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Long ago, danger always came to the people in Great Park who were the most brave and to the places that were the most beautiful. Men and women were never what they seemed to be, for magic and mystery and wonder were always possible. But that is not so different from the way things are today.

Not long after the boy, Hero, came to Great Park, he went exploring. He walked down across some craggy hills toward the Duck Pond, past Great Park Gardens and Mercie's Vineyards, then around the shores of Lake Marmo. He skirted the edge of Deepest Forest to faraway Outpost Meadow. Sitting beside Singing Swamp, he opened the lunch of cheese and bread Caretaker's Wife had prepared for him. Finally, at midday, he sought the cool shadows of Wildflower Woods.

For the first time in his life, Hero felt content and protected. No Burners chased him. No flames threatened. He did not know who ruled this place, but it was certainly better than Enchanted City.

Suddenly, the sound of laughter surprised him. Following the sound, he discovered a girl sitting upon a stump, with flowers between her bare toes. She was braiding her long, dark hair. She stopped, arched her arm, and a butterfly alighted on her finger.

She turned at the sound of his coming. At her look, Hero covered his face with his hand. For one moment he had forgotten his terrible scar.

"I woke up late," she said, not surprised to see him. Blowing the butterfly aloft, she continued pulling one flower after another from between her toes, weaving them into the braid.

"Welcome to the Kingdom," she said with a smile.

"The Kingdom?" Hero echoed. Everyone knew there was no such thing. Then he stopped; of course, this girl must be pretending. He could play along. "Oh, I suppose your father is the King."

"Oh, no," she answered. "The King is my older brother, as he is a brother to all."

Hero tried not to show his doubts. "Then you must be a princess," he teased, looking at her much-washed pants and shirt.

"Yes." The girl was tying her gym shoes. She stood straight finally, curtsied grandly, pulling out the sides of her jeans with her hands. "I am the Princess Amanda. Welcome, Hero."

Hero choked back a laugh and was surprised she knew his new name. Before he could say anything else, however, the girl spat.

"Can you do that?" she asked.

Anyone can spit, thought Hero. He spat on the ground.

"Oh, but can you do this? Can you hit that toadstool over there?" The toadstool was fifteen feet away and small. Amanda spat again and hit it—bull's-eye! Hero didn't know anyone who could do that. He said so.

"It's a gift," said Amanda. "I have perfect aim."

She spat again and hit a knob on a tree, quite directly. "I was just going to the practice field, but I thought I would pick some flowers for my hair. We are practicing for the Great Celebration. What is your gift, Hero?"

The boy thought, but nothing came to his mind. He was relieved when their conversation was interrupted by a cry that

echoed through the woods: “How goes the world?”

An answer came back: “The world goes not well.”

Then another answer, “The Kingdom comes.”

“That’s the Watch cry,” Amanda explained. “It goes from tower to tower. The Rangers keep watch. They guard the park against Burners and Naysayers. They also look for lame things and fire in the forest, and they protect the outcasts. Their hearts are brave and full of courage,” said Amanda as she started walking toward the practice field.

“Wait! Wait!” Hero exclaimed. “I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything.”

Amanda stopped. Tendrils of hair were already loosened from her braid. Some of the wild flowers had fallen.

“What is a kingdom? The kingdom of what? Where is the Kingdom?”

Amanda’s jaw dropped. She laughed in surprise. “Why, that’s the first rule of Great Park: A Kingdom Is Anyplace Where the King Rules!”

The boy felt stupid. The answer seemed obvious, but he still didn’t understand. “I thought this was a park.”

“Of course it is; it’s Great Park. And the Kingdom is in it. This is where the King rules in exile. But the Kingdom is not only here. It is anywhere the King is and is obeyed. Someday the King’s rule will be restored in Enchanted City—and everywhere. That’s why we call out, ‘To the King! To the Restoration!’”

Hero was pondering all this when without warning, a loud horn blew in the forest. It was answered by another and another. *Croi-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e! Croi-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e!*

Amanda dropped the flowers. Her body tensed with action. The smile left her eyes. “Danger!” she cried. “Ranger horns. Sounding warning.”

The horns wailed again. The three short blasts. *Croie! Croie! Croie!*

“Fire! Fire in the forest!” Amanda shouted. “Come! We must help. The horns are calling for help!”

Hero felt a sickening cavern open in the pit of his stomach. Fires? His old fear rose to nauseate him. A vision of smoke and pillars of fire flashed behind his eyes. Death drums and a funeral pyre. The mark on his face began to throb. He covered it with his hand.

Amanda did not notice. “Come!” she said. She grabbed the older boy’s arm and ran through the woods with him in tow. “We must hurry!”

The two raced to a large lodge built on the edge of Deepest Forest. Hundreds of Rangers were gathering, men and women wearing long, blue cloaks, with the silver clasp at their shoulders. Some grabbed buckets, some shovels and brooms; then they all rushed into the sprawling building.

Hero and Princess Amanda entered and were pushed along by the crowd to the front of the large hall. On the platform, a tall and powerful-looking man was examining maps, barking commands, sending off small groups of Rangers this way and that.

Finally, he turned and motioned for silence. The hall grew suddenly still. The man in the front continued to hold up his hand. Hero noticed that his black hair was streaked with gray. The dark eyes blazed. He looked like he could be a king, if there were a king.

Amanda answered Hero’s unasked question. “No, this is not the King. This is Ranger Commander.”

“Fire in the forest,” announced the Commander. He pointed to the maps spread on the large boards. “Two fires begun at distant points within a short space of time. Here and here.”