until the laughter died down and they lay with their heads together looking out the window to the castle on the hill.

The attic was absolutely quiet as they just stared out the window for a while. This was one of Nob’s favorite times, the two of them, the old peasant and her, being together and not saying a word.

She found herself thinking, as she would often do when she would quietly sit with Yeshu, about the one law of the king. It sounded like it was an easy one to live by.

“Well that doesn’t seem to be anything to kill a king about!” Nob objected out loud finally.

"Just keep listening, Little One." Yeshu continued,
“For many years the king and the people were together and the village was bursting with life! Even though there was a marketplace every thing was free, no one sold anything. The crops that fed the village were always full and lush with fruit, vegetables and grains. There was no need for the people in the village to tend to the fields. Everything would grow without disease and free of insects and harm. Enormous potatoes the size of small children would often be brought and shared by more than one family. Carrots grew so large that they were used, because of their strength and height, to make part of the town’s main gate!”

Nob had even heard a story of a celery stalk that served as a slide in the park. But her favorite was the watermelon that served the village nicely with fresh water for many years.

“The king’s servants would plant, tend, and harvest the food that was needed everyday. He would also provide the supplies needed to live happily in the village. Each morning the market would be full with vegetables and fruits without anyone in the village ever wondering how it all was provided. The food and supplies were delivered in carts from the castle to the square and every morning a servant would announce:

‘Blessings from the king, king of the universe that brings the bounty from the earth.’

Everyday it would be the same: carts of food being brought from the castle, a royal announcement and villagers filling their bags with daily supplies. That is how it had always been. Every day all of the food would be taken and no one would go away hungry. No one needed to worry about being late. There was always enough and exactly enough for what was needed.

Not only was there food but the village itself was beautiful and perfect in the days before the terrible dark day. Gardens of flowers and plants filled the streets with sweet smells and displayed their beauty in every color imagined. The sun would shine through the mighty oaks throughout the village. The trees would line the streets and gardens looking like gigantic glowing pillars of a cathedral. The grass waved and rolled like a thick green blanket covering every spot of free soil. Not one barren or dead spot appeared anywhere in the village nor did the grass ever grow too tall or wild. The sky sparkled and shone blue, and the clouds, which never darkened, would float like magnificent sailing ships

through a calm sea. Winter, storm, nor even chill had ever been known. No one in the village ever knew of a place other than this one. There was only the king, his palace, his servants, and his people.

The king and his servants had always cared for the town and all that lived there. A reason could not be given to think about another place for no other place had ever been known. Everything in the kingdom was as it had been from the beginning. No villager could even recall when the there was a beginning, and no one seemed to be bothered by not knowing."

None of this made sense to Nob. Everything seemed so perfect and she could not understand what it was that would cause it all to go so wrong.

"What happened?"

"It started with the Disgraced One"

"Disgraced One? What do you mean?" she asked.

"In the king's castle were many servants." Yeshu continued, "Some were seen in the castle preparing food, playing music, or accompanying villagers as they would walk through the large castle hallways and corridors. Then there were others that would till the plants in the village, clean the cobbled roads and assist the villagers with any of their needs. Some very special and mysterious servants were never seen and stayed in the throne room out of sight at all times. Yet, the most beautiful servants of all were the few servants that always stayed close to the king. They would speak on his behalf and represent him at official ceremonies. They were in charge of all of the other servants that

worked for the king. Among these few special servants were *Anunciador*, the king's herald, *Solidado*, the king's Man at Arms, *Curador* who would watch over the care of the village and *Empregado* who was the most beautiful of all. Empregado was created by the king to be the head of all the other servants. His majesty, beauty and power were only second to that of the king's. Many of the villagers would scramble to their windows or run out into the street when they would hear that Empregado was coming by their homes. His garments were beautiful with swirls of bright colors and golden charms glistening in the sunlight. His caravan would parade down the main road from the castle with his musician's music echoing off of the walls of the homes in the village. The "clip clop" of the horse's feet would keep time with the melodies as the tassels of the carriages and the waving of the banners would seem to dance to the festive songs. Children fought for front row seats as the parade would pass and Empregado would throw candies to the small hands reaching out to him. The candies sparkled and twinkled in the morning light looking like flashing gems raining down upon the children's smiling faces.

Every morning it was the same.

But every day the king would also walk down to the village. Yet, when the king would come down to the homes of the people later in the day he would walk from the main gate of the castle alone and through the streets to the square. He chose not to have a parade or candies. He liked to knock on the doors of the villagers and if they let him in, which they always did, he would sit with the children and play and relax with the parents and talk. He would eat with the family and spend hours with them in their homes. Everyone in the town had stories of how the king had been in their home

and how they loved to have him sit and talk late into the night. Each evening would end as he would tuck the children safely into their beds and sing them to sleep. Though the king would not leave their home until the early hours of the next morning, everyone seemed to be refreshed and awake the next day, even with out a long night's sleep.

At the end of the village near the great road that led up to the castle the king also built a house with a great room downstairs. Here he would meet with more than one family at a time in his "village home". It was a special place where the king and villagers seemed to become one big family. The king loved to spend time with all of them there as much as he loved meeting them in the palace. Everyone knew about the house at the end of the village and the villagers would take care of it and keep it clean and repaired to show their love for the king.

In the royal palace the king and Empregado would be seen spending their time together talking about the village and making plans. The two of them could be seen every day on the balcony of the castle looking down on the village. The street below would echo with their laughing and singing.

This is how it was for as long as anyone could remember.

No one could have known about the terrible time that was about to come, no one could have expected...

Everything was about to change."

Yeshu paused, letting his mind go back to that day.

Chapter 4

An Unthinkable Thing



t began as every day had always begun. Nothing seemed different when the first light poured across the end of the village and then up the side of the mountain to the peak of the highest tower of the castle. Birds were singing and the rustling in the cottages signaled the waking of the village's inhabitants. Neighbors waved cheerfully at each other as they gathered water for morning baths and dishes. Curtains were thrown open and children began to gather on the sides of the road. Music could be heard faintly in the distance from somewhere deep inside the castle. Soon Empregado would come down from the castle bringing the food and the items needed daily for the village. The convoy would pull into the square with carts full of provisions and food.

As usual the sun was bright and the flowers, which bloomed so brightly in the village, filled the air with a sweet smells. All through the village, laughter and conversation rolled up and down the street like a babbling brook. The day was bustling with life.

Just like every day.

Empregado entered the village from the castle with his musicians and carts loaded with food and threw candies to the children as they cheered and waved at the beautiful servant passing by. The parade only pausing if one of the younger children would dart in front of the rumbling carts. Empregado would gently help the young one to the side of the road

and say, "The king would certainly be angry with me if I were to harm a Little One."

Then he would give them a kind smile, pat their heads, and hand them back to grateful parents.

The carts circled into the square and stopped to signal the start of the days "shopping".

And as always Empregado was to announce,

"Blessings from the king, king of the universe that brings the bounty to you!"

Then it happened, a horrible thing, an unthinkable thing.

These were not the words on this day. Empregado had become prideful and seduced by the praises of the villagers. This morning he announced: "Blessings from the king, king of the universe, and Empregado, who bring the bounty to you!"

For the first time a cold wind tore through the village and dark clouds appeared in the sky boiling and rolling as the sun, which shown so brightly this morning, was blotted from view. The villagers were not filled with fear, but with wonder, for they had never seen clouds such as these before. The sky above the highest tower of the castle began to rumble, moan and fill with fire. Lightening flashed from the clouds followed by the applause of tremendous thunder which rattled the windows of the homes and caused many villagers to cover their ears.

Empregado froze in terror as he looked up at the castle. "No! You don't understand!" he shouted against the tumult sweeping down from the castle.

"You're Majesty! I only meant that I have a part in their care!"

A bolt flashed and struck the carriage of the royal servant knocking him to the ground. The white horses pulling the carriage startled and tore violently from their reins. They bolted from the square, eyes bulging in fear, and headed for the trees at the edge of the village quickly disappearing into the thickness of the woods. Empregado's robes and the scepter he carried, which bore the emblem and authority of the king, violently tore from his body as if by some invisible hand. The wind became a squall as carts and their contents were scattered around the square. Whirling winds lifted and dropped Empregado again and again against the floor of the square. He soon would have been swept away if he had not been clinging desperately with his fingers into the cobbled surface of the streets. The noise of the wind, the thunder, the screaming of the servants and of Empregado finally moved the village from their wonder and they began to run with terror toward their homes. Soon there was only Empregado and his servants left in the square. The carts, food, banners, and supplies were all carried by the storm back into the castle at the top of the village.

Then all became quiet and still as the now bruised, bleeding and broken servant gazed up to the balcony of the castle where he had spent so much time. "We can still be together, can we not?" he whispered.

“This is a misunderstanding my king. I only wanted to share a little with you.” he pulled himself to an upright position. Slowly he scanned the windows of the homes as fearful eyes peered at him from the homes. Empregado tried to smile at the faces within, but at each home the curtains would shut or the people would draw back into the shadows. “It’s me, your friend,” he would call to each tightly shut home. Up and down the square he searched looking for an open door. Every home was tightly locked. “Am I not the same one that you ran to see through these same windows just moments ago?” He peered and searched noticing that even his own servants would look away when his eyes would meet theirs. Empregado’s stunning beauty had faded quickly without the favor of the king. He caught his own reflection in a window and did not even recognize himself. The face that peered back at him was twisted, pale, and his eyes looked sick and hollow. He had always believed that there was beauty in him, even without his king. Realizing that all of his majesty and beauty were really just a reflection of the king’s broke something deep within the servant. His mind cracked and spiraled out of control and his heart shriveled from the grief.

Then for the first time hatred filled his emptied heart as he saw the once loving villagers cringing at the sight of him.

Empregado was to never sit in the castle with the king again. It was over.

“I didn’t do this” he said, “I DIDN’T DO THIS!” he shouted this time at the firmly locked doors around the square. “It is the king that has changed everything! He is the one

that you should cringe and cower from" he spat. "Don't you hear me? Do any of you know who I am?"

His hate began to grow even more as shades and sashes were shut and candles snuffed from behind closed windows.

In only a few short moments the beauty of the entire village had dimmed. The dark clouds and cold wind lasted for the rest of the night. No one ventured from his or her home and for the first time the village went hungry.

Slowly the once grand Empregado and his servants entered the same thicket that his horses had fled into. "You fools! You will never survive your king. He will destroy you like he did me, someday you will see, you will come to me for help. It is just a matter of time. I will be waiting." Empregado said as he looked over his shoulder at the village and stepped into the dark and wiry thicket.

There he stayed for a time and many believed that they would never see him again.

The next day the village was still provided food but there were no more parades. Just food left in the square for the villagers to carry back to their homes. The king would still come and visit like before. The beautiful servant was not seen nor was he expected to visit again. The village eventually forgot about Empregado and about the joyous morning visits.

In the darkness, when many were asleep and not expecting any danger but safely tucked in their beds, evil came. From the thick forest a figure crept and slithered silently

through the edge of the trees and approached the village with a pack of smaller creatures trailing behind it in much the same way.

Snickers and cackles bubbled up from under their breath and every so often one would shush the other bringing only an angry hiss back in response.

The larger figure made its way to the middle of the square in the cover of the darkness. “I’m here!” he gurgled. “Forgotten me so soon? Come out and see your beloved friend”, he hissed.

More cackling and laughter.

“Come out! Come out! Let the children sit and beg at my feet again let the cheers echo in my ears once more!” he yelled.

“Wake up you dunderheads! You dullards! You pathetic soft little creatures! Come to me again, COME OUT...NOW!”

Shrieks, laughter and shouts broke out around the square.

The townspeople awoke in their homes from the sound of the shrieking voice that echoed in the quiet streets. A few opened their doors to see what or who had awakend them but very quickly turned and hid from the hideous creature standing in the center of the village.

Empregado had entered the village again, though none recognized him as such. After so many years he had become something dark, twisted and evil. His face was like tanned leather. Yellow teeth with rotten brown craters and pocks filled his putrid mouth. Each and every tooth was jagged and broken except for two almost perfect fangs. His once

golden and radiant hair hung like thick strands of dirty yarn down his back. Leaves and garbage adorned each thick strand.

His clothes were so dirty and torn you could not recognize their original fashion. Yet in the dark you could make out vague swirls of color woven into the fabric. He also wore a cape of black. So black that in the dark neither stars nor moon reflected off of its onyx surface. His fingers were long with broken and jagged fingernails. Pieces of old meat and rotting filth were lodged so thick under them that it his fingers appeared even longer. His eyes were dim and grey. His tongue was long and slender and he would often accidentally bite it as he spoke because it would dart in and out of his mouth.

“You are repulsed at me? You pathetic sick little creatures! You have no idea what the king truly feels. I gave him my service, my loyalty and you all have given him nothing! Yet it is you he calls his treasure! So be it... I will give you reason to fear me, to cower before me. **I, EMPREGADO WILL BRING YOU WHAT YOU TRULY DESERVE!**

You will know that I am to be feared. Who will honor me? Who wishes to follow me?” Slowly, Empregado’s servants gathered by his side and fell at his feet devoted to him as they had always been, giving them selves to him in service and devotion.

Then looking up at the king’s castle he spat, “This is my army oh mighty king. I do not stand-alone! I am now ruler of this village. They used to rush to their windows to see me and their children would line the streets to greet me. It is time that they honor me once again. If not, then they will have to answer to me and my minions!”

At the top of the hill from the castles main gate Solidado rode with only three of his men to meet the banished servant in the square. Solidado slowly approached Empregado who was still threatening the villagers and cursing the king. “Empregado!” the king’s man of arms called, “EMPREGADO!”

“Ah, my dear old friend Solidado, you have come to join me?”

Solidado just stared at his former friend and declared slowly but firmly,

“By decree of the king, by his authority, by his power, you are forever removed from the palace’s service. Your position within the kingdom is nullified and void. You are no longer part of the royal court. The honorable name Empregado is stripped and you will carry a title of shame and evil.

You are requested to accompany me to the king’s throne room for the sentence of your crime.”

Schlechter, as he was soon to be known, sneered at Solidado. “It seems that I have the larger force with me today, old friend. Is it possible that you may be serving a soon disposed king? Could I encourage you to listen to logic? Possibly a deal could be made between you and me?” Solidado looked into the sickly pale eyes and for a moment saw somewhere behind them the comrade in which he had labored for so many years.

“Perhaps, there is still room for compromise and a way to restore him to the royal court?” he thought.

Schlechter reached his hand out to Solidado as an evil smirk curled the corner of his dripping mouth.

"There will be no deals with you. Unlike you, I do not treason against my king."

Solidado's eyes narrowed as he looked down on leathery face or his former friend.

Schlecter chuckled as he motioned for his servants to move towards Solidado and his men.

The small part left of Schlecter that had once been Empregado faded forever away, as the once beautiful and majestic servant was taken over with the corruption of hatred, evil and ambition. His eyes, which once sparkled blue and kind, had simply faded on that day he lost the kings glory, now they darkened into sickly greenish yellow bulging orbs. The eyes dulled with the presence of death that even caused the mighty Solidado to flinch. Schlecter growled, it bubbled and rattled in his chest and throat. Clinching his rotten teeth he spat, "Then die, you fool, die with the king that will soon be slain before these ungrateful beasts in their simple little huts!"

The evil servants leapt as one towards the king's soldier's intent on grabbing their swords and slaying them. Solidado with one swift movement of his mighty arm drew a brightly colored scepter from his side. The scepter had the emblem of the king! It was the very scepter that once belonged to Empregado. Light blazed from the emblem first blinding the servants who shrieked in horror. Writhing on the ground their bodies began to twist, crackle and deform. Moans of agony and pain echoed off the walls of the square giving a sound that made the villagers cover their ears in disgust and fear from inside their homes. Schlecter shouted a command that could not be understood by the mighty Sergeant at Arms. From the forest more grisly shrieking soldiers flew into the air and swarmed around the village. Like a flock of demented crows they flew back and forth. Some

knocking pieces of the huts roofs off, breaking trees and anything loose in the village. Solidado sat up straight on his horse but watching every movement of their leader. As Schlecter leapt to the skies to lead them he headed straight for the castles front gate. Solidado left the wounded evil servants to the two soldiers with him as he turned his steed towards the castle's drawbridge. Hoof beats pounded up the cobbled streets as Solidado held the scepter in the air with one hand and held the reigns with his other, his long red hair flowing like a battle flag behind him. Just as he reached the edge of the village he jumped from the stirrups flipped through the air and drew his heavy sword at the same time. He landed firmly at the edge of the great mote. Holding the scepter in the air he cried "The king's glory!" and raising the sword he cried "The king's might!" Again the light exploded from the scepter as the evil birds fell from the skies flopping around like dying black locusts. Schlecter fell at Solidado's feet. He tried to reach for the scepter that he once had held so proudly but the battle was over before it had really begun. Solidado held the point of his broad sword at the throat of his enemy. "Yield" he said quietly but firmly to the creature at his feet. Schlecter lay on his side panting a spitting in hate at the castle. "I defy you! All that you care for I will destroy, all that matters to you I will ruin!"

Solidado's soldiers gathered up their former fellow servants and surrounded them as they were escorted into the castle for judgment. None of them could be recognized as their former selves. Naked and with leathery skin, twisted spines, gaping mouths with rotten teeth, equaled in their repulsiveness only in what was formerly their beauty.

They were only in the presence of the king for a few moments before the sentence was pronounced. Then they were banished outside of the village. A gate was closed behind them, but not locked. Schlecter was disgraced but not completely denied all of his former power. The king left him some for the servant was to still serve the king. Even in his rebellion.

Yeshu looked at Nob who couldn't believe that Empragado could have turned evil so quickly.

"It wasn't that long before the banished former head servant of the king began to cause trouble with the villagers." Yeshu said. His eyes began to narrow as he thought of the evil servant. He once again looked up at the vacant castle on the hill. "He put on clothes that were more beautiful than any clothing in the village. He could disguise himself when he wore clothes of bright colors that would sparkle in the sunlight. But his costumes would only work on those who chose to see him as they wished. If they looked close enough they could see plainly that he was evil and dangerous. Along with him would be some of the other rebellious servants dressed in pure white and carrying in their arms flowers of purple, blue, red, yellow, and green passing them out to unsuspecting women and unprepared men. He would be invited into their homes but unlike the king he would do all of the talking and just eat their food. The villagers kept feeding his appetite and listening to his lies. The children would be ignored not only by Schlecter, but by their parents also. Many nights the children would put themselves to bed with empty tummies. They even believed that Schlecter was a true messenger from the royal court. He would deceive them with his lies because he had served so long in the castle he knew

how to make the lies sound official. He would tell them that he had seen the throne room and that there was nothing special about it at all.” Yeshu said in a low steady voice.

“Then he began to increase his lies by convincing them that the king really wanted them in the throne room and that it was a test to see if they really wanted to be closer to him. Eventually, the bitter and deceitful servant would convince them that the best thing for the village and for the king was to enter the throne room and be like the king. Then they could be closer than ever before. ‘Anyway’ Yeshu quoted the evil servant, ’isn’t that what he truly wants?’”

Yeshu’s stern eyes softened as he turned to look at Nob,
“But that is enough of the story for tonight, Little One”

Chapter 5

Lost Treasure



ough the story would end for the night Nob continued to ask Yeshu every time that she had a chance about the days before king went away. It seemed so confusing to her. Once again she thought about the story while sitting on a barrel in her attic and looking through her bag of thrown away things. She could not focus, because of all of the many questions in her mind, on her bag and its contents even though she needed to get ready for the next day of selling. Eventually, she just stared out the window, not like other nights when she would stare up at the castle, but down at the village below. She could not understand why the villagers would disobey the king. She tried to remember all of the things that she had been told by Yeshu. She could hear his old voice in her memory as he had continued the story...

“Schlecter would continue to whisper things in the ears of those who would listen and let him into their homes.” Yeshu said. “For years and years upon years he continued to spread lies until many began to believe the things that they had already convinced themselves of many years before.

As black as it was on the day Schlecter rebelled against the king an even darker day was coming. The little town would soon find that the cost of disobedience would be much higher than they ever would have imagined.

As the king walked down the road towards the village he knew that the day had come. He could have sent Solidado to the village to stop the plans that had been laid. He could have stopped them himself. But he didn't, he went to be with the people just as he always had before.

In the castle the throne room was unlocked. In fact there was no lock at all. There wasn't a need for one. The king had no need to lock a room that he had told the villagers not to enter. No townspeople had ever disobeyed the word of the king.

Just the evening before there had been a secret meeting at one of the homes in the center of the town. The meeting was to discuss the king and his law. That night, Schlecter was the featured speaker. The crowd listened quietly and nodded their approval of what he was saying.

Schlecter had learned to hide his true appearance from the people in the town. He could, for a while, change into something that seemed beautiful or regal. He could stay in the village for a short time but if he stayed too long he would become sick and weak and would have to return to the garbage pile outside the village to gain his strength. It was not until the kingdumbs appeared that he could be seen for what he really was, even when disguised. Yet, most would not recognize the danger and evil until it was too late. They would see what they wanted to see, and hear what they wanted to hear.

Tonight Schlecter was dressed in bright colors and a long flowing cloak. He began to speak in soft melodious tones, ‘Surely you don’t believe that the king would punish all of you if you went into the throne room do you?’

‘Why do you think the king would make such a law if he didn’t want to challenge and test you?’

‘Test us about what?’ one of the townspeople asked.

‘Whether you have become strong, bold, wise and brave, all these years you have sat back cowering, feeble and scared to challenge the king on this one little thing. This has made him so discouraged in you all. He wants you to be in the throne room don’t you see? But only the brave, adventurous, and royal are to be in such a room as the throne room of the king. If he just let you into the room than how could you prove to be worthy? Do you not understand this is what he really wants from you? Enter and become brave and bold, just like the king. It is the wisest thing to do.’ Schlecter could tell that they were beginning to believe the lies. ‘You would make your king so happy and proud of you.’

The villagers looked wide-eyed at the man standing before them. What they were hearing sounded so dangerous but it seemed to be right, it made perfect sense. What if they were letting the king down by not even wanting to get into the throne room?

‘I know that as a servant of the king that I should not be telling you this but I can’t stand to see him so disappointed in you all any longer.’ The evil former servant had a hard time not giggling out loud as he said the words.

So the plan was made. While the king came to visit the village in the morning, some would stay and talk with the king while others, lead by Schlecter, would go to the castle. Those going to the castle would enter the throne room with Schlecter and then report what they saw to the others. Just looking and not touching anything couldn't hurt, they thought, and maybe if they saw the room then they could make plans in the future to enter the throne room and surprise the king. 'Won't he be pleased with us!' they thought to themselves.

As the king made his way to the first house and knocked, a group of 8 men and 4 women began walking up the wide road to the entrance of the castle. Schlecter was not with them, he had promised to meet them inside and guide them through the intricate halls. He would have everything ready to go after they reached the castle.

The king had sat down in one of the homes before a blazing fire to tell stories to the children gathered around his feet. The parents of the children seemed very uneasy and kept glancing at one another and nervously cleaning the house in places that they had just cleaned moments before. But the king laughed, played and sang songs with the children.

Entering the castle the small band was greeted by a servant, 'Well, good morning!' the cheerful greeter smiled as he invited them into the main hall. 'Where would you like to go today?' the villagers jumped when he asked the question and then tried to settle down as if there were no unusual intentions for this day.

‘We thought that there was another servant that was going to be here today.’ One of the townspeople said. ‘Is there someone else that is greeting villagers today?’

The tall handsome servant thought for a while and said, ‘No, I am the only one serving in this capacity today. Is there a name? Maybe I can check to see when this servant will be here.’

The villagers did not want to say it was Schlechter because he had told them not to mention his name to anyone. ‘Because,’ he told them that night, ‘They know that a servant of my importance would never greet people at the door. They would know something was going on if you mentioned my name.’

After a short period of silence one of the oldest men in the group said, ‘We cannot remember his name could you just check if someone else is supposed to be here?’

‘Very well’ the servant said with a somewhat confused or possibly irritated look on his face.

‘Wait here, I will go check’ he said as he headed for a small room by the front entrance. He stopped before entering and looked back at the nervous group standing at the main gate. His face turning from irritation to something softer, perhaps it was sadness.

As he entered the room the villagers quickly opened the map that Schlechter provided them the night before. There was a secret passageway just 50 yards away. There would be a small door in the side of the grand staircase in front of them. The secret door was hidden from accidental viewing. Pressing on a precise place on the wall would cause it to open. The group walked off as quickly as possible trying not to make any noise.

From inside the little room, at a small window in the door, the servant watched them sneak away. Tears began to run down his chiseled face as he remembered the words of the king that he had received just this morning. ‘If any come from the village today looking for someone else to guide them, let them pass’. The servant could not understand why the king was going to let them disobey. But he would have to let them go or he too would be in danger of disobeying the king.

Making their way to the narrow walkway at the side of the grand staircase the villagers quickly searched the area or for any servants that may be following them and sounding an alarm. There were none. ‘Well, we have been quite lucky so far’ one of them said with a nervous chuckle. ‘Let’s see if we can find that secret spot’.

The group pushed on the sides of the staircase hoping to find the spot that Schlecter had described the night before. The longer it took the more agitated the small band became. ‘Wasn’t Schlecter supposed to be here to help us?’ one of the women asked. Then as if appearing from thin air the familiar voice of Schlecter whispered, ‘press here’. The thin voice startled the group and they looked the direction of the sound. All that they could see was the empty corridor leading away from the main hall. Turning back towards the wall a small brightly colored swirl spun on the corner of a single tile among the many marble tiles that covered the side of the staircase.

The leader of the small band reached forward and pressed on the ‘swirling’ tile. A door slid open smoothly revealing a hidden corridor that went a few feet and then turned hard to the right making it impossible to see where it led. ‘Should we go in?’ one of them

asked. The leader swallowed hard and tried to sound confident, ‘Why yes, isn’t this why we came?’

As the group disappeared into the doorway, the wall slid slowly shut behind them.

Eventually they reached the throne room entrance at the end of an enormous hallway. The door was made of mahogany with great hinges and latches, but no lock. A tremendous emblem emblazoned the front. The emblem was a larger version of the one that was on the scepter that Empregado had carried. The emblem was of a great shield. Embossed on the shield were a tree, a lion, a small cottage and a flame. Above the shield was a great crown with a dragon entwined around the base of the crown.

Time seemed to slow, as they stood paralyzed in the hallway staring at the heavy door. No one wanted to be the first to go in even though they all wanted to see the room that had, until this moment, only existed in their imaginations.

‘Open it’, one of the villagers said to another. ‘I’m not going near the door first... you do it.’ Each person tried to convince another and soon the walls echoed with their arguing. One of the women in the back of the group kept staring at the emblem as her feet moved her forward. The dragon on the great crown began to move and fill with swirling colors.

‘SSSSee the knob?’ the snake whispered to the woman at the door as smoke of purple and red spiraled from his nostrils. ‘It’ssss not locked. SSSSurely, if hisss majessty did not want you to enter he would have locked the door’. The women looked into the dragon’s pale yellow eyes and a feeling that she never felt before began to go through her

body. ‘But the king said we would be punished if we enter’ the woman’s fear filled her chest and her throat, yet she could not stop staring at the piercing eyes of the dragon only inches from her face now. It came closer until she could feel its breath on her face.

‘SSSSilly lassss, you missundersssstood the king. Do you really think he would punisssh you for sssomething that he wantsss you to do?’

The woman reached for the ring that served as the knob of the door and twisted. The door popped open ever so slightly.

Nothing happened.

The group, that had been fighting, immediately stopped their arguing to stare at the crack of light that now spilled into the dim hallway. ‘It’s open’ the woman whispered. ‘See nothing happened’ her voice becoming stronger. ‘Why don’t we go in?’ The group rushed the door at once, and even though it was large and heavy it swung back until it sharply struck the wall. The entire party fell into a heap on the floor.

The king halted in the middle of his song and became silent.

He looked at the inhabitants of the cottage and knew that it would be the last time that he would be there. The mother and father could not look into his face, as if they were ashamed to have him see what was in their eyes. He turned to the children who had quit singing when they saw the king’s face. Sadness filled his eyes as he said gently, ‘So it will be the innocent that will pay for this day’.

Frightened now with those words the parents ran to their children expecting the king's wrath to fall upon them and murder them. The mother ran and covered her children as she waited for the blow to come. But no anger arose from the king, only sadness. He turned for the door to leave and as he began to close the door he paused a moment and looked back at the family huddled before the fireplace.

His royal treasure ... was lost.

The small band in the castle stood slowly. Before them was a throne. It was whiter than any cloud that they had ever seen. The walls were covered with tremendous tapestries an enormous book rested on a stand by the throne. The pages were open and a quill stood next to the open pages. Gold, jewels and silver twinkled around them like a storm of fireflies. No one was there, at least it seemed that way at first to the small band now gawking at the beauty before them.

The throne grew brighter and brighter until they had to cover their eyes. From the high vaulted ceiling the outline of something large began to move. A scream echoed off the walls and grew to an ear splitting shriek.

Also, a rumbling from all around them grew and grew until it seemed to roar like a magnificent beast and the frightened villagers had to cover their ears from the growing din.

Before they could see or hear anything else the room it seemed to melt or crumble away from them until there was nothingness and they fell through endless darkness. After what seemed like a considerable amount of time the entire party hit hard onto the cobbled surface of the square. Dazed they looked around still not sure where they had landed. It was dark, there were no stars, no moon, and the sky seemed blacker than it had ever been. Rain began to fall and lightning flashed around them and each of the party ran to their homes and shut the doors tightly. There were no goodbyes or even a parting glance at each other. For some reason each couldn't stand to be seen by the others in the group. Shame had entered their hearts but since they had never felt shame before they didn't know that is what it was. Their stomachs twisted in remorse and their hearts pounded with regret. Shame was making them sick.

When the long night finally ended the villagers cautiously came out of their homes in which they were hiding. The king was back in his castle. The food and supplies that were provided every morning would not be coming. The servants that tended the fields or took care of the village had made their way back to the castle.

They would not be coming back.

The deceiving servant, who promised to enter the throne room with them stood in the shadows of a tree chuckling. He looked up at the castle and whispered, 'How does it feel, king? How does it feel to be betrayed?'

And for the first time in the village's history a brown and dry leaf from one of the tallest oaks in the village floated gently to the ground.”

Chapter 6

The Kings Judgement



o what happened after that night?" Nob asked Yeshu when she saw him in the market square. Yeshu handed Nob an apple and worked his way in behind her selling box so he would not block any business. Sitting down on the ground the old peasant took a deep breath, and with patience and love in his voice, began where he had left off in the story.

"As the morning dawned the next day, the people wondered aimlessly around the streets for most of the morning. There were no vegetables, fruits or grain for the morning meal. No oil for lamps and stoves. No blankets, or pillows or clothes. Long after the sun was overhead the people felt the first early pangs of hunger. A single servant made his way from the castle to the edge of the village. It was Anunciador the king's official herald. The villagers ran to the drawbridge in hopes that this servant was bringing them food. But he stopped at the very edge of the bridge without actually entering the village and lifted his regal voice so the entire town could hear.

'A sentence has been passed, concerning the crime of entering the throne room of the king. This sentence is from this day hence enforced.

Hear ye, hear ye,

The village may no longer have access to the castle of the king in any way.

The village will no longer be provided with food or supplies. The people must cultivate, sow, and reap the food that they need on their own.

The village must establish commerce to produce and sell supplies.

The men must do this.

For the women:

The king's visits to your homes and to the village have ceased.

You must have children and raise them without the king's visits, advice and care in your homes.

As for the servant who claimed to serve the king and encouraged your disobedience, let it be known that Schlechter is not in the king's service nor shall he be in the future. He is without pardon or restitution and will at the king's pleasure be destroyed by his chosen means. He will deceive and be deceived until he will be annihilated by what he seeks to destroy.

If any servant claiming to be from the king does not obey everything the king has commanded than he shall be, by law, executed by the village.

Hear ye, hear ye,

Let those with ears hear the judgment of the king.'

The servant turned quickly and made his way swiftly back to the castle. The drawbridge that connected the main road to the front of the palace, which had never been drawn, began to close behind him.

The great chains rumbled and creaked as the castles entrance was removed from the village.” Yeshu paused the story.

A woman began to walk by Nob’s box and then paused for a moment and headed back towards the young girl and her many wares.

“Do you have any string?” the woman asked.

“Oh I’m sorry” Nob replied. “I don’t have any string today”

“What about that string there” the woman motioned to a neatly wound small coil on the corner of her selling box.

Nob had not remembered putting a string there nor had she remembered ever finding any string recently. But it was there now and she couldn’t think of any reason why she shouldn’t sell it to the woman standing there before her.

“Um, how about two coppers?” Nob did not want to be too greedy especially since she had not even remembered having the string in the first place.

“Only two?” the woman asked. “That is worth at least four” She plopped four coppers on the box and put the string into her pocket. Yeshu smiled and nodded as the woman caught his eye and smiled back at the old peasant.

Yeshu continued his story.

“People walked to the edge of the mote around the castle. Looking down they could not see the bottom just a steep cliff that reached into the darkness below. The king’s castle was completely cut off from them.”

Yeshu slowly rose from his seat behind the box gave Nob a gentle touch on her head and said, “I must see some others today Little One. You keep on working hard and I am sure you will have enough to get what you need today” He started down the cobbled road but seemed to be walking like one of his legs was numb as he dragged his left foot along the ground. Nob figured that he must have put his leg to sleep while sitting behind her box.

Yeshu made his way clumsily around the corner and out of sight of the little girl and her box. On the window sill next to him was the neatly wound string that the woman had just purchased for four coppers. Yeshu chuckled and took the string and began to lace his left shoe that was missing its laces. After he tied the shoe tightly Yeshu bounded up the street and skipped along with the children playing in the streets.

Chapter 7

The Prince



t seemed that the more Nob heard of the story the more she needed to know. When Yeshu would visit in the past they would sing together, play games and talk about all sorts of things. But now Nob could not get off her mind the events from long ago. No matter how hard she tried she just couldn't understand. So again, on another night when Yeshu came to visit, Nob was full of questions. Yeshu never seemed to mind going over the story again and again. And with each telling of the story Nob heard something new about the king, the village, and his magnificent palace.

"Well", Yeshu started slowly, "At first the village was left to themselves. Eventually they learned to grow food, though never as well as the king's gardeners, and to make trade. Years passed and the village forgot about the king's love and care. They lived in the shadow of the castle but all those that had seen the king had passed away. Everyone knew the stories of how the first villagers died. They saw how their bodies began to change over time. Their eyes grew dimmer, hearing became muffled and muscles would weaken. But none had known death. At first death did not frighten them, it was a curiosity. Yet when the old cobbler who had entered the "long sleep" never awakened, but became rotten, the people soon began to fear death.

Worse than death was how the people began to change in their hearts. They grew selfish, vindictive, greedy, and proud. The 'Orsorum', the name given to the original villagers,

completely died off and their children the ‘Malvado’ began to live most of their lives as if there never was a king. Except for times of tragedy or of heartache when they would be found at the edge of the mote crying out across to the castle for the king to come back to the village and relieve their pain. For years the shouts would echo off the side of the castle and tumble into the chasm below. After so much time and with no answer many believed that the king had died inside his castle and that they were alone.

More years passed and times upon time. ‘Outros’, people from other towns and cities, began to move to the village. The Outros had never seen the king nor did they believe that the village ever had a king. At first the Outros were friends with the villagers yet over time, without the protection of the king the villagers became little more than slaves to cruel and evil men. They grew stronger and stronger and made the villagers toil and work for them in their shops and in the fields. They owned all of the stores and the market booths. These men followed other rulers and encouraged the villagers to bow to their kings and not to the village’s own “dead” king in an abandoned palace.

It was a dark and gloomy time for the people and many lost hope. They accepted that they would never be free and that their king would never be back.

The years passed and very seldom would any go to the edge of the mote to call out to the king unless their pain became great.

Yet, a few still believed that the king would not leave them or abandon them. They would continue to call out across the mote even in good times. The village would mock them and call them..."

"Kingdumbs!" Nob blurted out.

"Yes, kingdumbs, Little One." Yeshu smiled.

He sat up and adjusted the rolled up blanket under his back.

"In truth the king had not forgotten the village. He had never stopped loving them. His heart would break as he would watch the village be taken over by Outros.

When the Outros would leave or be driven out from time to time the village would believe that they had done it themselves. They would not realize that it was the king and his servants that would be behind the outsiders leaving.

Things would get better for a while but then again the people would do as they wished. It would never last, and again the Outros would return and each time with more cruelty than before. Only at the darkest times would the village ever be drawn back to the castle and pleading with the king to come.

For years Anunciador came to some of the kingdumbs in their homes and when others would not see him. He let them know that a prince would be coming to free them and to bring the villagers back into the castle. The king's magic was great and his prince would be born just like the other villagers. He would grow up in the village and be with them.

But on the perfect day he would go to the house at the end of the village where the king used to meet with the people and announce that he was the prince.

He was to tell them that the king's village would be made right again, better than it ever was, very soon. The king also instructed his prince to tell the village that he would protect the people and save them from being killed if they would keep the king's law."

"Were the laws bad?" Nob asked.

"Oh no, they were good. The laws that followed the original sentence protected the people now that the king wouldn't be able to be with them like before. The laws kept them from the harm which they had released with Schlecter. The laws would help the villagers understand how great their king was and how they truly needed him," Yeshu said.

"As expected, however, the village couldn't keep the laws. The king knew that a law is not really a law if there was no justice enforced for breaking them. So he made the declaration that broke his heart. The declaration that he knew he would have to make from the very beginning.

"The king declared that 'those that break the law must die.'", Yeshu said.

"Oh no, the king would never have made such a law!" Nob exclaimed.

“Even though the laws were good,” Yeshu put his hand on Nob’s shoulder, “the village chose not to obey.”

“So when the time was right he sent the prince to free them.”

Nob noticed that Yeshu seemed to get so excited telling this part of the story.

“Many did not believe that the prince could be speaking for a king that had not been seen for so long. So after a while they began to ignore the laws and their anger began to grow towards the prince that spoke them. Yet the prince loved the people of the town just like the king and would tell stories to the children and sit in the homes of many of the villagers. There was nothing that the prince did that the king had not done when he was in the village in the time before the dark day. All he did was precisely the same things that the king would do. Since many had become weak and ill, the prince would heal them and make weakened eyes see, and broken legs strong. ‘Only the king could have power like this’” they would say among themselves.

All the while, more and more Outros would come and again a few villagers would still cry out across the mote. They would plead that if the king was there that he would get rid of the Outros and make things like they were before. Little did they know that the king was listening to them yet his answer was not what they expected and they did not understand.

The prince would set it all right again.

Their anger grew as Schlecter, posing as a shopkeeper, gardener, or something else that they would not expect, continued to spread lies about the prince and blacken their hearts towards their unseen loving king. He would blame the king and his prince for the Outros and that if he was truly their king than he would save them.”

“I really don’t like that Schlecter very much” Nob frowned. Yeshu gave a soft laugh at Nob’s stern face.

Yeshu smoothed the hair on Nob’s tousled head.

“Little One”, Yeshu said gently, “The king knew that the village with the meddling Schlecter harassing them would never be able to obey. He also loved the people of the village very much. Yet, a king ceased to be king if he couldn’t or wouldn’t observe his own rules. He knew that all of the village would have to die for their disobedience and it broke his heart.”

Both Nob and Yeshu sat in quiet for what seemed like forever, everything seemed to stop while they waited.

Nob laid her head on Yeshu’s chest and she could hear his strong heart beating. She felt scared and confused but being with Yeshu always made the ugliness of the village, death, and her fear of never being with the king seem easier to bear.

“Of course there was one thing that would solve the problem” Yeshu finally said.

“What!” Nob gasped.

"The king had already made a way to fix it," continued Yeshu.

Nob looked at him puzzled and asked, "How could the king fix it? How could he be the king if he didn't obey his own laws and how could he be loving if his law meant that all of his people would have to die? How could he be king with no subjects? It's hopeless!"

Nob threw her hands up in frustration.

"The king knew that there could only be one way to keep the law, save those that he loved so much in the village and still be king," Yeshu said.

"How?" the confused little voice replied.

The king would have to find someone who had never been tricked by Schlecter or disobeyed the king's laws. Some one that was so perfect that they could represent the village before the king."

"It's impossible!" Nob objected. "No one in the village could be that perfect. Why would they have to be perfect anyway?"

Yeshu turned to the little girl now looking up at him, "So that one person could serve the sentence for them all"

"What do you mean Yeshu?"

"Only one without guilt could take the guilt of the entire village." He explained.

Nob thought for a while and then a terrible realization came to her mind.

"Do you mean that *the prince* would have to die for all those in the village?" Nob felt her throat tighten and a sick feeling fill her stomach.

Yeshu looked down at the village with eyes that twinkled with both joy and sadness.

"Yes" the old man whispered. "But his death would only appease the king's laws for those that were willing to accept his sacrifice for them."

“That’s not fair! All that the prince ever did was help people and tell the truth.” Nob objected.

“Why, should someone who was not guilty have to die? I thought the king was good, a good king wouldn’t kill a person that didn’t deserve it!”

“The people in the village began to grow in fear and hate of the king’s messenger and prince.” Yeshu spoke without acknowledging the little girls objections. “Their love turned to hate and they began to wish that he was not even there. They began to make plans to rid themselves of him...forever.”

“So they killed the prince?” Nob asked.

Yeshu sighed and looked up at the castle.

Nob swallowed and almost squeaked the words, “So...the king, wasn’t good after all? How could he be good if he let the innocent prince be killed by the village? The king would have to be cruel and evil to do such a thing” Nob could not believe that she actually just said those words.

But then something came to her mind. Puzzled she said, “Wait a minute, this doesn’t make sense. I thought the village killed the king not the one that he sent to them?”

”So they did” Yeshu’s eyes never left his gaze at the castle on the hill.

Nob wasn’t sure that she understood.

“The prince was born in the village and grew up hearing about the king, the laws, and how they had been abandoned to the Outros. He also heard about the hope and the promise that the king and his treasured village would be restored someday.

As he grew there were constant rumors in the village about how he was born in a very mysterious way. Because of this some feared him, but some had remembered and believed that the king had vowed that someone would come someday to rid them of all outsiders. They thought that he might be the very one that the king had promised to send so long ago.

But the secret that most did not know, at first, was the most magical part.

You see, Little One, the prince was the king.”

Nob noticed the old man’s eyes began to glisten. Again, Nob and Yeshu sat quietly for quite a while.

Nob couldn’t make any words come. They both just looked up at the castle in silence.

Nob was sure something was missing from this story about the king.

Finally she could not hold the question back from her lips...

“How could the king be the prince? How could he be born in the village and in the castle at the same time?” Nob head was buzzing with questions.

Yeshu answered without ever looking away from the palace on the hill, “Who else could ever be able to save the village from death if not the king himself?”

Yeshu turned and spoke to the young girl in a serious yet kind voice, “The people in the village still live Nob, do they not?”

Nob walked to the window and looked down at the village below. People were making ready for the night getting buckets of water, speaking with neighbors and lighting candles in their darkening homes. The village was bustling with activity.

“The king was the only one who could do it. He died... for them. If they would realize what he did all they would have to do is declare what the king did for them and accept that the sentence had been served for them. Then they could be in the castle with the king someday and never worry about Schlechter or laws or dying.

But a loving king cannot force them to accept that the prince served their sentence. The king knew that love without choice is really not love at all.

There are some who realize that the prince’s death saved their lives. However, there are still many that don’t understand and will eventually die, because they never realized what he did. So they will die and serve the sentence themselves because they choose to do so. The king will only wait so long before he fulfills sentence of the law. Some will be saved from the punishment, and some will not because they refuse to listen to the kingdumbs that came after him and accept the offer of the prince. They will not believe that the king had died so they wouldn’t need to.” Yeshu said.

“Some will even try to prove that they can follow the rules that the king made even though it is impossible. Others choose to try to be as good as they can and hope that the

king will forget the laws and let them enter the castle with him anyway. It's a deadly choice that they make.”

Yeshu continued, “Some just try to re write the laws, but the laws can never be changed or taken away. For the king is a magical king and he made sure that the law would never change”

Nob sat the rest of the evening in Yeshu’s arms. It was the only place that she wanted to be.

“Yeshu” Nob whispered.

“Yes?”

“I am sorry for what I said earlier, I do think the king is good king. I think he did save the village!” Nob stated, “I don’t care what anyone else thinks”

Yeshu chuckled.

“Yeshu” Nob whispered again, “I am glad you’re here to watch over me. I love you” Yeshu’s heart skipped a beat and his strong lungs took in a deep breath. “And I you, Little One” the old beggar said. Nob felt something warm fall on her cheek and run down the side of her face. She glanced at Yeshu’s eyes that now sparkled more than usual in the moonlight. Another tear fell from his great face and onto Nob’s. She wouldn’t wipe them away but would try to leave them there as long as she could. Yeshu

rocked her and sang her to sleep. Nob dreamed of beautiful castles, extravagant balls, long flowing gowns and dancing with her father, the king.

Chapter 8

The
Kingless Kingdom



hen Nob awoke the next morning Yeshu was gone. He had left another big juicy apple on her small table that stood by her sleeping mat.

Nob ate the apple and made up her little room the best that she could. She looked into her bag of forgotten things and saw another surprise that Yeshu had left her. An old picture frame was there among the other knick knacks that she had found the day before. She was sure to get a good price for this item. Nob pulled the picture frame out of the bag and looked at the old painted picture that it contained. The picture was so faded that she had to walk over to the window to be able to make out the images there. All that she could see was the faint image of an infant wrapped in a blanket. Gentle hands that faded away into the edges of the picture held the child. She could also make out some sort of word at the bottom but it had become so marred that she could only see the letters “PR” clearly. As she studied the letters she figured that they could possibly be the name of the baby in the picture. Nob wished that she could read like the children that went to the school everyday in the village. Yet, Yeshu had taught her to read a little and for that she was thankful.

“Pr...P...Pruu...dinse? Prudinse?” Nob sounded out her best guess at the name at the bottom of the picture. “That’s it I guess, Prudinse. Hello Prudinse what a beautiful baby you are!” Nob laughed as she spoke to the child. “You definitely have come to the right place here in my bag. We will find a good home for you when someone buys this beautiful old frame.”

She stuck the frame and picture back into the bag and headed out for another day of selling.

When Nob reached her box she started selling right away because she had plenty to sell without having to search around first. She took each item out like it was a treasure and set them down gently on her selling box. Beside each item she would scribble a little note with the price. Right in the middle of all of her wares she placed the picture and frame with a note saying:

“Mak bestest ofer”

She started making signs ever since Yeshu had helped her with sounding out words. It didn’t look exactly right to her but she was still proud that she had written it all by herself.

This was going to be a good day of selling, at least she hoped that it would!

Everything went along as usual until a man approached Nob’s box. He wore a long white cloak that dragged in the dirt. A hood covered his head and made it difficult to see his face. From within the cloak could be seen a sparkling belt with golden trinkets and bright swirls of color on his tunic. He reached with long slender hands out to the picture in the middle of the table. For some reason Nob felt cold though the day was warm and bright. “How much?” the raspy voice rumbled from beneath the hood.

Nob just stared for a moment as if she was frozen and unable to move. But then the salesman in her was able to come out, "How much are you offering?" Nob countered back to the man. She thought she sounded pretty good despite her uneasiness. With his other hand he reached out from the sleeve of the cloak and opened his fingers to reveal a few copper coins. "Hmm," Nob said as she rubbed her chin. Nob remembered vendor's in the square doing that when they would be selling things. The coppers moved around in the man's hand and then started dancing and spinning over his palm.

The coins swirled faster and faster and Nob became dizzy watching them.

"This should be enough" said the gravelly voice from under the hood.

Nob stared and tried to say "No, that's not enough" but instead she just kept gazing at the coppers and said, "No, that's...fine, sold."

The coppers fell hard on the box and bounced off the edge. Nob snapped out of her daze and chased the small coins as they fell to the ground and snatched them up. When she turned back to her box the hooded man was gone and so was the painting.

By mid day Nob had enough to buy some lunch.

Nob collected the items and headed into the square to the booth selling fresh bread, eggs, and cheeses.

"HELLO!" Nob yelled up at the tall counter that made up the front of the booth.

No one answered.

"HEEELLLLLLOOOOOO!" she shouted louder. "You've got a payin' customer here!"

A faint giggle could be heard from somewhere in the booth but she could not see anyone at all. Maybe she just imagined hearing the giggles?

“Alright then, I guess I will spend my money somewhere else!” she said in a serious voice.

Slowly, a bright red cap with a big tassel at the top began to rise up from behind counter. Following the hat was the round and ruddy smiling face of Miss Mildred McNandylilly. Nob always came to her booth when she had the money to get a little lunch. Mildred was a “kingdumb” and Nob liked to ask her questions and talk, much like she would with Yeshu. Miss Millylilly, as Nob called her, would also give her a little more food than what she had money for and would even fry up an egg or two on her little grill while they talked.

Milly cracked a couple of eggs and started frying a little meat with them as she spoke.
“Well, Nobby, In the days after the prince was killed there would be men in the village that would speak about a promise that the king made, a promise to never forget the village and to permanently remove all of the Outros and make their village beautiful and its people, at least those that were loyal to him even when he seemed gone, kind again. These men were told this by the prince only a few days before he was killed.”

“Many call us ‘Kingdumbs’ because we believe that a publicly murdered king is still alive and they believe we would have to be dumb or even crazy to believe such a thing.”

Milly laughed again and said, “I have always had people laughing at me but I don’t mind. The king is alive, I know it! Still some think that the king never even existed but there is

so much to show that he is still taking care of us. Besides, no one has ever been able to prove that he is still dead because...well... his body is gone.

“Gone?” Nob asked.

“Gone!” Milly continued, “After he was killed there were a few villagers who still loved him and they buried him.”

“So they buried him where no one could ever find him?” Nob asked.

“Oh no, no, no, no!” said Milly, “They buried him in an open place where everyone could see.”

“I’ve never seen the place”, Nob quipped, “And I know this whole village better than anybody. I know secret places that no one else knows about!”

Milly let out a big laugh, “I am sure you do, Nobby, I’m sure you do!”

The kind large round woman continued, “When those who were loyal to the king went to see the place where he was buried...he was gone!”

“So is that why some people think he is still alive?” Nob wondered.

“Yep”, her friend smiled, “including me!”

Nob and Milly talked all through the afternoon and she told her how some claimed to have seen the king and talked with him, but most of them were considered completely crazy by the people in the village. They were those that were taught by his loyal subjects who used to be seen with him when he was still alive. But most of those who are loyal to the king seem to be hidden mostly. After all, to be loyal to a murdered king could be very dangerous at times! All of us have been born since he was killed but we still hope

because those who came before us have explained about his sacrifice for us. “It may be dangerous,” Milly let out a loud laugh, “but I have never been good at being quiet!”

Nob didn’t care if it was dangerous she didn’t think the king was dead either. She knew he would be back some day, at least she hoped he would.

Nob would wait for the king no matter how long it was or how crumbly the castle became. Yet, it had been so long and Nob wished that he would come back soon.

“I guess I’m a ‘kingdumb’ too”, she said with her arms folded across her chest. Milly let out a loud laugh that caused many in the square to turn and look even though the square was busy with activity.

“Oops!” Milly said, “There I go again causing a commotion.”

A tall man carrying a large bag of candles walked quickly but cautiously over to Milly’s booth.

“Miss Milly, you must not draw so much attention to yourself. There are many dangerous people in the square today.” It was Ryshzard the light carrier, another “kingdumb”. “You know how they suspect anyone that laughs too loudly, or sings, or speaks of the king. Please Miss Milly, we worry about you.” Ryshzard said with earnest but kind eyes.

“Oh Ryshzard, I am what I am. I can’t keep from being happy. I have to trust that the king will protect me.” Milly said as she squeezed her friend’s hand.

“I know Miss Milly, just be careful”, he said.

"Will do, but you can be a little on the loud side yourself Ryshy!" she cackled.

Nob laughed too.

"Toodle ooooo!" She called out to the man as he waved goodbye.

The tall man smiled and just shook his head. "My king, please take care of her". He whispered under his breath. He walked away from the booth and headed back into the middle of the square. Every now and then he would stop and talk with someone and then reach into his sack and hand them a candle.

As Milly spoke with the light bearer, a figure in a long white cloak watched intently from the shadows at the far end of the square. In his hand was the frame and picture that he had purchased from Nob just a short while earlier. Looking at the frame his boney thin fingers tore the picture from the frame and threw it in the wagon which carried garbage to the waste pile. "You will not know," he growled.

Nob finished up lunch and headed back to her box right outside the square.

Milly bundled up the rubbish from lunch and carried to the waste pile wagon.

"OOH! What have we here? Why would such a beautiful baby be thrown away like this?"

She looked lovingly at the little infant painted on the canvas and gently folded it up into her apron.

"I bet Nobby would like to have a picture like this" she thought to herself.

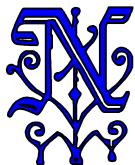
The thought made her laugh out loud as she headed back to her booth.

From behind an old dying tree the hooded figure watched from the shadows out of the glare of the mid day sun.

Crushing the frame he turned quickly and headed towards the gate leading out of the village. His head ached and his stomach felt like fire. “I will be back, Fat Cackling Fool!” he growled.

Chapter 9

Not Alone



Nob finished selling that day and headed home wondering why she had still not seen Yeshu. She hoped that he was not sick, though she had never known him to be.

As she walked back to her attic she decided to take the long way home and say, “thank you” to Milly for the lunch. Milly never charged her anything and always claimed that she had accidentally made too much. Nob knew that she made the food just for her because Milly did not eat any. Miss Milly would rub her stomach and smile and say, “I don’t think I can eat one more bite! Would you like the rest of mine Nobby?” But Nob knew.

Then she saw it.

Miss Milly’s food stand was on fire!

Nob ran across the square as fast as she could run. As she was almost to the booth an arm caught her and scooped her up. “Whoa, little lady,” the man said, “Don’t be going in there, you will burn your self to a crisp!”

“Where is Miss Mill Lilly?” Nob shouted.

“We don’t know, it’s too hot for any of us to get close enough to look,” he held Nob firmly to keep her from diving in the fire looking for her friend.

Nob could feel her heart pounding in her head and it was hard to breathe. Her legs felt tingly and everything was starting to go black.

She awoke, a while later, lying on a blanket with a wet rag on her forehead. The booth was destroyed and the fire that had been raging was only smoking now.

She made her way over to the charred remains of the stand where she had enjoyed so many meals and conversations. She tried to not think about what may have happened to Miss MillyLilly. But even so, it was all that she could think about right now. She sat on the ground and watched the sun set through the smoke. “Why?” was all that she could say.

Later as she headed for the road leading to her home she caught a glimpse of something red. Under some charred wood and a canvas sack Nob found Milly’s hat. She held the hat against her face and cried. “Miss Milly, where are you?” Then Nob gasped again when she realized that the canvas sack belonged to Ryshzard and it was covered with melted wax. Something sparkled in the setting sunlight. In the midst of the wax was a single golden trinket.

Nob wandered the alleys and streets hoping against hope to find Miss MillyLilly, Ryshzard, or most of all Yeshu. She had never felt so alone. Before long she stumbled in a dark part of the village that she had never seen before. She thought about how she had bragged to Miss Lilly about knowing every part of the village. She was scared but

even angrier that she had allowed herself to wander into such a dark and lonely place.

Most of the houses were empty and those that were not seemed even more ominous to get near. A small cracked fountain stood in the middle of a little circle of broken down dwellings. Nob hoped to get some water but none was had from the old fountain. Fatigue had taken over Nob's fear and anger as she slumped onto a small bench and closed her eyes. Sleep wouldn't come because of the noises from dark corners and the silence from everywhere else.

She felt a hand on her shoulder that made her jerk to attention and fall down to the ground off the bench.

"I'm sorry! I did not mean to startle you." A woman's kind and warm voice said. "I'm Liebby Mittleed, you look like you may have lost your way" she smiled at Nob as she reached out her hand. The woman was too beautiful and kind to be in such an empty and broken down part of the village. The moonlight caused her soft features to stand out against her long dark hair that seemed to blend into the darkness of the square that surrounded her. Her eyes were dark brown and Nob could see the same lights that she always saw in Milly's and Yeshu's eyes.

"Well, I was looking for some friends of mine and I guess I didn't pay attention to where the road led." Nob confessed. "Now I can't find my way home." Liebby sat on the bench and patted the seat next to her inviting Nob sit along side. "You have not told me your name"

"Oh, I'm sorry, my name is Nob"

"Nob? Nob what?"

"Just Nob, there isn't anything else"

“Nothing else? Oh, but there is so much more I think. I know that when I was a small girl I never could have been so brave as to go looking for friends alone”

She touched Nob’s hair. Nob felt the warmth from her soft hand as it seemed to work its way to the very tip of her toes. She felt safe.

“Perhaps you are ‘Nob The Brave’, or ‘Nob The Explorer!’” Liebby said.

“I don’t feel brave and what kind of explorer gets lost when looking for their friends”

“Hmm,” Liebby hummed. “How about ‘Nob The Friend’?”

Nob liked that.

“Ok, I guess that would be good,” she smiled. “I am worried about my friends. I don’t know what happened to all of them.”

“Sometimes when we feel alone our friends may be closer than we think. If we go back to where we started than maybe we can find them there?”

“How about getting you home” Liebby said as she took Nob’s hand.

“You don’t seem to belong here Liebby. You are much too kind and much too beautiful for a place like this.”

Liebby knelt down to look Nob in the eyes. “I will always be here Nob. For who will guide the lost and frightened children back home? When you can’t find your way or it seems that all of the people that should love you are gone, then that is where I will be. You haven’t lost your friends, and you have made a new one.” Liebby touched Nob’s cheek and gave her a soft hug. Nob was glad that she had lost her way and was able to meet Liebby.

They walked together a short distance talking about what had happened that day and before long Nob began to recognize the homes and shops around her.

“I think I can find my way home from here, thanks Liebby” Nob turned and started off to her attic.

“You’re welcome, Little One”

Nob spun around to look at Liebby when she said those last two words but Liebby was already gone.

Later that night in her attic Nob curled up under the blanket. She could not get rid of the uneasy feeling that she had when the man bought the picture that day or when she saw Miss Milly’s booth and the melted wax from Ryshzard’s sack.

“Oh Yeshu, where are you tonight? I need you with me.” She wished her old friend was there to hold her and make her feel safe. She crept over to the door of the attic and opened it just a crack. She looked around the abandoned store but everything was dark and still. As she closed the door she again wished Yeshu were there. She latched the bar across the door, which seemed to make her feel even more trapped and alone than it did safe.

She still had the red hat belonging to Milly safely tucked under her pillow.

Looking up at the castle she wondered. Not about anything specific, she just wondered. The night felt dark and her hopes so invisible. She was unaware how long she sat up staring at the castle.

“Yeshu” she spoke softly, “where are you?”

Eventually, she fell asleep and dreamed again, but this time she did not dream of being a princess. The dead eyes of the merchant she saw so many years ago came to her in her dreams. He snickered and laughed and brought only ugly memories of all the people that had hurt her, shouted insults, or chased her away from the square in the past. Yesu made her feel loved and important. But so many had hurt her in the past and told her that she was just a dirty little girl with no good use that after a while she couldn't think of herself as anything else. The nightmares became worse and worse and Nob ran from dark figures chasing her through the woods and mocking her as she ran. Rough arms pulled at her and scratched her arms. She could feel hot breath on her neck. The images began to swirl out of control as she screamed through the woods trying to find safety. She just wanted to get away, to find some place to hide.

"Nob." A soft voice spoke to her from somewhere ahead in the black dense woods of her nightmare.

"Come on Nob, you can do it baby" the woman's voice called to her.

Nob was ready to give up, to just let the awful things take her and end the fear, the running, and the pain.

"Nob, don't give up" the kind voice called even closer this time.

"Where are you?" she screamed as her panicked pace increased as underbrush and thorns tore at her legs.

"Right here, baby, right in front of you"

As she ran the woods became brighter and the bad things began to fall away behind her.

"Never give up little one. Never stop"

The woods filled with sunlight and the underbrush turned to soft green grass and she was standing in a beautiful meadow filled with flowers and a soft bubbling brook. Then a woman with long flowing golden hair stood in the path ahead. Nob thought that she looked like an angel. Her eyes were magnificent! They sparkled blue, only a little less than Yeshu's. She approached the beautiful angel before her and instinctively reached out to reach her hand.

“You are beautiful Nob. Don’t let anyone tell you that you are not worth loving”

“Who are you?” Nob asked as she touched her glowing bright hair that flowed over her shoulders.

“I am all those little ones that have been abandoned, or hurt, or unloved. I am the beauty that is in all of them, even you.”

The beautiful angel reached for Nob and they embraced. She felt warm and safe to Nob.

As she squeezed her tighter she disappeared in Nob’s hugging arms.

She looked and the woman was not there, but at the same time Nob felt that somehow she had not left.

She had not noticed at first but now saw that a single rose was in her hand. It was perfect and glistened in the sunlight. The dew on its petals flashed like diamonds and one dew drop fell from its petals.

“Sweet tears” Nob whispered.

“I am always here” the woman’s voice came from somewhere deep in Nob’s soul. “I always have been...follow him” she said as her voice faded.

Nob awoke from her dream and was once again in her attic home. Dark, dusty, and alone. She sighed, and fluffed her pillow the best she could when she saw it for the first time.

“How had she never noticed?”

Right there above the door to her little room was carved a beautiful rose with one sweet tear falling from its petals. Directly below the rose were carved the words “Never Forget” Nob smiled and covered herself up with her thin blanket.

“Thank you, but follow who?” she said as she drifted off to sleep.

There were no more dreams that night, only peaceful sleep.

In the street outside, a hooded shadow emerged from the alley and headed for the front door of the store...

Chapter 10

Night Visitor



ang!... crash!

Nob leapt awake and felt she would jump out of her skin!

In the store below she could hear rustling and shelves being turned over and boards breaking. Glass shattered and growling and hissing could be heard in the middle of the destruction. Then silence.

Nob listened for what seemed like forever until the familiar creaking of the stairs could be heard. Nob had climbed the stairs so often that she was aware of each distinct sound. “The first step” she thought. “Three, six, nine” there were only twelve steps leading to her door.

Bang, bang, bang!

The door seemed to come out of its hinges from the pounding! At first she froze on her mat and stared at the door. But soon she realized that if someone was trying to come in that she had better look for some sort of way to defend herself. Her eyes darted around her little attic home. The most ominous looking weapon she had was a collection of buttons and a fairly large stick that she used for walking, not that she needed it for walking, she just liked the way it looked.

Before Nob could grab the stick the door swung open. Nob dove under the blankets pulling them over her head hoping that somehow she wouldn’t be noticed.

“Yeshu help!,” Nob could only whisper under her breath. She must have forgotten to latch the door, but she could have sworn that she had locked it before she went to bed.

“Nob!” the voice whispered.

Nob held perfectly still and hoped that the nighttime intruder would decide to leave.

“NOB!” the intruder spoke louder this time.

She knew that she was shaking under the blankets, surely he would see.

Slowly, footsteps creaked closer to where she was bundled under her blanket bunker

“Nob?” the voice came out this time with a deep friendly chuckle.

“What are you doing under there Little One?” Yeshu asked as he pulled the blanket off of her head.

“What am I doing, well what are you doing!” she yelled, “It’s the middle of the night, you scared me to death! And what in the world were you doing down there? It sounded like you were tearing the place apart! The king will not be happy with you breaking his house you know!” Yeshu let out a loud laugh. Nob was embarrassed to have her friend find her hiding under her blankets and it made her face hot. Yet in reality she was so happy to see Yeshu again that she just wanted to hold on to him and never let go. Nob leapt up and grabbed the beggar’s waist and squeezed as hard as she could. “Where have you been?”

“No time for hugs, Little One, come quickly! We’re going to the castle today!” Yeshu said.

“WHAT?” Nob gasped. “We can’t go to the king’s castle we’ll get in trouble, besides the bridge is up. We can’t get there even if we want.

And the entire castle is just for the king and his family now, right? Isn’t that what you told me the king said when the village disobeyed?” Nob stumbled as she tried to untangle the blankets from around her legs and wipe the sleep out of her eyes at the same time.

Yeshu just kept smiling and motioning for her to hurry up.

“Do you trust me?” Yeshu asked.

Nob had always wanted to see the inside of the castle, but she had already learned not to take too many risks and this was the biggest risk she had ever thought about taking. Yet, Nob had never known Yeshu to do anything that would hurt her or get her in trouble, so maybe this risk was worth taking.

“Well...., O.K.,” Nob agreed, “But you better know what your doing!”

“Then, follow me” Yeshu said gently.

Chapter 11

Forgotten Place



s they trekked towards the castle Nob wondered how on earth they would ever be able to get inside. It had been so long since anyone had tried to live

there no one knew where the keys were.

Just as they reached the wide street that opened at the long broken drawbridge that led up to the castle, Yeshu made a quick sharp turn to the right to the mouth of a small and rocky path that did not look like the way to a royal palace. “Where are we going? Everyone knows that the front gate is at the end of that wide road that leads up from the village” Nob said.

“I know Little One, but that is not the way in” Yeshu answered.

The beginning of the trail had two large trees that looked like gigantic guards by the side of the road. They moved over the rocky surface to the top of a hill that looked down not only on the village but on the castle also. It was the most beautiful view of the village and castle that she had ever seen, even at night. She could see for miles and miles. When they reached the summit of the hill in the middle of the path stood a third much larger tree making it impossible to go any further. You could not go around its massive trunk, over its towering branches or under the depths of its roots.

“Well this is a dead end” Nob said a little sarcastically.

“For some it is, for others it is a beginning” Yeshu said with such joy that he looked younger than usual.

“What do you mean?” Nob questioned.

Yeshu stood and looked at the large tree for a moment then he reached out and caressed its rough bark with his hands. Leaning forward he whispered something to the tree that Nob could not hear. Then Yeshu turned to Nob.

“This is the place where the king died, Nob”, Yeshu said. “The villagers had to come to this tree to kill him.” Nob felt sorry that she had never really noticed the tree before and she wondered how so many people had forgotten this place.

“How did they do it? I mean...kill him?” Nob was not sure that she wanted the answer. Yeshu took a long breath and closed his eyes.

“The king had been growing this tree before the village ever came to be.” He said. “The castle was not even built when he planted the seed for this very special tree. There was nothing but the king then. No castle on the hill, no village in the valley. He stopped at this place and knelt down in this very spot. With his strong hand he made a hole in the ground and while his hand was still in the hole he closed his eyes. He stayed for what would have seemed forever to the people in the village. At the perfect time he removed his hand from the ground and smiled. A look that had never come to his face before caused the king to break out with laughter and a tear fell from his eye and watered the place where he had placed the hole. Immediately it closed and the first fragile green shoot began to poke through the soil. The king leaned down and spoke, ‘not yet, but soon, very soon.’

After he planted the tree he turned and made his way to the place where he was to have his palace and with another loud laugh and a wave of his royal hand the castle began to appear brick by brick until it stopped at the peak of the highest tower. Pennants of gold

and silver appeared from each towers peak. The walls were of the purest white marble and they shimmered in the light. Brilliant gems were embedded into every window frame and door way. A magnificent bridge extended over a mote that had no apparent bottom and was so wide that it was impossible to reach without the drawbridge. Banner's of purple and blue flanked the great doors at the end of the bridge leading in and out of the royal palace. The doors were also made of pure gold planks strapped together with straps and rivets of the purest silver. On the doors were the emblem of the king and the only handles were on the inside. There was no possible way to open the great doors except from the inside. Finding the castle to be everything that he wanted it to be, he walked up the hill, over the great drawbridge and in through the front gate. Everything inside was bright and sparkled as he entered the main hall. As he entered light began to fill the castle and the gold and silver that were in the walls, floor and ceiling began to flash and twinkle in his presence. He spent hours and days completely content and happy in his magnificent and beautiful castle, walking, dancing and singing in the halls.

Then one day, the perfect day, he made his way to the throne room and sat on his beautiful white throne. With a clap of his hands the first servant appeared and took his place near the king. It was Empregado. He walked to the throne and bowed down to the king. ‘What is your wish, Your Majesty’ the servant spoke. ‘My wish, Empregado is to have treasure’ he boomed. With another clap came Anunciador, Solidado, and Curador, shortly after that, more servants began filling the castle. The king oversaw all that happened within the castle for days, months, years and eons.

‘Is this all that you wish your treasure to be Your Majesty?’ Empregado asked. ‘Oh no, Empregado this is not my treasure’ the king laughed. ‘Treasure must be something more

beautiful than this' And for years and a time he created more and more servants and the palace was filled with more and more beauty, until one day he climbed to the highest balcony in the tower and looked out over the valley below.

He spoke with a loud voice and with each command water, trees, plants animals, and the first little houses of the village began to fill the valley below. Flowers of every color began blooming like fireworks from the lush green grass. Bird song began to fill the air. Animals ran across the valley, some in herds and others all alone or in smaller groups. The fruit of the trees and bushes supplied all of the food that the animals needed and none were ever hungry or sick. The sweet smell of his creation blew up the hill and filled the king's nose making him take a full deep breath of their aroma.

The buildings in the village were strong and each in their perfect place. They had doors but no locks and the roads were smooth as glass. The king looked over the valley, 'Yes, yes! I like this very much' he said. More time passed and the king ruled over it all. Empregado once again came to the king who was still looking down on the valley below. 'Your Majesty' this truly is a most beautiful treasure! It is glorious!'

The king laughed, 'Empregado, this is still not treasure! My treasure is still more magnificent than this'. Empregado looked at the valley and thought he could never imagine anything more beautiful than what he beheld that day.

But the king was not through. No, he was no where near finished with his kingdom.

And then one day...

He demanded for all to cease in the castle's activity as he said, 'Now, for my treasure!' Everything was absolutely still in the royal palace as all the servants waited for the king to act. The birds quit singing, the refreshing breeze calmed, and the light from the sun shone brightly into the square of the village below. The servants stared out of all of the windows of the castle looking down in the valley in anticipation of what they knew would be the most beautiful of the kings creations. What they were about to see was the kings treasure and his most valuable possession for the first time. They could hardly keep from breaking into song and celebration even before they beheld the greatest of his creations. The king filled his lungs and gently blew across the valley. They stared in wonder as the first of the treasure appeared. A villager rubbed his eyes and sat up in the square. His hair was ruffled, and his presence was not that impressive, especially compared to the entire kingdom around him. Getting up he walked the streets touching every wall, smelling every flower, and tasting every fruit he came across from the trees throughout the village. He began to laugh and as he did the king in the castle began to chuckle with him.

Empregado stepped up behind the king again and asked, 'Are you saying that those little soft pudgy things... are your treasure?'

'Oh yes, yes, can't you see it?' the king said. He could not quit gazing down on his beloved villagers, his heart swelled with joy. Empregado looked again, 'No, but I am sure...um... but... I'm sure that I will someday, your Majesty' he said as he backed away from the balcony and into the tower. But after many, many years he never did see what the king found so beautiful.

In fact he could only see them as weak disgusting, gullible, little creatures.

So that is how the village began, Little One.

Years passed and all that was good was changed. The king would not have his treasured village and all seemed to be lost. That is why the prince had to come. For the king would never lose his royal treasure forever. The prince would be the only one that could get it back.”

“So how did the prince get it back?”

“Remember, Little One, people in the village began to fear and hate the prince.” Yeshu shared.

“But he loved them so much! He didn’t want them to die.” Nob protested. “What did he do to them? He only cared for them! Didn’t they know that?”

“At first it was just a few that felt hatred towards the prince, but soon almost the entire village began to believe that they didn’t need the king.” Yeshu said. They would rather follow the “Outros” and their leaders. Behind it all was Schlecter who would whisper to them in the dark and encourage them to believe that the king really was not the one that kept and protected their lives.”

Yeshu told her of how a few in the village began to shout for the prince to die. The village became so frightened and angry that riots began to break out.”

“From the beginning the king would come to this tree from time to time. It was his favorite location to think and watch over the village. No one knew of the tree except the king and he would sit for hours and hours alone there. From the tree he could see both his castle and his village. From the foot of the tree it would appear that the village was a continuation of the castle. There was no mote or draw bridge to separate the two.

The prince, who really was the king, had come here again on that day so long ago. Yet, instead of the usual refreshing that he felt here, he was upset, disturbed and quite serious. The sky darkened above him and became darker and darker as he could hear the villagers below gathering into a mob. Wind began to blow and swirl around the king. The villagers were able to find the entrance to the path that led to the tree. No one had ever remembering seeing it before but for some reason today it seemed so clear and obvious to them.

Earlier in the day the prince headed to the end of the village to the house where the king would sit with the people of the village. But when he got there he discovered that shop keepers had set up shelves and counters to sell their goods. The prince was angry because the king had built the house to be his home in the village and not a place to sell things. It was a place to sit, talk and be together with the king.

The villagers told the prince that they were sure that the king, if he was still even alive, would not mind them setting up shop here. This way they did not have to carry their items in the carts to the square everyday. If they could set them up here then they would not have to drag loaded carts back and forth. It was easier for them and the king had been gone so long that the house was being wasted setting there.

The prince's anger grew as he left the house. He walked to the edge of the mote and cried out across the mote. But his words did not echo off the castle at all. They were strong and powerful and they seemed to pierce the massive walls.

The prince turned after standing quietly for a while and headed back to the king's house that was now a store. He entered and said, "This is not what the king built this house for...OUT! All of you get out!" He grabbed armfuls of merchandise and began throwing it in the street. People began yelling and running after their stock that was being flung up and down the street.

The prince continued until all that was left were empty shelves and counters in the king's house. He stood at the door until all of the merchants headed back to the town square. Many of them cursing him and threatening him as they left. The prince made his way up the stairs of the house and into the room where he would live while with the village. Looking out of the large window he could look up and see the king's palace."

"My store?" Nob asked. "I have been in the king's house all the time?"

“All the time, Little One” Yeshu said.

Nob had been living in the king’s house and had not even known. She hoped that he would not be angry with her if he found out.

Yeshu continued with the story of the day the prince was killed.

“The village gathered in the square and decided to rid themselves of the prince. They were fed up with him telling them what to do. ‘What right does he have to kick us out of the king’s house!’ they would say.

The prince continued to stand at the tree as he heard the shouts below in the village. Dead leaves were caught into the swirling wind and seemed to come alive, they would be swept up quickly into the air and then they would dive and buffet the prince. They started swirling around him again and again. The prince stood strong and turned to face the path where the villagers would soon appear.

They reached the base of the tree and halted as soon as they saw the prince. They screamed and shouted that he was a criminal and that they did not want him or their king. The crowd grew louder and louder yet he just stood facing their hate and braced himself in the midst of the ever-strengthening winds. The villagers began taking rocks and pelted him along with the violently diving leaves. He stood firm at the base of the tree as a rock struck him squarely in his forehead causing a large gash. Blood gushed from the wound and ran down his face and into his eyes causing him to blink from the stinging. Still he stood firm at the place that he had prepared so many years before. The blood only

seemed to cause the mob to grow bolder. It ran down the prince's head and body and eventually dripped from his fingertips.

The leaves that had been twirling around the prince began to change. Their colors flashed purple, blue, red, yellow, and green. The leaves became longer and longer until they appeared more like multicolored tornados of ribbons. Soon they were tearing and whipping at him with such force that he stumbled to a knee. His clothes were ripped away as large cuts and welts appeared all over his body. Blood flowed from him like spiny fingers. The "ropes" of ribbons began to grab at his hands and his feet and cause him to fall completely to the ground. In an instant he was lifted into the air thrown hard against the rough bark of the tree. The ropes pulled and wrapped his body firmly into place. He did not fight against the ropes but allowed them to completely entangle him. The ropes grew even longer as the villager's insults, accusations, and screaming became a roar.

Through their shouts, laughter could be heard coming from someplace other than the hill where they were all gathered. The laughter grew into a hideous cackling hilarity. The colored cords wrapped tighter and tighter holding the prince firmly to the tree. Then the extra ropes, not being used to hold him to the tree broke off and spun wildly in the air above them. If someone had looked they would have seen that there were small sparkling charms at the end of each cord. Then spinning out of control they shot through the sky to someplace out side the village.

They appeared like a giant pinwheel tumbling through the sky.

The sky continued to grow darker as the sun disappeared completely from view.

Then the wind stopped.

The mob grew silent.

The prince, wrapped in the ropes of purple, blue, red, yellow and green, hung there bleeding.

He looked down from the tree at the villagers with blood stained eyes. Yet his eyes held love and not hate.

From the palace there was a noise as if a thousand cried out in pain at the same time.

Solidado, while weeping with his face to the ground held tightly to his sword set firmly in its sheath. ‘Let me stop this, I beg you my Majesty!’ he whispered through clinched teeth. He paused as if listening, and after a moment he whispered again, ‘As you wish’.

The powerful servant let his hand slip off the grip of his sword.

The servants all backed from the windows and fell on their faces. Through screams and sobs they cried, “Hail the king, the king victorious!”

Through the prince’s pain strained lips there could be seen the signs of a small smile.

The prince could not take his eyes off the villagers as he spoke slowly but clearly, ‘There you are, my beloved treasure! I have found you’

All that could be heard was the labored breathing of the prince growing weaker and weaker. He looked at the castle and cried out one last time, "Make ready, there is nothing more to be done!" then his head fell to his chest.

The prince, was dead.

From outside the village there was a shrill scream that was so loud that even from the remoteness of the hill on which they stood the villagers had to cover their ears.

Chapter 12

Magic Painting



et's go" Yeshu said as he motioned to the tree. "Go where?" Nob asked.

"There is no way to get to the castle from here."

"Not true, Little One. It is the only way"

Nob was so confused and couldn't ask another question even though she still had so many in her mind.

"Ok, I trust you"

"Then take my hand"

Nob took the old man's hand and followed him to the tree. Yeshu did not slow as he reached the base of the tree but actually sped up. Nob closed her eyes as she prepared to collide into unforgiving rough bark.

Then something happened or it would be better to say that nothing happened. When she opened her eyes she saw Yeshu smiling at her and still holding her hand. The tree that stood so ominously before her was now behind her. She could no longer see the village and she could only see a side of the castle that she had never seen before. The grand castle was even larger than she had figured. The path began to smooth as it winded down to the wall at the side of the castle. Yeshu began to pick up speed as they got closer to the castle.

Then Yeshu walked up to the old rusty door that was at the end of the long narrow path. The door was just large enough for one person to pass at a time.

Nob was getting ready to ask Yeshu how he knew so much about the tree and the castle when the rusty door popped open and he stepped inside.

Nob had never seen Yeshu look so excited before. He stuck his head back out of the door and said,

“Come on, hurry up I have something for you in here” And something that almost sounded like a “giggle” came from the old beggar. Nob had never heard a sound like that from her friend before.

“You’ve been here before!” Nob said in astonishment.

“Oh, yes, I’ve been coming here for years working on this just for you” Yeshu smiled.

“For me?” Nob asked.

Slowly Nob stepped in the castle she had only dreamed about for so many years, maybe this was a dream now.

“It’s no dream” Yeshu said, “It’s the most real thing you will ever know.”

Nob wondered how he knew what she was thinking.

The castle was not musty, dirty and all dark inside as she expected. It was beautiful! Like nothing she had ever seen. The walls were covered in pure gold and the curtains were of the finest red velvet. Deep carpets were on the floor and there was furniture of fine strong cedar and mahogany. Music filled the air, and it seemed to be coming from everywhere. There was a banquet table at the end of the room full of more food than she

had eaten in her entire life! The room was brightly lit and everything gleamed with jewels but she couldn't see any candles or lamps anywhere.

"This is for you Nob" Yeshu laughed.

Nob didn't understand how a poor beggar like Yeshu could do this and how had he gotten all of this stuff? Yeshu took her over to a wall where a large picture was covered with a heavy veil. He grabbed the veil and pulled so hard that it ripped right down the middle and fell to the floor. Nob couldn't believe her eyes. It was the picture of the king, which she had been waiting for all of her life. But his face wasn't what she thought it would be, it was the face of Yeshu!

He had been with her all of her life, but how could he be the King!

Yeshu turned her around and asked softly, "Nob, do you believe?"

Nob wasn't sure what she believed, maybe this was a joke. Yeshu could have talked one of the painters in the square to paint him in a picture as the king. It could all be a lie.

"But why would he do that?" she thought. "He couldn't get anything from a poor beggar girl, and he had always been so nice and kind to her. As far as she knew he had never lied to her either."

Nob turned and looked into his weathered but gentle eyes and said, "I believe"

With that Yeshu was covered in light and his ragged clothes became bright and shined brighter than anything in the room. A crown larger than any she had ever seen was on his head and his face and hair became white and beautiful. The kind but old weathered eyes strengthened and sparkled with fire. For a moment Nob was frightened but Yeshu smiled

at her and pointed at the picture again. Behind the King in the picture was a little girl, she was dressed in a long beautiful gown and crown. Her face was perfect and Nob thought that she was prettier than any girl she had ever seen. Next to the big picture was yet another smaller picture of the girl standing by herself.

As Nob started to get a closer look at the picture her heart jumped as the girl in the smaller picture moved!

Or was it a picture?

She moved closer ...and the girl moved closer to her.

It wasn't a picture at all, but a mirror! Nob realized that the girl in the big picture was her.

Yeshu let out a laugh that echoed throughout the castle as he said.

"Nob you are my daughter! You are and have always been the princess of your dreams."

And for the first time her name didn't sound plain and short, it sounded royal when the King said "My Princess Nob".

She heard a laugh from behind her that she could recognize forever. "Hey there Nobby, Ryshzard and I have been waiting for you!" Nob spun around to see Miss MillyLilly but she was tall and more beautiful than any woman that she had ever seen.

"Where did you go? I looked for you everywhere."

"Oh that nasty Schlechter got a little rough and Ryshzard tried to protect me, but that old lizard just wouldn't quit. But when it was all over the King came to Ryshzard and me

and brought us to the castle. It was the best thing that ever happened to us. I'm sorry that you felt sad Nobby. But it wasn't time for you to be here yet."

"That's OK" Nob said, "I am just glad that you are alright"

"Oh Nobby I have something for you!" Milly held out the picture that she had taken from the trash pile. "I thought you would like to have this"

"Hello there, Prudinse. I thought that I would never see you again.

The King let out a chuckle and said "Not Prudinse, Little One. Take another look" Then he took his hand and waved it over the picture. At once the color became bright and full and the frame appeared again. Etched in the frame in sparkling gold letters was the word, "Princess"

"Everyone should have at least one baby picture of themselves, don't you think?" the King said as he hugged Nob.

"Me? This baby is a painting of me?"

"Yes Little One, you are my princess and you always have been"

Nob and the King walked out on the balcony of the highest tower and in an instant the entire castle changed and became a beautiful palace. Crumbled stones rebuilt, jewels gleamed, and the palace's walls again glistened with gold and silver. Light flooded the sky and the small village below came to life. Green grass covered every bare spot. Flowers bloomed of every color along the streets. All the dead and brown leaves throughout the village blew from every corner to the great waste pile outside the city. Great oaks once again reached high into the sky looking like gigantic pillars in a temple. The chains that held the giant drawbridge firmly in place broke free and the heavy bridge

fell and shattered into a thousand pieces before tumbling into the dark of the bottomless chasm. The path that led to the tree widened as it became quite evident that the only true path to the castle's entrance was through the tree. There would never be another way to get to where the king dwelled. The mighty old tree quivered and then bloomed like an explosion with white blooms. Leaves filled the branches and a sweet fragrance filled the air.

The tree would only bloom once, but once was all that would be needed, for the blooms would never close. The tree would always bloom and neither leaf nor pedal would ever fall.

The castle's walls vibrated with music from every direction. People ran from their homes and bowed down and began shouting with one voice.

“Hail to the King, our King”

“Hail to the King above all kings”

In the Royal Palace the servants cheered as each of those of the village that used to be called “kingdumbs” were escorted into the throne room and shown pictures on the wall of each of them with the King. For the law had never changed. The throne room was still off limits to all except the King and his family. With each person Anunciador would check their name off in the book by the throne. The King’s family was in the book and all that were in the book were family.

Nob saw one other person who made their way into the throne room. Around her there was a large crowd of children. The woman kept them all close until they were safely

within the door way. "Off you go children!" she said as they all scattered throughout the room. Nob ran over to Liebby. She smiled at Nob and said, "I brought them home safe" as tears began to fall from her beautiful brown eyes. Nob leapt into her arms and said, "This is the place that someone like you should be, Liebby". Liebby cried even harder. The King walked over to Nob and Liebby and lifting His hands gently to Liebby's face He wiped away her tears. "Good job, Liebby, well done". Liebby smiled as the King kissed her face. Liebby walked over to her picture with the King. Her picture was larger than most because every child that she had helped was in the picture with her. Not one was lost.

Yet, the other villagers seemed to be gone, along with the Outros. No one ever thought of them again. Schlecter tried to run for the woods that had once hidden him so many years in the past. But Solidado cut him off before he had even made it half way to edge of the thicket. He was alone and in the open and under the gaze of the Kings general. "No more!" Solidado shouted at the evil ex servant. Schlecter's clothes with their bright colors and swirls began to fade. The cloak began loose its beautiful white glow. It became a sickly yellowish green. All of the golden trinkets appeared to shrivel like grapes would to raisins. The scepter of the King was raised and struck Schlecter on the head as he fell to his knees panting and spiting at the warrior that would soon destroy him with the King's power. Solidado leapt from his horse and flipped through the air. The sunlight at his back caused Schlecter to shield his eyes. Solidado landed gracefully in front of his former fellow servant. Schlecter began to cackle as he rushed towards the King's man at arms. With one flowing movement Solidado struck Schlecter again

sending him sprawling on his face. Solidado walked over and lifted the pathetic depraved little enemy over his head. With his massive and strong arms threw him outside the village and into the waste pile outside the walls. Schlecter screamed and cursed him, the kingdumbs and the King. Black birds circled about the waste pile and dove violently in to the bruised and beaten ex servant. The gate to the village was then locked. There was no key nor was there a keyhole. The gate would never be opened again.

The rebellion was over.

Later that evening the King laughed a laugh that echoed through the heavens as Nob spun, and danced, and laughed with her Father late into the night.

Nob could hear Miss Lilly laughing somewhere in the castle and she couldn't help but giggle. Everything was as it should be.

That night Nob would lie on her bed in the tower of her palace and stare down at the old crumbling abandoned store and forget.....

What it was like, not to be a princess.

POSTLUDE



piny creatures gaze as the village fades from view leaving nothing but thick darkness all around. Broken pinwheels, regurgitated candies, and filth smeared ribbons of purple, blue, red, yellow, and green are sprawled through the mound of sewage and rubble. Charms that once shimmered in the light now shriveled rust and corrode from the acid laden air that blows yet brings no relief from the stench.

A low groaning from beneath the filth is the only sound.

“The village?

Where is the light?

Alone...alone with only these pathetic little creatures!”

The evil servant growls through deformed features; His twisted body quivering in horror and hate.

“THE VILLAGE IS MINE! DON’T TAKE IT AWAY! PLEASE. DON’T DO THIS...don’t take it all away...don’t leave me alone...please...” The once magnificent royal servant weeps through blood thirsty and dead eyes, a single tear of hate streaking his coarse scaly cheek.

Schlecter looks at the empty small faces of his captured prey. Their faces are the only recognizable part of an earlier time. The faces are those once belonging to the people of the village.

Yet, not all faces were there, not one face of a “kingdumb” could be found.

“Idiots, Fools! Pathetic little imbeciles! You took my offer.” he hisses as hate begins to gurgle up through his throat, “Fools!”

“Curses from your king, king of the perverse, Empregado, who brings the bounty of death to you!”

The twisted deformed little creatures scatter looking for somewhere to hide from the wrath of their tormentor, their fear and pain only feeding his hatred and anger.

“So this is my reward? THIS IS MY HERITAGE!” he shrieks.

Screams of horror and death start to fade and eventually are lost into the abyss of blackness as the creatures are slain and slain again under cruel hands.

*Then never heard, or seen again;
The place of forever thrown away things...the place of never more.*

The End