

# 11 • The War of Fire

**A**nd now, evil lifted its head at the noise of chaos. As smoke billowed from Great Park, dark figures began to advance out of the Enchanted City...

Caretaker rushed into the cottage carrying Princess Amanda in his arms. He laid the child on a cot. Mercie strained to see her. "What has happened?" she asked.

"Fire-fighting," the old man answered, and the look he gave his wife told all: Because of Princess Amanda's disobedience, Great Park was now vulnerable to danger.

*Croi-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e!* *Croie! Croie!* The Ranger horns blasted the warning over and over. Fire! Danger!

"Do what you can for her, but quickly!" Caretaker ordered, hurrying toward the door. "Then come to Inmost Circle. The Enchanter's men are rushing the gate. You will be needed right away."

Immediately, Mercie turned and went to the fireplace, where she quickly mixed together a basin full of herb salves. "Hero," she called, "I need your help. Dip these clean rags into the bowl. Then cover the child's burns. Like so."

Mercie cut away Amanda's singed clothes and covered her with a blanket. Hero watched as the old woman patted compresses into place on all the scorched and burned skin. She took a mug and filled it from the jug of healing draught. Gently, she poured it down Amanda's throat.

*Croi-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e!* the horns sounded, urgently.

"I must go," Mercie said to Hero. "Danger has breached our gates." The old woman paused as she went out the door. "If you are threatened in any way, do not be afraid. Speak the Ranger

cries to give you strength: 'To the Kingdom! To the King!'"

Then she was gone.

Hero watched the wounded girl, so still on the cot. What had happened? Her blistered skin, her closed and swollen eyes frightened him. She scarcely seemed to be breathing.

Frantic noises from outside intruded into the silence of the cottage. All the able people of Great Park were hurrying toward Inmost Circle where the Sacred Flames were being lit. Hero heard Ranger shouts, heard the warning horns sounding over and over. Then from far away, he heard the ominous, low beat of the death drums of Enchanted City. His ears picked out another sound, too: *Nay-nay-nay, nay-nay-nay, nay-nay-nay.*

It was the battle song of the Naysayers, who held the power to freeze people's minds by speaking "no" into their hearts. Hero knew that Burners, spreading fires of destruction with their glowing pokers, and Breakers, carrying cudgels to beat to death those who resisted them, would be creeping behind the marching army of Naysayers.

Hero's heart filled with despair. The boy looked at the girl on the cot. He knew she was dying. *Amanda, Amanda*, he moaned inwardly as all the memories of the young princess came rushing upon him: Amanda sitting on a stump in the woods, with flowers between her toes; Amanda throwing Caretaker's hatchet with perfect aim to defend him against the Faithless Ranger; Amanda laughing.

Hero knelt beside the cot, his eyes wet with tears. Then he remembered Mercie's last instructions. "To the King," he whispered, choking on the words. "To the Kingdom!" His heart was heavy, but he repeated the words over and over. Suddenly a

quick power seemed to fill him, a force close to anger. He stood and shouted at the top of his lungs, "To the Kingdom! To the King!"

Did the room tilt? Or was Hero simply overcome by his emotion? Amanda suddenly stirred on the cot, and Hero realized he could no longer hear Naysayers chanting their cry.

The girl groaned under the blankets. Her eyelids fluttered open. "Caretaker? Fire!"

Hero knelt beside her again. "He's gone, Amanda. He and Mercie and all in Great Park are hurrying to Inmost Circle."

The girl sat up, swooned, and tried again. Hero fought to keep her from rising, but she was desperate. "Don't stop me!" She screamed. "We must go! We are all in danger!"

Frantic, Hero turned to search for the healing draught of medicine. *Where did Mercie put the jug?* But he stopped when he heard someone enter the cottage. Whirling around, Hero saw a dark figure standing in the doorway. It was bent and huddled, hidden beneath the folds of a dark robe, but Hero could see the face, chalk-white, with piercing eyes and a chilling grin. The intruder held an ugly club, knobbed and brutal-looking, in its hand.

It crept slowly but surely toward the corner where Amanda rested.

Hero wanted to throw himself in the path of this terrible form, but he was as frozen as the moment, which seemed to move on crippled feet.

The Breaker raised his cudgel above his head. Amanda moaned. Then from nowhere, Hero heard a shout. The stamp of rushing feet and the whirl of a flying hatchet filled the room. A man in a blue

cloak and the ghostly Breaker were locked in a fierce wrestling match, which sent chairs and tables crashing and ended with the Breaker being hurled out the door into the smoky afternoon.

A Ranger stood in the middle of the cottage, straightening tables and chairs. He shot a grim smile at Hero and Amanda, both of whom were filled with shock. "That's one for Great Park!" he said as he tossed the cudgel, abandoned by its owner, into the fireplace.

"How...?" Hero asked.

The Ranger gently and carefully wrapped Amanda in a blanket. "My orders were to come get you two," he answered. "Saw him sneaking in. The lousy creatures! Always take advantage. Now the Park's full of his kind." He hefted the girl into his arms and motioned with his head to Hero. "Grab something loose-fitting that she can wear. And hurry!"

The Ranger stepped swiftly out of the cottage, but Hero hesitated, his heart beating wildly at the thought of walking through a burning Great Park. Something like an unbidden prayer, or an old song half-remembered, quietly rose within him. *To the King... to the King...*

In one movement the boy rushed after the Ranger into the hot and strange afternoon. A strong smell of smoke choked the air. The sky above was boiling with awful, yellow-gray clouds. Something shadowy caught Hero's eye. A dark form darted behind a tree, then another followed it.

When they finally reached Inmost Circle, the Sacred Flames were blazing with power. Rangers inside the circle were shouting commands as the subjects organized into striking units, firefighters, protectors, and flame carriers.

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