

7 • The Forbidden Princess

In the courtyard of a small temple on the same street as the Enchanter's grand Dagoda, the Forbidden Princess came nightly to her balcony so that all who desired might gaze at her beauty. She was indeed lovely, but her eyes were empty and her expression blank.

Oh, Great Park ... Great Park. Amanda sighed and longed for her friends, Caretaker and Mercie, remembering the Circle of Sacred Flames and the Great Celebrations. How she would love to make entrance and become real—a princess again.

Despite these longings, she contented herself to be doing the crucial work of the Kingdom. In the months since slipping into Enchanted City, she had learned respect for her unpolished compatriots in the Taxi Resistance and for the skills of the chief, Big Operator, and she had discovered that her own gifts of perfect aim and seeing were invaluable to the cause.

Amanda spent many nights in the little courtyard not far from the bustling terminal of the City Taxi Company. She liked to sit in the soft light of the lanterns and remember Great Park—the graceful wood doves, the forest creatures, the pattern of leaf and sun and shade on a hidden stream.

After a while, Amanda realized that the dark-skinned beauty who came to the balcony was not simply idling away the nights; she was appearing on command. Citizens came to the temple—one here, another there, perhaps two or three together—and turned their faces toward the balcony. A tiny bell rang, a mere whisper of sound, and then the girl would appear, her soulless eyes staring. “Ah,” the people would say. “Such beauty!”

At first, Amanda came to the courtyard simply because she

needed a rest from the stress of traffic dispatching. Now she came because the plight of the girl drew her, a plight she didn't understand.

One night a damp fog stinking of sludge smoke and burning garbage settled on the city. Amanda walked the dark streets, restless for clean air and the sun and a romp on spongy moss. She was not afraid to roam at night. Amanda was not afraid of anything, except her own dangerous stubbornness—a lesson hard learned in a terrible incident that had brought shame to herself, pain to all she loved, and disaster to the only place she would ever call home.

She had loved a forbidden thing and had not been the same since. A child with wild flowers in her hair, whose laughter constantly announced her presence, Amanda once had loved extravagantly, without question. Now she questioned all loves and was cautious about loving anything.

On this night Amanda slipped into the courtyard. The lanterns cast an eerie glimmer in the fog that oozed from the streets under the heavy outer doors. She stood beneath the balcony window, glad that the girl would not have to make many appearances on this frightful night.

The bell whispered—oh, dear, she had gazed too long. The girl appeared; Amanda was sorry to have disturbed her. “She's very beautiful,” said a voice from the shadows behind her.

Amanda whirled around! Who was hiding in the courtyard? “Don't be afraid—” the form moved away from the cloisters. Even in the damp fog, its motion was familiar. The voice was comforting, a well-known voice.

Her old impudence returned. “Have you nothing better

to do than frighten unsuspecting maidens in dark streets? I thought you were supposed to be out chronicling sightings.” But Amanda was glad to see her old friend. Though she had heard much about his exploits, their paths had not crossed since that first day’s encounter in the taxi terminal.

Hero spoke in a low voice. “The same old Amanda. Be careful what you say. You never know who might be hiding in the shadows. This is a bastion of the Enchanter.”

He lifted a lantern from its hook and carefully shone it in the corners. They were alone. The girl on the balcony had taken her bored silence inside.

Hero was taller than Amanda remembered. By the light of the lantern, she noticed that the planes and angles of his face had broadened, outgrowing the scar that had disfigured a boy’s cheek. Now the old wound gave him a rakish, elegant air. He had become handsome.

She wanted to protest, “I’m not the same old Amanda. I’m no longer just a play friend!” But she suspected he had grown so tall he would never notice that she had grown as well.

He pulled her to a bench, where they sat together. “Big Operator told me you come here often.” He spread his dark-blue slicker around her shoulders to shelter her from the damp. Its color reminded her of the soft, rich homespun of Ranger cloaks, of flashing silver insignias, of courage and proud command and of the forest cry, “The Kingdom comes!”

“Amanda, you need to be careful roaming through Enchanted City. Great dangers lurk in every corner of every street.”

Amanda stiffened. Her answer was also low. “I can take care of myself.”

She wanted
to protest,
“I’m not the
same old
Amanda. I’m
no longer just
a play friend!”

But Hero was in earnest. “In Great Park you are the amazing princess who used to out-spit and out-aim any contenders! But this is my territory. Innocence is dangerous in Enchanted City. Case in point: Don’t ever come out on rainy nights without a covering, some sort of mackintosh. Even the air bodes ill; people die of the night ailment. The health you take for granted in Great Park and the healing powers of Mercie are not natural to this place.”

Amanda felt an old indignation rise—she was not a child—but it slipped away just as suddenly as it had come. She had learned all too well the folly of arrogance. She *had* been cold. She *was* glad for the warmth of his shared rain-cloth. He was right: The paths and forest trails were her native terrain, but the hard paving stones of this dark place were his. Now she must learn from him.

The courtyard doors to the street creaked open. A form crept in, and Amanda felt Hero tense beside her and grasp the handle of the hatchet beneath his slicker. A Breaker had entered the courtyard. Amanda’s own heart quickened; she had once seen the chalky white face, the piercing eyes, the chilling grin, the cudgel raised to bash her as she lay in pain. *To the King*, she mentally intoned. *To the Restoration*. The bell whispered; the girl came to the balcony; the Breaker gazed and withdrew to the streets.

Hero murmured again, “She’s so beautiful even the no-people come to look.”

“But her eyes, her eyes—they’re blank. There’s no life in them.”

“Of course,” explained Hero. “She’s the Forbidden Princess.”

“The Forbidden Princess?” Amanda asked. They were out on