

4 • Mudslinging

On beautiful days, most people felt Bright City was becoming a wonderful place to live. But sometimes the weather was less than perfect. Occasionally there was even a bad storm. When unforeseen troubles multiplied, more than a few people still complained. When they were inconvenienced too much, they looked for someone to blame. "It's his fault, or her fault, or your fault..."

"Mudslinging!" The report came over Central Radio Dispatch at MERCY ST. TAXI CORPS. "Mudslinging! Play Plaza No. 5."

Hero, Little Child and Amanda were touring the taxi headquarters. Since New Day Rising and the ousting of the Enchanter, there was no need for an underground resistance. Now the taxi company was involved in rescue operations that could be carried out in broad daylight. The efficient restored garage was a command center for the Restoration. Another report came crackling over the dispatch.

"Mudslinging! Play Plaza No. 5. Mudslinging! Play Plaza No. 9."

Hero groaned and hurried to the strategy map that was mounted high and filled one whole wall. Climbing the platform, he located the two trouble spots. In frustration, he slapped his hand against the map. "Chaos," he mumbled. "Always happens after power-outs." He motioned to Amanda and Little Child to join him on the scaffolding.

The Chief Cabbie also hastened to the map wall and looked up, "Pendant three and pendant four. Whaddaya expect?"

"These were the pendants that were energy futile in the power-out," Hero explained.

The Chief pulled an alarm bar, sounding a loud signal: *Trouble! To the streets! Trouble! To the streets!*

Hero stepped down from the platform and grasped his brother's shoulder. "This is one of the reasons power-outs are dangerous to the city, L.C. When the energy fails, some people act as though the Enchanter still ruled. They panic. They forget Kingsways. All the unplanted plazas have been scenes for recent mudslinging. For some reason, people start calling one another names and throwing dirt."

By this time the garage was rumbling with the sound of doors slamming, ignitions firing, cabbies shouting, tires squealing.

Hero shouted to Amanda, "Take L.C. with you and go in the first taxi vanguard to Play Plaza No. 5! I'll try to catch Ranger Commander. He was afraid this might happen again."

"And you"—he pointed at Little Child as he backed away—"stay in the taxi. Whatever happens, don't get out into the streets. I'm warning you, you're liable to get mud right in the face." With that, Hero and the Chief Cabbie rushed away to jump into a command taxi. Its siren wailed and its flashing light began to rotate.

"Over here!" shouted a cabbie to Amanda and Little Child. "Get a move on."

In short order, the yellow checkered taxis were out onto the streets, each driver knowing exactly his or her place in the vanguard and each understanding his or her responsibility.

Little Child sat tense in the back seat, watching out the windows for trouble. "Amanda? Why do the people throw mud?" This never happened in Great Park. People weren't cruel to one another there. How could this be the King's city if the

people threw dirt at one another?

Amanda leaned from the front seat where she was riding watchpoint beside the driver. "City ways, I guess. Something about the power going out. I'm not sure why. But I do know we better get all those play plazas planted and landscaped soon."

One by one the yellow taxis rounded a corner, dispersing into a large circle with the intent of moving slowly into and through the disorder. Little Child was startled to see mobs of people gathering on opposing sides of a street outside the unfinished plaza. Inside the stone walls, mounds of earth, readied for trees and shrubs, were piled along the walkways. Clods of dirt flew through the air. Crude, hastily lettered signs bobbed over the heads of the people: "POWERWORKERS ARE SABOTEURS!" "THE CITY THAT DOESN'T WORK!" People raised their fists and shouted angrily at each other.

"It's your fault!" A fistful of mud flew through the air. *Whap!*

"No. It's your fault! Power was better in the old days." More fistfuls of mud winged back across the street. *Whap! Whap!*

People pushed each other and shoved, ducked, and jostled to be in the best slinging position. Little Child was amazed to see mothers shouting from the curbs, their children beside them. They screamed and slung mud while their boys and girls watched wide-eyed. Anger pulsed through the crowd, charged with catcalls and baiting.

"Wait here," said Amanda as she opened the cab door. A roar of noise rushed in. She ducked a flying glob.

"Bu-but it's dangerous out there," Little Child replied.

"Yes!" she shouted. "That's why I said to stay in the taxi!"

He could barely
hear her cries,
"These are not
Kingsways!
No name-
calling! No
mudslinging!"

The door slammed and Little Child watched as Amanda began to edge through the crowd. He could barely hear her cries, "These are not Kingsways! No name-calling! No mudslinging!" Soon she was swallowed up in the angry jostling.

His heart pounding, Little Child settled anxiously into the seat. The cabbie monitored dispatches over his radio, signaling his position, then at a command—"Taxis advance!"—drove slowly, slowly, parting the shouting crowd. The boy pressed his nose against the back window. A blob of mud hit the glass.

Smack!

He jerked his face back in surprise. Had someone flung dirt at him? The messy clod slid to the car's trunk, and then an athletic form came running past, scooped up the pile, took aim and whanged it back into the crowd. "Hah! Gotcha!"

This was awful. How did rioting get stopped once it had started? Another mudball hit the glass and splattered across the window. *Smack!*

Little Child was enraged. He wasn't doing anything wrong. Why were they throwing at him? He wanted to open his door, scoop up the dirt and toss it himself. And where was Amanda?

Meanwhile the cabbie kept inching the taxi deeper, deeper into the fracas. It was from this position that Little Child could clearly see the opposing mobs, each on one side of the street. "Ya want dirt? You'll get dirt!" *Splat! Splat!*

And wha-a-a? Who was that? Who was that man in the middle of the street, that streetcleaner with a cart and pushbrooms and shovels and a dustbin? What an odd and dangerous thing to be doing, cleaning the mud right in the middle of the fight. And how useless! The more he shoveled, the more mud landed in the street.