Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Lost King

Written by

Ursula Jones

Published by

Inside Pocket Publishing Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

For Pinkie Kavanaugh

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously.

Published in Great Britain by
Inside Pocket Publishing Limited
First published in Great Britain in 2012

Text copyright © Ursula Jones, 2012

The right of Ursula Jones to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-9084581-2-4

Inside Pocket Publishing Limited Reg. No. 06580097
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Bookmarque Ltd, Croydon

www.insidepocket.co.uk

THE LOST KING

by
Ursula Jones



PROLOGUE

The king was pretending to be dead. He lay quite still on his back with his eyes shut. He'd been lying out there for hours amongst the other bodies strewn around the castle courtyard. He didn't know much about what had caused this catastrophe, but he knew he was king. He'd seen them kill his father and he'd watched from underneath his bodyguard's cloak as they dragged his uncle's corpse away. With his Uncle Haakron dead too, there was no one else left to be king but him. The king was seven years old today.

When it happened, the cooks had just given him his chocolate ice cream birthday cake. They had surpassed themselves. It was made in the exact shape of his father's castle, with fireworks leaping out of it. Blue fire ran down the sides from the chocolate battlements. Gold stars shot from the Topmost Tower. His parents and the other kids at the table were laughing. His older sister, Melior, had just said, 'Cut and wish. Go on, silly,' when the tall windows of the Ante-room smashed inwards and glass rained down as the enemy attacked.

Somehow he'd stumbled into the courtyard where Saan, his bodyguard, had found him. But someone had stuck a dagger into Saan's back during the fighting and Saan had fallen forward onto him, nearly squashing

him under his huge weight. So it was Saan who took the brunt of the bullets sputtering across the gravel when the enemy mounted their guns on the walls and strafed the yard.

As the fighting raged around them, the little king had gradually pulled Saan's cloak over himself until he was entirely concealed. Saan had been gasping and coughing blood but he'd told him to wait until the fighting had died down. He would know who had won the day by the banners.

'Whoever is the victor will run their banner atop the tower,' Saan whispered to him. 'If it's ours, go straight to the throne room and sit yourself squarely on it. If it's their banner, get out. There's loyal folk out there who will treat you kind. You know the way.' The blood bubbled in Saan's voice. 'I showed you the secret way.' Then someone came by and smashed Saan's head in. The king could feel Saan's blood drenching his own body.

Two men stood so close to him their boots grated on the gravel right next to his ear.

'All kids look alike to me,' one of them grumbled.

'Anyway,' growled the other one, 'how do you tell the king's kid from any other kid? It's a needle in a haystack job if you ask me.'

'Better get on with it,' said the first voice, 'it's urgent.' And the two moved off. So the little king knew someone was searching for him, but who were they? Why were they looking for him? Were they the enemy or his own people?

It was quiet now. He dared to ease himself gently from under Saan and peer out from beneath his cloak. There were bodies everywhere, lying still as stones. One

or two, though, were struggling to get up. The little king craned to look up at the Topmost Tower. The banner was there! But whose was it? Who had won the day? As he squinted at the limp banner, a breeze picked up and straightened it out. It was his father's! His father's banner was flying high from the tower. The battle was over; the enemy had been defeated.

The little king felt a wave of relief break in his chest and realised for the first time how scared he had been at the prospect of finding himself alone among the enemy. He wriggled from under Saan, and Saan's body rolled over with a thump. A voice said sharply, 'Watch it, that's my foot.'

He saw a boy sitting up on the other side of Saan and rubbing his ankle where Saan's dagger handle had hit it. The boy was very battered by the battle but he seemed familiar. 'Looks like we've won,' he said and stood up. He was a big boy of about twelve and the little king saw he had the small royal crest on the front of his tunic that all his father's pages wore. 'Let's go, mate,' the page said.

The little king got to his feet too and the page flashed him a sympathetic smile at the mess he was in. The king knew him now. It was Gurmail, a nice boy who was always ready to stop what he was doing to play.

Gurmail looked more searchingly at the king. He took in the distinctive fair hair, soused now in Saan's blood, and the dark eyes looking up at him from a blood encrusted, small brown face. 'Sorry, sir', he said. 'Didn't recognise you.'

The little king knew he must get on his way to the throne room. He nodded at the page and set off across the courtyard, skirting the dead. He turned in the frame

of the arched main doorway and looked back at Saan's body and at what was left of his dark face, ashed over now with death.

He put his thumb in his mouth and silently thanked Saan's spirit for saving his life. He glanced sideways up at the god's Offering Table. The fruit and bread that had been on it were stamped to a pulp on the ground. He thanked the god for defending his father's castle. Then he remembered it was his castle now and he turned and trotted inside, heading for the throne room.

The castle was deserted. The wind blew through the stone corridors. There wasn't a window left with glass in it. Shards crunched under his shoes as he made his way quickly to the Ante-room. He pushed open the door and was at once confronted by a crowd of jostling, whispering children.

A man with a kind brown face and deep red hair smiled down at him and beckoned him inside. The hem of the man's robe was rusty with dried blood. The little king held back for a moment, sucking his thumb, then continued purposefully across the roomful of children towards the door of the throne room.

'Is that everyone?' the man asked, then added cheerfully, 'Room for one more,' as Gurmail, the page from the courtyard, came into the room too. The man closed the door and addressed the children. 'Now,' he said pleasantly. 'Now,' he repeated more loudly. The whispering and muttering stopped and the children gazed up at him.

They were all sorts: Messenger Boys, kitchen boys, schoolboys, boys from the butchery or maybe not. Maybe they were just bloodstained like he was. His robe was crimson from neck to toe with Saan's blood. He noticed

there were girls in the room too, raggedy looking things with their hair tied back for war.

The man moved amongst the children and took a rifle from one, a sheaf of arrows from another and a hatchet from another, explaining, as he did, that the battle was over now. 'We can lay down our arms,' he said. Then he told them that the enemy had killed their people by the hundreds and that most of the grown-ups were dead. 'Many of you will have lost your parents,' he said gravely. A tiny girl burst into tears. 'Be brave. You will be looked after.' He patted her head kindly, then said sadly, 'Our king is slain.' Most of the children began to cry. The man crouched down beside them, put his arms round several of them and rocked them comfortingly.

'But the king has a son,' the man said, and he smiled suddenly. 'He will be the new king'. His voice grew stronger as he explained that this was what the old king would have wanted. He smoothed the hair back from a weeping child's face. His fingernails were black with blood and he smiled again and stood up. 'The new king will be crowned at once,' he said, 'and we shall rebuild our kingdom. Long live the king.'

'Long live the king,' the children repeated in a tearful murmur.

The man sighed and looked them all over. 'We are all so dishevelled, so battle stained, I scarcely recognise any of you.' He smiled helplessly and was silent for a minute. Then he threw up his hands in mock despair that made some of the older children smile too, despite themselves. 'No,' he said, 'I can't guess. Tell me. Which of you is the king?'

There was silence. The children looked about them and then back at the man who had folded his hands inside

the sleeves of his robe. ‘Which of you?’ he asked again and the little king took a step towards him, pushing his way under another child’s arm.

But the little king’s robe was gripped from behind, pinning him to the spot. He struggled for a second and the grip tightened. He was almost choking. The neck of his robe was cutting into his windpipe. Someone was trying to prevent him speaking to the man. Someone was preventing him from being king; someone who was in league with the pageboy too, because Gurmail stepped to the front of the crowd of kids now and held up his hand. ‘I am the king’s son,’ he said loudly.

Everyone began to talk at once. With a massive effort, the little king managed to open his mouth to protest and a hand came from behind him and clamped his mouth. ‘Your Majesty,’ the man was saying. Oh this was so unfair! The little king fought uselessly to free himself from the horrible hand as the man went down on one knee in front of the lying pageboy, who the little king had always thought was his friend. The boy took a deep breath and said, ‘That’s me all right.’

‘My most gracious Lord,’ the man said, and the door opened and two enemy soldiers came in. The man wasn’t a bit frightened, though. He gestured in the page’s direction and the soldiers killed the boy with a single cut to the head.

The children screamed and stampeded out of the Ante-room. They poured over the dead page’s body, jamming the doorway as they tried to get out. The little king ran with them. He looked up into a soldier’s face and saw he was grinning. The red haired man was prodding the pageboy’s body with his foot, saying, ‘That’s my orders accomplished. Home time.’ He was taking off his robe

now and asking, ‘How do you get out of this thing?’ The king saw he was wearing an enemy uniform underneath the robe. It had all been a trick: the flying banner, the pretence that his father’s side had won. It was all a trick to catch him and kill him.

So who had saved him from giving himself away? He shot a look behind him but the room was empty of children now. He was alone with the man and the two soldiers. He froze. His robe! It was embroidered front and back with his own royal crest intertwined with his father’s. The front may be covered in blood but the back was a dead give-away. He was going to be recognised now.

One of the two soldiers stamped his boot suddenly and said ‘Boo!’ at the little king, who shot through the Ante-room door followed by the sound of their laughter. ‘Dirty little devil,’ he heard one of them call after him.

He had to get out of the castle at once. He stopped at the end of the gallery to find his bearings. He wasn’t used to wandering about the place. Most of the time he’d stayed with his mother in the king’s quarters, playing up on the roof gardens with his sisters, Melior and Lal. It occurred to him he must not think about his mother and his sisters or that they were all dead. He must not draw attention to himself by crying.

Saan had said that the enemy would be guarding the castle gates. To get out unnoticed, he had to leave by the Secret Way in the Inner Court. He leant against the gallery wall and remembered how he used to look down from the roof gardens onto the Inner Court far below. That meant he should go down. But which way was down?

A slimy feeling on his back made him turn round

sharply. The stone wall he'd been leaning against was smeared with glistening brown stuff. He held his robe and twisted the back towards the front, nearly ricking his neck to see. His back was covered in the brown stuff. It looked as though he'd messed himself. He sniffed. He stank of chocolate. Someone had smeared his back with chocolate ice cream cake, his own birthday cake. His embroidered royal crest was completely obliterated by chocolate.

The door of the Ante-room crashed open at the far end of the gallery, and the two enemy soldiers came out lugging the dead pageboy. A voice ranted from inside the room, 'How do you know it was him? Kill them all. Kill every child that cannot account for itself. And get this dratted ice cream mopped up.'

The king didn't wait to hear any more. He flew out of the gallery down a long flight of stone steps into a tangle of puzzling corridors running this way and that. At last he found the door to the Inner Court.

From this entrance, he knew you had to turn left and walk twelve arches down. He didn't know what that meant but he'd find out. He took the iron ring of the handle carefully in both hands and lifted the latch. It was a low door that a grown-up would have to stoop to get through, but the king slipped through like a little ghost. He waited for a minute to be sure he was alone.

The Court was in deep shadow. He was standing in an even more shadowy arcade. The stone floor felt slippery wet, but he could not see what was on it. The arcade ran round the Court's four sides in a series of arches. These must be the arches you had to walk down. The centre was open to the air. There was usually a fountain playing there but it had been turned off. The castle

towered above the Court, surrounding it on all sides, but at the very top he could see a rectangle of deepening blue sky with a hint of a skimpy crescent moon. He gave a little skip. That was where he was going: away from these terrible enemy people. He turned left and began to count.

Seven, eight; he walked on down the arcade. He could just make out a pile of rubbish ahead of him through the gloom. As he got close he saw it wasn't rubbish. It was people. They were dead and stacked on top of one another at the twelfth arch. A great many people in the castle must have known about the Secret Way. So had the enemy.

He moved even nearer and saw two of the children he'd asked to his birthday party amongst them. Tears came into his eyes as he stared up at the wall of bodies. They were blocking the way out. He must not cry.

Then one of the bodies said, 'Oh, no! Not another,' and clambered upright. It was one of the enemy. The enemy grasped the king by his fair hair. Another soldier came round the pile of bodies. The king could hardly move his head but his eyes were level with the man's scabbard. He saw the foreign-looking pattern engraved in the metal. He saw the pale flesh of the man's fist all covered in blood as he drew his dagger. 'Gluttons for punishment, aren't they?' the man said to his companion, and the king saw his arm draw back to drive the dagger into his ribs.

With a violent slapping, cracking sound, the fountain broke into life. Someone had turned it on and water beat down onto the paving stones of the Court. Both soldiers jumped and turned to look at it, and the king ducked from between them and fled. The soldiers wheeled

round, cannoned into each other, fought each other, and long after the king had got clean away, came to a breathless, confused standstill.

The king was trapped in the castle, with everyone on the lookout to kill him. He'd once seen a rat caught in a cage trap. He remembered the gardener dangling the cage over a tub of water, about to plunge the rat in and drown it and the rat, huddled against the bars, making a sobbing sound, knowing its life was at an end. The king felt like the rat.

He crouched in a doorway and put his hands over his ears to keep out the noise of the sobbing; but he couldn't, because it was in his own head. Then, like a single note of music over the top of the sobbing, he heard a voice that seemed almost his father's say, 'What about the old service stairs?'

He remembered them at once. The service stairs had run like mad threads behind the walls of the castle. They'd been used before the proper plumbing was put in. In those days, servants had hurried up and down them discreetly carting away chamber pots from bedrooms. Commodes and bowls of washing water were spirited away, out of sight and sound, to be emptied outside. Even whole bathtubs had been known to make the trip. As if by magic, a servant could appear silently in a room through one of the cleverly disguised entrances, winkle a bedpan from its modest hiding place and, just as magically, disappear with it.

The service stairs had fallen into disuse long ago, but some of the staircases were still there and some of the hidden ways onto the stairs remained open. The only one the king knew about was in his father's dressing room at the top of the castle. He stood up and began the

long climb upwards.

It took him ages, hiding in alcoves and cupboards at the least sound of someone approaching. Once he climbed into the niche of an arrow slit window and stood, flattened into its stone angle, while a line of prisoners emerged from one of the lifts and shuffled away with three enemy guards. All the time he could hear a voice shouting in the distance, and the sound of far off cheering blew in through the broken windows.

At last he came to the tall double doors of the Great Room. He had to cross it to reach the final flight of stairs to his father's apartments. The shouting was much louder now. He stretched up, opened one of the doors a crack, and saw a row of the enemy. They had their backs to him.

The windows to the balcony of the Great Room had been opened. They were standing in their dark blue uniforms, looking down at the crowd in the courtyard below. Gleaming sashes ran in a brilliant diagonal across the back of each tunic. Gold epaulettes sprouted from their shoulders like furious hair. The wind picked at the plumes on their shiny helmets and gently shifted the massive tapestries that stretched from ceiling to floor, lining the Great Room with woven pictures that told the history of his father's city. His city.

One of the enemy was talking to the crowd through a megaphone. It was hard for the king to understand him because he was using long words. He crept inside the open door to listen.

'The lying tyrant is dead,' the man said and, to the little king's horror, one of the other men held up his father's head stuck on a bayonet for the crowd to see. 'Let him cure his headache now,' the man said. There

was a huge noise of appreciation from the crowd, and the other man jerked the head on the bayonet up and down in the air. Suddenly his father's head swivelled to face the room, and his dead eyes stared meaninglessly into the little king's. Or was there a meaning? His father's head swivelled away again. The little king held onto the rough, stiff edge of a tapestry to steady himself. He must not cry. He must not draw attention to himself.

Now the man was holding up a letter and tearing it up. The letter was from his father; it had the king's seal on it. The man threw the bits of letter in the air and the wind whirled them back into the room. 'Rubbish,' he said, and the crowd roared.

'For that, his castle is taken,' the speaker went on. 'Nothing remains but to exterminate…'

What's exterminate, thought the little king.

'…to wipe out,' the speaker translated obligingly, 'his heirs.'

That's me, thought the little king.

Then the wind blew the door behind him shut with a bang. Two of the enemy turned round in a flash. One had a drawn sword; the other held a handgun. The one with the gun strode across to the doors and pulled them wide open. He looked up and down outside. 'Nothing,' he said to the one with the sword and closed the doors. 'Just the wind.' And the little king, plastered against the wall behind a tapestry, released the breath he'd been holding with a soft sigh.

He edged round the Great Room, slithering sideways behind the tapestries like a cautious crab until he came to the gap occupied by the door to his father's apartments. A piece of the torn letter had been blown there. It was lying on the ground. It was blank. He was on the wrong

side of the letter to read it. He must go on.

In two steps he'd be able to reach up to the handle. The crowd outside gave another roar and the enemy officers flooded back into the room, talking excitedly.

The king peered through the chink between the tapestry and the wall and saw a white-gloved hand grasp the door handle. Then the owner of the hand came into view. He was a tall, narrow, pale man with dark eyebrows and a dark moustache. The man was so close to him that the little king could see his own reflection in the bottom gold button on the man's uniform. The man had an important feel about him. He was obviously the boss.

The boss man opened the door. 'Did themselves all right, didn't they?' he commented, looking up the carpeted flight of stairs to the royal apartments. Then a thought struck him and he tugged at the tapestry the little king was standing behind. 'One of the first things we can do,' he smiled at his officers, 'is trash this lot.' One of the men whooped. The boss man smiled again and went up the stairs.

They began at once. The king heard laughter and some tense silences, then some counting in loud unison. One, two, three, and he heard the first of the tapestries crash to the floor accompanied by cheering and jeering. He couldn't risk making the return journey back to the main door. They could pull his hiding place apart at any second. There was nothing for it: with a quick prayer to the god, the king darted across the gap between the tapestry and the door and up the stairs after the boss man.

No sign of him on the landing. The doors to right and left that led to the roof gardens and his sisters'

apartments were shut. The door to his parents' room ahead of him was half open. He crawled towards it. He noticed a lighter oblong patch on the panelled wall next to the door. It was where the family portrait had hung: his father and mother, Lal, Melior playing with her skipping rope, himself on his pony, and the baby in his mother's arms. The picture was in splinters in the corner of the landing. He must not cry.

The boss man was in his parents' bedroom. The king could see him kneeling by the big bed, leaning his elbows on the blue quilt. He had unbuckled his sword and laid it on the carpet beside him. The king could see the boss man's profile. His eyes were closed. He had black lashes. His white gloves were clasped together. The boss man looked as if he was praying, except the picture propped on the bed in front of him was not of the god: it looked more like half a gilt wheel.

The way into the dressing room was directly behind the boss man. The little king offered another prayer to the god and crept forward. The king was behind the boss man now. He could see the dust on the soles of his boots and the white skin of the back of his neck sticking out of his gold braid collar as he leant his head forward slightly to pray.

It occurred to the king that he could kill the boss man. He could pick up his sword and thrust it between his shoulders. He nearly did. But then that same voice in his head intervened. He measured with his eye the size and weight of the sword and the boss man. Even kneeling down he was taller than the king. He was huge; he was strong. The little king tiptoed on, opened the dressing room door, went through like a mouse, turned the key soundlessly and withdrew it from the lock.

Hundreds of his father's robes hung on racks. His shoes, lined up in neat rows, held the shape of his father's feet; and a coat, draped over a stand ready to be brushed, looked almost as if his father were there, wearing it. The room had the reassuring feel of his father and of home and safety, and he had to fight with himself not to lie down amongst the clothes and go to sleep. Home was danger now, and he would never wear the royal sky blue robe of office which was kept here in the glass cabinet.

The king pushed his way in amongst the garments. The coat hangers rattled above his head. He leant all his weight against a woollen cloak to slide the clothes along the rack and scanned the wall behind it. Where was the entrance to the service stairs? Somewhere here. He pressed the wall. Nothing happened. He pressed in a different place. Still nothing. And again. Nothing. His heart began to thump. Suppose it never opened? He thought of the boss man praying outside. Then he heard the handle of the dressing room door being tried and the boss man calling out to the men below, 'There's a locked door here.' He heard him shouting to them to come and force the door, and he pressed frantically on the wall again.

Then came the sound of the men pounding up the stairs to the royal apartments. The king began to beat on the wall with the palms of his small hands. Crash! The men were throwing themselves at the door. Crash! The door juddered. Crash! Then a panel in the wall slid sideways. Stinking cold air flowed in from the pitch-dark rectangle it revealed. Crash! The door bowed with the impact. The king stepped into the dark, heaved the cloak into place behind him and pulled the panel shut as the door burst open.

The dark was terrible. He had always been afraid of it. He didn't dare move forward. He stood paralysed with fear, his eyes wide, trying to gain a little light out of that cold, smelly dark. Then a pistol shot was fired on the other side of the panel. He had to get going.

He stretched out his hand and the key he was still clutching grated against a stone wall. So he had a wall on one side of him. He could feel gritty, thick dust under his feet and he moved one foot forward, tentatively scraping it along a surface. He found the edge of a step. Or was it a precipice? A sheer drop into thin air? He wished his sisters were with him. They would know which it was. '*Fluffy white and green and gold*.' It was the nonsense rhyme his sister skipped to. Very, very carefully he lowered his foot, keeping the heel of his shoe pressed against the stone rise. There seemed to be nothing there. The terror rose up in him. The rhyme filled his head and pushed out the fear. '*Fluffy white and green and gold, Yellow magic in a mould*.' Then his foot found something: the next tread. Then the next, and the next one. He was all right; he was on the service stairs.

Down and down he went, very slowly, keeping the rhyme in his head so that nothing else could get into it, repeating it over and over, '*Fluffy white and green and gold, Yellow magic in a mould*.' Not caring about the stench now, or the blackness; just making his way painfully to safety and the kind people Saan had talked about.

Then something dark rushed past his shoulder. He gabbled the rhyme silently again and again. '*Fluffy white and green and gold*.' He grabbed at the wall at his side, and the key in his hands clonked away down the steps ahead of him. How could he have seen anything in this

darkness? But he was right; below him the faintest fuzz of light was showing. Then the dark shadow jumped past him again. It was crooked and skinny and it whispered his name in a hoarse voice.

His terror made him press back against the wall. He couldn't move. But he knew he must. He must run away up the stairs. He must. But before he could, the wall he was pressing against moved and then was suddenly gone and he fell backwards through another entrance panel that had opened up in the wall behind him. He fell into silky, sucking-down, choking powder. He was sinking into the slippery stuff, his fingernails scraped on wood as he sank, choking and fighting for air.

Dazzling daylight flooded in from above him and there was a knock of wood against stone as someone opened up the top of wherever he had arrived. He was seized by a fiery-faced Baker. He'd never seen a face so red. It had wide-open pores round the nose and bristly stubs of black moustache and beard sticking out of it. The little king was hauled out, covered in flour. The Baker said, 'Kids! I thought we'd got us a nice rat.'

One of the enemy was standing by – a barrel-chested soldier, who was wearing a revolver in a holster and passing the curved blade of his long kukri knife from hand to hand as he watched the struggling, coughing king. 'Who is this, then?' he asked. 'You said you'd shown me all your boys.'

In one swift rip, the Baker tore the little king's robe off, opened an iron porthole and threw the robe into the roaring furnace behind it. The robe, Saan's blood, the dried chocolate ice cream birthday cake, and the little king's own royal crest intertwined with his father's, glowed brightly and were gone.

‘Give him here,’ the soldier said. ‘A kid can’t account for himself, we see him out.’

‘He’s the second shift,‘ the Baker replied. ‘My boys work in shifts; there’s a horde more like him.’

The fiery-faced Baker kept tight hold of the little king squirming in his hands and gave him a reproving shake. ‘Hiding in my flour vat! What were you afraid of, boy?’ he bawled. ‘Nobody kills a baker.’ He stared the little king in the eye and emphasised, ‘Not even a *baker’s boy* like you. You hear me? Not even a baker’s boy.’ And the king knew what he was being told. The Baker bawled to some unseen person, ‘Brad! Clean up this brat and put him back to work.’

Brad turned out to be a tall, brown, skinny boy of ten or so. As Brad led him away, the king heard the Baker say to the enemy, ‘His first battle. He’s not accustomed.’

And the enemy answered, ‘It gets to you, your first one, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, well if you’ll excuse me,’ the Baker answered briskly, ‘I’ve your army to feed.’ The enemy took the hint and strolled off to the other end of the Bakery.

The king followed Brad into a room off the Bakery. There were white uniforms of all sizes, like the one Brad was wearing, hanging from rows of pegs on the whitewashed walls. Brad selected a small pair of trousers and a jacket and chucked them onto a bench in the centre of the room.

‘Get those on you,’ he said. The little king looked at them and wondered how on earth you did that. He was used to his robe; and anyway, someone always dressed him. He picked up a garment and thrust a leg into the first available hole.

Brad sat down on the bench and laughed. He laughed

so much it brought two other curious boys into the small room. They were similarly dressed in white uniforms and soft white shoes. The other boys began to laugh too. The king had put one leg through the neck of the jacket and the other down the sleeve. The three boys rocked with laughter.

The little king spoke. ‘What…?’ he said, and stopped short. He had meant to say "What’s so funny?" but he was frightened by the sound of his own voice. It was the first time he had spoken since Saan had been killed. His voice was high and shrill and terrified.

The other boys seemed to find the single ‘What?’ even funnier than the antics with the jacket. ‘What?’ one of them imitated him squeakily, and they all three doubled up with laughter.

The Baker suddenly appeared in their midst and put his raging face close to the little king’s. ‘Joker!’ he rasped. Then he roared at the three boys, ‘Get out of here.’ He jerked his head at the king. ‘This one’s in for a belting, and you will be too if you don’t clear out,’ he roared at them. They left instantly. A floury haze hung in the air where they’d been standing.

The Baker unbuckled his thick leather belt to thrash the king. He slashed it down hard on the bench. ‘Scream,’ he instructed the king, and the little king screamed. As he did, he realised he’d been wanting to scream all day. ‘This,’ said the Baker, as he hit the bench again with the belt, ‘is the last time I can show you.’ He stripped off the king’s jacket and put him into the trousers. He threw away the king’s shoes. They were pink where the flour had soaked up some blood he must have stood in. Every so often, while he dressed him, the Baker brought the belt down again on the bench and the little king

screamed.

'Thank you,' the little king said, as soon as he was dressed. Once more the Baker thrust his scarlet face close to the king's. 'No thanking,' he hissed. 'Nobody thanks here.' He straightened up and glared down at the king thoughtfully. Then he added, 'And no talking, see? Not until you're rid of that posh accent, see? Shut it. You're dumb.' He hit the bench. The king screamed. 'All you can do is scream. And work.'

The Baker was breathing hard now from the hitting. 'You're a baker.' He hit the bench. The king screamed. 'You're dumb. The clamour of the guns has scared you dumb. That's your story, see? And you answer to the name of Reb.' The belt smashed down on the bench once more and the king nodded in reply to the Baker; then he screamed.

But he didn't answer to Reb. The story of the single, shrill, 'What…?' got about the Bakery and it stuck. Soon the little king was known to everyone as Watt, the dumb baker's boy.

* * *

All this was in the one-hundred-and-tenth year of the Empire. As time passed, nobody bothered to wonder where Watt came from other than the flour vat, or who he was or what he was really called. His Royal City of Khul lost itself and its name too and was known simply as Slave City. And just as its king vanished, so did Khul's greatest treasure. Like the king, it lay unrecognised, a prisoner of ignorance, in the city that was conquered by the Old Country in a single day to become the most far-flung colony of its huge empire.

CHAPTER ONE

'Where?'

The call was as lonely as the grave.

'Where? Where?'

He tugged his father's arm and cried. 'What? What are you looking for?'

Tears of blood spurted from his father's eyes and surged over Watt's head in a tepid wave. He fought the blood but he was drowning; drowning in his father's blood.

Someone took hold of his hand. Someone pulled him upwards. Someone called his name. Someone grumbled, 'You and your nightmares!' Watt opened his eyes. Brad was there in his white baker's boy uniform, pushing Watt back onto his straw mattress on the stone floor. 'You may be dumb when you're awake, Watt, but you can't half holler when you're asleep.'

Watt smiled up at his friend. It was morning and he was safe from his dreams for another day. Every night for the last six years his tortured father had haunted his nightmares, looking and looking for something but Watt could never find it because he could never discover what his father was searching for.

Brad said, 'I came in to give you a call and you fair frightened the life out of me with your shrieks. And