

Johanna the Warrior Maid tells the Tale of Faraway Burning.

A work in progress, by Johanna.

Near evening, on a crisp night late in November of the year 2015, King Aaron of Faraway watched the shadows lengthen north of the city. He would face south to watch the sunset except for one thing. His daughter was somewhere to the north, lost for months along with his oldest friend and many dozen of his loyal woodlanders and their friends. After the loss of his new wife, herself cursed and acting against him, he was finding it hard to bear.

He desperately wanted the Princess Virtue to be safe. She had been through so much in her short life, even considering the curse laid upon her on her naming day by the fairy queen, Baeldannen. Misfortune followed her, defined her.

High King Aaron considered this as he watched the passing sun lengthen over the Border Hills and Cottington Woods beyond. He was absorbed. And that was why he did not at first hear the cry of the guard outside his door. No one would, unannounced, enter his private chambers without good reason, so when the door swung open he turned, prepared for just about anything.

A soldier held the door wide as the Captain on watch, Sir William, entered. Sir William was concerned, which made the High King concerned.

The High King waited, but for only long enough for the captain to form a quick bow and right himself. Hurriedly, the captain told him, "The city, sire. We're under attack."

He had his sword on and was heading to the door almost before the man was finished speaking. "Who? How?" the High King asked. "Is it Roderick?" He thought the Clubland King wouldn't dare. But he also knew that Roderick just might.

"Sire..."

Now the High King did wait, and was instantly impatient. "Tell me, captain."

Sir William told him, "I'm sorry, your Majesty. We just don't know. The parks along the waterfront are burning. Brigades were assigned to control them, but figures of fire emerged and attacked them. We cannot get near enough to get them under control."

They moved through the castle. This floor was entirely comprised of the High King's apartments, most of which had not been used since the High Queen left. The sky to the south glowed red. It was dusk, but in addition to the swollen sun of the evening the sky was filled with roiling clouds of angry black smoke. A line had been drawn along the shore of Midland Lake with walls of flame, flickering and barely visible through the smoke. The fire was large.

"When did this happen, captain?" he demanded.

"Moments ago, majesty," the captain replied. "I wasted no time in alerting you."

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Rings of flame had appeared as if from nowhere, each in a separate wooded park. The fire spread quickly. Bucket brigades were set up equally as quick, but by then the various small fires had reached out to one another and formed that single, long wall. As men got closer to fight the rising flames, creatures emerged, like men in shape but burning. What defenders that did not die were forced to retreat.

Within the burning wall, at points wherefrom the flame had first appeared, formed pockets of relative calm. The defenders of the city were not at first aware of these pockets. It was High King Aaron Faraway who first saw them, watching as he was from his tower high atop the castle wall. Though there was still plenty of fuel to burn, the flame therein guttered and went out.

“More creatures?” he asked, more to himself than to the captain who still stood beside him.

But the captain peered carefully across the distance. “I think not,” he told his liege. “Those are men.”

But for the smoke he could not make out their colors, but the men were many and growing greater in number by the moment. They formed ranks around that initial point, facing outward. They bore shields, he could see, and some had spears or swords.

“Archers,” the High King commanded, and the captain was gone, shouting as he ran down the halls out of the High King’s apartment.

The army of Faraway is well trained, and at the time they did not need the king to lead. By the time that Sir William reached the front of the battle, other officers had brought to bear archers who quickly fired volley after volley into the flames. Arrows turned to burning arrows, and at least some struck the growing army that was forming behind the wall. With the number that was already in place, it would have been impossible to miss.

The creatures within the flame, indeed the flame itself obeyed the same mind that issued the men forth, seemingly from out of nowhere. They strode outward. Behind them came the wall, and within that wall the number of soldiers grew. Arrows struck at the creatures of flame. Some fell, yet others managed to reach the wall of archers, who fell back and made way for men with swords.

There was chaos all throughout the streets of Faraway. Men and women fled as soldiers passed them heading in the other direction. Fire leaped, crossing alleys and avenues. Where stone did not burn and fire would starve the beasts would appear, leaping almost as in joyous celebration high into the air and onto that which did burn, and the fire continued to grow.

Soldiers burned, but even as they did they struck a blow against the creatures of flame. The things were not unharmed by steel. In places did archers fire back from within the flame, but they could not strike at the city’s defenders without also striking their fiery allies.

Then came the men of Laketower, wielding magic, and weaving spells of water and air. They came on the city in boats, landing on the far side of the conflict. Smoke became steam as the rear wall of the attacking flames were extinguished. The men within turned on the magicians. A great many died to their magic, but they brought death to the magicians as well, and those new comers to the battle were forced to flee back their boats, and back across the lake to their tower.

The attack by the magicians drew the attention of the attackers away from the soldiers of Faraway. Those men plunged into the flames while archers loosed over their heads. The ring of flame that protected the invading men remained, but of the creatures therein there were less.

The High King did not watch the conflict from above. With sword in hand he came to the conflict. "Report," he ordered. "Tell me what is going on."

His priests had not been idle. While some busied themselves healing the burned and the injuries inflicted by raining missiles, others had divined the nature of their enemy. They made their reports, and, so informed, Sir William found the High King. "Elemental spirits, your majesty. They emerged from gateways. From Fairy we believe."

"Baeldannen," the High King growled.

Sir William told him, "It seems likely."

The High King asked, "The men?"

The captain said, "They wear green and black, sir. As you suspected, they come from Collamoore."

The High King ground his teeth.

"That isn't all, sir," the captain continued. "The Frostwroth are with them."

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The wall of fire faltered but did not break. From between pockets of flame the Clubland soldiers emerged, meeting the city men with the clash of steel on steel. The sun set over Faraway City, but the orange glow still emanated from great pockets where fire burned.

High King Aaron Faraway fought furiously beside Sir William and his men. As his arm grew tired he recalled his daughter and wondered if he would see her again, and after that he was too busy fighting for his life and the life of his city to spare her another thought.

This occurred in late November. It is January now. The High king is alive, if not well. His daughter is absent still from his side, but he is grateful for that, because the city still fights, the fires still burn, and the conflict looks far from ending.