

BATTLE WITH THE WITHER KING

AN UNOFFICIAL MINECRAFTER'S ADVENTURE



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BATTLE with the WITHER KING

By
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Note from the author

This is another of the short stories that I've been writing recently. I've found I like writing these short stories a lot, though they don't seem to stay very short. I'm glad you found this story online. Check my website, www.gameknight999.com, for information about more stories coming soon.

This story is actually part of some tutorials I developed for use in schools. Though I am no expert when it comes to writing, and I learn a little more every day, I decided to put what I've learned together in the form of videos for aspiring young writers to look at. I taught a few workshops at libraries and at conferences and used these materials to teach what I've learned, and they were very warmly received. You can find these materials and video tutorials on my other website, www.markcheverton.com under the *For Teachers* tab.

On the website, there is the example story as well as the worksheets called *Write your Own Minecraft Story*. In these materials, I demonstrate how I outline a story and break it down into different components. Well, this story is the outcome of all that work outlining and defining character flaws and setting and plot and . . .

I'll be writing more books, of course, but also more short stories. It is my hope that some of you read this story, and enjoy my writing, and then look at some of my other books. Keep checking www.gameknight999.com and www.markcheverton.com for notices about new short stories.

Teachers, please go to the *For Teachers* tab on www.markcheverton.com. I'm trying to put a lot of resources there for you. It is my sincere hope that we can work together to inspire many new young writers. Teachers, check the bottom of the *Introduction* tab for information about a video Q/A for your students as well as information about getting a set of bookmarks for your class. Any of your students can send the stories they write to www.markcheverton.com. I post every story I receive that is more than 1 sentence long, so please encourage your students to send them to me. Every email I receive is answered, personally, by me.

Keep reading, keep writing and watch out for creepers.

Mark Cheverton (Monkeypants_271)

Being who you really are, inside, is much easier than trying to be something others want. If those around you don't like you for who you are, then maybe you're trying to impress the wrong people. Surround yourself with authentic friends and you will always be accepted.

Chapter 1 – Isolation

The community that surrounded him felt so far away, he thought he'd never be able to feel its embrace.

Watcher looked down at the village from atop the watchtower. Warriors were celebrating their recent victory over a zombie-attack that had raged all throughout the night, and now the rest of the villagers, or NPCs (non-playable characters) were standing around the central well, congratulating the soldiers.

At the center of the celebration was Carver, the biggest and strongest of the warriors, Watcher's own personal bully. Villagers patted the big NPC on the back or clanked their weapons against his iron armor in appreciation of his bravery. Some of the NPCs were singing, others dancing. Food was being distributed to the village defenders as cake was set out on wooden tables.

His stomach grumbled.

Watcher stared down at the party, a chilling sense of sadness and isolation filling his thin, lanky body. He wanted to be a soldier more than anything, and could think of nothing better than going out with the other warriors to protect the village, but he was small and weak. Recently, he'd tried to join the army. Carver had personally dressed him in full iron armor, then given him an iron sword. The stocky leader had chosen a blunted stone sword to test Watcher's fighting skills. It had been the most humiliating experience in his life. The iron armor was too heavy for his scrawny legs and he could barely lift the iron sword. All of the villagers saw it was too much for the young boy, but Carver continued anyway. He charged at Watcher, slapping him across the stomach with his sword, then spun around and hit him on the back. Watcher's helmet, which was too big, slipped down over his eyes; he couldn't even see where Carver was standing. He had stepped forward, swinging his sword only slicing through the air. After three or four swings, the blade dropped from his tired hands as he fell to the ground, exhausted.

"You see," boomed Carver. "I told you that being a soldier was the job for a *real* villager, not a puny little boy like you. You even dropped your sword. A real warrior never loses his weapon. You are an embarrassment."

The big NPC pushed Watcher onto his back so that the fatigued boy was staring straight up at the sun like a turtle turned upside-down. He struggled to stand but was just too tired.

"Remember this, Watcher, next time you think about trying to be a defender of the village. This is for NPCs with strength and muscles that can wear armor and wield a sword." He stepped forward so he was staring straight down upon Watcher. "Go take your puny little bow and get back up into your watchtower. All you do up there is daydream. You are useless as a watchman for the village, but at least you'll be out of the way. I'm done with you."

Then Carver walked away and left Watcher on the ground, baking in the noonday sun. Once all the warriors had left, some of the other kids in the village

helped the humiliated NPC out of the armor. He'd been up in the watchtower ever since, sulking.

Now, the sun was beginning to rise in the east, a deep line of red splashed across the horizon announcing the coming of a new day. Watcher stared off to the east as the sky filled with reds and oranges and yellows, the curtain of sparkling stars slowly drawing back to allow the square face of the sun to reclaim the heavens. The tall spruce trees in the mega taiga biome extended their dark shadows across the brown and green ground, cutting across the many leafy ferns and clusters of mossy cobblestone that dotted the landscape. Large boxy clouds overhead cast dark shadows upon the ground, creating perfectly rectangular regions of darkness amidst the incredible tall trees and the brown podzol soil. It would have been a beautiful scene, if Watcher didn't feel so alone. Instead, it just felt more distant and untouchable.

Suddenly, something moved through the forest, something dark. At first Watcher thought it might just be the shadows of a large cluster of cobblestone, but the dark shape moved from east to west, trying to stay within the shadows cast by the clouds, only darting through the sunlight to a new gloomy rectangle on the ground.

Watcher pulled out his bow and notched an arrow. Waves of lavender light ran up and down the length of the weapon, his *Infinity* and *Punch* enchantments casting a sparkling purple hue across the top of the tower.

He knew he couldn't fire at the shadowy presence; it was much too far away. But if anyone could make a long shot with a bow, it was him. Watcher was probably the best archer in the village, though no one valued his ability. 'Real soldiers used swords' . . . that's what everyone told him.

Regardless of how far away that shadowy creature was, he felt better with the bow in his hand.

He watched as the shadowy thing moved closer to the village. It seemed to float smoothly across the ground as if it was flying, and not using legs.

What kind of creature could fly across the ground like that? he thought.

It wasn't a ghost or a dragon, he was sure of that. Watcher leaned forward, over the edge of the tower to get a better look. As it drew near, more details came into view. It was broad across the shoulders, much wider than a villager, but very narrow near the ground. And there seemed to be some kind of bumps above its shoulders . . . three of them.

"That's strange," Watcher said to the empty tower.

He leaned out a little more, peering into the morning light that bathed the landscape.

"Hey, what are you doing up there Skinny?" boomed Carver's voice. "You looking to jump?"

Watcher glanced down at the NPC. He was pointing up at him with his sword, an annoyed sneer on his boxy face. The other warriors snickered and threw their own mocking comments up at him.

"Don't worry," Carver added, "I don't think you will hurt anyone if you land on them."

The soldiers roared with laughter as they pointed up at the tower.

Watcher ignored them. Sadly, he was accustomed to this from Carver and the other soldiers. It used to get to him and spark his temper, but after years of this torment he'd learned to just ignore them; arguing with them never accomplished anything.

Concentrating on the forest that surrounded the village, he scanned for the dark creature. The shadows of the tall spruces now merged into each other as the sun climbed higher into the sky. It was difficult to see into some of the shadowy patches as they were very . . .

There it is!

The creature was now getting closer to the defenses that surrounded the community. Moving from shadow to shadow, the dusky monster slinked ever closer to the gates that stood open in the fortified wall. It passed through a wide area of sunlight and stopped for just a second.

Suddenly, Watcher recognized the creature; it was a wither. Three dark heads sat on its broad shoulders. A blackened spine ran down its back with ribs sticking out its side, a stubby bone protruding out the bottom.

The monster floated upward just for a moment, then turned its central head toward Watcher. Light from the sun sparkled off something gold and shiny that sat on its evil head; it was the Crown of Skulls. Instantly, Watcher knew the identity of the intruder. It was the creature of legends, the monster of nightmares; it was Karkan, king of the withers.

Am I really seeing this, or is this just another of my daydreams? Watcher thought. *I have to say something to the others, but if I'm wrong, I'll be ridiculed even more than usual.*

It didn't matter. Karkan was clearly up to something nefarious and evil, and it was Watcher's job to protect the village and warn them.

"QUICK, CLOSE THE GATES!" Watcher shouted as he looked down at the celebration.

The warriors looked up at him and laughed.

"There's a wither near the gates," he continued before any of the soldiers could shout their insults. "Karkan, the king of the withers is out there and he's up to something! Close the gates before he gets in."

"Is this another of your imaginary attacks?" Carver called up at him.

The last time, Watcher had called for the gates to be closed because of an impending attack, but he'd imagined the whole thing. Instead of it being an army of spiders, it had been a small group of pigs; that hadn't helped his reputation very much.

"No, it's real!" Watcher shouted. "Karkan is out there, just past the tallest spruce. If you move quickly, you'll see him."

Some of the villagers looked at the reluctant Carver with concerned expressions on their faces. They all knew that withers could be lethal; their flaming skull attacks difficult to survive. Some of the NPCs grabbed their children and rushed them to their homes causing an avalanche of fear to crash down upon the community.

With a sigh, Carver glared up at Watcher, then gathered his soldiers and headed for the gates. They sprinted out of the village then spread out in a defensive

formation with shields in their left hands, swords in their right. They advanced through the forest, ready for the dark creature to show its three heads.

Watcher pointed to where he'd seen the monster, but it was gone, only shadows of ferns and trees remained. He sighed, knowing what was coming.

The warriors reached the base of the tall spruce and looked around, then started to laugh.

"Watcher, where's your monster?" one of the warriors shouted.

"Is this your mysterious creature?" another shouted, banging on a cluster of mossy cobblestone with his shield.

The villagers laughed as the headed back into the village, mocking comments being fired up at Watcher like poisonous arrows. Carver, though, said nothing. He just glared at the lanky NPC, an expression of furious rage in his dark brown eyes. After passing in through the village gates, the stocky NPC pointed up at Watcher with his sword and shook his head, then turned and made for his home, the other warriors doing the same.

"I saw him, I know I did," Watcher said in a low voice. "I couldn't have imagined Karkan out there in the forest . . . it looked too real."

With a sigh, he put away his bow and climbed down out of the tower. But as he descended the ladder, Watcher failed to notice the flash of something shiny at the top of the tallest spruce tree. Sunlight reflected off a ring of gold with a dark inset skulls, the crown sitting slightly askew on an ashen skeletal head. Karkan's eyes, black as pitch and filled with a thirst for violence, glared down at the village, a hateful sneer on the monster's three faces.

Chapter 2 – Greed

Karkan floated out of the branches of the tall spruce, a maniacal laugh coming from the left skull, his right and center still sneering down at the village.

“Those foolish villagers don’t know what lies beneath them,” the middle skull of the wither king said.

He closed all six eyes and inhaled. The scent of gold wafted into his senses, the aroma filling them with a feeling of power and strength. To the wither king, gold was everything. He craved the precious metal, thirsted for it as if it were the last cool drink of water on a parched desert. Karkan could sense when gold was near, and when he detected its presence, he had to have it. Nothing could sate his hunger for the shining gold.

“I must have it,” Left head, always the impatient one, said.

“We must plan carefully and be patient,” calm and thoughtful Right skull said. “Perhaps we can scare them away.”

“That will take too long,” said Left. “We need that gold . . . now!”

“We will try to scare them away as Right suggests,” Middle commanded; this was the skull that was in charge. “But if they do not scare easily, then they will be destroyed.”

Middle was the more vicious of the three skulls, which was why he was in command, and wore the Crown of Skulls. The golden circlet was a relic passed down through the wither society, going from wither king to wither king throughout Minecraft’s history. No one really knew who had made it, or when; it had always been with them and was the sign of leadership and power within their society. Few villagers had ever seen it and lived.

Shaking his head to adjust the angle of the crown, Middle commanded the rest to descend from the tree. All three skulls could command the body, but if they gave opposing directions, then movement was difficult and, at times, impossible. To move quickly and efficiently, all three skulls had to agree.

“Let us go back to the wither temple and bring more of our brothers and sisters,” Right suggested. “We will scare them into leaving their village, then we can destroy it and take the gold that hides underground.”

“No, we cannot wait,” Left objected. “We should attack . . . now!”

“That would be foolish and you know it!” Middle snapped. “We will do as Right said and collect our troops. If these villages will not be scared away, then they will be destroyed.”

“Destroyed . . . I like the sound of that,” Left said with an evil child-like cackle.

Middle looked at Right; they both rolled their harsh white eyes.

“What of the NPC warriors?” Right asked.

“You mean the armored fools that came out of the village with their swords?” Middle replied.

"Of course not," Right said. "I mean the one in the tower. Likely he saw us and reported our presence to the others. That was how the foolish warriors knew to come out of the village. They circled right beneath the tree in which we hid."

"Didn't you see how scrawny and thin he was," Left said. "That one in the tower could barely hold up his own arms. He is no threat. We should just go back and destroy him."

The wither slowed for a moment as Left tried to return to the village, Right and Middle still pushing them away from the village.

"LEFT!" Middle snapped. "We *will* return to the wither temple now. Cooperate or be punished when we get home."

Left sighed, then acquiesced, helping to push their massive, charred, bony body through the mega taiga forest.

In the distance, bright green bushes and vines shown between the dark brown trunks of the massive spruce trees. The shadowy forest, with its brown soil and piles of mossy cobblestone, made the vibrant greens of the jungle biome that sat next to the forest seem even brighter. The sight of the junglewood trees and pods of glowing cocoa nestled in the tree branches brought a smile to all three faces.

Within the jungle sat their hidden wither temple and home. After resting in their stone sanctuary, they would gather their brothers and sisters and visit the NPC village again.

"When we return, we will take what is rightfully ours," Middle said. "The villagers can choose their own fate."

"I hope they stay and fight," Left said. "We haven't destroyed a village for a while. And a good battle will make the gold we take seem even better."

"Perhaps you are correct, Left," Middle said. "Karkan, the king of the withers takes what he wants, and all must bow to us or be destroyed."

The three skulls laughed evil, maniacal laughs that made the trees around them cringe in fear.

Chapter 3 – Insignificants

“I know I saw the wither king,” Watcher said.

His friends all nodded their heads. They were meeting in the storeroom that was carved into the side of the crafting chamber deep underground. It was where Watcher and his friends met, and hid. They were the outcasts from the village; NPCs too weak or small or misshapen to be warriors like Carver and the other soldiers.

“So what?” Farmer answered. “Are you going to do anything about it? Of course not. You’re an Insig like the rest of us.”

Insig was what the other villagers called their little band; it meant Insignificants. The group of friends had taken on the shorter version of the word to name their band of companions.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m an Insig or not,” Watcher insisted. “I still saw Karkan . . . I know it.”

“It doesn’t matter what you know,” Weaver said. She stood and crossed to the other side of the storeroom, her perpetual limp from having one leg longer than the other making a syncopated tha-THUMP, tha-THUMP sound. Sitting down on a bale of hay, she reached out and took a loaf of bread from the chest and took a bite. “All that matters is what you can prove to the warriors. Those thick-headed NPCs can only understand what’s directly in front of them. They have no faith in the Insigs, and in you, Watcher.”

“Yeah, for g-g-g-ood reason t-t-t-oo,” Saddler stuttered as she stood. She was the tallest of the Insigs, with long blond hair tied in a pony tail that spilled down her back like spun gold. “You’ve imagined l-l-l-lots of things up th-th-th-there in your t-t-t-tower.”

“I know I have, and I’ve apologized for that lots of times. But this time, I know for sure that I saw the king of the withers, and he is up to no good.”

“If you’re s-s-so certain, then g-g-go find that monsters and p-p-prove it to the solders.”

“Yeah, if you can find proof, then the soldiers will believe you.” Harvester added. He was the smallest of the Insigs, though he was the oldest. His small size brought ridicule from the warriors and many of the villagers. “Maybe then, the soldiers like Carver will show you some respect.”

“HA . . . soldiers showing respect to an Insig,” Farmer said, his unusually tall frame dwarfing the other Insigs. “Never gonna happen.”

He turned to look at Watcher, but the lanky youth wasn’t really sure if Farmer were looking at him, or Saddler who sat at his side. Farmer had a lazy eye that pointed off to the side, making it hard to tell where he was really looking.

“I don’t care about respect,” Watcher said. “I care about the people in this village. So I’m going out there to find Karkan and figure out what he’s planning. Any of you going with me?”

The other Insigs glanced down at the ground, avoiding Watcher's penetrating gaze.

"You know we aren't allowed out of the village," Weaver said as she limped back across the room to the storeroom door, her curly brown hair bouncing about like tiny little springs. "The last time we went beyond the village walls we all got in trouble. The soldiers had to come and get us. They said we were helpless out there on our own."

"And the problem is, you believe them," Watcher snapped. "Just because we're Insigs, it doesn't mean we're helpless."

He glared down at the others, but none looked up.

"Fine, I'm going on my own. Don't any of you say anything about where I am until I get back."

Watcher stormed to the door and flung it open. He crossed the floor of the crafting chamber, glancing at all the tunnels that plunged downward into the flesh of Minecraft; they were the village's mineshafts. Along the walls of the chamber sat piles of iron ore, coal, cobblestone, and diamond, but the largest pile shown bright in the torchlight: gold. One of the mineshafts had hit a large deposit of gold, and now blocks of the shining metal filled one corner of the crafting chamber.

Marching past the gold, Watcher climbed the steps that led out of the crafting chamber and to the surface, determination carved into his face.

"I'm gonna find Karkan, no matter what," Watcher said in a low voice, trying to boost his courage.

But the fact was, he was afraid. Withers were the most feared creatures with the exception of the ender dragon, and Watcher was going to go looking for their king, Karkan . . . it was insane. The thought caused waves of fear to crash down upon him, but the lanky archer was tired of being bullied by the warriors, especially Carver. He was going to show them that this Insig was a valuable member of their community. Watcher just hoped he actually possessed the courage to see this through . . . and not be killed in the process.

Chapter 4 – Proof

Watcher slipped out of the village without any difficulty. Few villagers bothered to notice him when he was trying to be seen. Moving about in the shadows and along the walls of buildings seemed to make him nearly invisible. Pulling the gate closed behind him, Watcher dashed through the forest, heading for the tall spruce where he'd seen the wither last. He could have taken a horse from the stable, but he wanted to be close to the ground; it would make picking up the wither's trail easier . . . he hoped.

The trees in the mega taiga stretched high into the air, their brown, gnarled trucks stretching up maybe twenty blocks, if not higher, until stubby branches protruded from their side. Watcher always thought the gigantic spruces looked like massive arrows stabbing up at the clouds. He's imagined many a battle between the leafy spears and the fluffy clouds. Maybe some subterranean giant was trying to spear the clouds so they could be dragged underground and eaten by his wife and children. What if they . . .

He shook his head and drove the imaginary adventure from his mind. Karkan *had* been to their village and Watcher had to prove it, somehow. Daydreaming right now would not help.

Weaving around the trees and past the leafy ferns that grew out of the light brown soil, Watcher finally found the tallest spruce. This was where he'd seen the king of the withers; there must be some evidence, somewhere.

A gentle east-to-west wind flowed through the forest, causing the leaves on the bushy ferns to rustle ever so slightly, creating a backdrop of peaceful music. In the distance, he could hear wolves howling their song of strength and pride. Watcher knew the majestic animals wouldn't hurt him, though the warriors always seemed afraid of them.

He laughed; the soldiers understood little other than the sword and the shield.

And then his keen eyesight spotted it . . . a leaf on a fern that looked charred.

Watcher ran to it and looked closely at the plant. He pulled the leaf from the bush and held it up to his eyes. The tips of the fronds were charred and blackened. But it was not as if it had been burned by fire; rather it was as if a deadly disease had eaten away at the plant. Carefully, he put the leaf into his inventory, then scanned the forest before him.

And then he saw another one, farther away.

Watcher sped to the next fern. It too was blackened. Karkan had probably brushed against the plant, and the magical power within the monster that gave its flaming skull attack such lethal effects, had likely scarred this bush. Many of the other villagers would have missed these subtle clues, but with Watcher's incredible eyesight, better than any other NPC in their community, he had been able to spot it.

"This is a trail I can follow," Watcher said aloud to the empty forest. "But it is not proof. No one will believe this evidence. I need more."

As he looked down at the wilted leaf, fear nibbled at the back of his head like hungry little spiders, causing his feet to grow heavy, his breathing labored.

"No, I must continue!" he growled to himself. "This Insig will not quit."

Pulling out his bow, he continued to follow the trail as the sun slowly neared the western horizon. Orange and red light from the setting sun cast a warm crimson glow on the forest, causing the shadows from the tall spruce trees to lean away from the setting sun as if they were trying to escape the relentless approach of night. The shimmering iridescent glow from his enchanted bow added a splash of purple to the surroundings, giving him a few extra moments of light before the sun finally settled itself below the horizon for its long evening nap.

Overhead, a million stars sparkled down upon him. Watcher looked up and smiled. He loved nighttime, with the glittery pinpricks of light, and the silvery moon, and the inevitability of dawn just over the horizon. The one thing he didn't like was the monsters, for nighttime was monster time in Minecraft. But with his sharp eyes, he could see the monsters coming from far away and was never nervous about being outside of the village after dark.

Following the trail of scorched leaves and scarred trees that marked the wither king's trail, Watcher moved through the forest, his bow offering enough light to see the telltale signs.

Suddenly, a noise like that of a cat's meow reached his ears. Tiny little square goose bumps formed on Watcher's arms and neck as he scanned the sky.

"Was that a ghost?" he whispered to the fern at his feet.

The meow, this time a little different, came again. It was clear the sound was not from the sky, but from the ground. That meant it was not a ghost . . . good. Watcher had no desire to face a ghost all by himself. Gripping his bow tight, he continued forward. Suddenly, the temperature went from cool and dry to something that was hot and extremely humid. The meows grew louder. Before him stood tall, lush green trees with vines hanging down from their limbs like dreadlocks from some kind of Rastafarian. High amidst the branches, orange-ish brown cocoa pods hung, clinging to the vine covered tree trunks. Reaching down, he grabbed a bright yellow flower and put it to his nose, drawing in the rich, fragrant aroma. To his left and right, he saw clusters of melons almost ready to be harvested. Instantly, Watcher knew he was in a jungle biome and before him were junglewood trees. This biome teemed with life. Ocelots meowed all around him as he moved through the dense shrubbery. He felt safe with the wild cats nearby; that meant creepers, with their fear of cats, would stay away.

Because of his light frame and strong legs (for his size), Watcher was easily able to leap through the jungle, continuing to follow the path, his bow casting a circle of sparkling purple light, allowing him to see. As he wove his way through the dense undergrowth, the jungle began to brighten with a silvery light. Glancing up at the sky, the lanky boy saw the square face of a full moon looking down upon him, illuminating the terrain and giving everything a slightly magical appearance.

Watcher smiled; he loved the moonlight.

Suddenly, a terrible, horrific sound echoed through the jungle. It was a hollow sort of wail that was not speech, nor response to another creature; it was just the terrifying howl of something evil and dangerous. At that moment, Watcher realized he'd caught up with the king of the withers, Karkan.

Putting away his bow so as to hide the purple glow, he moved cautiously through the jungle, making as little noise as possible. A thick junglewood tree, the chocolate-brown cocoa pods hanging just overhead, stood in his path. Climbing up the vines, he moved around the tree and into a cluster of shrubs. When he peeked over the plants, Watcher was shocked at what he saw. Before him was the largest tree he'd ever seen. A massive junglewood tree fifteen blocks wide, stood atop a hill, the thick roots of the tree snaking out like wooden vipers, grabbing ahold of the ground to support the massive plant's bulk. Branches stretched out in all directions, with vines drooping off the clusters of leaves like long stringy green tears, giving the tree a sad sort of look.

At the base of the tree, nestled amongst the thick curving roots, Watcher saw a large structure made of mossy cobblestone. Vines spread out across the building as if the jungle were trying to absorb it back into its verdant folds, much of the building recessed into the base of the tree. A gigantic opening stood at the front of the construction, large enough for a ghastr to fly through, with tall pillars of stone bordering the entrance. Above the opening, three dark skulls stood out against the gray blocks. They looked as if they guarded the building, though in this creepy place, Watcher couldn't imagine anyone wanting to go in.

Suddenly, Karkan floated of the structure followed by a smaller wither. His golden crown shown bright in one of the few patches of open moonlight, reflecting the silvery rays directly into Watchers eyes.

He ducked down quickly; if Karkan discovered him in the jungle, Watcher wouldn't have a chance.

"What do you mean we can't attack the village?!" Karkan screamed.

"The zombies are attacking us as we speak," another wither replied. "The army was sent to repel their assault."

"But I need them NOW!" Karkan said. That voice sounded different to Watcher, filled with impatience.

"I can recall your warriors, sire," the wither commander replied. "But then the zombies will get to our temple. Those decaying monsters cannot be allowed to enter our sacred home; it is only for withers and no other monster can be granted entrance. None can know of the secrets hidden there."

"I know the law, of course," Karkan replied, this time with a calm and methodical voice. "Perhaps we can assist in the battle against those decaying monsters."

"Yes sire."

"We will crush the zombies, then return to this village," Karkan added, this voice sounding mean and vicious. "They have something I desperately need, and I refuse to be denied my prize."

Watcher crawled forward and dared another peek around the bush. The wither king was now floating a dozen blocks away with his back turned to him, the second monster off to the left and out of sight. But then, Karkan did the strangest

thing. The skulls to the left and right turned to the center head and gazed longingly at the gold crown. They licked their lips as if it were possible to taste the gold, the fanatical craving for the shining metal obvious on their dark faces.

That's what he wants, Watcher thought. *Karkan wants our gold.* The realization struck him like a bolt of lightning.

Carefully, he slunk back down behind the leafy bush and listened to the monster. This time, Karkan's voice changed again into something vicious and angry. "Hurry, take me to the battle with the zombies. I will finish that fight so I can destroy the village and take what is rightfully mine . . . which is everything!"

The withers floated off, moving deeper into the jungle. In the distance, he could hear the growls and sorrowful wails of the zombies as faint explosions rumbled across the biome.

"He's going to destroy our village so he can get to our gold," Watcher whispered to himself. "I must get back as quickly as possible.

Fear prickled at every nerve as if tiny needles were jabbing at him from all sides. Standing, he took off running back toward his village. But in the darkness, he misjudged his footing and tripped, falling with a thud.

"What was that?!" Karkan asked. "Who's there?"

Watcher didn't stay to answer, he just ran for his life and the lives of his fellow villagers.

"I see you villager!" Karkan bellowed. "Spying on me will do you no good. Soon I will be on your doorstep, and you will answer to the king of the withers for hording all that gold. IT WILL BE MINE!"

The monster laughed such a maniacal, spine-tingling laugh, that Watcher thought he was going to pass out from sheer fright.

Then he ran. Springing over bushes and around trees, Watcher tried to weave to the left and right in case the monster fired one of its deadly flaming skulls at him, but no attack ever came. With heart pounded in his chest, more from terror than from fatigue, he dashed through the jungle and then into the forest.

"I must tell them what I heard," Watcher said. "But how do I get them to believe me? If they don't listen to me, then the withers will destroy everything."

And as he bolted through the forest, icy fingers of dread wrapped themselves around the last bits of Watcher's courage and began to squeeze.

Chapter 5 – Karkan

Watcher rushed through the forest like a madman. He trampled ferns and crushed patches of brown mushrooms as he streaked through the mega taiga biome, desperate to put as much distance between himself and Karkan as possible. He could still hear the monster's demonic laughter in the back of his mind, that hollow sort of wail at the end of the chuckle that almost turned his blood to ice.

Finally, he was able to see light from between the thick trunks of the spruce trees; torches atop the fortified walls casting circles of yellow light upon the landscape. The laughter in his mind began to recede as the sounds of his village grew louder. Cook pots clanked on top of furnaces as the smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the forest. *I bet that's Baker's bread*, he thought. Steak sizzled as mushroom stews bubbled, filling the air with delicious smells that drifted over the tall cobblestone wall and into the forest; it made his mouth water.

How could some monster try to destroy all this, he thought. *It's my home.*

"Someone's approaching," a voice yelled from the top of the cobblestone wall.

The sound of metal clanking against metal filled the air as the armored warriors formed up on the other side of the wall. Watcher could hear Carver shouting out orders to the soldiers, getting them ready for possible battle. He sounded strong and brave, as if there were not an ounce of fear in the big NPC's voice.

I wish I were like Carver, Watcher thought as he waited at the foot of the fortified wall. *He's strong and brave and not afraid of anything. All I am is weak and frightened of a wither's laughter. The warriors named us correctly, the Insignificants . . . maybe they were right.*

He sighed.

Suddenly, the gates to the village swung open and a stream of iron-coated villagers flowed out, weapons drawn and shields at the ready. They quickly surrounded Watcher, but when they recognized him, they turned and faced the forest, taking up a defensive formation in case any monsters stormed out of the darkness. Carver then strode out with just a sword in his hand, an angry scowl on his face.

"What are you doing out here after dark, Insig," the stocky NPC barked.

"I found the wither king," Watcher replied. "I knew I didn't just imagine it. He was out there, watching our village and he . . ."

"You know it's dangerous going out into the forest after dark. There could have been monsters around. If they had snuck up on you, then me and my soldiers would have to come out there and rescue you."

"Monsters can't sneak up on me, that's absurd," Watcher said, then cringed at the disrespectful tone to his statement.

"Absurd, huh . . . You think you can just break the rules whenever it suits you."

"You don't understand, Karkan is going to attack the village. We need to prepare before he..."

"I keep hearing you talk about the legendary king of the withers, yet you still haven't shown me any proof. Where is your evidence, Insig. Show me!"

Watcher stepped back, suddenly afraid of Carver.

"Well... I... uh..."

"Show me!"

Watcher reached into his inventory and pulled out the fern leaf. He pointed to the charred tip, but the whole thing had become crunched from being stuffed into his inventory. It was difficult to see anything unusual with the leaf.

"What is this supposed to be?" the stocky NPC asked.

The warriors looked at the leaf and laughed, some of them pulling up tufts of grass and handing them to Watcher as more evidence. The only one not laughing was Carver; he never laughed nor smiled. It was as if he might fall apart if a grin ever creased his face.

"Well... uhhh... I followed a trail of charred plants until I made it into the jungle. Then I..."

"You went into the jungle!" Carver exclaimed. "You know there are tons of creepers in there. They blend in with the plants and are impossible to see. You could have been blown up."

"There were ocelots all around me, so I knew there were no creepers nearby."

"You relied on a bunch of cats to protect you?" Carver asked.

The rest of the warriors laughed.

Here comes the humiliation part, Watcher thought.

"A bunch of wild kitty cats aren't gonna protect you from a deadly creeper. You Insigs know nothing. Get back inside so we can close up the village for the night."

"But creepers *are* afraid of ocelots. They *do* keep them away," Watcher said in a weak voice, but he knew he'd already lost the argument, even if he were right; Carver and the other warriors never bother listen to someone like him.

Maybe he is right, maybe we're just Insigs, Watcher thought.

As he walked into the village, Watcher saw NPCs staring at him, some of them pointing and laughing while the others were whispering to each other, shaking their boxy heads.

"But the wither king... he's out there," Watcher pleaded, "and he's gonna attack our village soon. We must get prepared or..."

"Or what?!" Carver snapped as he stepped into the village and closed the gates behind him. "Or we're gonna be destroyed? Or they're gonna take over everything? Or? Or? Or? I'm tired of hearing you rant about your imaginary villains."

Watcher thought about mentioning the gold, but he knew Carver would never listen. The stocky warrior was right. Watcher and his friends were just Insignificants and nothing they said or did was important to anyone else. He might as well be invisible, which was how he felt.

Suddenly, that terrible, hollow laughter floated out of the forest. It was faint and hard to hear, but his keen hearing was able to catch it. Watcher's blood ran cold as icicles of fear stabbed at him from all sides.

"He's here," Watcher moaned.

"What are you talking about, Insig!" Carver snapped.

"Karkan, he's here, and he's going to destroy the village."

He heard the evil laugh again, this time a little louder. Watcher wanted to dig a hole and climb inside as terror overwhelmed his senses. Some of the other villagers heard it this time and looked confused.

"Are you insane," Carver growled. "Now you think this imaginary wither king is here and is going to attack our village."

Some of the other warriors laughed at Watcher, mocking him with hurtful comments but Carver remained stoic, a stern look always on his square face.

Suddenly, the king of the withers shouted a deep throaty roar that echoed as if it were made from within a bottomless pit. All of the villagers grew quiet as they stared at the front gates of the village, the forest beyond the cobblestone walls now looking sinister and evil.

"This village is sitting on land that I want," a voice bellowed from within the forest. "And when I want something, I take it."

Slowly, Karkan moved out from behind the bushy top of a spruce, his three heads glaring down at the villagers with a venomous hatred. A malicious smile grew across each skull as if the wither king knew some kind of evil secret. Then with a laugh, he launched his flaming skulls down at the village, screams of terror from the NPCs filling the air.

Chapter 6 – Attack

Karkan laughed as his flying skulls streaked down at the fortified walls, dark flames surrounding each like a deadly halo. They smashed into the cobblestone walls and just tore gaping holes in the fortification. More fell down upon the NPCs, striking those atop the ramparts, rending HP (health points) from the villagers' bodies.

Shouts of panic and pain filled the air as villagers scrambled for cover. Many dove through doorways to get inside, but the wooden walls of their homes did not protect them. His flaming skulls carved through the houses and found the NPCs that hid within, causing many to scream in terror as they were stuck by his aerial assault.

"This is what happens when you don't give me what I demand!" Karkan shouted.

A villager was running across the top of the wall with sword and shield in his hand.

"Look, the fool is trying to attack us," Left said. "I want to destroy him, but slowly."

"We cannot treat this as a game," Right snapped. "All of us, attack."

Left and Right fired their skulls at the NPC, followed by Middle's dark blue flaming skull. The first two hit the villager, then the blue skull struck the doomed soul. Instantly, the NPC looked confused as the wither effect took him over, making it impossible to tell how much health he still had.

"Left, Right, hit him again!" Middle ordered.

Left and Right fired another volley at the villager. Because of the wither effect, the idiotic fool didn't know his health was almost consumed. The next two flaming skulls took the rest of his health, causing his armor and weapons to fall to the ground, his body disappearing with a pop.

"Ha ha ha," Left laughed.

"Be quiet!" Middle snapped.

Some of the warriors were assembling near the gate. They were wrapped in iron armor and each held a sword and shield. The trio of heads fired their flaming skulls at the wall, tearing a gigantic gash through the defenses. They fired again, causing the warriors to scatter like silverfish in the sunlight.

"Ha ha," Right chuckled quietly.

Middle glared at Right, silencing him. He then turned his head toward the village below.

"Villagers, this is my land, and I want it. You have two days to leave this village. When I return, my wither army and I will level this place to the ground, leaving behind only a smoking crater. We will then take what is ours, which is EVERYTHING!"

Before the villagers could form a response, Karkan headed back toward the jungle and his sacred temple.

“Why do you give them two days?” Left asked. “We could have destroyed them now.”

“Didn’t you see the one with an enchanted bow?” Middle asked.

Left and Right both shook their dark heads.

“If they have archers with magical weapons, then they could be stronger than we realize,” Middle explained. “We will let them stew in their fear and think about what we could do to them. I’m sure in two days, they will be gone and we can just take the gold that lies under their homes.”

“But what if they haven’t left in two days?” Left asked.

“Then you can do that which you do best . . . destroy.”

Left gave a hoarse, choking sort of laugh that eventually spread to Right and Middle until all three dark skulls were chuckling with evil glee.

Chapter 7 – Signifs

The village was covered with debris, pieces of the village wall here, chunks of a roof there. Buildings were destroyed and families were left homeless. But worse still were the items that were strewn about the village, each marking where an NPC had perished, their inventory items being the only evidence they had ever existed.

Grief-stricken villagers wailed in despair as they mourned the loss of family members. Mothers cradled a shovel or hoe in their arms as they wept, fathers and brothers boiled with anger and heartache.

The sound of all that misery and despair made Watcher openly weep. He didn't feel strong enough to hold back the tears . . . or maybe it took more strength to show the emotions, he wasn't sure. All he knew for sure was he'd never felt such overwhelming sadness in his life.

"My friend, Baker . . . she was standing right there," Watcher moaned as he stared at loaves of bread that floated off the ground nearby.

She had been the same age as Watcher, and always secretly gave him and the other Insigs fresh bread when it came out of the furnaces. Now, bread would never taste the same again. The lanky boy moved to the brown loaves and allowed them to flow into his inventory, then sat on a block of stone and just stared at his surroundings, his body numb.

Carver stormed through the courtyard of the village, fuming mad. He yelled at the gaping holes in the walls and the torn up buildings, his sword in his hand. Watcher could tell he wanted to hit something and vent his rage somehow, but there was no enemy here to attack, just sorrow and grief.

Suddenly, the faintest of high-pitched cries reached Watcher's ears. It was not the weeping sobs of an adult; this was the cry of an infant in pain. He looked at the building behind him. The flaming skulls had smashed right through the walls and destroyed Baker's whole family; her mother and father and younger sister hadn't stood a chance. They were just erased from the face of Minecraft, only a few tools and some childish toys remained. Their daughter, Hunter, she wasn't even a year old and now that little girl was . . . suddenly another high-pitched cry reached his sensitive ears.

He stood and moved into the destroyed home, pushing aside pieces of the shattered walls.

"What are you doing in there?" Carver demanded. "Leave their stuff alone. This is not time to divide up their belongings."

"Be quiet!" Watcher snapped. "I hear crying."

Watcher moved further inside their house and listened. Another muffled sob tricked its way through the debris. Watcher carefully pushed aside parts of a broken table and pieces of shattered furnaces.

"Insig, now is not the time to clear out their home. Don't you have any respect?" the big NPC barked.

Watcher held out a hand, silencing Carver. Some of the warriors gasped in shock.

"How dare you!"

"Shhhh!" Watcher insisted.

He got onto his hands and knees and pushed through the shattered home, listening. Another sob . . . it was getting weaker. Watcher lifted blocks of wood from the wall and threw them frantically aside, some of them flying into those behind, but Watcher didn't care. And then, after hefting a wooden chair aside, he found a hole in the ground that had likely been put there by one of the flaming skulls. At the bottom of the hole lay Hunter, her skin almost as pale as a skeleton. Quickly, Watcher pulled out a shovel and dug up the sides of the hole so he could climb down to the girl.

"I'm sick and tired of this, Insig," Carver boomed. "Get out of there, or I'm coming in after you!"

Carver's voice sounded as if it were a million miles away.

Watcher lifted girl into his arms, then pulled an apple out of his inventory and gave it to the innocent child. She took it into her small hands and devoured it. Instantly, color began to come back into her face. He gave her a piece of bread, her sister's bread. Hunter gnawed on it until it was gone; her HP was slowly rejuvenating.

Carefully, Watcher climbed out of the hole and moved through the rubble.

"That's it, Watcher!" Carver boomed. "I'm coming in there to . . ."

Instantly, he grew quiet when he saw the little girl in the skinny boy's arms.

"I would have found her sooner if you had stopped screaming," Watcher said quietly to the stocky warrior. He raised his voice for all to hear. "She's OK everyone, but . . ." Tiny square tears began to tumble down his cheeks. "But no one else survived in the house."

Carver looked down at the little girl, then drew his gaze to Insig. Watcher thought the impossible was about to happen; Carver was going to apologize. But before the warrior could say something, Watcher spoke.

"I told you Karkan was out there, but you wouldn't listen," Watcher growled. "Now that monster has hurt our friends. Hunter must grow up without parents because the king of the withers wants to take our land."

Carver lowered his gaze to the ground. Watcher could tell the big NPC felt responsibility for this tragedy and expected a public reprimand from the lanky boy. But instead, Watcher handed the young girl off to another villager, then faced Carver, defiance etched into his square face.

"You think we should leave the village?" the big NPC asked in a soft, uncertain voice.

Watcher took another step closer until he was toe-to-toe with the stocky villager. Some of the other warriors gasped. No one stood that close to Carver and stayed on their feet. Slowly, the warrior raised his head and peered into Watcher's brown eyes.

"Once you run from a bully, you never stop," Watcher said. "Instead of just running away, we need to change the situation. He wants something here in our village. We just need to figure out what it is." He knew what the monster craved, but

Watcher didn't want to say anything to Carver, not yet. "Once we know that, then we have the power, and that bully, Karkan, will be at our mercy."

Carver stood a little taller as Watcher's words buoyed his courage.

"We must refuse the role Karkan as put us in . . . the victim." Watcher said, his voice growing louder.

He glanced at the other Insigs that stood near the village's well and saw the same recognition in their eyes. All of them knew what it was like to be told they were the victim and agree to their role. They had accepted it all this time because they figured it was the natural order of things, and they lacked the self-esteem to think better of themselves. But there was nothing natural about what the wither king had done, or was going to do.

The Insigs all stepped forward and stood at Watcher's side, glaring up at Carver.

"We n-n-n-need to gather s-s-s-some information," Saddler said.

"And one thing we're good at is moving about unseen," Harvester said in his small high-pitched voice. "We'll find out what the withers want, and then take it from them."

"That's right!" Weaver added as she shifted weight off her short leg.

"What do you think?" Watcher asked Carver.

The big NPC paced back and forth. He glanced at Watcher, then cast his gaze at the other Insigs. Suddenly, little Hunter cried out. She was being passed from one adult to another and had awakened briefly. Carver glanced at the little girl as she nestled in the arms of a new protector, then drifted back off to sleep.

"OK, we'll go out there and figure out what this wither king wants from us," Carver said.

The Insigs cheered.

"But we're doing this *my* way, you got that?"

The small, skinny villagers nodded their heads, eager to prove themselves. Watcher stayed perfectly still.

"I give the orders and you do what I say, no matter what," Carver said. "That's the only way I'll allow all of you out of the village."

"Well, to be honest, with the holes in the wall, it'll be pretty hard keeping anyone in the village," Watcher said.

Carver flashed the lanky youth an angry glare.

"Much less keeping the monsters out," the skinny boy added.

"You're right," the big NPC replied. "Go get your stuff and remember you are under my command. My warriors are gonna be responsible for protecting all of you out there in the forest and jungle. You obey my commands."

"Yeah!" the Insigs exclaimed, then turned and headed off to retrieve their stuff, leaving Watcher still standing before Carver.

"So, was that enough proof?" Watcher asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"You believe me about Karkan, I just want to hear you say it."

The stocky NPC glared down at the small boy, fury burning in his eyes. He took a step closer to Watcher, then spun around and walked away, leaving the boy standing there alone, as usual.

Glancing at Hunter who was now asleep in Tailor's arms, Watcher felt an anger rise up within him like he'd never felt before. It was all so unfair . . . Karkan destroying these lives.

Even though he has the might, he doesn't have the right! Watcher shouted within his mind.

His anger grew brighter as if a blazing fire had just taken root in his soul and was threatening to consume his entire being. He'd been bullied for so long, he'd come to think that maybe he deserved it, but Hunter didn't deserve this, nor did her parents, or the warriors on the walls, or the other villagers destroyed by Karkan and his flaming skulls.

Suddenly, a hand settled onto his shoulder causing him to spin around. Drawing bow and arrow from his inventory in a smooth fluid motion, he notched the arrow and pulled it back, ready to fire. It had all happened so fast, some of the warriors nearby gasped in shock and surprise.

"S-s-s-low d-down," Saddler said. "It's just me."

Watcher slowly lowered his bow, then put it back into his inventory.

"H-h-h-here's your leather and s-s-some f-food."

He took the supplies and armor. There were two sets of the protective clothing, one dyed a dark brown, the other a bright green. He donned the dark armor, then gave Saddler a smile.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's n-n-n-no big d-deal."

The other Insigs arrived, all of them wearing dark brown armor like Watcher. At the same time, Carver arrived with a dozen warriors and enough horses for everyone. The soldiers jumped up onto their horses, then watched to see if the Insigs could mount their steeds. Without hesitation, each of them jumped up into the saddle and pulled them around into a tight circle. Carver and the others didn't know the Insigs had been taking horses out to ride at night through the forest for a long time; being invisible has its advantages sometimes.

"OK, listen to me," Watcher said as he motioned the other Insigs into a tight circle. "This is gonna be dangerous. I won't blame any of you if you want to stay here instead of heading out there and finding Karkan." He glanced at each of his friends, a look of angry confidence on his square face. Watcher saw the same expression staring back at him. "Good. We aren't gonna let Karkan hurt our friends or destroy our village. This is our home, and we'll protect it any way we must."

"Yeah!" Farmer barked, his good eye staring right at Watcher. "We're the Insignificants, and we won't be trifled with."

"NO!" Watcher snapped. "We aren't gonna accept that name anymore. None of us are insignificant and we should have never let them call us that. We are the opposite. Each of us has our own skill, and we're gonna put them to use against this threat, this bully . . . Karkan."

"Then if we're the opposite," Harvester said in his small, high-pitched voice, "that makes use the Significant's."

"I l-l-like that," Saddler added.

"Yeah . . . we're the Signifs," Weaver said proudly, a smile creasing her square face.

"Ok then," Watcher said, then moved his horse even closer to the others and lowered his voice. "Signifs, I already know what Karkan wants . . . our gold. If I tell Carver, then he's going to do something stupid. This is something the Signifs need to do; we're our village's only hope. Saddler, go get all the gold, and also bring all the blocks in the chest at the back of the store room."

Saddler looked at Watcher with confusion on his face.

"Just do it . . . please," the lanky villager asked. "I have an idea, but it will take all of us working together to pull it off."

Saddler nodded, then jumped off her horse and ran for the crafting chamber, the blond ponytail flowing behind her like a streaming yellow flag. In minutes she was back on her mount, a devious smile on her face.

"I'll tell you my plan when we find a good place to pull it off," Watcher explained. "Do all of you have your green armor?" They nodded. "Good, we'll need it. Those idiotic soldiers are going to stand out like beacons in the jungle. We'll need to protect them while we're pulling off my plan. I have some ideas how to do that, but all of us should keep an eye on them, just to be safe. Probably none of them have been in the jungle before."

"We've all been there tons of times," Farmer said.

"Yep, that's why we need to watch out for the warriors," Watcher added. "Are all of you ready?"

They looked at Watcher and smiled.

"Then let's go find us a wither king!" Watcher shouted.

The Signifs all yelled and cheered, then rode through the massive hole in the village wall, Carver and the other soldiers trying to catch up.

Chapter 8 – Jungle

They galloped through the mega taiga, the horses' hooves filling the forest with thunder. Watcher glanced over his shoulder. Carver and the other soldiers were struggling to catch up to the Signifs, surprised looks on their square faces. Some of the warriors were shouting over the hoof beats, likely trying to figure out when these tiny villagers had ever learned how to ride a horse, much less go at full speed through the forest, weaving around mossy cobblestone and giant taiga trees.

Watcher signaled the others to slow down, allowing the other warriors to catch up. The Signifs all smiled, a satisfied expression on their faces.

Carver moved next to Watcher.

"Where did you see this wither?" the stocky NPC asked.

"He was in the jungle."

"I know that, you already told us. But where, specifically?"

"I'll explain when we reach the jungle," Watcher replied.

Carver was about to object, but Watcher turned and urged his horse faster. When they reached the end of the forest, the villagers brought their mounts to a halt. Many of the animals lowered their heads and munched on the grass and leaves in the verdant growth of the jungle that sat right next to the mega taiga. Watcher quickly dismounted, then winked at the other Signifs, letting them know to follow his lead.

"Ok, where is this wither king?" Carver asked.

"Well . . . um . . . it's . . . um . . ."

"Where did you see him?!" the big NPC snapped.

"Well, if you . . . um . . . go north, you'll find a clearing," Watcher said, trying to put as much fear in his voice as was believable. "At the clearing, you head west and you'll find a massive junglewood tree larger than anything you've ever seen. It's easily twice the size of any other tree in the forest and a dozen blocks across."

"That's where you saw the wither king?"

Watcher nodded his head, then looked down at the ground. The rest of the Signifs did the same.

"I get it," Carver said as he moved his horse closer. "You're afraid?"

The NPCs all nodded their heads.

"Don't worry, you can wait for us here. We'll follow your directions and find out what this Karkan wants, then meet you back right here . . . OK?"

Watcher nodded his head, then looked up at Carver. The warrior had no problem believing that they were all afraid, but he could probably never imagine they were brave.

The big NPC pulled his horse around and urged it into a gallop, heading north, the rest of the warriors following. When they were out of sight, Watcher looked up at his friends.

"Everyone dismount, the horses will be of no use in the jungle," he explained.

"What was all that about?" Farmer asked.

"I had to get rid of Carver and the others so we could set our trap and take care of the withers," Watcher explained. "If we told them what we were going to do, they'd just get in the way or think we couldn't do it."

"B-b-but we c-can do anything!" Saddler said.

"We all know that, but the warriors don't believe it."

"Then we'll show them," Weaver said as she pulled her horse to a tree and secured its lead. She then limped back to the others.

"All of you know where that gigantic waterfall is located in the jungle?" Watcher asked.

"Of course," the chimed.

The warriors were afraid to go into the tangled biome. Creepers prowled the jungle, their mottled green skin merging with leafy growth, making them difficult to spot. Spiders also frequented the dense undergrowth. But if you knew how to listen for the creepers and where to look for the spiders, they were easy to avoid. With all their clanking armor and bright shining swords, the soldiers naturally attracted monsters to them.

"Then let's get changed and get moving," Watcher said.

The Signifs all took off their dark brown armor, and replaced it with some dyed bright green. They stood out like beacons in the mega taiga, but as soon as they stepped into the jungle, the villagers nearly disappeared.

Because of their lightweight, agile frames, the five companions moved quickly through the jungle. Watcher always marveled at Weaver when she ran. The girl's limp looked terrible when she walked, but when she ran, Weaver had figured out how to leap forward with her strong leg, using her shorter weak leg to balance the landing.

They shot through the jungle like skinny little green missiles. Always towering over the terrain was the massive junglewood tree that hid the wither temple. It was still far away, but its massive height allowed its treetops to constantly peer down upon the occupants of the jungle. The presence of that massive tree made Watcher shudder; he knew Karkan would be there, waiting. If their battle with the zombies was complete, then his army of three-headed monsters would be there as well, and that's what had Watcher worried. Battling a single wither was one thing, but battling an entire army of them was something completely different. If their plan didn't work, then the Signifs had little chance to survive, and they all knew it.

As the companions leapt over bushes and climbed around huge tree trunks, a thunderous sound grew louder. It made the ground shake every so slightly, as if some kind of mythological beast was smashing the very fabric of Minecraft.

Watcher smiled.

"We're almost there," he said to the others.

They smiled back to him but fear still lurked in the eyes of his friends.

In minutes, they'd reached a river that carved its way through the jungle wilderness, a massive waterfall feeding the cool blue flow. At the foot of the falls was a small island made of stone and gravel. It was maybe twenty blocks wide, the river parting around the tiny piece of land.

Watcher sloshed through the river that wasn't very deep and climbed up onto the island. His four friends joined him and cast their gaze on their surroundings. Tall jungle wood trees ringed the area, leafy green sentinels that were about to witness an insane battle.

Leaning close to his friends, Watcher explained his plan to nodding heads and fearful gazes. They all knew this was all or nothing. If they failed, then they would be destroyed and their village would likely become a smoking crater. Everyone was relying on the Significants, whether they knew it or not, and as icy needles of fear stabbed at his soul, he laughed at that thought.

"W-w-what's so f-f-funny?" Saddler asked.

"Who'd ever thought our village would pin their hopes upon us, the Insignificants," Watcher said.

"The Significants!" Harvester snapped in his high-pitched voice.

"Sorry, I forgot, the Significants."

"We'll show 'em," Weaver said. "We'll show 'em all."

"Or die trying," Farmer added.

"We won't give up until we've made our friends safe," Watcher said. "They're depending on us, and we aren't gonna let them down."

The other Signifs nodded their small head.

"Ok then, let's get our trap set up."

The friends went to work. The only sound Watcher could hear was their tools chiseling away at stone and rock, the roar of the falls, and his heart thumping in his chest.

Chapter 9 – Battle

Watcher and the Significants put the final touches on the gigantic mound of gold ore at the foot of the waterfall. They could hear the soldiers approaching, their metal armor clanking together, making enough noise to attract every monster in Minecraft. Watcher figured they heard their pickaxes and shovels tearing into the landscape, and headed toward the sound.

Suddenly, hollow, moaning sounds wove their way through the dense underbrush. It made Watcher shudder with fear. That was not the sound of a wither approaching; it was the sound of many withers moving in their direction. He suspected the dark monsters were not heading for the Signifs, rather they were stalking the noisy warriors that were blundering through the forest.

We need to do something . . . fast, or the withers will attack the unsuspecting soldiers, Watcher thought.

Quickly, he moved to the top of the golden pile, then pulled out a wooden sword. Carver had given it to him after the last time he'd tried to join the army. It was a child's toy, and the big NPC had said that was the only weapon Watcher should ever use. The other soldiers had roared with laughter, as did many of the villagers. The humiliation from that day still hurt, but what they were doing today was far more important than trying to be accepted by the soldiers and fit in. What they were doing today was about life and death; it didn't matter what anyone thought, as long as they were still alive.

Gripping the handle of the toy sword firmly, he brought it down onto the gold blocks with all his strength. The pile of yellow metal rang like a massive gong, the vibrations floating out into the forest. The ocelots ran in fear as the few spiders that were watching the villagers clicked the mandibles in agitation, then scurried away. He slammed the sword down again and again, beating on the pile until the hateful sword finally shattered.

"That will bring the monsters," Watcher said

They all stood for a moment and glanced around. Each had a look of fear etched deep in their square faces, but there was also an expression of pride as well. They were refusing to be bullied; they were changing the situation and removing the gold from the village. All of the Signifs stood a little taller today; maybe they'd saved their village . . . maybe. But Watcher knew they needed to do more. He'd heard the Karkan's heads talking before, and had seen the evil looks in their dark, sinister eyes. He knew the wither king was going to destroy the village whether the gold was there or not.

Drawing a huge breath, Watcher screamed his challenge as loudly as possible.

"Karkan, you want your gold . . . it's all here! Come and get it if you're not afraid!"

An angry howl burst from the jungle as the king of the withers bellowed in rage.

"Withers, forward . . . go get them!"

Crashing sounds filled the air as the withers stopped their silent stalk of the warriors and charged toward the challenge, floating through vines and tree branches with reckless abandon. The jungle filled with the sounds of tree limbs breaking and vines being torn from the treetops as the monster army approached.

Watcher's breathing became heavy as his body tingled all over with fright. His heartbeat quickened; he could feel it hammering in his chest. He glanced around at his friends, but the rest of the Signifs had taken their positions, burrowing into leafy holes around the golden pile, waiting for his signal.

Suddenly, Karkan crashed through the branches of the junglewood trees at the top of the falls and gazed down upon the mound of gold ore. A shadowy wave of withers followed him, filling the air like a poisonous hateful cloud.

"Here is your gold, now leave my village alone," Watcher shouted.

He shook with fear as his voice cracked.

Karkan laughed.

"What makes you think I won't just blast you with my flaming skulls, pathetic villager?" Karkan asked.

"Because I know you won't damage your precious gold," Watcher replied.

He could hear the soldiers approaching; they were trying to be quiet, but that was a difficult task for those armored, clumsy oafs.

"If you agree to leave my village alone, I'll let you have this pile of gold. Your withers can come down here and take it, one block at a time. Do we have a deal?"

The king of the withers glared down at Watcher, the left and right skulls surveying the surroundings while the eyes of the middle head bore into the young NPC. Sunlight glinted off the Crown of Skulls, giving the horrific creature a momentary golden halo. In that brief instant, Karkan almost looked beautiful. But then a cloud moved overhead, blocking the rays of the sun, and returning the monster's hateful, terrifying visage.

"I like you, villager," Karkan said. "You are willing to stare death in the face and try to strike a bargain. You have courage and I respect that."

Karkan drifted forward so that he floated out over the falls, staring down at Watcher. The young NPC was afraid if he came any closer he might see the suspicious trail of redstone emerging from the back of the pile.

"Yes, I think we do have a deal, villager. Now move aside."

The king of the withers motioned his minions to come forward. Slowly, his army of dark, three-headed monsters descended over the cliff and moved close to the pile of gold. The burnt stench of the monsters was overpowering, but Watcher waited until they completely surrounded him, then he turned and leapt into the air. He landed on the side of the gold ore pile, then jumped again, flying through the air as if gravity did not apply to him. He landed on the shore of the river that flowed away from the waterfalls and took off at a sprint. As he ran, he flipped a lever that stood behind a shrub. Instantly, the trail of redstone dust grew bright red, casting a warm crimson glow that lit up the bushes and stone.

"It's a trap!" Karkan screamed. "Get back!"

But it was too late. Just as the NPC soldiers emerged from the thick brush, the pile of TNT that was hidden under the gold blocks detonated. A massive ball of fire blossomed around the pile of shining metal, enveloping the withers within its explosive petals and tearing their HP from their already charred bodies, destroying the entire horde and leaving behind a massive crater, sparkling nether stars falling to the ground like crystal rain. Slowly, water filled in the hole.

"NOOOOOO!" Karkan screamed as he descended to look for any survivors.

Just then, the warriors charged forward, hoping to catch the monster unaware. Unfortunately, they all felt it necessary to yell and scream some kind of impressive-sounding battle cry. But all it did was warn the wither king of their attack.

The monster fired its flaming skulls at the attacking warriors, the projectiles taking a terrible toll. NPCs yelled out in pain as the wither effect overtook them, making it impossible to tell how much health they still had. A blue flaming skull exploded nearby and Watcher's vision went fuzzy for a moment. He had no sense of feeling to his body, as if it had all gone numb, but he was still able to move. Unable to tell how much HP he'd lost in the attack, Watcher moved to a clump of shrubs and drew his bow. He glanced around the leafy block. Warriors were swinging their swords at the monster, jumping into the air in an attempt to hit the monster, but none could hit him. Karkan rose just high enough to be beyond their blade's reach.

Notching an arrow, he fired it at the floating monster, then instantly started to run. A skull wreathed in black flames crashed down where he had been standing, but he was already long gone. Quickly, the wither effect faded, and Watcher could tell he'd just taken a glancing blow; his health was OK, for now.

The jungle had become a scene of chaotic destruction as flaming skulls from Karkan flew in all directions. Across the river, Watcher stared in horror as two black skulls, then a blue one smashed into Carver, striking him directly in the chest. It knocked him to the bank of the river, his HP nearly exhausted. For the first time in his life, he saw fear fill the big NPC's eyes. Carver was afraid he was going to perish in the jungle, no not afraid . . . terrified.

Here was an enemy slowly floating toward Carver, and none of the stocky NPC's booming insults, nor bullying, nor muscles, nor anything could intimidate the king of the withers. It was clear, Carver was terrified beyond thought, and all he could do was crawl behind a bush and hide.

Suddenly, realization dawned on Watcher; he and Carver were alike. They both knew what it was like to be afraid, but they also knew what it meant to care for those around him. Watcher knew the big NPC was scared not just for himself, but also for the villagers that were relying on him, and if he were destroyed, then he couldn't protect everyone.

If Carver could be afraid, like me, Watcher thought, then maybe I can be strong and brave, like him.

Waving his bow in the air, he signaled to the other Invisibles.

"Everyone together," he yelled.

Quickly he ran as a flaming skull descended on his position.

"Now."

He drew his arrow, aimed and fired. Pulling another arrow out of his inventory, Watcher fired again and again, then ran as the other Signifs fired and sprinted as well. Fifteen arrows streaked toward Karkan. The first wave hit him. And, as expected, he tried to rise upward, away from the ground. But Watcher and his friends had anticipated that. Their second shot was aimed a little higher, and the third even higher. The king of the withers moved into their maelstrom of pointed shafts, roaring in frustration as he flashed red, taking damage.

Watcher ran through the jungle, jumping from bush to bush. When there was an opening toward the wither, he fired three quick shots. The rest of the Signifs were doing the same, running and firing. All of them knew if they stood still, they didn't have a chance.

Quickly, he moved through the jungle, trying to get closer to Carver. He paused to shoot, then sprinted. Skulls smashed into the undergrowth, not where he'd been but a little ahead. It was clear the monster had figured out their strategy of run and shoot and was trying to guess where the villagers would be, but Karkan always underestimated the speed of the Signifs. With the bright-green, lightweight leather armor, they were impossible to see. And as the NPCs were especially light themselves, they were also fast, much faster than a fully armored villager.

Roars of pain erupted from the falls, followed by an explosion as a flaming skull smashed into the jungle to his left. One of the Signifs had landed a critical shot, their arrow taking HP from the ashen beast.

Watcher spotted a tall tree near the falls. He knew the wither king would be trying to get even higher in the air, so it could escape, but Watcher wasn't going to allow that.

"Signifs, to the trees!" the lanky boy yelled, then sprinted to the huge junglewood.

Grabbing hold of the vines, he started to climb, moving quickly up the trunk as if he were part spider. Watcher knew they had to destroy Karkan or he'd come back again and again until he destroyed their village. He wasn't sure how many warriors were still alive down there on the jungle floor, but they were still at risk. They had to end this . . . fast.

I hope Carver and the others are alright, Watcher thought as he climbed the tree. But with the onslaught of skulls at the jungle floor, he couldn't imagine how they could have survived.

Something made a sound below him, but the lanky youth couldn't stop to look. If one of the other withers that had survived the blast of TNT and was now stalking him, there was nothing he could do. If he pulled out his bow to shoot at the creature, he'd fall and likely not survive. There was nothing he could do right now other than climb and stop Karkan.

He climbed higher and higher until he reached the leafy canopy. Holding onto a limb, he pulled out an axe and began hacking away at the leaves, creating a small tunnel through which he could climb. He inched up slowly, the sound beneath him getting closer and closer.

Chopping as fast as he could, Watcher finally made it to the top of the junglewood tree. When he stood up, he could see all the other Signifs poking their heads upon their trees, bows in their hands, arrows notched. But when he turned to

face the king of the withers, he found Karkan facing him, all three skulls staring straight at Watcher.

He had nowhere to run and no place to hide. The young boy was completely exposed. Slowly, he reached for his bow, but when Karkan saw the movement, all three heads fired their flaming skulls.

Fear exploded within Watcher, igniting every nerve with flame. Terror and dread paralyzed him as the three skulls plummeted toward him, seemingly in slow motion. He noticed the center skull was a grayish-blue compared to the other, darker ones. That was a strange thing to notice right before one's death. The sound of leaves crunching met his ears, but he did not bother to turn. His life was about to end, and he'd given up. Watcher's moment of bravery was gone, only to be replaced by destruction.

All he could do was stand there and watch the flaming skulls approach. . . and wait.

Chapter 10 – Iron

Suddenly, a flash of iron shot past Watcher as Carver sprinted across the treetop and stood before the young boy. He lifted his large rectangular shield and held it before him. Reaching out with his other arm, Carver grabbed Watcher by the collar and pulled him close.

Just then, the flaming skulls smashed into the shield, pushing his backward just a little. Carver dug his iron boots into the leaves and held his ground. Cracks formed on the shield as the projectile damage tore into the metallic rectangle, but the shield held.

Karkan roared in frustration, his hollow, mournful wail echoing across the jungle and making the surface of the Overworld quake in fear.

“Now! Do your archer thing,” Carver said as he pushed Watcher forward.

The lanky NPC was confused.

I’m alive! I’m ALIVE! And Carver saved me.

“Quick, fire that bow before it’s too late!”

His brain was working again.

“Significants,” Watcher yelled “OPEN FIRE!”

Watcher notched an arrow and fired at the monster. At the same time his four friends emerged from their hiding places in the treetops. They all stood, confident and proud, and added their pointed shafts to the assault.

A wave of arrows flew through the air and struck the monster. Before it could launch another deadly attack, they fired again and again. Karkan, realizing he was taking damage, did what all withers do. But the monster had already taken damage and was getting weak. He tried to rise, but found his strength faltering.

“YEAH!” Carver shouted. “Keep firing! Let him have it.”

Their arrows streaked up into the air, many striking the monster.

“Watcher, I’m running out,” Farmer yelled.

“M-m-me too.” Saddler added.

“We almost have him destroyed,” Watcher said to Carver. “But if we run out of arrows before we finish off his HP, we’re doomed.”

“Let me see if I can take a bug chunk out of him,” Carver said.

“What?”

But the big NPC didn’t answer. Instead, he lifted his iron sword over his head, holding the handle with two hands. He then leaned back and threw the razor sharp blade directly at the wither king. The shining blade tumbled end over end like a spinning silver meteor. It then struck the dark monster in the chest, carving a huge chunk of HP from the monster.

“FINISH HIM OFF!” Carver shouted.

The Signifs fired at the beast. The wither king yelled in frustration as he flashed red over and over again. And then, with a final, hollow wail, the monster

disappeared with a pop, his Crown of Skulls and a gigantic nether star falling to the ground.

"We d-d-did it!" Saddle yelled from her tree.

"I knew we could do it!" Farmer shouted.

"Yes," Watcher said.

He turned to look at his friends. They all stood strong and proud on their trees, bows held high over their heads in victory. Watcher then looked up at Carver.

"It seems you dropped your sword," he said to the big NPC.

Carver looked down at Watcher, his face stoic and emotionless. But then something happened that the young villager had never seen in his life. A grin slowly formed on the big NPC's face. Reaching out, he enveloped Watcher in his big arms and hugged him tight.

"Sometimes, warriors don't use swords or wear big, heavy armor," Carver said. "Sometimes, they use bows, and they use their brain; that's something another warrior taught me recently." His smile grew bigger. "Maybe a soldier shouldn't be measured with blades and metal and muscles, but with courage and the size of their heart."

Watcher was about to speak when Carver continued.

"And maybe a real warrior would rather be who they are, instead of changing to just be accepted. I was wrong to mistreat you and your friends." He released the lanky boy and stepped back. "I learned something important today, and I hope you did too."

"Me . . . what should I have learned?"

"That you shouldn't change who you are just to fit in. Watcher needs to be the best Watcher he can be," he turned and faced the other Signifs, "and Farmer should be Farmer, and Saddler, and Weaver, and Harvester. You should all be who you were meant to be, regardless of what anyone else thinks."

"Hey . . . he knew our names!" Weaver shouted.

"Yes, I knew them all along," Carver confessed. "I just called you Insigs because . . . because . . ."

"Because you were afraid?" Watcher asked.

"Maybe."

"Well, you aren't gonna call us Insigs anymore!" Watcher demanded.

"Of course not," Carver replied.

"Because it's not our name anymore!" Weaver shouted in a strong, clear voice.

"It's not? Then what is your name?"

"Let's all tell him," Watcher said with a smile.

"WE'RE THE SIGNIFICANTS!" they all shouted together.

"That's the best name ever!" Carver replied. "I want to be one too."

"Well . . . we need to see if you're worthy first," Watcher said with a smile. "You'll have to prove yourself by doing a few things."

"Like what?" Carver asked.

"Like this."

Watcher move to the edge of the treetop, then jumped off the edge. They were impossibly high, and no one could survive that fall.

"WATCHER!" Carver screamed as he moved to the edge, worry creasing his boxy face.

A splash sounded below as the young boy landed in the river that snaked its way through the jungle. The other Signifs laughed, then jumped off their trees, landing in the water far below. Carver moved cautiously to the edge of the tree and saw the water far below.

"Come on!" Watcher yelled. "We do it all the time."

"But if I miss and hit the ground, I won't survive," Carver called back.

"Then d-d-d-don't m-m-miss," Saddler yelled back with a smile.

"You said you wanted to be a Significant," Watcher said. "You gotta learn to face your fear, 'cause we're afraid of a lot."

Carver sighed. Then with a smile on his face, the big NPC jumped, laughing aloud as he fell.

The End?

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MCphoenix99 made the fantastic cover for this story. Check out his YouTube channel for some of his incredible speed art videos.

Keep reading and watch out for creepers.

Mark



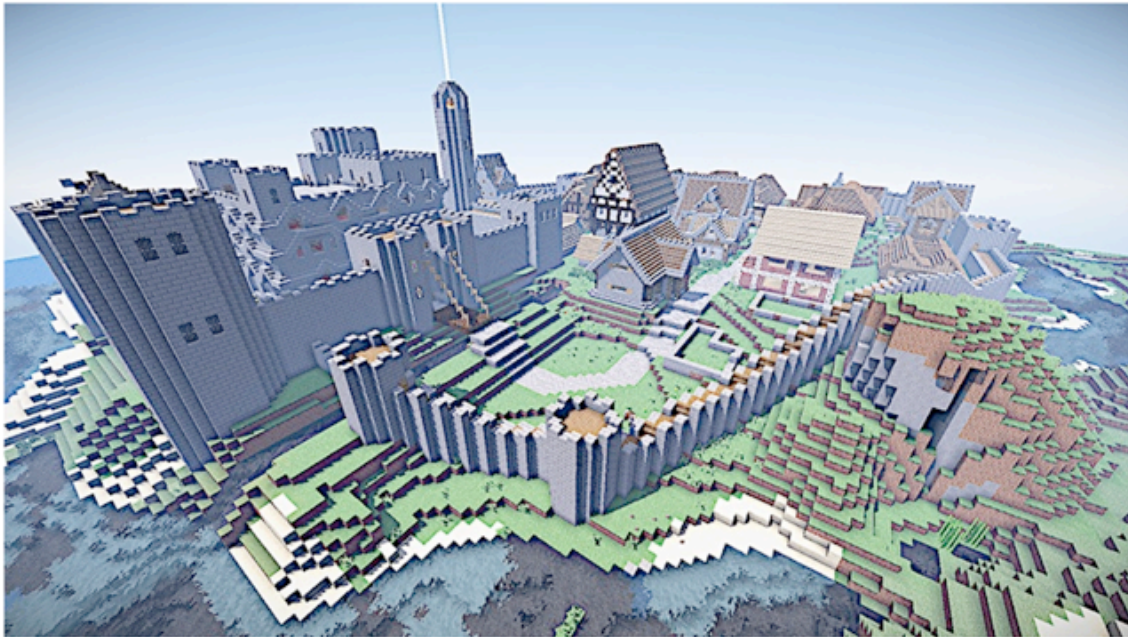
Gameknight999 Minecraft Network

Below is an image from the building server on the Gameknight999 Minecraft Network. This is a public Minecraft server made for kids and readers of my books. We don't tolerate bullying, cussing, stealing, griefing, or anything that hurts the community. As a result, people help each other, just as Watcher, Farmer, Weaver, Saddler, and Harvester would expect.

This server was setup by our server/plugin/Minecraft ninja, quadbamber. Check out his YouTube channel; it's called LBEGaming. He is a wizard with all things Minecraft and this server would not be possible without his hard work!

There is a Survival server, Creative server, KitPvP server, Survival Games server, Paintball server, as well as others coming soon (TNT Defense maybe returning soon). Hopefully, by the time you read this story, we'll have the Elytra Flying Server server up and running.

The IP address for the Gameknight999 Minecraft server is:
mc.gameknight999.com



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