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Opening Extract from...

Fierce Kingdom

Written by Gin Phillips

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4:55 p.m.

For a long while Joan has managed to balance on the balls of her bare feet, knees bent, skirt skimming the dirt. But now her thighs are giving out, so she puts a hand down and eases onto the sand.

Something jabs at her hip bone. She reaches underneath her leg and fishes out a small plastic spear – no longer than a finger – and it is no surprise, because she is always finding tiny weapons in unexpected places.

'Did you lose a spear?' she asks. 'Or is this one a scepter?'

Lincoln does not answer her, although he takes the piece of plastic from her open hand. He apparently has been waiting for her lap to become available – he backs up, settling himself comfortably on her thighs, not a speck of sand on him. He has a fastidiousness about him; he never did like finger painting.

'Do you want a nose, Mommy?' he asks.

'I have a nose,' she says.

'Do you want an extra one?'

'Who wouldn't?'

His dark curls need to be cut again, and he swipes them off his forehead. The leaves float down around them. The wooden roof, propped up on rough, round timber, shades them completely, but beyond it, the gray gravel is patterned with sunlight and shadows, shifting as the wind blows through the trees.

'Where are you getting these extra noses?' she asks.

'The nose store.'

She laughs, settling back on her hands, giving in to the feel of the clinging dirt. She flicks a few wettish grains from under her fingernails. The Dinosaur Discovery Pit is always damp and cold, never touched by the sun, but despite the sand on her skirt and the leaves stuck to her sweater, this is perhaps her favorite part of the zoo – off the main paths, past the merry-go-round and the petting barn and the rooster cages, back through the weedy, wooded area labeled only WOODLANDS. It is mostly trees and rocks and a few lonely animals back here along the narrow gravel paths: There is a vulture that lives in a pen with, for some reason, a rusted-out pickup truck. An owl that glares at a hanging chew toy. Wild turkeys that are always sitting, unmoving; she is not positive that they actually have legs. She imagines some cruel hunter's prank, some sweat-stained necklace strung with turkey feet.

She likes the haphazard strangeness of these woods, which are always shifting into some half-hearted try at an actual attraction. Currently a zip line is strung through the trees, although she never sees anyone zip-lining. She remembers animatronic dinosaurs here a couple of years earlier, and once there was a haunted ghost trail. There are hints at

more distant incarnations: large boulders that she assumes are real but possibly are not, plus split-log fences and a pioneer cabin. No obvious purpose to any of it. Empty cement pools might have been watering holes for large mammals. There are occasional efforts at a nature trail, random signage that makes a walk feel less anchored rather than more – one tree labeled SASSAFRAS while the twenty trees around it go nameless.

'Now, let me tell you something,' Lincoln begins, his hand landing on her knee. 'Do you know what Odin could use?'

She does, in fact, know a great deal about Norse gods lately.

'An eye store?' she says.

'Yes, actually. Because then he could stop wearing his eye patch.'

'Unless he likes his eye patch.'

'Unless that,' Lincoln agrees.

The sand around them is scattered with small plastic heroes and villains – Thor and Loki, Captain America, Green Lantern, and Iron Man. Everything comes back to superheroes lately. Pretend skeletons lurk beneath them in this sand pit – the vertebrae of some extinct animal protrude from the sand behind them, and there is a bucket of worn-down paintbrushes for brushing off the sand. She and Lincoln used to come here and dig for dinosaur bones, back in his former life as a three-year-old. But now, two months after his fourth birthday, he is several incarnations past his old archaeologist self.

The dinosaur pit is currently the Isle of Silence, the prison

where Loki, Thor's trickster brother, has been imprisoned, and – when questions of extra noses don't arise – the air has been echoing with the sounds of an epic battle as Thor tries to make Loki confess to creating a fire demon.

Lincoln leans forward, and his epic resumes.

'The vile villain cackled,' Lincoln narrates. 'But then Thor had an idea!'

He calls them his stories, and they can last for hours if she lets them. She prefers the ones where he invents his own characters. He's concocted a villain named Horse Man, who turns people into horses. His nemesis is Horse Von, who turns those horses back into people. A vicious cycle.

Joan is half aware of Lincoln's voice changing tones and inflections as he takes his different characters through their paces. But she is pleasantly drifting. In the mornings these paths would be crowded with strollers and mothers in yoga pants, but by late afternoon most visitors have cleared out. She and Lincoln come here sometimes after she picks him up from school – they alternate between the zoo and the library and the parks and the science museum – and she steers him to the woods when she can. Here there are crickets, or something that sounds like crickets, and birds calling and leaves rustling but no human sounds except for Lincoln calling out his dialogue. He has absorbed the patter of superhero talk, and he can regurgitate it and make it his own.

'There was a secret weapon on his belt!'

'His evil plan had failed!'

He is vibrating with excitement. Every part of him is shaking, from the balls of his feet to his chuffy fists. Thor

bobs through the air, and Lincoln bounces, and she wonders if he loves the idea of good conquering evil or simply an exciting battle, and she wonders when she should start making it clear that there is a middle ground between good and evil that most people occupy, but he is so happy that she does not want to complicate things.

'Do you know what happens then, Mommy?' he asks. 'After Thor punches him?'

'What?' she says.

She has perfected the art of being able to listen with half of herself while the other half spins and whirls.

'Loki has actually been mind-controlling Thor. And the punch makes him lose his powers!'

'Oh,' she says. 'And then what?'

'Thor saves the day!'

He keeps talking – 'But there's a new villain in town, boys!' – as she curls and straightens her toes. She thinks.

She thinks that she still needs to come up with a wedding present for her friend Murray – there is that artist who does dog paintings, and one of those seems like a thoughtful choice, so she should send an e-mail and see about placing the order, although 'order' is probably an insulting sort of word to an artist. She remembers that she meant to call her great-aunt this morning, and she thinks that maybe instead – she is solving problems left and right here, having a burst of mental efficiency as Loki gets buried in sand – maybe instead she will mail her great-aunt that hilarious paper-bag monkey that Lincoln made in school. Surely the artwork is better than a phone call, although there's a certain selfishness to it, since she hates to talk on the phone,

and, all right, it is a cop-out – she knows it – but she settles on the paper-bag monkey regardless. She thinks of the squash dressing her great-aunt makes. She thinks of the leftover plantain chips in the kitchen cabinet. She thinks of Bruce Boxleitner. Back in junior high she was slightly obsessed with him in *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, and she has discovered that the show is available in its entirety online, so she has been rewatching it, episode by episode – it holds up well for a 1980s show, with its Cold War spies and bad hair – and she can't remember whether Lee and Amanda finally kiss at the end of the second season or the third season, and she has six more episodes to go in the second season, but she could always skip to the third.

A woodpecker hammers somewhere nearby, and she is pulled back to here and now. She notices that the wart on Lincoln's hand is getting bigger. It looks like an anemone. There is that beautiful shifting of shadows on the gravel, and Lincoln is doing his evil-villain laugh, and it strikes her that these afternoons, with her son's weight on her legs, the woods around them, are something like euphoric.

Thor falls against her foot, his plastic head landing on her toe.

'Mommy?'

'Yes?'

'Why doesn't Thor wear his helmet in the movie?'

'I think it's harder to see with a helmet on.'

'But doesn't he want his head protected?'

'I suppose sometimes he wears it and sometimes he doesn't. Depending on his mood.'

'I think he should protect his head all the time,' he says.

'It's dangerous to battle without a helmet. Why do you think Captain America only wears a hood? It's not good protection, is it?'

Paul gets bored with this superhero chatter – her husband would much rather talk football formations and NBA line-ups – but Joan doesn't mind it. She was once obsessed with Wonder Woman. *Super Friends*. The Incredible Hulk. *Who would win in a fight*, she once asked her uncle, *Superman or the Incredible Hulk?* He'd said, *Well, if he was losing, Superman could always fly away*, and she'd thought that a blindingly brilliant answer.

'Captain America has his shield,' she tells Lincoln. 'That's what he uses for protection.'

'What if he can't get it over his head in time?'

'He's very fast.'

'But still,' he says, unconvinced.

'You know, you're right,' she says, because he is. 'He really should wear a helmet.'

Some sort of man-made rock forms the back wall of the pit, beige and bulging, and a small animal is rooting around behind it. She hopes it is not a rat. She imagines a squirrel but makes a point not to turn her head.

She opens her purse to peer at her phone. 'We probably need to start heading toward the gate in around five minutes,' she says.

As he often does when she says it's time to stop playing, Lincoln acts as if she has not spoken at all.

'Does Dr Doom always wear a mask?' he asks.

'Did you hear me?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'What did I say?'

'That we're about to leave.'

'Okay,' she says. 'Yes, Dr Doom always wears a mask. Because of his scars.'

'Scars?'

'Yeah, the scars he got in the lab experiment.'

'Why would he wear a mask because of them?'

'Because he wants to cover them up,' she says. 'He thinks they're ugly.'

'Why would he think they're ugly?'

She watches a bright-orange leaf land. 'Well, they made him look different,' she says. 'Sometimes people don't want to look different.'

'I don't think scars are ugly.'

As he's speaking, a sharp, loud sound carries through the woods. Two cracks, then several more. Pops, like balloons bursting. Or fireworks. She tries to imagine what anyone could be doing in a zoo that would sound like small explosions. Something related to the Halloween festivities? They've strung up lights all over the place – not here in the Woodlands but all over the more popular pathways – so maybe a transformer blew? Is there construction going on, a jackhammer?

There is another bang. Another and another. It sounds too loud to be balloons, too infrequent to be a jackhammer.

The birds are silent, but the leaves keep skittering down.

Lincoln is unbothered.

'Could I use my Batman for Dr Doom?' he asks. 'He wears black. And if I use him, can you make him the right kind of mask?'

'Sure,' she says.

'What will you make it with?'

'Tinfoil,' she suggests.

A squirrel scrabbles across the roof of the dirt pit, and she hears the soft *whoosh* of its impact when it leaps to a tree.

'And what will we use for the scarves?' Lincoln asks.

She looks down at him.

'Scarves?' she repeats.

He nods. She nods back, considering and replaying. She gives herself over to deciphering the workings of his brain: it is one of the bits of mothering that has delighted her all the more because she did not know it existed. His mind is complicated and unique, weaving worlds of its own. In his sleep sometimes he will cry out entire sentences – 'Not down the stairs!' – and there are windows to his inner machinery, glimpses, but she will never really know it all, and that is the thrill. He is a whole separate being, as real as she is.

Scarves. She works the puzzle of it.

'Do you mean the scarves on his face?' she asks.

'Yes. The ones he thinks are ugly.'

She laughs. 'Oh. I was saying "scars" – you know, like the one on Daddy's arm where the water burned him when he was little? Or the one on my knee from when I fell down?'

'Oh,' he says, sheepish. He laughs, too. He is quick to get a joke. 'Scars, not scarves. So he doesn't think scarves are ugly?'

'I don't really know how Dr Doom feels about scarves,' she says.

'He doesn't have them on his face.'

'No. Those are scars.'

She listens, half considering whether she could have handled the idea of scars more tactfully, half wondering about gunshots. But they could not have been gunshots. And if they had been, she would have heard something else by now. Screams or sirens or a voice coming over a loudspeaker making some kind of announcement.

There is nothing.

She has been watching too many battles.

She checks her phone. They only have a few minutes until the zoo closes, and it is entirely possible that they might be overlooked back here in the woods. She has imagined the scenario more than once: camping in the zoo overnight, maybe even intentionally hiding back here, going to visit the animals in the pitch-black of midnight – children's books are written about such situations. It's ridiculous, of course, because there surely would be security guards. Not that she has ever noticed a security guard here.

They should get moving.

'We need to go, sweet,' she says, lifting him from her lap, waiting until he takes his weight on his own feet, which he does reluctantly. She thinks he should be wearing a jacket, but he swore he wasn't cold, so she let him leave it in the car.

'Do we have a little more time?' he asks.

She gets up from the sand and slides on her sandals. This preference for sandals is the reason she lacks the moral authority to tell him to wear a jacket.

'No,' she says. 'It's nearly five thirty. Closing time. Sorry. We need to get out of here fast, or they might lock us in.'

She is now starting to get nervous about that possibility – she's waited too long, and they have the whole walk out of

the woods and then the long way through the children's area, and they really are going to be cutting it close.

'Can we stop at the playground and go across the bridge?' Lincoln asks.

'Not today. We can come back tomorrow.'

He nods and steps from the sand onto the sparse grass. He does not like to break rules. If the zoo people say it is time to go home, then he will go home.

'Can you help me with my shoes?' he asks. 'And put my guys in your purse?'

She bends down, brushes the sand from his feet, then pulls his socks over his pale toes and his wide, stubby feet. She tears open the Velcro straps of his tennis shoes and looks up to see a cardinal land an arm's length away. The animals have no fear in them at all here. She can sometimes spot half a dozen sparrows or chipmunks or squirrels within a few feet, eyeing whatever battle Lincoln is staging.

She drops his plastic figures into her purse.

'All done,' she says.

5:23 p.m.

Joan scans the sand pit for any forgotten plastic men, and then she takes Lincoln's hand and heads down the path leading out of the woods. She wonders when he will stop wanting to hold her hand, but for now they seem equally happy with the arrangement. In less than twenty steps the trees have opened up – it's only an illusion, the seclusion of this place – and there's the sound of the waterfall splattering on the rocks in front of the otter exhibit.

The otter is one of their favorite animals, one of the few that will still pull Lincoln from his stories. The two otters have a huge cavern-styled enclosure with faux-rock overhangs, and the animals curve and flip and dive in a greenish pool behind a wide glass wall. The rocks jut over the walkway, and a waterfall rushes over visitors' heads and spills down to a turtle pond thick with lily pads and reeds and some sort of purple-flowered stalk. The wooden footpath that winds over the pond has always struck her as the prettiest part of the Woodlands – but now it seems only empty.

Lincoln laughs next to her. 'Look at the otter. Look how he swims.'

He still struggles with words ending in *-er*. 'Ott-o,' he says, instead of 'otter'. Lex Luth-o. Score a goal in socc-o.

'I like his paws,' she says.

'He has paws? Not fins? Real paws like a dog or finger paws like a monkey?'

She is tempted to stop and point out the anatomy of otters. This is what she wants most for him, maybe, to see that life is full of astonishing things, to know that you should pay attention – *Look, it's beautiful*, he said, staring into a puddle of gasoline in the zoo parking lot – but they don't have time. She gives his hand a tug, and he comes easily enough, though his head is slow to turn away from the otter. As they step onto the wooden bridge, lily pads to either side of them, she wishes that they would see someone else, some other chattering family also running late. Not that it's unusual to have the path to themselves. They often see no one else all the way to the exit in the afternoon, and they are pushing it closer than usual to closing time. She picks up her pace.

'Want to race?' she asks.

'No.'

'You want to skip?'

'No, thank you.'

He plods along.

She sometimes wonders if his determination not to do a thing is in direct proportion to the amount of enthusiasm she shows for it. He continues meandering along the bridge, pausing to shrink back from a gnat or to stare down at a speckled koi. He comes to a complete stop to scratch his chin. When she asks him to hurry, he frowns, and she knows by the look on his face what he will ask for.

'I want you to carry me,' he says.

'I can't carry you all the way to the car,' she says. 'You're getting too big.'

She watches his lip slide out.

'Here's my compromise,' she says, before this escalates and slows them down further. 'I'll pick you up when we get to the scarecrows, and I'll carry you from there. If you can do a good job of walking to the scarecrows.'

'Okay,' he says, although his voice is wobbly and his lip is extending more, and he is starting to wail even as he moves his feet in time with hers.

She did not, it occurs to her, specify that he could not cry as he walks. He is technically meeting her terms. It is possible that he will cry himself out in a few seconds and get distracted by some passing thought of Thor's helmet or Odin's eye patch. It is possible that he will only cry more loudly, and she will give in and pick him up because he has actually walked quite a long way, uncomplainingly, on his small legs. It is possible that he will keep crying and she will stand firm and make him walk all the way to the car because she does not want him to turn into one of those children who throw tantrums.

Such a system of checks and balances – parenting – of projections and guesswork and cost–benefit ratios.

A dragonfly hovers and darts. A heron picks its way along the edge of the water. The wooden path cuts back and forth through trees and wild grass.

Lincoln has stopped crying, and she's fairly sure he's humming the Georgia Bulldogs' fight song – 'Glory, glory to old Georgia! / Glory, glory to old Georgia!' – although as soon

as she finishes the thought, he switches to the Texas Longhorns. No one in their family is a fan of either team, but he soaks up fight-song lyrics as he soaks up superheroes and villains.

He is a collector. He accumulates.

Through the trees she can see the tent-like top of the merry-go-round. It shines white against the dishwater sky. They pass a chicken-wire-enclosed exhibit for a one-legged eagle and a near-invisible enclosure for a pair of egrets. There are dead logs and monkey grass and lime-green weeds. She walks toward an overhanging branch, and one of its leaves detaches, turning into a yellow butterfly and weaving up to the sky.

Finally they are back on the concrete sidewalks, which are as wide as roads. Jack-o'-lanterns perch on the fence posts.

They take a few steps into civilization, and she glances over at the merry-go-round. It is still and silent; the painted giraffes and zebras and bears and gorillas and ostriches are frozen. Lincoln used to love the merry-go-round, although he would only ride a zebra. Now the carousel animals have rubber bats and tiny Kleenex ghosts floating around them, hanging from the wooden framework. She and Lincoln are close enough that the white canvas top covering the carousel spreads over them, bright and calm.

'Mommy,' he says. 'Carry me.'

'When we get to the scarecrows,' she says, ignoring his arms stretched toward her. 'Just a little farther.'

He doesn't protest this time. They hurry past the merry-go-round, toward the food court and the Kid Zone

Splash Park, with the fountains of shoulder-high water still arcing onto the blue-raspberry-colored splash pads.

'Medusa's been here,' Lincoln announces, and she looks beyond the spraying water to the shaded spot with the stone statues of a turtle, a frog and a lizard. These days, anytime they see stone figures it is a sign that Medusa has passed by. *Spider-Man has been here*, he says to spiderwebs.

'Those poor guys,' she says, because it is what she says every time they pass Medusa's victims.

'They should have kept their eyes closed,' he says, because it is what he says every time.

She glances at the darkened glass of the Koala Café, with its shelves of plastic-wrapped sandwiches and Jell-O and hard-boiled eggs, but she sees no sign of movement inside. The plastic chairs are upside down on the square tables. The staff usually close down the restaurants and lock the buildings fifteen minutes before closing time, so she's not surprised.

Off to their right is the playground with the rock mountains and swinging bridge. Once upon a time, Lincoln was interested in Antarctica, and the big rocks were icebergs. Then last spring he was playing knights and castles on the swinging bridge, yelling at invisible kings to bring out the cannons and to fill the catapults with rocks. Now that same bridge is always Thor's rainbow-colored pathway to Earth. In a year Lincoln will be in kindergarten and these days of superheroes will fade and be replaced by something she can't guess, and then at some point the zoo itself will be replaced and life will have gone on and this boy holding her hand will have turned into someone else entirely.

They are making good time now, scurrying past the gift shop and the wooden cut-out where a kid can stick his head through a hole and pretend he is a gorilla. They slow down by the algae-clogged aquariums at the edge of the children's area – Lincoln cannot resist looking for the giant turtle – and an older woman appears a few yards in front of them, just around the curve of the aquarium walls, staggering backward slightly. She is holding a shoe.

'The rock's out, Tara,' she says, and there is a certain cheerful desperation in her voice that identifies her as a grandmother. 'Come on, now.'

Two blonde girls, surely sisters, come into view, and the grandmother leans down, holding out the shoe to the smaller girl. Her hair is in pigtails, and she looks a little younger than Lincoln.

'We've got to go,' says the grandmother as she works the rubber sandal onto a small foot. Then she straightens.

The little one says something, too quiet to hear, even though they are all within a few feet of each other now. Several flies tap against the aquarium glass.

'I'll take them off when we get to the car,' says the grandmother, out of breath. She takes an off-balance step, holding the girls by their wrists. The girls blink at Lincoln, but then the woman is propelling them forward.

'That's a grandmother,' Lincoln says, too loudly, stopping suddenly enough that he jerks Joan's arm.

'I think so, too,' she whispers.

Joan glances toward the older woman – there is a flowery chemical smell in the air, perfume that reminds her of Mrs Manning in the sixth grade, who gave her and no one

else a copy of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* on the last day of school – but the woman and her grandchildren are gone now, already past the curve of the final aquarium.

'If I had a grandmother, is that what she would look like?' Lincoln asks.

He has been fixated on grandparents lately. She hopes it will pass as quickly as all his other phases.

'You do have a grandmother,' Joan says, tugging him forward again. 'Grandma. Daddy's mommy. She was here at Christmas, remember? She just lives far away. We need to go, sweet.'

'Some people have lots of grandparents. I only have one.'

'No, you have three. Remember? Now we've got to get going or we'll get in trouble.'

The magic words. He nods and speeds up, his face serious and resolute.

There is another popping sound, louder and closer than before, maybe a dozen sharp cracks in the air. She thinks it might be something hydraulic.

They've come to the edge of a pond – the largest one in the zoo, nearly a lake – and she catches a glimpse of swans cutting through the water. The path forks: the right branch would lead them around the far side of the pond, up through the Africa exhibit, but the left will take them to the exit in a few less seconds. She can see the green-and-red flash of the parrots up ahead, unusually quiet. She likes their little island in the middle of all the concrete – a bricked-in pool with a grassy mound and spindly trees – and it is always their first and last stop, the final ritual of every visit.

'Start practicing your parrot caws,' she tells him.

'I don't need to practice,' he says. 'I just want to see the scarecrows.'

'We'll have to look at them while we walk.'

A long row of scarecrows has been propped along the fence that circles the pond. Many of them have pumpkins for heads, and Lincoln is fascinated by them. He loves the Superman one and the astronaut one – with the pumpkin painted like a white space helmet – and especially the Cat in the Hat.

'All right, sweet,' she says.

He drops her hand and lifts his arms.

She glances along the fence, spotting the bright-blue pumpkin head of Pete the Cat. About halfway down the fence several scarecrows have fallen. Blown down by the wind, she assumes, but, no, it hasn't been stormy. Still, the scarecrows have collapsed, half a dozen of them scattered all the way down to the parrot exhibit and beyond.

No, not scarecrows. Not scarecrows.

She sees an arm move. She sees a body way too small to be a scarecrow. A skirt, hiked indecently over a pale hip, legs bent.

She is slow to lift her eyes, but when she looks farther, past the shapes on the ground, past the parrots, toward the long, flat building with public bathrooms and doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, she sees a man standing, facing away from her, unmoving. He is by the water fountain. He is in jeans and a dark shirt, no coat. His hair is brown or black, and other than that she cannot see details, but she cannot miss it when he does finally move. He kicks the bathroom door, his elbow coming up to catch it, a gun in his right

hand, some sort of rifle, long and black, the narrow end of it stretching like an antenna past his dark head as he disappears into the pale-green walls of the women's bathroom.

She thinks there is another movement around the parrots, someone else still on his feet, but she is turning away by then. She does not see more.

She grabs Lincoln and heaves him up, his legs swinging heavily as he lands against her hip, her right hand grabbing her left wrist underneath his bottom, linking her arms.

She runs.