



THE KINGDOM OF NEFARIA was beautiful, but prone to evil schemes.

There was, for instance, the Great Cheese Fraud of the Fourteenth Century (the perpetrators made quite a bit of cheddar before the villagers caught on and tore them to shreds). Then there was Lord Maximilian's ill-fated attempt to control the land with highly trained spider monkeys (that the spider monkeys ended up being quite peaceful did not make the scheme any less evil). And who could forget the Anti-Beanbag Society's plan to slightly empty every beanbag in the land until none of them were comfortable?

The residents of Nefaria had grown used to schemes popping up, and though they tried to remain vigilant and refused to let their land go full-on evil, it was exhausting to always keep an eye out for these things. And hard, too. Sometimes the vilest of schemes don't seem all that evil at first glance. They seem normal, harmless—pleasant, even. They can take on the

appearance of something commonplace, with no hint at the evil lurking beneath. Even the kingdom's dedicated evil sniffer-outers missed a lot of them.

Some Nefarians left, of course, fleeing to the nearby kingdoms of Jovialla and Los Angsteles. Even if a place is home, there's only so much people are willing to deal with. Other Nefarians tried to find a reason *why* their land was particularly prone to evil schemes. They tested the water, and the soil, and even some birds. But there wasn't anything demonstrably evil in any of them, and so a lot of people went on with their lives and hoped all the hubbub about evil schemes would fade away eventually.

Bobert Bougainvillea—a young and smallish resident of the upper hills of Nefaria—never really thought about evil schemes. Maybe because eleven-year-olds are usually not the ones called upon to fight them. Young Nefarians learned about evil schemes in school, and in the course of their daily lives (sometimes it seemed like it was all adults wanted to talk about), but Bobert himself thought of them as a part of the world that he didn't understand much but also didn't have to yet, kind of like taxes, or how to tell if fruit at the market was any good. Bobert also didn't think about evil schemes much because he was too busy dealing with other things that were borderline evil—or at least they felt that way to him.

Like waking up at sunrise to walk uphill, then downhill,

then back uphill to school. A beautiful hike, sure, as Nefaria was full of canyons, majestic in the morning light, or as majestic as anything could be at that time of day. But all the while Bobert had to avoid the flying goats (part of another failed evil scheme), which brayed way too loudly, and whose droppings splatted to the ground like the grossest bombs ever. And after an hour of huffing and puffing and ducking and diving, he had a whole day of classes to sit through with his clothes sweaty and his legs sore.

Then there were the other kids.

They never seemed to *see* him. If that was evil or not, Bobert couldn't tell. He didn't care much what it was called. He didn't like it.

When they worked on group projects, other students all rushed to find one another. Even the kids who were picked on found solace in one another. But Bobert was always left last, looking around, waiting for the teacher to try to direct the kid who hadn't gotten to his friends fast enough to join Bobert in a team. The other kid would be wandering around the classroom, counting off classmates, passing by Bobert two or three times until Bobert managed to raise his voice and say, "I don't have anyone."

At lunch he rotated seats, waiting for the day when someone would tell him he was too close. Tell him to get lost. Tell him to leave them alone. Even negative acknowledgment would

have suited Bobert. But no. They never even looked his way. They sometimes sniffed at the air hungrily (his dad made Nefaria's best goat stew), but then they'd pretend it was one of their own meals that they were sniffing and Bobert would remain invisible.

After school, in no rush to begin his hour-long hike back home, Bobert would sometimes follow groups of schoolmates as they made their way into the woods to play, or as they went into town to cause mischief. He didn't even have to be particularly sneaky as he followed them. If he stepped on a twig, they might turn their heads over their shoulders to look back, but they never seemed to see him just a few yards behind. He could even whistle to himself, watching them intently, and it was as if he were a ghost.

Except even that wasn't true, because most of the kids at school talked to the various ghosts who lived in Nefaria. His classmates would talk to *ghosts* and not to him.

It had always been like this, as far as Bobert could remember. At the park when he was little, he was constantly digging holes in the sandbox by himself. In first grade he played hide-and-seek at recess, thrilled to be included, only to be found hours later, hiding in the gardening shed, by the school groundskeeper. All the kids had forgotten he was playing.

Now, there were rare little moments here and there when kids saw him, spoke to him, and when sometimes it even felt

like he could have friends. Like the morning just a few months ago when he and Stanbert had talked about their favorite famous sword-swallowers before school. Or the time Rubyn had come over to do a class project with him and they actually spent the whole time laughing as they put their poster together, recounting their favorite exploits of the famous warrior Imogene Petunias.

But those were just brief glimpses of hope, and the next day at school Stanbert and Rubyn didn't look his way at all. Bobert would be left on his own to think about Nefaria's greatest living warrior, Imogene Petunias, pretending he was as popular and beloved as she was.

Once, Bobert asked his parents, the only people who seemed to see him all the time, why he was invisible to others. But one of the unfortunate things about parents, as anyone with them will tell you, is that they don't have all the answers. They sat beside him and tried to tell him it was all going to be okay, but they couldn't tell him why things weren't okay right now, or when it was going to stop being like this.

The day that Bobert stumbled into one of Nefaria's evil schemes started out just like all those others. Long, terrible, kinda pretty walk to school. Flying-goat poop. He pretended to be Imogene Petunias, fighting off warriors from Grumponia, in order to make the hike a little more interesting. No one said "hi" in the

morning; no one said “that smells great” at lunch. There was a brief moment of excitement when he thought Candelabra, one of the coolest girls in school, had asked him for a quill. But it turned out she had been talking to Jennizabath, who was sitting behind him.

His parents were going to be in town for a meeting until night, so instead of going home when school was over, Bobert decided he would go to the town square and sit in the sun and do his schoolwork. And maybe people *there* would notice him. Maybe someone would sit on a bench next to him and ask him about his day. If that didn’t happen, at least he would be with his parents sooner, not having to wait for them to make it back home.

He took the path everyone from school took when they wanted to go to town: behind the main building, past the school’s various pigpens, following the shadow of the turret on the berry fields, until he found the tree where the spider monkeys sold candies to the schoolchildren.

Bobert waved to the spider monkeys but didn’t stop, appreciating the little nod that the dad monkey gave him before Bobert slipped into the woods.

He’d taken his time leaving school, so he was surprised when he heard voices coming from just ahead. He picked up his pace, because sometimes just eavesdropping on other kids made him feel a little less alone.

THE BRAVEST WARRIOR IN NEFARIA

“It’s definitely not true,” he heard one of the voices say, though he couldn’t yet see who it was. There were at least three of them crunching their way through the leaves on the path. Nefaria didn’t have four straightforward seasons. There were more like seventeen of them. But throughout most, the leaves were crunchy.

“It is!” a second voice exclaimed.

“If you think it’s just a legend”—a third voice spoke up—“then why don’t you go and do it?”

It was then that Bobert saw through the trees that it was Candelabra, Jennizabeth, and Stanbert. Unlike him, Candelabra seemed to be friends with everyone, easily jumping from friend group to friend group, universally liked. *How* did she do it?

She and Jennizabeth were walking in front, with Stanbert following behind. He was using a fallen branch like a walking stick, although he mostly just waved it around and swung it at tree trunks as he passed by.

“I don’t even like gum that much,” Jennizabeth said. “Plus, I’ve had gumballs from that machine a million times before. It’s just a normal gumball machine. And you never get the red ones, which everyone knows are the best ones.”

“I like the purple ones,” Stanbert said.

Candelabra and Jennizabeth (and Bobert from afar) let their silence tell him how wrong he was.

“How come we don’t know anyone who’s disappeared, then?” Stanbert said after a moment.

“Because we’re not dummies!” Candelabra said. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t have to stick my hand in a fire to learn that getting burned hurts. Someone learned that lesson for me a long time ago.”

“Or we *are* dummies, because we believe some silly story without any evidence,” Stanbert countered. “Don’t you listen to what Professor Blort says? Believing something without evidence can feel good, but that doesn’t mean that thing is true.”

Bobert could only see their backs, but he could sense Candelabra rolling her eyes. He’d seen her roll her eyes in class a lot, especially in Professor Blort’s class. He was one of those teachers who seemed to believe that everyone but him was wrong. He would probably become an Elder someday, Bobert thought. Along with the king, the Council of Elders helped decide how a lot of things in Nefaria ran. And they mostly thought every idea but theirs was bad, even if it was one of their own ideas from years before.

“Have you ever gotten a gumball after sundown?” Stanbert asked. He whacked at an overhead branch with his walking stick. Little bits of the branch fell off and landed on him, though he pretended like they hadn’t.

“Well, no. But that’s because my mom gets mad if I ruin my dinner,” Jennizabeth answered.

“So, you have evidence that the gumball machine is normal during the day, but we all know that,” Stanbert said. “What you don’t have evidence of is that the machine is normal *after* sundown. I’m just saying we prove it.”

They fell into silence again, the challenge hanging in the air, like a ghost. But less chatty than a ghost.

They continued on for a few minutes that way, each deep in thought, the only sound the wind rustling the leaves and their boots crunching down on the ground. Bobert liked it so much, walking a few steps behind them: the silence made him feel like he was part of the group too.

Bobert knew what gumball machine they were talking about. He’d heard the stories too (spoken near him, never to him). The rumors said that if you tried to get a gumball after sundown, the machine trapped you inside. But, as Stanbert had pointed out, no one had gotten trapped that he knew of. There weren’t even *that* many unexplained disappearances in Nefaria. Most of them were because of the quicksand pits that hadn’t been covered up.

Bobert vaguely remembered his parents talking about a kid they knew getting trapped in a gumball machine when they were little, but that was only once, and he couldn’t even remember if it was a real memory or if he was getting confused with a rumor or—

Oof.

Too busy thinking about the machine and feeling like he was part of the group, Bobert failed to notice that they had stopped moving. Which resulted in him walking directly into Candelabra.

He was smaller than most kids in his grade, and Candelabra had already hit a growth spurt, so it was Bobert who ended up on his back on the ground. Looking up, briefly confused about what had happened, Bobert thought to himself that it was a really pretty day. Afternoons in Nefaria could be beautiful, what with the sun making the orange leaves glow, and no goats to be spotted in the super-blue sky. Goats usually took afternoon naps.

Then Candelabra's face blocked the view. He hadn't noticed her freckles before, or the way one nostril was a little bigger than the other.

"Were you following us?"

Bobert blinked. All three of them were looking at him now. It was a little intimidating. But also kind of a thrill.

"He ran right into you," Stanbert said. "Of course he was following us." He then gently poked at Bobert with his stick. "Why were you following us?"

"Bobert," Bobert said, hoping they would remember him if he said his name. That they would realize he'd been in school with them for years, had sat next to them in class and participated in projects alongside them.

“Whatever,” Stanbert said. “Were you following us?”

Bobert gathered himself and stood back up. “I wasn’t. I was just going into town.”

“We were going into town,” Jennizabeth said. “So you *were* following us.”

“I was, uh, doing both?” Bobert mumbled.

Candelabra watched him for a while before she said, “You were listening to us, weren’t you?”

Bobert’s eyes went wide. “Whaaaaat? Noooo.”

“What do *you* think? About the curse?” she asked Bobert.

Bobert was still having to gather himself from being spoken to directly. His heart did a little jig in his chest. “Hm?”

“The gumball machine,” Candelabra said. “Do you believe the stories?”

Bobert examined his feet, wondering how he could so desperately want to talk to other people and yet not know at all what to say to them. “I dunno,” he mumbled. As soon as he’d mumbled, though, something inside him stirred, like it was rejecting his urge to not say something wrong, to not say the thing that would turn him invisible. “We live in a weird place where almost anything is possible and schemes are everywhere. I don’t know if the gumball machine is cursed or not, but I think it’s super interesting that it *could* be.”

He bit his lip, wondering if he had made a terrible mistake.

They were all staring at him. Candelabra especially was holding his gaze, like she was studying him.

Finally Stanbert broke the silence by turning to Candelabra. “Whatever. The stories are not true! And we should stop being so scared and just use it.”

The group of three started walking down the path again, and Bobert watched them go, feeling like, sure, it wasn't the best of exchanges, but he was sad it was over so quickly.

Then Candelabra looked over her shoulder at him. “Are you coming?”