

Chapter 1

The boy stood at the entrance to his cave, yawned, and stretched his thin arms toward the clouds painted orange by the newly risen sun. He paid no attention to the usual distant sounds of the morning: a rooster crowing, a farmer shouting at his herd of cows, the sound of horse hooves on the town's cobblestone streets. No, the sound that had awakened him in the cave he called home was the sound of a crowd gathering.

He squinted as he looked at the village below. Wisps of a low cloud hovered over the valley that was home to the village of Ispour, but he could still see the main part of the town. People were streaming toward the town square near the center of the village, creating a fast-growing crowd. There was news to be told. Himm became excited.

People found it strange that he called himself Himm, but then he was strange to all the people in the village of Ispour for many reasons. He had no parents. Oh, Himm knew that he must have had a mother and a father in order to be born, but he had never known them. No one in town knew who his parents were.

He was also the boy who lived in the cave near the top of the hill overlooking the village. No one else in or around Ispour lived in a cave but Himm. How he came to be and how he had survived to be twelve years old no one knew, not even Himm.

Himm grabbed his empty bag, swung it over his shoulder, and started down the path toward town. He always carried the bag; you never knew when you might find something you could use. He called the things he found "treasures." It was how he furnished the cave he called home: the dented tin cup from which he drank, the thin blanket with six holes (he had counted them) under which he slept, the child's painting that hung from a stick poked in the wall. He also had a collection of five small stone statues shaped like

various animals that people had thrown away because each had been broken and was missing a tail, an ear, or a leg. All of his furnishings had been things others had thrown away; he had placed them in his bag and brought them back to the cave. He liked his “treasures” and he liked his cave. It was his home.

Himm never remembered having a home with other people. Apparently when he was just old enough to walk he had suddenly appeared in town, walking the streets. No one remembered seeing him as a baby. Had he been raised in secret behind closed doors by parents, or at least a mother, who abandoned him? His memory didn't go back that far. His earliest memories were of being handed bits of food by villagers as he walked the streets and of sleeping in farmers' barns, snuggled in the hay stored above the cows.

Himm pulled up his brown robe, lifting the hem to his knees, and then jumped the small stream that cut across his path. The robe was too small, and it was worn thin. Soon he would be given a new one. This was another of the mysteries of Himm's life. Ever since he could remember, he would always find a new robe just when he had outgrown his old one or had nearly worn it out.

He found the new robes in various places. Himm discovered several of the robes half-buried in the hay in the barn where he had slept many of the nights of his youngest years. One time he found a robe next to a sleeping wild dog he named Bibbs that he had tamed. He often slept next to Bibbs to stay warm. Several robes had been stashed under garbage at the village dump, carefully placed so they wouldn't get dirty with the surrounding garbage but obvious enough that a little boy scrounging for “treasures” easily found them.

Himm didn't know for sure how he was always able to find a new robe. It seemed like too much of a coincidence that he was lucky enough to find one just when he needed it, but he didn't know anyone cared enough about him to make certain he was always clothed. He had a few friends, but none of them

had the means to provide him with the robes. It was a mystery. All he knew, as he continued his trek down the mountain to the village, was that it wouldn't be long until he would come across a new one.

Himm finally arrived at the edge of the village, passing the hitching post lined with three horses for sale. Two days earlier there had been four horses there. Apparently someone had bought one. He passed the potter's house, where the steps were lined with pots for sale. Himm waited for a cart pulled by a small donkey to pass before he crossed the street. By now he had been joined by a half dozen other people who were also heading toward the town square. They talked among themselves, exchanging morning greetings and asking each other what was happening. No one talked to Himm. Few people ever did, and he often felt as if he were invisible.

"Himm!" a voice called out behind him. He turned to see Shimdee limping at a fast pace, trying to catch up. Shimdee was older and taller than Himm. They had been friends for a long time, and Himm was glad to see Shimdee.

"Do you know what's going on?" asked Shimdee, as he slowed his pace to match Himm's.

"No, I just came down from my cave when I heard the commotion." Himm gave Shimdee a slight grin. "But I bet you know what's going on." Shimdee always seemed to know what was going on. He was the smartest kid in the village, as far as Himm knew. Most of the other kids didn't like Shimdee because of his deformed leg, but that had never bothered Himm. Most of the kids didn't like Himm either, so the two had something in common. It helped bond them as friends.

Shimdee smiled. "Yep, I know what's going on." He said no more, and just kept walking beside Himm.

Himm glanced at Shimdee. "Well, you going to tell me or not?"

Shimdee's grin grew wider and he broke into a chuckle. "Sure. The emperor's representative arrived in the village this

morning. I hear he's going to announce that our king is dying and that a new king must be chosen."

"Why is he coming to a little village like Ispour to announce such big news?" Himm asked.

Shimdee nearly stumbled over a protruding stone on the cobblestone street and grabbed Himm's arm. Once he regained his balance he said, "Sometimes I'm amazed by what you don't know, Himm. Whenever the kingdom needs a new king he must be chosen from our village. It happens about every thirty or forty years. It's the one thing that makes Ispour famous. The king must be a boy from Ispour. Our village is the birthplace of all the kings - - it always has been, always will be."

"Oh," said Himm, not knowing what else to say.

After walking a short distance, Shimdee broke the silence. "I wonder who will be the new king?"