

Daylight commenced, conveying with it the raging torrents of ice and wind so typical of the local milieu. As the new day dawned, patches of pure white ground were made visible under the azure sky, and crystal-clear pools of frozen water were unearthed with a vivid brilliance that would have momentarily stunned onlookers, had there been any. But the single sky village that dared brave the area had not yet awoken. The day was young, the villagers were not. Their chores could surely spare a few more hours of un-attendance. And that indolence, thought the scouts of the Alvara, well-hidden in a deep cave nearby, would surely be their downfall. Such had it been with the others.

Schleik's diminutive figure appeared at the far end of the Quarter at precisely 2 PM, as it did every day. However, something from his typical cheerful gait was missing. His shoulders slightly sagged, his head bowed; these immediately began ringing alarm bells in a certain onlooker's head, as he happened to be gazing out the Common House window.

"Schleik! What's the matter? Speak up boy!"

Schleik continued at his sluggish pace, slowly walking down one of the various suspended walkways that connected the village, determinedly looking down, until it occurred to him several minutes later that an alarmingly hefty shadow was standing immobile right in front of him, effectively hampering his path home. Realizing that 'spilling it' was inexorable, Schleik reluctantly gazed upwards, into the affable features of his Uncle Thorix.

"Schleik! What's the matter lad?"

A groan emanated from deep within Schleik's petite form.

"Brax caught a virus, and the doctors are at a loss as to when he'll be up on his feet again... And as if that isn't enough, Krul and his gang have decided that now's as good a time as any to get me, what with Brax not being here to protect me anymore."

A low growl rumbled from Thorix's chest.

"I'll be blasted if I just stand around while some dirty kids mess with my own blood."

A smile hesitantly broke out on Schleik's face, as he realized that with Uncle Thorix around, Krul wasn't going to bother him. And, just as suddenly, that smile shattered.

"What about school? You aren't there with me!"

“Believe me boy, if that Krul so much as lays a hand on you at school, he’ll have more to reckon with than Brax when he’s feeling up again. I don’t doubt that Brax could handle all of those scummy kids by himself, but even an ox like him has his limits. And that’s when you call me!” laughed Thorix with a mighty clap on Schleik’s bare back.

Feeling cheered, Schleik thanked his uncle and continued on his way home, mulling over the tiring times at school he had endured that day. What with Krul’s bullying, his spiteful teachers, and his only friend in the world not being there to comfort him, it came as no small wonder that Schleik was feeling very small and alone lately. Of course, he had his uncle. But how often did he get to see him? Three, maybe four times a week? Certainly not frequently enough to outweigh all of the hardships he had to endure daily.

His family life was hardly better. Schleik’s parents were rarely sober, and were constantly either gone, or experiencing the after-effects of heavy drinking at home. This of course led to constant fighting between his parents, and several occasions where Schleik would simply have to sneak out of the house, to avoid being caught in the middle of his parents’ hostile rampages.

Friends, Schleik had one. His name was Brax, and he was the only thing that kept Schleik willingly going to school day after day. Brax was a massively built student for his age, and literally acted as a barrier between Krul’s gang and Schleik. There had been numerous occasions where Krul would have been responsible for the brutal beating of Schleik, when, as if by a message from some god, Brax would appear and ‘save the day.’

Thus, it came as no surprise that Schleik missed him dearly. If not for the practical reason that he was now a target for Krul and his gang, then for the sentimental reason that Brax was his one friend in the vast reaches of the known world. His one link to intelligent companionship, to brotherly love. Brax needed to get well again, and soon.

Two-hundred miles to the west, all Hell was breaking loose. From the sky, all seemed serene and peaceful. The clear, crisp mid-afternoon, the powerful, majestic forest sweeping as far as the eye could see underneath, the mighty mountaintops soaring gracefully in the distance, all served to create a scene of the utmost tranquility and harmony. To the casual observer, that is. But a bird, or perhaps a gifted hunter somehow taken to the skies, could possibly have detected the malevolence in the air. They could have seen the thin screen of smoke rising from between the thick foliage of the canopy, heard the faint reports of agonized screams far beneath, or perhaps even sensed the faint smell of seared flesh. Assuming a tree-top level view, it would become apparent why.

Lines of gaunt-faced men were impassively firing volley after volley of barb-tipped arrows from their position on the ground, into what appeared to be a suspended ball of fire in the white-washed trees. After some scrutiny, it would have become apparent that that 'ball of fire' was in fact another sky-village. That is, a sky-village in the savage process of utter decimation. Behind the formations of archers, seasoned groups of artillery operators were launching barrels and pots of oil into the canopy, which exploded in fiery blasts of searing heat, effectively melting ice and flesh alike. But at this point, who was left to care whether they were burned or not? Certainly not the villagers, most of whom were lying dead on the dangling walkways in the treetops, or collapsed mere decimeters from the stairways leading to the ground, with flaming arrows in their backs or bear traps savagely clamped around their bloodied legs. The evil in the air was unmistakable. The pure, unblemished iniquity of the event in progress was so strong as to be almost tangible.

To the few villagers still alive in the inferno-village, this was completely unprecedented. Who had ever heard of hunters amassing in such large groups, giving themselves a name that identified them as a single faction, and attacking faultless villages? It was unheard of.

But, orthodox or not, the one thing that presented itself as evident to the few villagers still alive was the need to escape. The news needed to be circulated, so that the other villages could arm themselves if necessary against this new threat. But how? All of the visible staircases leading to the ground were being watched. That much could be ascertained by gazing at the piles of corpses lining the wintry forest floor. So how, then, could an escape be made?

These questions raced through the village headman's mind as he assessed the situation. Speaking, he proclaimed, "My friends. This is completely unprecedented. Nothing like this has ever happened in the history of our people. As such, I regret to inform you that I am at a loss as to what may be done. I see there are almost 20 of us gathered here, in one of the last few unburned buildings left in the village. And we cannot afford to lose anyone. The word must be spread. An escape needs to be made. Our people must reach the other villages of the Loop, and tell them of the abominations that are occurring!"

A tide of agreement swept through the crowd.

"But what, chief?" a voice piped. "We ain't got any more routes to take! Look at old Stem and his family! They tried climbing that secret vine behind the inn, and even they got caught! I say we might as well stay here and at least die within our own homes, and not on the ground like unintelligent beasts!"

Unease gripped the assembly. The headman seemed to ponder these words for a minute. Seeming to reach a consensus with himself, he spoke.

“Well, tell me, Urik. You’ve no family or close friends here, do you?”

“Umm, no chief, as you very well know. What’s it got to do with this?” inquired Urik.

“Now tell me Urik, do you still have any family left *anywhere*?”

“Of course I do sir! My family is one of the most extensive in the Loop! Always has been,” proclaimed the man proudly. “Of course, they all up and left me here to go ‘make their fortunes,’ as they called it, but I don’t mind. This is home to me, always has been. Even when—”

“That’s enough, Urik,” the headman cut in.

The man nodded, not abashed in the slightest.

“Back to the point, all I was trying to ascertain was that you *do* in fact have family residing in the other villages. But now, let me ask you to do something, Urik. Take a peep out that window over there, and tell me what you see.”

Urik obediently trotted over to a window in the corner of the home they were gathered in, and took a quick, furtive glance outside, before immediately ducking his head back in.

“Chief! I see fire everywhere, and dead people all around! It’s the stuff of nightmares, chief! Why would you want me to see that?!” cried the man.

“Now, I would ask you to be honest with yourself. Do you truly believe that this is going to stop here, Urik? Do you really think that these men, massed for war, are attacking *just our village*, and then returning to whatever pits of Hell they sprang from? Or, do you think it more likely that they will in fact move on to the rest of the Loop, and attack the other villages?”

“Well, if you put it that way sir, I s’pose they might go for the other towns...” mumbled Urik uncomfortably.

“Which, correct me if I’m mistaken,” continued the headman, “would ultimately result in that (at ‘that,’ he pointed out the window, to the carnage outside) happening to the other villages, and your *extensive* family. Now, I may be wrong in assuming this, but you don’t really want that to happen, do you Urik?”

“No sir...” mumbled the man, head hung and point received.

“Right then. Now that that’s settled, I think we can all agree that an escape needs to be made. Any suggestions?” asked the headman invitingly.

At that moment, a sudden explosion rocked the building, causing the very tree it was perched in to sway ominously. A volley of sharp *thwap*'s followed this, before culminating in a series of dull thuds on the outside of the structure.

With a wry smile, the headman spoke. "To those of you with ideas, I'd suggest you present yourselves now, or forever hold you own, and all of our peace. God with us."

"Oi! Where do you think you're going, chimp?"

At the sound of that rough and easily distinguished voice, Schleik immediately felt a wave of dread sweep over him. Slowly pivoting in an about-face, he turned toward Krul, and the gang he always had with him.

"I said, *where do you think you're going?*" barked Krul, taking two massive strides forward and slamming his arms into Schleik's unclothed chest. As Schleik was virtually launched off his feet and into a nearby drainage ditch, the harsh laughing of Krul and his cronies could be heard above all else. A mounting sense of terror crescendoed in Schleik's small form.

Krul began walking towards the ditch, his gang barely containing their suppressed mirth behind him.

And again, as he had done so many times before, Schleik wondered at the sheer injustice of it all. Simply being small had made him a target for one of the most colossally-built students in the village. Schleik usually kept to himself. He was quiet, and very observant. He was a watcher, a recorder. But he rarely took part in any events himself, content to merely sit back and watch as others acted. He bothered no one, and was not spiteful, not rude, nor malcontent.

And yet, here he was, this mammoth of a mammal staggering toward him, thinking of his pain as nothing more than a little game. Life certainly wasn't the fairest force in the world.

"Well, chimp. Are you going to apologize or not?" asked Krul with a sneer, now directly in front of the ditch in which Schleik was still lying limp in.

"Apologize? For what?!" asked Schleik with a slight crack in his voice.

"For getting in my way!" shouted the bully, spittle flying from his large, hairy lips and splattering on Schleik's face.

Sighing inwardly, Schleik consented.

“I’m sorry, Krul,” he said, rising slowly out of the ditch to face the bully.

“SAY IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT!”

At that, Krul lifted a huge fist, the arm supporting it bursting with vividly detailed veins. To say Schleik was terrified would have been a rash understatement. Even after years of the same mistreatment, he was still nowhere near developing a tolerance for the cruelty. Krul was always contriving new and innovative plots on how best to make Schleik’s life a misery. And each of these novelties was still painfully fresh in Schleik’s mind. As such, the white of the clouds in the sky accurately reflected the colors of Schleik’s eyes, just as the bending and quivering of the trees the village was perched upon replicated the shaking of Schleik’s frail body.

The fist came cutting through the air as cleanly as if it were a knife slicing through a stick of butter. Schleik’s eyes followed the hand rapidly approaching his protruding jaw, until contact was made. The force of the impact literally lifted Schleik off his feet, and sent him hurtling through the air back into the ravine, where he lay in a sprawling heap.

Again, the sounds of Krul and his gang’s mirth were the most prominent aspects of the scene Schleik found himself trapped in. He heard their laughter, and he cowered from it. The harsh cacophony of derision came pounding into Schleik’s head with all the gentleness of a sword thrust. It cornered him, reminding him how worthless he was; how insignificant he was.

He was a game for others to play with, an object for useful members of society to use whenever they deemed fit. He was nothing, important to no one.

Again and again, these thoughts ricocheted through Schleik’s head, slowly eroding his sense of self-worth, and weathering his will to get up and walk away. He could just lie there, drifting in and out of time, oblivious to his surroundings, while all the hurt and pain that seemed to be the primary fruits of the world continued on, undisturbed by Schleik’s absence. It certainly seemed preferable to getting out of the ravine, only to be thrown back in the next day.

“C’mon mates. The little bugger’s had his fill,” announced one of Krul’s henchmen.

“OI! IT’S OVER WHEN I SAY IT’S OVER!” shouted Krul, livid that someone had dared try to direct their course of action.

“Krul! Look at him! He’s barely moving! Let’s just leave ‘em and go before someone sees us!”

“It’s a bit late for that, I’m afraid,” announced a new voice.

This voice was different than the others... It was warm, pleasant. Deeply reminiscent of a full autumn day, spent relaxing in leaf-beds on the forest floor, and bursting with a sense of comfort and surety.

“Scram!” shouted one of Krul’s men.

“And why should we? What’s tough-boy gonna do if we don’t?” demanded Krul, clearly angered by the intrusion.

“Well, for starters, I’m going to help my friend stand up,” said Brax, indicating the limp figure of Schleik. “And then, of course, if you won’t leave peacefully, I’m afraid we just may be at an impasse.”

Following his spoken course of action, Brax casually walked over to Schleik, and whispered something in his ear. A brief exchange took place, before Schleik was being helped up, his weight supported by Brax’s heavily muscled arms.

All this Krul observed with a sneering indifference, as if he thought Brax and Schleik beneath his notice.

“Well then? What’s it going to be, friends?” asked Brax with a calm assurance.

All he received in response was a slight grunt from Krul, before he turned tail to Brax and carelessly swaggered away.

The bullies gone, Schleik suddenly became very animated, and very much oblivious to the pain of his injuries.

“Brax! You’re well again! I was so worried! Are you ok? What happened? Thanks for helping me! I missed you!”

The words came streaming out of Schleik’s mouth, in one long torrent of euphoric expressions of thanks and queries of Brax’s welfare. His friend was back. He was safe from the tortures after a mere couple days, and he had his only friend again. Things were certainly looking up.

As the last of the buildings in the sky-village collapsed to the ground, Colonel Fletching gave a single nod of approval, before barking out the order that would end the Alvara’s work in that area.

“Pile the carcasses! Have them soaked and burned! And for the love of God, MAKE SURE NO ONE ESCAPED!”

At this, a small patrol of approximately 20 soldiers broke away from the main force and began panning out, combing the trees above for any sign of life.

Fletching was satisfied. He turned on his heel and strode away, into the dark reaches of the snowy forest, whistling to himself, and already planning the assault on the next village. He was clearly confident at the prospects of wiping out the infernal villages that resided in the forests he so needed to control. After all, cities could not be built without timber. And timber could not be acquired when dozens of villages that lived *on* the timber were in the way. As such, they needed to be eliminated. Such was the way of progress, of the advance of civilization.

Secure in his self-assurance, Fletching nonchalantly strode through the forest, pondering all that happened. But he was not so alone as he thought.

Miles above Fletching, he was being watched. Or rather, he was a hazy, indistinct figure in the peripheral vision of Urik as he sanguinely swung from branch to branch in the icy treetops, making his escape. He wondered for a brief second who that figure, so far below him, could be, before dismissing the thought as unimportant, and returning his mind to the task of following the long line in front of him. The village headman was leading the escape, at the front of the procession, leaping wildly from tree to tree.

The consensus to escape by tree had been reached very recently. Minutes after the headman’s invitation to those with ideas, an escape plan had been drawn up. The villagers were to climb through the roof-hatch in the building they were in, and then climb up the trees into the dense foliage above where more cover would be provided. This had been carried out with the utmost care and apprehension. After all, if one was caught, they all were.

And so, extreme caution was put into play as the survivors of the assault began climbing upwards. However, as they ascended, it became apparent that stealth was not going to be a prominent concern. The villagers crawled up the nearly-vertical tree trunk with a skill that suggested decades of practice, though none of the escapees could remember ever climbing such a large tree in their lives.

Finally, reaching the optimum altitude, they stopped their upward climb, and began moving horizontally, leaping from tree branch to tree branch, trunk to trunk. The arrangement from there was to get all the villagers into a safe grove in the forest, where they could discuss further plans centered on warning the rest of the Loop.

As the villagers executed flawless leaps from branch to branch, and impeccably timed jumps from trunk to trunk, little thought and concentration was required. There was an instinctual ability to swing between trees that appeared to be ingrained into each and every villager. This being the case, the remainder of the escape plan was carried out without incident.

And so, after a mere hour of wild leaping and swinging, the village headman halted the procession, a plausible destination of the exodus reached. They discovered a grove of thick, gnarled trees surrounding a small clearing, that provided an ideal location for a temporary respite, and more importantly a safe, unobtrusive site where further plans could be discussed. Deeming the area agreeable, the headman mentally selected the area as the village's new command center.

With no dearth of grunts of exertion, the village headman dropped from tree limb to tree limb until he was again footed on terra firma, the rest of the village following suit.

Slightly unsteady on his feet after so much time without the required use of them, the headman tottered in place for nearly a minute, before addressing the escapees.

"Before we begin any official business, I would like each and every one of you to congratulate yourselves. What you all just accomplished was no small undertaking. Of this, I am fully aware, and would now like to offer my thanks in exchange for your cooperation in these troubled times."

The villagers beamed, delighted at their chief's gratefulness to them.

"Now, as you have no doubt ascertained, we have some rather pressing business to attend to. I personally would wager that unless we can warn whatever villages of the Loop that still remain of this infernal and evidently unprepared-for threat, they will all fall. Our people will die out, and the hunters will destroy our homes and all that we hold dear. This being the case, we have urgent plans to draw up, crucial preparations to make. But before I continue, I would ask, are there any among you with questions, concerns, or objections thus far?"

All eyes stayed trained on the headman, their owners not moving a muscle. The villager's tacit confidence in their chief's ability to devise a glorious, life-saving plan was steadfast, unwavering. As such, not a hand was raised, and not a mouth was opened.

"Well then," continued the headman, "onward, to business. It has come to my attention that we have but one honorable option. And of that one option, we have two possible methods of accomplishing its means."

Looks of confusion spread across those assembled like a wild conflagration.

A smile tugging at the headman's lips, he clarified.

"The way I see it, our only available option is, unequivocally, to warn the other villages. They need to be informed of this threat, and we are, presumably, the only ones that possess the ability to grant them that need. On this, I'm sure we are all agreed."

Scattered nods and looks of agreement confirmed the headman's conjecture.

"And, of that, we have two possible ways of achievement. We can all, as a group, warn individual villages, or split up into small parties and assign each to a separate village. Inevitably, there are drawbacks and advantages to each course of action. If we go as one large group, we will have much more credibility, and our story is more likely to be believed. But of course, we will move throughout the Loop at a much slower rate, which may in the end render our work useless, as we may arrive too late to warn the remainder of the villages. Alternatively, if we split into small groups of say, two or three, and send each party to a different village, assuming all the other nine have thus far been left untouched, the news will be circulated much more quickly. But each group would invariably have a drastically reduced believability."

At this, the approximate 20 villagers began whispering amongst themselves, trying to ascertain the wiser plan. The volume of the proceedings grew steadily louder and louder, frightening many of the impressive specimens of the local fauna away from the clearing. The headman eventually had to shout to be heard over the tumultuous commotion that was besieging the secluded vicinity.

'ATTENTION! Please! Everyone listen!'

The last of the voices died down, as the ever-loyal villagers all prepared to postpone their bickering in order to hear their chief out.

"Friends! This is exactly what we're trying to *avoid*! Division amongst ourselves will save no one! While we all stay here arguing, another of our villages may be even now, burning to the ground! With the wish of preserving order, I will now open the floor to any *individual* who wishes to address the congregation. I ask that any questions for the speakers be held until the end of their address, as with objections and challenges. Now, who's first?"

Schleik and Brax were walking across one of the myriad suspended bridges in the town, on their way to the Quarter, where most of the village's residences were located. However, they had no intention of visiting any such dwellings. In all likelihood, Schleik's parents would probably be drunk and fighting, while Brax's parents were in the same places they had been for

the last 10 years: lying under a dirt mound on the forest floor so far below the town, stone-cold and unbreathing.

No; Schleik and Brax were on their way to a far more hospitable place. They were en-route to a place Schleik had discovered several years prior, while running away from Krul who, even then, had been a tyrannical reprobate.

It was nothing extravagant; a clearing on the forest floor, completely hidden by thick, icy trees, and only able to be reached by way of an old rope dangling into the middle of the clearing from an abandoned home in the town. A few scattered chairs here and there, and the odd table strewn around provided sitting room for the friends, but other than that, it was completely bare. But to the two friends, it was a place of perfect comfort, where they could relax and retreat from the pressures of the world, even if but for a short while.

“But Brax,” Schleik was saying, “I thought the doctors said they didn’t know what you had! I thought you weren’t going to be able to recover anytime soon!”

With a hearty chuckle, Brax replied, “Oh, I recovered all right. And I’d say it’s rather good the doctors couldn’t figure out what I had. If villagers showed up at the doctors’ with banana poisoning all the time, the town would certainly be much worse off!”

“Banana poisoning?! You’ve got to be joking!” cried Schleik.

“Afraid not, mate! It would appear I was eating a banana that happened to be several weeks old, and had been soaked in muddy ditch-water. Courtesy of our dear friend Krul.”

Not laughing anymore, Schleik gave Brax a questioning glance as they walked.

“Oh, I heard some of his cronies laughing about it on my way home from the doctors’. I figure the reason they weren’t with Krul when he was waylaying you was that they were making sure I was still down for the count. Of course, vigilance has never walked hand-in-hand with boredom and unattended drinking,” added Brax, smiling at the memory of his ‘watchers,’ laying a heap outside the hospital window, drenched in alcohol.

“Oh,” replied Schleik. “I suppose it was their plan for getting you out of the way, so they could have their fun with me...”

“Schleik, I’m always going to be watching your back. Believe me, Krul isn’t going to lay a finger on you as long as I’m around. Banana poisoning or not, I *will* be here for you,” Brax said.

And that, Schleik decided, was one of the few things that made life worth waking up to.

Suddenly reaching the abandoned home where the rope leading to the ground was hidden, the two friends glanced around to make sure no one was watching, before slipping inside. Finding the rope in one of the back rooms, they shimmied down it, careful to keep the loud creaking of the rope at a minimum.

Reaching the ground, they breathed deeply, taking in the surroundings they had seen so many times before, yet never tired of.

Schleik and Brax took their seats, in two of the rickety chairs that were situated in the place. Reclining into the disused chairs, the friends could barely keep up a conversation for the next few minutes, before the blissful non-reality of sleep tugged them from their world into its own, where the worries of life were washed away, if only for the time being. After all, the two friends deserved a peaceful sleep, what with the scouts of the Alvara already retreating back into the woods from the opposite end of the clearing, hardly waiting to tell their colonel about the secret entrance into the town they had just discovered, so that the next onslaught could begin.

After hours of heated debate, a plan had finally been agreed upon. The villagers were to split into three groups, each party warning a village of the threat of the hunters. From there, they could gather others from those villages to help warn the remaining towns.

The arguing finally over, they wasted no time in putting their plan into action. Two groups had already left, and the remaining party was just about to depart the clearing as well. Urik and the village headman were a part of this final group, and were awaiting the following task with an alacrity not common from those at such an advanced age.

The last of the preparations made, the group departed, heading for the very village Schleik and Brax were so loathe to living in, and were at the very moment laboriously returning to from their secret clearing.

The journey was to take about two days, and would require a constant state of alertness, lest any of the Alvara run into them on the way. The hunters would no doubt be planning the next assault already. It was urgent that the news concerning the Alvara arrive at the village before they themselves did.

The headman began to jog, the others following his lead.

Time was running, and so should they be.

Colonel Fletching received the news merrily.

“Splendid!” he exclaimed. “So we may not even have to go through all the planning of a head-on assault. Storm the town from the inside, and chase all the villagers into one area, from where we can pick them off, one by one. This certainly makes things easier. Superb work, gentlemen.”

The scouts that had relayed the news nodded once in acknowledgement, before skulking away to gather more recon on the various remaining villages that inhabited the immense forest.

Satisfied with his troops’ work, Fletching sat back down in the seat from which he had risen at the scouts’ arrival. Not for the first time, the colonel reflected upon the past few months, and the incredible things that had happened since.

He had just been returning to his small, rural town after spending the day deer hunting, when he had been waylaid by a small, quirky courier from the country’s royal court.

“Excuse me sir, but can I have a minute?” he had said.

Surprised at seeing a stranger in such a small, uninteresting town, Fletching had consented without thinking.

“Excellent sir! If I can have a quick word with you somewhere private, I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised!”

From there, Fletching had led the small fellow to his home, where he lived alone but for his two hunting dogs. The courier had then proceeded to tell him about the ruler of the realm’s new master plan. Put simply, he wished to demolish the nearby forest, using the profuse supplies of timber they would acquire to build a magnificent, indestructible city, with which the people’s legacy could live on by after the generation had passed on. But of course, for such a grand feat, workers were needed. And soldiers. Soldiers to handle the rumored beings that took shelter in the forest, that just may be provoked into fighting back should their woodland begin to be cut down.

Fletching had at first discarded the idea. He was about to say so- he had even opened his mouth preparing to decline the offer. That is, until the young courier mentioned the pay. Any reservations Fletching had had immediately died down, as he marveled at the payment he could receive should he join the king’s campaign. Well more than he made through his hunting pastime.

Following that turning point in Fletching's career, he had followed the courier back to the capital of the realm, been assessed by the royal court, and finally rewarded the rank of colonel. Then he had been put in command of the majority of the militia that would be responsible for cleansing the forest of the mysterious inhabitants.

And now, here he was, mere weeks later, three villages already wiped out, and the fourth soon to follow. How many more remained was to be determined at a later date. But whatever the number, and whatever their sizes, Fletching was confident he could eliminate them. After all, massacring chimpanzees wasn't exactly city-irrigation.

It had been two days since Schleik and Brax had last visited their secret clearing, and they were eager to return. Schleik desperately needed a place where he could ease the worries from his mind. His parents had been more belligerent than usual lately, their fighting sometimes escalating to the point where Schleik would have to sneak out of the house in order to sleep without being woken up by the shouting.

As such, Brax was eager to help lift Schleik's spirits. He knew that Schleik was having troubles lately, what with his unpleasant family life and too-frequent scrapes with Krul. This being the case, Brax was even now at the clearing, finishing his handiwork there. Hours ago, he had dragged down a large tarp, and had rigged it up in the trees to provide a Spartan roof over a portion of the clearing. Then he had constructed a pair of new chairs to put in the area, to replace the grimy, fragile ones already there. Following this and completing his work, he had begun the arduous task of constructing a table. That accomplished, he observed his innovations to the clearing.

The banal roof could provide shelter in times of rain or heavy snow, while the chairs and table could supply some of the base comforts of familiar furniture. Now, as Brax finally finished his constructions, he sat in one of the chairs he had just built, needing a quick respite before he began the industrious climb back up to the town.

He had just closed his eyes, about to commence in a quick cat-nap, when the sudden snapping of a twig nearby began ringing alarm bells in his head.

If the dead branch snapping in an area with little wildlife, and on a day with almost no wind wasn't enough to alert Brax, the harsh, guttural sound of foreign voices on the outside of the not-so-secret clearing was.

The scouts of the Alvara were being less-than-diligent. They were casually strolling to the hidden entrance to the town they had discovered the day before, in the small, concealed clearing. They were discussing arbitrary whims that came to mind, such as the issue of little rations, and the families they were missing back home, in their own country.

Suddenly coming upon the clearing, they came to a standstill. Waiting for a minute to make sure no one was in the area, the small party of three began to creep into the clearing, stealthily making their way to the hidden rope. But as they were walking by a little cluster of chairs, they noticed a set of very recent footprints leading towards the rope they were heading for at that very moment. Quickly realizing the significance, they began sprinting with all their might.

Reaching the rope, the first of the scouts launched himself upwards, reaching the extremity of the rope in seconds. Hauling himself into an abandoned home in a state of drastic disrepair, the scout took rapid glances around the room he was in, checking for any signs of life. Any signs of a villager hearing the scouts' approach and retreating into the town to warn the others, and for the first time in history, reveal the Alvara's existence. Seeing nothing, the man continued through the house.

He combed every inch of the building, hoping against hope that whoever the footprints belonged to hadn't already left the old house. If he had, there was nothing the man could do. Suddenly realizing that the constant sound of his friends behind him had ceased, the man turned around, making towards the rope again to determine the reason for the others' lagging behind.

Reaching the cable that led to the frosty forest floor nearly a half-mile below, the man took a long sweep of the clearing with his sharp eyes. Seeing nothing, and very much puzzled by it, he began his descent.

Then the first scream reached him.

Brax was curious. He knew that the clearing was completely hidden, so it couldn't be another villager. And it was highly unlikely that it was a villager, just out for a stroll on the wintry forest floor. A lot of work was required, traveling between the town and the ground. And he knew the wildlife of the area seldom came near the town, due to the villagers' noise level which usually scared the local fauna away.

There was absolutely nothing that could explain the foreign sounds he had picked up. They sounded as if they belonged to another intelligent creature, or group of them for that

matter, for the voices had received strings of sounds from other voices in return. They could communicate, whatever they were. But in a complicated language the likes of which Brax had never heard in his life.

Realizing that, should the need arise and he need a weapon, Brax made for the rope where nearby, he had tossed the remains of the chairs he had tried to construct earlier yet not succeeded in making serviceable. Grabbing a long, battered chair leg, Brax suddenly heard the conversation cease. He heard the footsteps stop, and the voices freeze.

Seeing this as a cause for alarm, Brax immediately hid in a thick snow-coated brush nearby, wondering if the odd creatures would step into the clearing so that he could have a look at them.

He was not to be disappointed.

Suddenly appearing at the opposite end of the clearing were three of the oddest creatures Brax had ever seen. They were similar to his folk, save that these eccentricities were more upright, had a straighter body. They had more compact heads, and they lacked the hair on their bodies that was so crucial in surviving in the climate. Instead, they seemed to be wearing fabrics of some kind, bundled around them presumably to keep out the bitter chill. They wore thick brown *somethings* around their feet, made of a material Brax had never seen the likes of before. Their heads were uncovered, and Brax saw that they had tanned skin, with thick hair on the tops of their heads. One even had hair on his face, like Brax's people. Although this man had limited the hair to just above his lips, and on his chin.

And they carried things Brax knew only too well. There was absolutely no mistaking the sharpened spears they had at their waists, nor the bows slung across their backs. But if these were hunters, Brax wondered what they could possibly want in an area with little to no wildlife. There were minimal land creatures, and a definite scarcity of beasts of the air.

The three conundrums before him greatly puzzled Brax. He observed as they began moving towards the rope he and Schleik used to get from the ground to the village, and vice versa. He saw as they suddenly began running. Wondering why they would possibly choose to enter his village, armed and through a secret way, Brax prepared to jump out of the brush and ask for a few answers, to satisfy his curiosity and ascertain that the newcomers weren't intending to do anything harmful.

He had braced his legs to pounce out, just as the first of the oddities began climbing up the cable. Brax watched, fascinated, as the man used just his arms to propel himself upwards, along the rope.

Realizing that he was wasting time, Brax chose that moment to jump from his location. If the newcomers were shocked, they certainly didn't show it. One moment, Brax was standing there, smiling broadly at them, as they stared impassively back, and the next, they were drawing the bows off their backs, and stringing arrows to them.

Realizing what was about to happen, Brax suddenly sprinted away, diving behind a tree just as a pair of *thwangs* sounded. The arrows imbedded in the tree, Brax ran to the other side of the massive trunk, grabbed them and, using them as handholds, began climbing.

Once more, two razor-sharp arrows came streaming through the air, at Brax's exposed figure. Whether it was luck or pure bad marksmanship by the attackers, the arrows missed.

Brax was not going to wait to see if their aim improved. Still clutching the chair leg, Brax jumped off the tree onto another, and continued his ascent. This he repeated, until he was directly above the two hunters, effectively hidden in the canopy, invisible to the two men scanning the trees for any sign of him.

Brax realized he was going to have to do something. These potentially dangerous creatures could not be allowed to enter his village after their other companion. He had to stop them. But how could he hope to? The two men were armed, and were obviously trained killers. He was still underage, and possessed no knowledge of life-and-death fighting.

But there was something else he *did* have. Like all of his village, he was a natural climber, rope swinger, and tree jumper. He had the instinct buried deep in him, the instinct that allowed him to climb the steepest of trees and swing from the frailest of ropes.

Brax made his decision.

He jumped to a different tree, grabbed an ice-covered vine dangling in front of his face, and made a leap of faith, throwing his life in the vine's hands. He swung towards the ground, keeping as quiet as possible, until he was right above the two men. Then he released the vine, landing squarely on top of them, eliciting a surprised yell from one of the men. He quickly made use of his bulk, placing the two under him and sitting on them and keeping them pinned to the floor.

The men squirmed, kicked out and punched, they hissed, spit, and screamed. But Brax had no intention of letting them leave. He was going to wait until they tired, then tie them up and bring them to the village headman for questioning.

But of course, he had forgotten one important factor.

A sudden crackle to his right made Brax stand up and turn. The third of the men was standing a little ways away, his spear in his hand. The man stared impassively at him for a second, before throwing the spear with practiced ease.

Brax saw the finely honed spear coming in his direction. He heard the air whooshing, saw the graceful arc the weapon made. He even felt the faint *crack* as the spear, thrown with deadly precision, collided with his neck, breaking cleanly through it. He took in the gaping hole in his neck for a slight moment, and briefly observed the man's indifferent smirk, before he toppled to the ground, lifeless.

"Are. We. Almost. There. Chief?" panted Urik, barely keeping pace with the headman.

"As a matter of fact," suddenly the chief stopped running. "We are."

The six villagers following him gratefully sat down, resting their aching legs.

"Everyone! The village is just around the corner. Let's very carefully sneak around the back. We don't want to announce our arrival and cause any undue tension in the town. Quietly does it!"

At that, the headman crept quietly forward, keeping in the shade of the monstrous trees for cover. A sudden scream made him turn to the side. The other villagers all looked curiously at him. Shrugging, the headman began to creep towards the direction the scream had come from. Not hearing anything further however, he stood still and waited for something that would give away the location the scream had come from. He didn't want to risk getting lost so close to their destination.

Suddenly, a series of yells and grunts reverberated from almost directly in front of him, on the other side of what he had taken to be an impenetrable wall of trees. Suddenly seeing a gap however, he began to cautiously sneak towards it, the other villagers following suit.

Reaching the fissure, the headman peeked inside, and perceived what appeared to be a small, uninteresting clearing. A few chairs and a table or two were scattered randomly about, and an old rope was hanging into the corner of the clearing.

Then he noticed the trio of flailing arms and legs. He watched as Brax, obviously a resident of the village, wrestled with, of all things, two humans!

The headman was shocked, and stood there, wondering what on Earth was going on. He watched as Brax emerged the victor, the two humans stuck under his imposing physique. He

watched as a third human appeared, wielding a gleaming spear. He watched as the newcomer threw the spear directly into Brax's throat, killing him almost instantaneously.

The headman stood, dumbfounded.

Then became angry. He had just seen the accursed humans kill yet another of his people. And he wasn't going to stand idly by. Hooting wildly, he grabbed a broken tree branch from the ground, and charged into the clearing, Urik and the others seconds behind him.

Schleik wondered why Brax was late. He was supposed to have met him almost an hour ago. Schleik was standing behind the school, eagerly waiting for Brax to show up, so they could visit the clearing again. But he had not yet arrived, and it was getting late. Not wanting to miss out on visiting the serene area for a whole extra day, Schleik decided to just go to the clearing by himself. After all, the area was still peaceful, with or without his friend coming along.

Schleik walked quickly to the hidden rope, arriving at the clearing in almost no time at all. And what he saw there astonished him. 7 people, definitely from another village, surrounding 3 of the oddest creatures Schleik had ever seen. The three oddities weren't moving. Suddenly the largest of the 7 villagers turned around.

"Why hello," said the headman. "And who might you be?"

"Ummm...I-I-" stuttered Schleik. "My name is- is Schleik. What happened here?"

"Well Schleik, I suppose we can tell you the story later. But right now, we have some rather pressing news to deliver. If you could show us the way to your village's headman, we would be most appreciative."

Schleik consented, turning back to the rope to show the way. Until he saw something that quite nearly made his heart stop.

"NO! NO! NO! WHAT HAPPENED?!" Schleik shouted, tears streaming down his face. "WHO DID THIS?"

Schleik ran over to the body of his only friend, and collapsed on it, hugging the lifeless corpse as tight as he could.

"I'm so sorry, Schleik," said the headman. "Your friend was murdered by the men you see here. They had their recompense. I realize their lives are an unfair price to pay for your friend's, but I extend my deepest condolences to you."

Schleik didn't move. The world felt as if it was caving in around him. His only friend, the one person that made his life worth living, was dead. Stone-cold, murdered by three strangers. Schleik didn't want to get up. He wanted to lie there, and die beside his friend. Nothing was ever going to convince him to get up and face the world again. Not after this. No, Schleik's life was over. He was finished.

"Schleik! Please! I realize you're upset, but it's urgent that we speak to your headman! Believe me, the deaths will not stop here unless we can see him!"

That roused Schleik.

Gazing at the visitors with empty, glazed eyes, he got up and walked towards the rope. The headman and his party followed.

Three days later, the village was prepared for war. The staircases leading to the ground were all destroyed, all connections to the forest floor eradicated. Schleik and the strangers had arrived at the headman's home just as he was preparing to retire for the day. They talked long, forming a strategy to save the village. And now, the final steps were put into place.

If the Alvara attacked, they would be sorry they ever did.

Still concerned over the loss of his three best scouts, colonel Fletching pondered what could have happened. Shaking his head, he rebuked himself. He was about to attack another sky-village, and it was definitely not the time to be pondering past mysteries. There would be time enough for that later. Now, it was time for war.

Fletching gave the signal, and the first of his plan went into action.

His fastest scouts sprinted around the village to the secret clearing he had been informed of. Entering it, they looked around. There was no rope. They hesitated, wondering what they were supposed to do. They were scheduled to be in the city, ready to open the gates in naught but a few minutes. And they had no way of getting inside in the first place!

They debated amongst themselves, finally deciding that the best thing to do would be to run as swiftly as they could, back to Fletching and inform of the setback.

They turned on their heels, ready to run with all their might.

Until they saw the eyes. Hundreds of eyes, gazing at them impassively from the tree-line mere feet away.

Startled, the group of approximately 30 scouts began to back away. Before seeing the next sets of eyes, coming from the canopy far above them. And the next sets, coming from behind.

They were surrounded. And there was nothing they could do.

The eyes stared at them, their owners not making a sound. Simply watching, watching, watching...

One moment there were eyes, the next there were monstrous apes the size of three men sprinting towards the scouts from all directions.

Realizing they were about to die, the scouts quickly drew their spears, determined to take as many of the creatures with them as they could.

Fate did not favor them that day.

No casualties were received for the apes as their front line bashed into the group of scouts. There were few wounds received as the incredible animals picked up two to three humans at a time and hurled them into boulders or trees.

A mere 10 minutes later, their work was finished. The last of the humans was dead, their bodies disposed of. Quickly disguising the corpses, the apes retreated back into their village, scaling the trees with skillful effortlessness.

Fletching was disturbed. First his three most loyal scouts had gone missing, and now an entire party of nearly 35 was gone too. He laughed bitterly. It didn't matter anyway. Even if the gates had been opened, the walkways connecting them to the ground were demolished.

Fletching was also very puzzled. Somehow the village had been warned of the campaign, and had taken precautions against the attack. But how was that possible? He shrugged it off, determined to conquer the village, regardless of the cost. Thinking about trivial matters wasn't going to help him win the battle. He needed to think about the present.

Thus, his plan was born. These were *apes* he was fighting. He didn't need a 'master plan.' All he needed was brute strength. His men already possessed all of the mental superiorities.

Sounding the command for a full-fledged charge, Fletching grabbed a bow and ran to join the fray.

The first they felt of it was a searing heat, like nothing they had ever experienced in the frozen tundra they lived in. Then they saw the trees around them exploding in bursts of fire, and the mass of black arrows thudding into the buildings and wooden streets.

Everywhere he looked, Schleik saw his neighbors falling, struck by an arrow or burned by an oil explosion. And there he was, cowering under a park roof like a child, while his neighbors stood in the open, returning fire with their bare hands, using the arrows getting shot at them.

He couldn't take it any longer. Brax was dead, his neighbors were dead. Schleik needed to do *something*.

Grabbing an arrow off the street, Schleik ran to the nearest building, entered it, and accessed the roof. From there, he climbed like a spider to the canopy, and began scanning the forest for something he could do to help.

Then his eyes alighted on colonel Fletching.

He had to be important. Numerous people were running up to him for instruction, while he shouted orders. He simply had to be the leader of the attack. In Schleik's head, a bold plan was born.

He began swinging through the canopy wildly, until he was well away from the battle. Only then did he begin climbing downwards, toward the ground. Touching down on firm land, Schleik set off at a running pace, back in the direction of the assault. He ran as fast as his untrained legs could carry him, until he spotted the colonel, lagging behind his troops, directing the combat.

Schleik took full advantage of his small stature, keeping low to the ground and hiding in the thick verdure that grew all over the region. Slowly creeping up behind the colonel, he drew the arrow in his hand, preparing to make the strike that couldn't even begin to make up for Brax's brutal death.

Almost upon Fletching, Schleik pulled his arm back, raising the barb-tipped arrow in the air. Fletching turned around right at that moment, somehow sensing what was about to happen.

There was no heroic yell, no superhuman shout of defiance. Just a brief squawk of surprise, before the arrow was plunged deep into his chest. Fletching tumbled to the ground at Schleik's feet, gasping for air, every breath requiring an incredible amount of effort.

Schliek bent over him, his face deadly serious.

"That was for Brax."

He turned to walk away, as a cold hand suddenly gripped his ankle and tripped him. The hand belonged to the almost-dead colonel Fletching. The colonel whistled, the effort almost killing him. Suddenly a group of four appeared in the brush around Fletching.

"You called, colonel? I thought I heard- OI! C'MERE ANIMAL!" shouted one of the four arrivals, all of a sudden seeing what happened.

Schleik, petrified, stood frozen in place. As multiple sets of iron-gripped hands clasped him and hoisted him into the air, he lost consciousness, and knew no more.

Epilogue

The newly appointed chief of the Loop sat down heavily, deeply pensive. He was the leader of the now-united villages, and should have felt euphoric. But he didn't. All he felt was a crushing sense of remorse. Remorse for the villages that were killed off, and remorse for the people that had died defending Schleik's town. He thought back to that day, when it had seemed hopeless. The village was burning, the peoples' hopes dashed. Then the other villages had arrived. The other two parties he had sent out had arrived with reinforcements, having heard of the Alvara's intention of sacking Schleik's village. They had repelled the humans wave after wave, until the assaults finally ceased. No prisoners had been taken, but those who surrendered had been free to leave, so long as they promised never to return to the forest.

The headman had been among those who led the tedious organization and planning required in making contact with the other villages in order to find out just how many had survived the frightful hunters' campaign. Then he had helped plan the ceremony that would celebrate their victory, and officially unite the villages as one nation. Finally, he had received the great shock that he had been secretly elected as the leader of the newly united villages, and was requested to take office immediately. This he did, with a great many reservations. But the headman had accepted, for the good of the people.

Regrettably, the young fellow, Schleik, had not made it through the battle. But it was rumored that he had been responsible for the death of the Alvara's leader, which had thrown the humans into disarray, making the balance of the battle tip in favor of the defenders. What he accomplished was no small feat. Recovering Schleik's body would have been nigh on impossible at the end of the battle, with such an abundance of carnage about. But luckily, another child of the village, Krul, had found Schleik's body as the defenders led a counter-strike, and carried it back to the village himself, all the while fending off attacks from human stragglers. He had seemed distraught at Schleik's death, and repeatedly whispered, "I'm sorry" to the small corpse.

But finally, the humans' hopes of winning the battle obliterated, the fighting had ceased. The villagers collected their dead, while the hunters left the scene as quickly as they could, to return to their own country and report their failure to their king.

And now, here he was. The recently appointed chief of a large, thriving nation, with a bright future ahead, and a dark past behind. An evil past, marked by the pain and suffering of too many.

Suddenly smiling, the chief dispelled the gloomy thoughts from his mind. He was not going to let the sacrifices borne by so many turn out to be for naught. He was the new country's leader, and a cheerful confidence was something he was going to need. Evil days were past. A new era of light and peace was dawning, and the chief was not going to miss it, wasting his days thinking of iniquities long over.

Standing, he left his simply-carved throne and walked outside, into the bright light of the new day.

He had a nation to lead.