

## The Battle

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

This is the story of the Battle of Steep Valley Ridge. A battle where the many lives of Plantae, Animalia and Fungi inhabiting the deep woods of Steep Valley were very much at stake. Our story begins with an important encounter between an emissary sent by the Biped Changelings (Animalia that could alter their environment in sometimes harmful ways) and the Great Willow Chief. The emissary, entering the deep woods by the Boulder of Ages Past, keeps right at the fork of trails to come upon Sir Wickerlot who is already expecting him. He then curtsies with his best and fullest bow.

“Dear Sir, the war is upon us again. The barbarian hordes have advanced into your woods and threaten to seize Whisper watershed. We need the help of your fellow trees to halt their advances into Steep Valley Ridge.”

As soon as the emissary had delivered his war tidings with a tone of reverence, Sir Wickerlot begins to move, his limbs shuffling and roots making the earth rumble. He then replies to the emissary: “I sensed your arrival and knew through my flying messengers that the war has already begun. We plan to defend the ridge by standing firm on our ground and agree to hide your troops from The Crooked.”

“Thank you Sir.” The emissary says politely. “We will need invisibility from your rootish kind if we are to defend and save the ridge.”

“Dear emissary, I’ve been told that the Citadel to the South has been taken already with its North ramparts demolished. Now many of my kind are at risk of being uprooted and slain.”

“Yes Sire. I received word of the Citadel’s fall and have learned that they plan to turn it into a war-fortress. Many folks from the south of my two-legged kind have perished or have be forced into slavery on that same ground. Our plan is to halt their advances this far North to keep our woods and waters from being ‘slash-burned’ and poisoned.”

“I will send word out through the roots of my trunk and the leaves of my crown.”

“Thank you Sir. May we have permission to camp out here tonight? A few of my Uprights think we may need to learn about the ridge and stay up to see if their spies are already about.”

“You certainly can dear emissary. Please remember to only use dead-wood for a fire and to stay on the paths to avoid trampling my Younglings.”

“Yes dear Sir, we will keep our earthen oaths in exchange for our secrecy amid your kind.”

After bowing again in his utmost polite manner, the emissary of the Biped Changelings retreats from the Great Willow Chief leaving the lagoon, mystical wetland and Boulder of Ages Past. Returning to his camp, the emissary sends for his top

Ranger and the two decide to camp a short distance away with a view of the watershed paths.

That same night, the Ranger and emissary hide behind some young Aspens that tremble slightly in the muted wind. As it begins to grow dark, they can hear voices coming from Whisper Creek just below the ridge and their hideout. As the voices grow louder, they can faintly make out the flicker of torches and count at least five flames some hundred yards away by the creek bed path.

“I don’t like the looks o-this!” One of the voices hollers in the dark. “All o-these woods and trees and such are for the takin’, but this place looks cursed ur sumthin!”

“Don’t worry! Once we map out these here trails, we search the woods and then this ridge is ours!” Another voice replies.

“Why don’t we stop here and camp out! Getting tired of walkin’ about. We should eat and take it easy for the night. I’m starving!” A third voice says even louder than the other two.

Suddenly, the sound of a man on horseback can be heard approaching from the North. Soon, the sound grows louder with the clippety-clop of a horse’s hoofs of the stony trail. The rider, who seems more powerful and authoritative than the others, approaches the gathering on the lower valley paths and takes a torch out of one of their hands.

“You imbeciles! You’re being too loud! The woods here have ears, I can tell.” The rider says searching the darkness as though he can feel the presence of the two spies by the quivering Aspens. Feeling a sudden chill down their spines, the Ranger and emissary, shielded by Sir Wickerlot’s leafy allies, duck down and try to stay as quiet as possible while avoiding the rider’s stare.

“I don’t like the looks of this trail. Anything in the woods can see us from a mile away. Tonight will be the last night we camp out in this part of the creek.” The same deep and chilling voice utters to the rugged darkness.

“Let’s toss our torches in this here rock pit!” One of the foot soldiers hollers.

“Keep it down you idiot!” The rider murmurs angrily. “We’ll make a fire and keep the torches. We’ll need them again tomorrow when we explore where to set up camp. We have to learn about these wooded trails if we’re to control the North passage.” The rider states coolly with his quiet and calculated tone.

Once the darkness had fully set in, the torch-bearing group below extinguishes their torches as they prepare to make a large bonfire. The forest, still harbouring the two Upright spies, shudders as a few young creek-side Willows are hacked and thrown into the rock pit’s fiery mouth, sending a dull glow visible far into the wooded ridge. Laughter and loud noises can be heard in a cackling foreign tongue as the group of troll-like Crookeds roast some kill carried along with them from afar. As they drink, laugh

loudly and belch by the fire, the rider sits off in the distance going through his plans of conquest for the days ahead. The two ears by the Aspens suddenly grow worried about the rider sensing their presence again and begin a slow retreat into the woods, creeping back toward their makeshift camp, to send notice of what they had just observed about the encroaching enemy's plans for the ridge.

The following morning, the Ranger dispatches a group of his archers on a mission south to spy on the Citadel. On route, they are to uncover an enemy outpost close-by, that contributed to the fortified city's fall into Crooked hands. A map had already been found with five Willows positioned precisely like five fingers of a hand, a matter of yards away from a turret's secret access point. The archers were selected based on their swiftness and ability to run invisibly in the old growth forest south of the ridge and Whisper Creek. They were also well trained in the art of 'canotting', a type of transportation on creeks and rivers using oars or paddles for propulsion, when the route became aqueous. Canots were hidden in a secret hideout by an old Oak to the South, should a strategic 'wet operation' against the Crooked be deemed necessary by the Upright side, who were already planning spy missions to free the remaining slaves of the Citadel, captured when the North rampart fell to barbarian hands. Once the archers are dispatched, the emissary sends two Thrushes bearing messages from the ridge.

"Fly south and find the five willows. Wait there until the archers arrive and signal to them with a song." The emissary says loudly to the birds upon their release. The birds then swoop high above the forest canopy and disappear in the distant skies bearing the important message of one of their non-feathered allies as they rapidly orient themselves with their southward bearings.

From the distance, running in the same direction with bows and arrows tethered to their shoulder packs, the archers begin their rapid course toward the Citadel with hopes of finding the enemy outpost. Swiftly hopping over logs and darting through the forests of ancient Cedar and Yellow Birch, the archers plan to save some time by only stopping at sundown to gather their strength in a secluded temporary woodland camp.

Not long after the archers and messenger birds have set off on their respective missions to the hidden outpost, the same rider that the Ranger and emissary had seen the previous night, takes off in the direction of his army's camp on the same stallion. Upon reaching his tent, where only Crooked senior command could enter, he uncovers a glass orb which is kept below a piece of silk cloth. Looking into the orb, he uses his skills as a warlock to communicate with a sorcerer whose evil power far surpasses even his own.

"Your Excellency..." The rider speaks into the orb with a tone of subordination. "We have begun our conquest of Steep Valley Ridge respecting your orders. In two days we will begin our attack on the woods at the base of the ridge and plan to take the position atop the ridge by dawn."

“I sense they are preparing to defend the position by weakening us to the South.” The sorcerer replies with a deep and unwavering voice. “I’ve received word that there may be an uprising from the slaves near the Citadel. The South must stay under my full command! Be vigilant for a party of the Uprights travelling afoot and passing through the wooded passage leading to the Citadel’s East tower.”

“I sensed there may have been spies about the woods where we were camped last, your Excellency. I’ll make sure my new dispatch are less noisy than the bunch from last night.” The rider continues, speaking again into the orb at his Crooked master.

“Gather troops near the place where there may have been spies and attack from that point and up the same ridge. If they were hidden there, they’re concerned about losing that ground. Once we take the ridge, we will begin clearing out the trees to build a second Citadel. Go at once, and fail me not.” The sorcerer says, disappearing from the glassy orb which grows dark again. The rider then covers it up in the same cloth and leaves the confines of his tent.

As the archers continue their swift course southward through the ancient woods, the bow and arrow bearing warrior leading their running formation pauses briefly to read the wind through a patch of hemlock and senses the presence of the enemy through a trail of mushrooms missing their toadstool tops. The Crooked frequently harvested toadstools to create concoctions that were destined to be used on their enemies upon capture. The patch of hemlock rustles in the wind and appears to signal through its limbs that the archers should head slightly further East and make their approach by way of the water. The forest seemed to know that the enemy was expecting them to arrive by land’s route. The archers soon adjust their course and chart their approach toward the hideout bearing the well-dissimulated canots for the ‘wet operation’ against the enemy. After three more hours of rapid tree-gating, the archers arrive at the stronghold as the sun begins its descent to the West pane of a soft-hued horizon. After a rapid meal, the lead archer approaches an old Swamp Oak by Babble River and knocks three times on its exposed bulbous roots. No sooner as the knocks are felt by the grandfather tree, the earth shakes and the tree shifts revealing two canots with paddles, tethered and ready for the aqueous journey ahead.

“Thank you dear Sir!” The lead archer speaks aloud in the old Oak-land tongue.

“Be swift and let the river guide you. The enemy is watching the woods and not the water.” A deep earthy voice utters from within the old Oak’s trunk.

“We will take the rapids and try to find the enemy outpost.” The archer continues.

“The Thrushes came by a few hours ago. They’ll be waiting by the Willows. When you see an old friend of mine bowing its head so low you have to duck down, you’re getting close.” The wise grandfather plant says before shifting again and finding its old position as a senseless inanimate object by river’s edge.

The archers, feeling relieved by the guidance of the wise River Oak, clamber into the two vessels and direct their bows to the white water rapids on route to the Citadel and its hidden outpost. On the way down the rapids, the five archers in the two canots maneuver around boulders and use the eddies to resettle and plan their approach, before more challenging oncoming swirling waters and waves. Avoiding pillow rocks and holes on the slightly treacherous route downstream, they arrive at the large sweeper that the River Oak had told them about. They then steer their boats to shore, cautious to not announce their arrival as they close in on the secret location of the dissimulated outpost.

After disembarking the canots on a sandy beach hidden behind a row of cedars, they cautiously prepare their bows and silently make an approach toward a small woodland path. Suddenly, the song of the Thrushes can be heard from the treetops a few yards away. Upon hearing the song, the archers look up ahead and see a hand of Willows reaching toward the sky like the Wicker-folk of Sir Wickerlot's kin. After confirming they are in fact on the trail to the hidden outpost, the archers pause and regather themselves hoping to catch the enemy by surprise. They then decide to climb up the trunk of nearby Aspens in order to observe the woods and spy on the Crooked guards should they reveal themselves by the stand of Willows.

Once atop the Aspens, hidden well by the leafy crowns, the archers ready their taut bow strings patiently eyeing the slight clearing below them. Suddenly, a light is seen and voices can be heard.

"Sargent Bogg, I'll keep watch in the outpost tonight." A gruff voice says near the source of light by a big boulder.

"You're the only one tonight. Don't nod off. You'll get your sleep tomorrow." A second voice says with an authoritative tone. Suddenly, two Crooked guardsmen emerge from a small rocky staircase dissimulated behind the boulder by a Juniper bush hedge. The archers continue to eye every move of the guardians of the outpost now standing directly at the base of the Aspens.

Soon, the senior in command veers off into the woods opposite the river while the other walks back to the outpost entrance and descends the stony steps. As the light of the torch fades, the archers covertly climb down the Aspens and try to find the access to the underground turret before the guardsman goes back in his lookout position within the well-hidden below-ground chamber. Upon pushing back the Juniper bush, two archers silently descend the steps while the others keep watch behind the tree trunks in case 'The Keeper' arrives on the scene once again. After a few moments, a loud thud is heard by the ground-level assailants and one archer from below sends a signal to descend into the outpost. As the two groups of archers seek to re-gather, the unconscious guard is tied up by with rope in the stronghold that has direct sight-lines into the adjacent woods through a small long slit below another woodland boulder. A periscope-like eye piece is also found in the turret which watches the woods from canopy-level through a hollowed out and dead tree limb.

With all five archers within the hollow war-chamber, a rapid search ensues to uncover the enemy's plans hidden away within a series of short tunnels. Finally, a

female archer signals to the others that she has found a map of the Citadel with detailed markings on a catapult attack against its walls and ramparts. Past dates match up with the time the fortification fell into Crooked hands. After noticing this war-map, another tunnel reveals the existence of a map of Steep Valley Ridge laid out on a table with more markings and an approaching date in the future. Upon further inspection, the archers notice a largescale attack planned a week prior with upwards of four hundred Crooked armed militiamen. A series of arrows reveal their trajectory to a particular part of the woods close to where the warlock rider had been reported by the Ranger and emissary. One archer quickly reaches into his pocket to gather a small parchment and writes a quick war message to be sent back via feathered allies. As soon as the important war-plans are transmitted from inkhorn to parchment, it is rolled into a small cylinder and bound to a Thrush that perches onto the shoulder of the same archer, eager to flutter swiftly back north along a similar path.

“Fly back and send the latest report sir Thrush! A war is upon us shortly.” The female archer proclaims to the messenger.

“I’ll ride the tree tops just below the clouds and be there tonight.” The Thrush chirps in its avian tongue. It then uses its wings to clasp the air to race back into the late afternoon sky.

After leaving the Crooked guard tied up at the base of the entrance to the turret, the archers swiftly get back into their canots to avoid ‘The Keeper’ and continue further downstream toward the Citadel. Babble River continues its rapid meandering flow before culminating at a large waterfall renamed Citadel Falls by the newly-occupying enemy.

As the winged messenger and archers head off in opposite directions, the warlock goes back into his tent in the army encampment to communicate once again via his crystal orb. Upon removing the cloth, the ball shifts revealing dark clouds that focus once again on a set of gleaming eyes. Soon, his sorcerer speaks to him as the energy of the glassy surface is channeled by the warlock who feels temporarily possessed by the spectral powers of the spherical object.

“I sense that the outpost has been found!” The angry voice of the sorcerer stammers. “I told you to guard it!”

“My apologies Sire. I’ll send a dispatch to check on our key war-chamber. I specifically asked for it to be guarded from within and from above.” The warlock tells the sinister master.

“IF WE LOSE OUR SECRECY, WE LOSE THE WAR!” The enraged sorcerer shouts causing the warlock’s orb and tent to shake in its moorings.

“Sire, I’ll look into taking back the outpost and sealing off the roads to the Citadel.” The warlock utters in a reverent tone. “Shall we continue with our plans to attack Steep Valley on the Harvest Moon Festival when the tree folk are full of the season’s wine?”

“OF COURSE YOU FOOL! And make sure you add an extra fifty men for your latest misshap!” The sorcerer exclaims flashing a dark cloak over the orb making it coal-black and still once again. The warlock, figuring the séance is ended, covers his own orb and heads back out into his encampment to direct his army.

Upon the Thrush’s return with the sun making its descent upon the sluggish horizon, the small rolled up scroll is untied by the emissary and the Crooked war plans are rapidly deciphered. A shudder goes through the woods as the Thrush begins its call sequence to inform the leafy kin of more enemy plans to clear the nearby woods and construct a new war fortress on Steep Valley Ridge.

As the archers continue their course on cascading waters, a heavy mist can faintly be seen about half a mile ahead. Continuing to weave around waterlogged boulders with the stern acting as a compass and the bow dodging the immediate obstacles at hand, the river riders become slightly weary about the eerie calmness before an abysmal drop of several hundred feet at the edge of the waterfall’s rocky ledge. Finally, the slope of the rapid begins to flatten out and the loud sound of Citadel Falls can be heard closing in on the river crew. The duo of canots veer off to the right to eddy turn behind another boulder and the vessels are pulled up on land located to the West of Babble River. After covertly stationing their boats, the archers sneak into the neighboring woods staying out of sight of the enemy and cautiously begin their descent alongside the tall river mount. Upon reaching lower Babble River, an archer carrying a portable spyglass looks through the lens and sees the ruins of the Citadel’s North Rampart. Looking a short distance south away from the falls along Babble River, a large cage made of hardwood from felled neighboring trees can be found, containing the fallen Citadel’s slave survivors.

Making their approach toward the Citadel on the land opposite Babble River, the archers cross the river in the mist of the descending waters using their floating bows to hold on to as they flutter kick the waters to propel forwards with their sacks of arrows on their dry backs. Upon reaching the other side of the shore, the team touches down on sandy shore and swiftly closes in on their caged allies after reaching the breached ramparts of the Citadel. The archers then split off into two separate groups, one group entering the ruins nearby and the other heading off to prepare for a raid in the confines of the woodland jail.

Upon reaching the ruins of the Citadel, the group of two archers notice a large cavalry of Crookeds by the East Tower. They rapidly seek cover behind a pile of rubble looking cautiously at the tower in the distance to study the enemy’s stronghold and positioning. In the tower, a Crooked militiaman stands guard with what appears to be a crossbow, to protect the group down below. Amid the cavalry, on a large silver-maned stallion stands a high-level Crooked commander. On his head rests a helmet with a long silver spike. Word had travelled that the man with a spiked skullcap was none other than the notorious Admiral Borg. Wearing a carapace of bronze and black armor

that glistens in the late-day sunlight, the Admiral was none to be one of the most ruthless in close combat, etching his kills on the withering Tree of Despair.

Several kilometers from Steep Valley Ridge, directly to the West of Whisper Creek, stood Grimley Fortress. Once a peaceful community of peasants and laborers of the ancient woods, a violent onslaught led by 'Evil-wood' of the warlock order, claimed the lives of many of the commune's young and sent the few beleaguered survivors into exile. In his east-facing chamber overlooking the woods, the seated spectacled warlock gazes at a demon mask which suddenly comes to life.

"My spies have informed me that a team of speeding arrows are closing in to the Citadel." The possessed demon mask articulates with eyes like red embers.

"Sire, I've received word from the North that we are to close in on Steep Valley..."

"Yes. We are to join forces in two directions using Admiral Borg's armies to the south and Warlock Wipkill of Crooked Camp's hordes at the northern front lines to take the ridge after dusk."

"Sire, we worry about our outpost just north of here. We were supposed to receive word by now from 'The Keeper' on war plans regarding the ridge. We are ready to attack during the Harvest Moon Festival but need more directives on key positions and reinforcements..."

"I sense the outpost has been raided and our plans intercepted... Send word to Warlock Wipkill to the North that we need to find 'The Keeper' who has committed the war plans to memory. When we find him, we need him to recreate a war map of the ridge to be sent out via our Fire Lizard messengers to inform our war clans at all of our three strongholds."

"I will do this Sire." Warlock 'Evil-wood' says to the mask as it loses its fiery hue and lies motionless on its small iron frame atop a small table.

Hours later at the Citadel, Admiral Borg prepares to address his cavalry all stationed in the Citadel ruins below him.

"We've just received word from a Fire Lizard sent from the North that the plans for our attack on Steep Valley Ridge may have been intercepted by the enemy. We are to continue gathering our armies and readying them for an attack in two days..."

As Admiral Borg continues to address his cavalry, an archer closes in to listen behind a large ancient Oak tree.

"We are to follow the same battle plan and will await instructions... We expect that 'The Keeper', who has committed the plan to memory, will be found alive..."

After eavesdropping on Admiral Borg's updated battle plan, the two archers move back a short distance into the deeper thickets of the ancient wood. One of them raises the palm of her hand and a small sparrow lands on it. After writing a short



message, the other archer wraps the small message up into a miniature scroll and tethers it to the sparrow, which flutters off immediately to the North bearing its important cargo.

“When the Borg cavalry sets off for the ridge, we should try to free the prisoners by the East Tower and Citadel Falls. It’s too much of a risk with their numbers as they are right now.” The female archer says to her partner.

“They won’t be expecting us if we attack at nightfall. This will weaken them. We will then lead the prisoners through the woods on the other side to Babble River.” He says to her.

“Good idea. There’s a risk this way, but we’ll at least avoid their armed hordes moving north from the opposite side. They’ll have to take the other route if they are to assemble opposite the ridge on the west side of Whisper Creek.”

“I hear the south end of the woodland path can be found starting just to the east of Citadel Falls. It leads to the Boulder Pass and friendly eastern territories of Steep Valley.”

“Let’s camp out here. When our other three return from their positions by the jail, we’ll take turns spying some more to find a way to free the caged prisoners.”

As dusk began to set in, the other three archers find their way back to the hidden makeshift camp.

“We checked out the cage and the sentinel guarding from a small fortification nearby. We think our special Millenioid forged arrows can break the lock to the jail door if aimed correctly. We’ve got three chances to rupture it and then we’re out of the special kind of ammunition...” One of the arriving archers says to the others.

“I think we should plan to shoot a friendly dull one into the large cage bearing a message for the prisoners inside that we are here for a jail-break.” A second archer says.

“We both discussed this when you three we’re making plans for the raid. Borg and his cavalry are setting off soon. We should wait until their large hordes start to move north. Then we’ll weaken them in the South before the big battle.”

“Good idea. I think they’ll set off tomorrow. We should plan the raid for that same night.”

The next morning, the archers awake to the sound of a loud war horn. Assuming positions in a tall set of cedars, one of the archers armed with the spyglass, watches as Borg’s cavalry sets its course toward Steep Valley Ridge and the North. After having a quick meal of berries and oatmeal, the five start to plan their raid on the jail. Firing an arrow into the cage as the sentinels are distracted, one of the caged Uprights finds the parchment tethered to it and quietly reads the following message to the other group of

captives: *“Be prepared for a jail break when the Big Bear Paw first lights up the night sky to the east.”*

“Someone is here to free us!” One captive says with a slightly whispering tone.

“Let’s gather our strength now. When we’ve broken free we may have to run in the deep woods for a while...” Another older captive Upright says quietly.

As night began to creep in over the Citadel ruins and the large caged woodland jail, the three archers wielding a special forged arrow, await the celestial appearance of the Bear Paw in the eastern sky.

“I see the constellation now. Let’s get our arrows ready!”

“You two with the regular arrows, we need you positioned so that you can both aim at the sentinels when the captives are freed from the large cage.” A lead archer says just moments before the raid.

Acting on a signal after the celestial sign appears, the archers take aim at their two different targets. Two of the three Millenioid arrows hit the bull’s eye on the cage door, fracturing the strong and reinforced forged iron of the lock. Immediately after, the prisoners break free from the guarded enclosure and run toward Citadel Falls. Just before the two sentinels can fire arrows of their own down below, the two remaining archers fire a barrage of arrows at them, wounding one and killing the other. Once the jail raid plan is put into motion, the group of thirty captives are herded by the lead archer and directed to the woodland path nearby.

“Come quickly! We’re going to camp north of here on our way back to Steep Valley Ridge. A war is on the horizon and they may need some of us as reinforcements.” The female archer says to the crowd.

“We’ll head north on the right banks of Babble River making sure we take cover if the enemy hordes come upon our parts of the woods.” Another archer adds.

Back by Whisper Creek, Warlock Wipkill’s forces at ‘Crooked Camp’ begin to assemble in their invasion positions on the west banks of the creek. Within the warlock’s tent, ‘The Keeper’, who had not encountered the archers when they ambushed the outpost, draws out a battle plan from memory for the taking of Steep Valley Ridge. Once the plan is drawn, it is recopied and both identical parchments are rolled up into miniature scrolls. Moments after, both men exit the high command tent and a loud whistle is blown. Immediately after, two Fire Lizards land on both shoulders of the warlock and each grab one of the identical parchments with their talons. One flies off to Grimley Fortress just to the West and the other toward Admiral Borg’s advancing armies closing in from the South, bearing plans for the imminent invasion.

In the forests of Steep Valley Ridge beyond the east banks of Whisper Creek, the Ranger studies the positions of the enemy through the trees as they prepare to assemble their forces opposite the ridge and creek bed. Instead of drinking and

celebrating the fall harvest as was their yearly tradition, a group of front line Uprights begin to form a preliminary line of defense, wielding farming tools and wooden staffs to resist the enemy down below.

“We have just received word from our archers that the enemy will gather their three clans opposite the ridge and attack tomorrow at dusk. We are also counting on some of our people being freed from the Citadel to the South. We need to fight to defend Steep Valley Ridge or the Crooked hordes will take over and we will all fall into death and slavery.” The Ranger tells her front lines firmly.

Early the following morning, armed with the recopied war plan delivered by Fire Lizard, Admiral Borg and his cavalry arrive at Whisper Creek. After setting up camp on the west banks of the creek bed, the armed barbarian hordes assume their position just to the South of ‘Crooked Camp’. Approximately an hour later, Warlock ‘Evil-wood’ and his forces of gloom set off from Grimley Fortress to the west to act as reinforcements behind the forming armies at ‘Crooked Camp’.

Overhearing the loudness of the barbarians in the usually quiet ravine of Whisper Creek, the Uprights begin to assemble their armies in long rows under the protection of Sir Wickerlot and his leafy kind. As the lines assemble with a numerous group of archers stationed high in the canopy above, a messenger Thrush from Citadel Falls lands on the shoulders of the emissary. After chirping out a message to the knowledgeable Upright linguist, the birds flies off on another airborne mission.

“Looks like the prisoners at the Citadel have been freed.” The emissary says to the Ranger.

“They’ll be heading towards us on the woodland trail that leads to Boulder Pass.” She replies.

“The prisoners can rest in the back woods when they get here but we’ll need our five archers as reinforcements. They’ve trained well for this time.” An archer nearby says from the top of a Tamarack tree.

“We need a speech to motivate our lines.” The emissary says to the Ranger.

Climbing up on the Boulder of Ages Past, the Ranger prepares to give a speech to her armies.

“We know that tonight is usually a night of drinking and merriment. However, we will delay our usual festival because the enemy is very much upon us. When we hear the horn of woe down from the barbarian camp by the creek bed, we are to charge and resist! ARE YOU WITH ME?”

In response to the Ranger’s question, the gathered crowds of Uprights hidden amid Wickerlot’s kin, raise their various weapons and tools in the air, in an energetic act of deferent approval. As the sun begins to set its course over to the westerly horizon, the tension begins to build on both sides of Whisper Creek.

As dusk approaches, the exhausted group of freed prisoners, accompanied by the group of five archers, continue to close in on Boulder's Pass via the scenic woodland trail.

Suddenly, the horn of woe screams out its eerie battle cry as the barbarians begin their sinister advance toward the wooded ridge. As the horn sounds, the forest shudders and the farmers and infantry in the front lines scream loudly as one, charging full force into the valley below. As the Uprights charge toward the Crooked hordes below, the archers, perched high atop the forest canopy, unleash multiple rounds of arrows toward Wipkill's charging armies. After three and a half hours of intense battling at the foot of Steep Valley Ridge, Admiral Borg throws his Crooked banner into the waters of Whisper Creek and commands his dark forces to retreat. Continuing to apply pressure from atop the ridge, the Ranger uses her reinforcements to form a barrier line and commands them to unwaveringly march toward the retreating hordes in case the enemy is trying to bluff defeat. Suddenly, word begins to travel among the tree folk through their secret rootish underground network that the returning archers have reached Boulder's Pass to the south of the ridge.

"Emissary, the five are back, along with a large group of famished and exhausted escapees from the Citadel prison."

"Thank you Sir Wickerlot! We will need their bows in case 'Evil-wood' plans a sneak attack with Borg retreating his hordes."

"The forest thanks you for your help. We will try to save our kind by the Citadel in case Borg continues to plan cutting down more of our root-kin by the Falls."

"We will assist on such a future mission to keep Borg and his allies at bay. But first, we must celebrate this season's harvest with the arrival of our dear friends from the Citadel."

With the archers watching Whisper Creek from a long row of trees atop the ridge all through the night, large crowds of Uprights begin to celebrate the victorious harvest in the deep back woods of Steep Valley Ridge. Warlock 'Evil-wood', guided again by his demon mask, decides to fully retreat his forces from the well-guarded and unclaimed valley in the same manner as Admiral Borg and Warlock Wipkill. While Sir Wickerlot's kind continue to show concern about the enemy planning to control the south woods by Citadel Falls, the three armies of misery are now very much divided, with fears and doubt standing in the way of the reunification of their warrish clans.

--The End--