



The Golden Bird

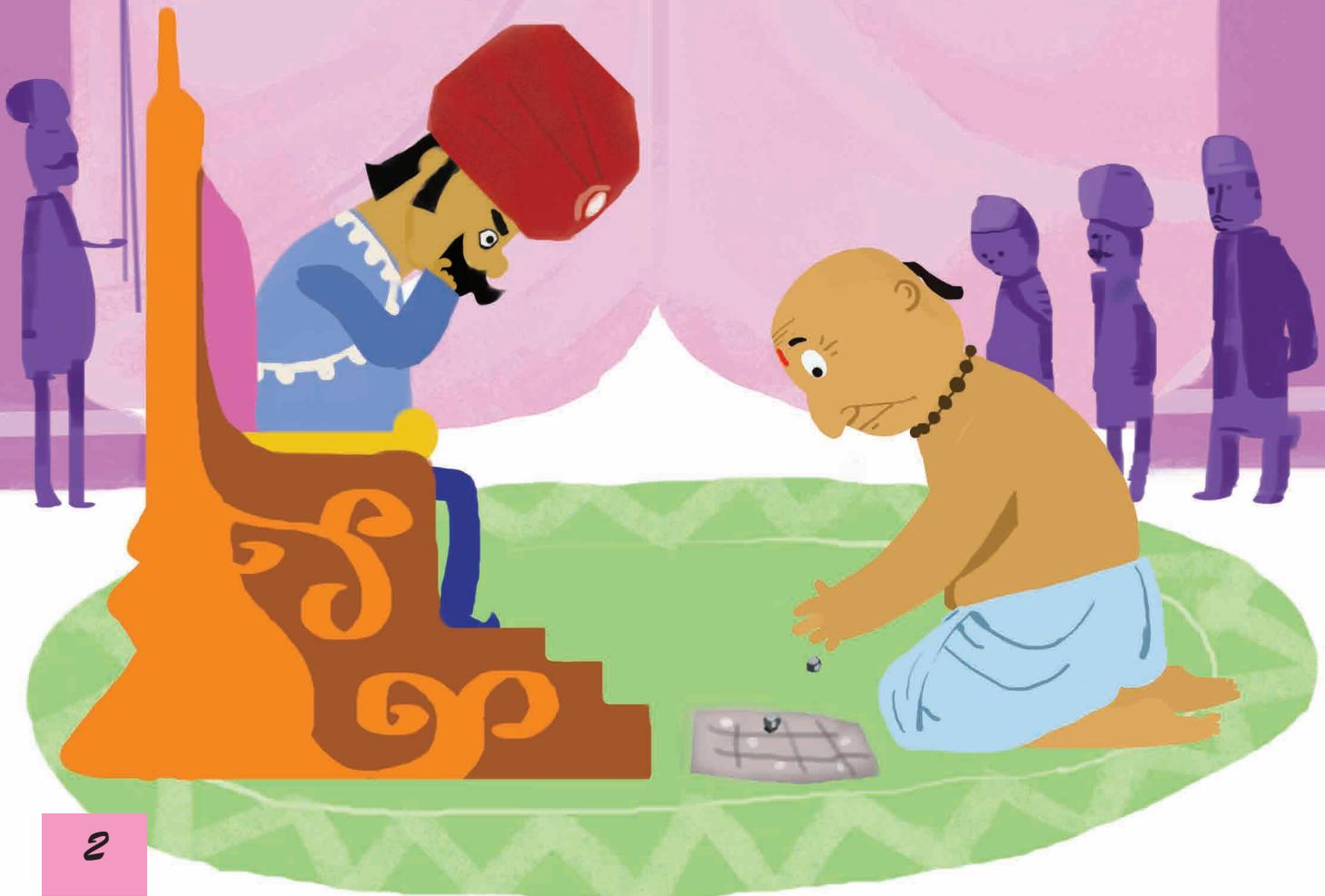


Author: Sayed Ashique Mahmood
Illustrator: Swarga Bhattacharya



The King of Swarnadwip, Maharaja Rajabahadur, was sitting on the throne and twisting his moustache. His court was attended by his courtiers and ministers. The royal astrologer was about to make an important prediction and was deep in thought. The king thundered, "My royal astrologer, tell me what I need to do to become emperor of the entire universe."

"Your Majesty," the astrologer answered, "the stars say there is a one-hundred percent chance that you will become emperor of the entire universe."





“Bravo, bravo!” Everyone in the royal court began to clap. The royal astrologer opened his mouth to say something more, but stopped himself. The king noticed his hesitation and said, “Tell me what’s on your mind. Do not be afraid!”

The astrologer said, “Your Majesty, we have an astonishing golden bird living in our kingdom. If you can catch this golden bird, no one will be able to stop you from becoming emperor of the entire universe.”



The king said, "This golden bird must be caught. Make arrangements to catch it now!" The royal announcer made a public circulation: "Anyone who catches the golden bird will be rewarded by His Royal Highness the King of Swarnadwip, Maharaja Rajabahadur."



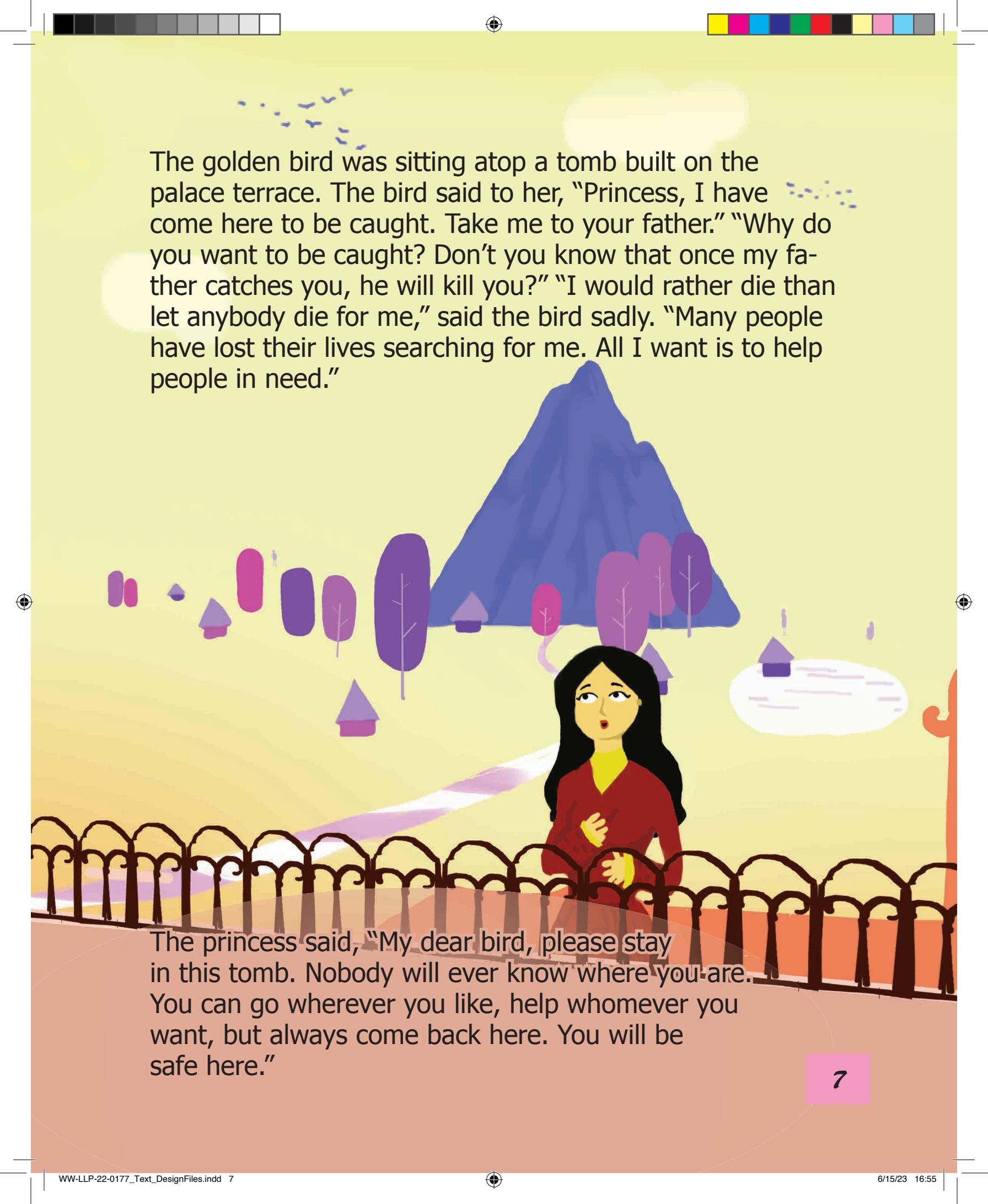


The subjects of Swarnadwip searched the hills, mountains, and forests to find the golden bird. Finally, the royal astrologer predicted that the golden bird lived on the peak of the Neelgiri Hills. The king immediately set off for Neelgiri Hills with his army.

Meanwhile, the princess of Swarnadwip was looking out from the palace terrace, watching the marching army. As she gazed towards the horizon, she noticed a slight movement in the corner of her eye.

There was the golden bird!





The golden bird was sitting atop a tomb built on the palace terrace. The bird said to her, "Princess, I have come here to be caught. Take me to your father." "Why do you want to be caught? Don't you know that once my father catches you, he will kill you?" "I would rather die than let anybody die for me," said the bird sadly. "Many people have lost their lives searching for me. All I want is to help people in need."

The princess said, "My dear bird, please stay in this tomb. Nobody will ever know where you are. You can go wherever you like, help whomever you want, but always come back here. You will be safe here."



The princess asked the bird, "Golden bird, aren't you hungry? Can I bring some food for you?" "No, princess," the bird said. "I live on raindrops, the light of the moon, and dewdrops in the morning. I do not need food."





Countless stars were shining in the sky. The golden bird watched the night sky as it sat in the tomb. Then came a faint sound of a little boy crying somewhere in the distance. The bird flew from the tomb in search of the boy.





The next morning, every ramshackle house on the street over which the bird had flown had been transformed into a beautiful home. Children were walking to school holding all the books they needed. They laughed and giggled in their new clothes. Every street scene looked as if it were from a postcard!





Every slum had been transformed into rows of neatly organised brick houses lit by bright lights. Children were reading storybooks, old women were decorating the walls with colourful paints, and young people were singing on the streets.





The next day, as the princess climbed up to the tomb of the palace, she heard some sad music. She found the golden bird playing the violin. When the princess came closer, she was shocked. The golden bird had lost half of its feathers!



"Oh golden bird! Why have you been so hard on yourself?" "Princess, didn't I tell you that all I wanted to do was help people?"



The princess looked into the eyes of the golden bird and smiled. Then she looked at the kingdom of Swarnadwip through the window of the tomb. Everywhere she looked, she found signs of renewed affection and love among the people.

The princess spoke to the bird, "Oh my golden bird, you really have helped the people of Swarnadwip." But the bird said sadly, "No, my princess. There are still many who are poor and distressed." The golden bird turned to face the princess. "Princess, will you please do me a favor before I die?" The princess cried out, "No, no! You won't die. You're just tired. Rest up, and I will see you tomorrow."



The golden bird said,
"Princess, I haven't told you
what I really wanted to tell
you." The princess was too
distraught at the thought of
the golden bird's death. She
said, "I will listen to what
you have to say tomorrow.
Now take a rest, golden bird.
It is quite late. We will
meet tomorrow."



Meanwhile, the king was trudging back to the palace from his Neelgiri Hills mission, which he had officially declared unsuccessful. As soon as he entered the city, he was shocked. Where there had been slums, there were now beautiful homes, wide roads, and happy people. "Who made these changes to my country?" he wondered.





Maharaja Rajabhadur called a grand meeting of the entire kingdom on the city grounds. Thousands of people of Swarnadwip attended the meeting. The king said, "My dear people! Have you found the golden bird? Any of you?" The people answered in one collective voice, "No, Your Majesty."





One person among the crowd said, "Your Majesty! We have not seen the golden bird, but we have received its gifts. The golden feathers scattered by the bird have filled our lives with happiness and security."





The king cried out in anger, "How dare you! You are the subjects of this land, so what you receive from the bird must be counted as a treasure belonging to your king."



Back in the royal court, the king ordered,
"Royal astrologer, tell me where the golden
bird has concealed itself!"



As the royal astrologer tried to calculate the bird's whereabouts, the princess' assistant went running to the harem. She quickly conveyed everything to the princess. The princess hurried to the tomb of the palace to warn the bird.

But before she could say anything, the golden bird said to her, "I was waiting for you, princess. I have no more time. We must finish the task before the king arrests me." The golden bird whispered something in the princess' ears.





Tears filled her eyes. "I can chant the spell," she murmured, "but I cannot pluck your beautiful feathers."





The royal astrologer finished his calculations. His face was shining with victory. "Your Majesty, you have caught the golden bird! The bird is hiding itself somewhere inside the palace. How strange!" The king said, "Find the bird and bring it to me. Now!"

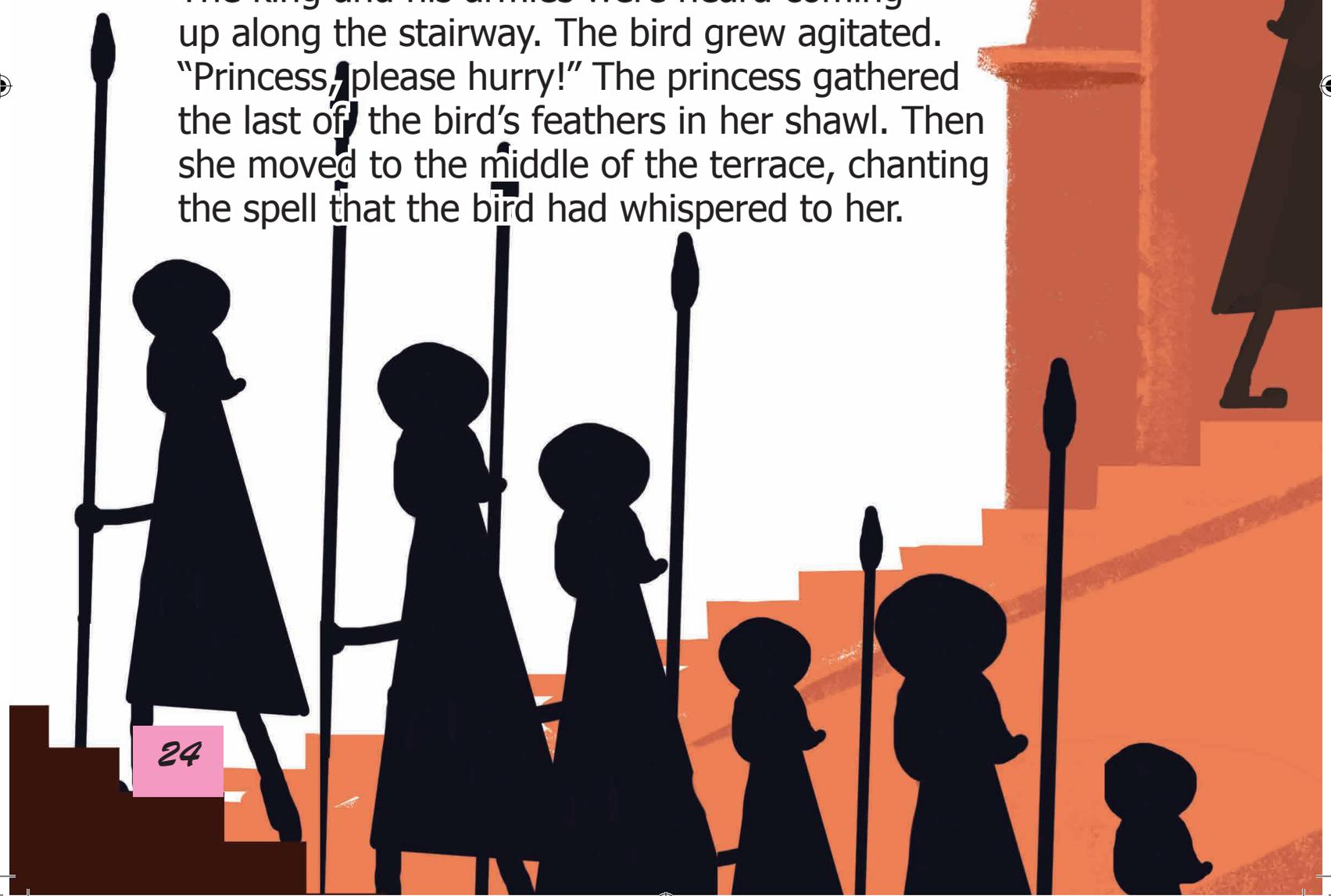




The princess and the golden bird were on the palace terrace. The king's soldiers could be heard searching for the golden bird. They even searched for it in the harem where no man was allowed.

The bird became restless. "Princess, please don't wait any longer." The princess hurriedly plucked the bird's remaining feathers, tears flowing silently from her eyes. The golden bird closed its eyes in pain.

The king and his armies were heard coming up along the stairway. The bird grew agitated. "Princess, please hurry!" The princess gathered the last of the bird's feathers in her shawl. Then she moved to the middle of the terrace, chanting the spell that the bird had whispered to her.





“The poorest of the poor must get a feather each. Feathers fly away, fill their lives with peace.” As the princess chanted the spell, the golden feathers rose up and disappeared into the sky. The next second, the king and his soldiers reached the terrace.



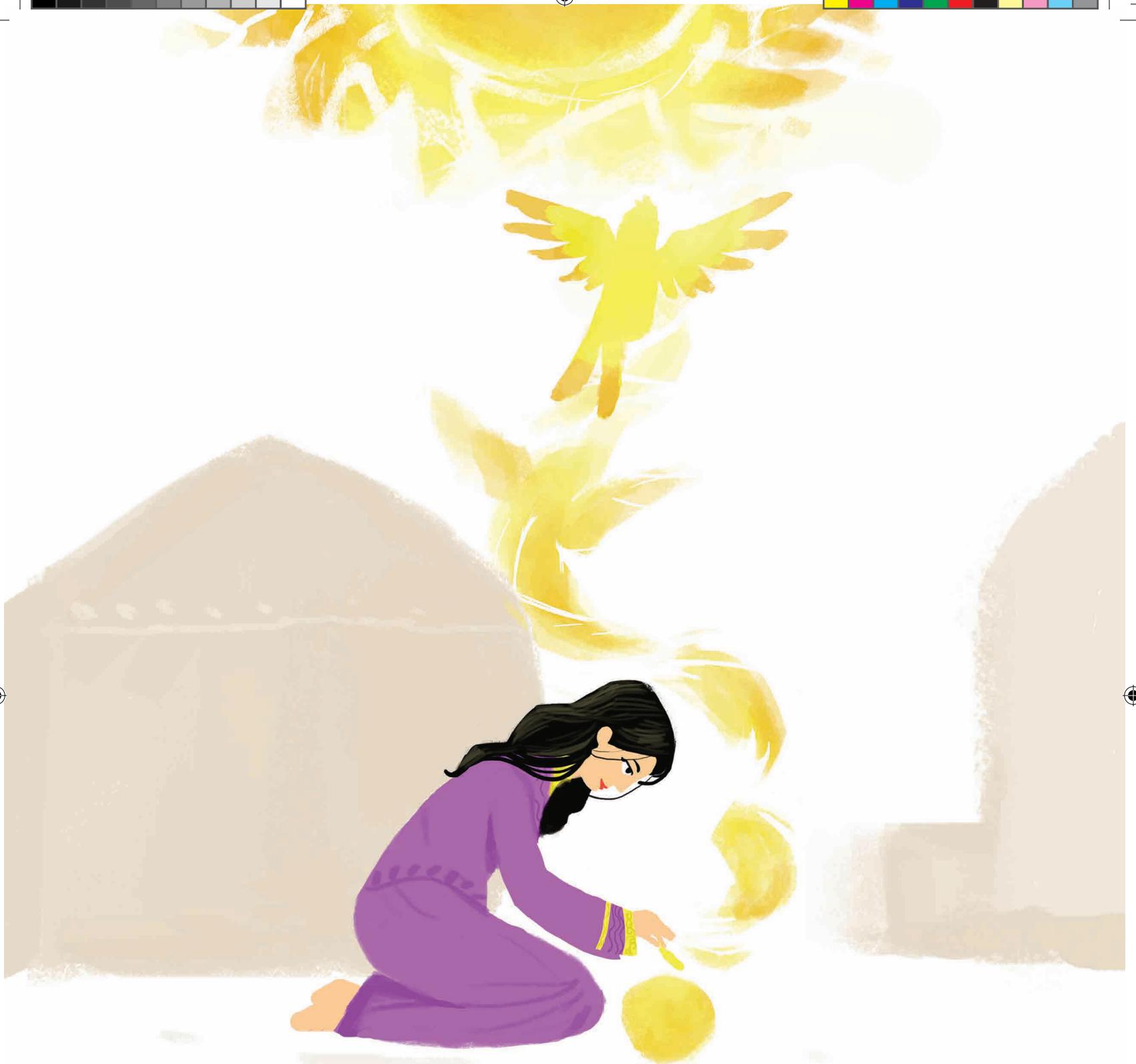


The princess was heartbroken that her father had caused the death of the kind-hearted golden bird. She asked him, "Tell me, father, who is more precious to you? The golden bird or me?" The king was stunned. He sat down on the terrace and fell silent. The princess sat down next to him. He looked at her with tears in his eyes and held her.



"No, my child," he said quietly. "You are the treasure of my heart. I would rather have your love than be the emperor of the entire universe."





The king's courtiers found a golden ball on the roof and a golden feather beside it. The princess took the feather and touched the golden ball to it. The ball glowed brightly and to everyone's amazement, transformed into a golden bird! The bird flapped its wings and flew into the sky to join the sun.

