

Morlithis and Fiera rushed over to the edge as Slarn laughed, drowned out by the water's roar. Leo knelt on a lower ledge, looking up at the two and smiling. Morlithis and Fiera both replied with a sneer, not amused by Leo's practical joke. Leo stood up, took a steadying hold of the edge, and began slowly shimmying to the right, disappearing behind a wall of falling water. Slarn hopped down and followed, as did Morlithis and Fiera.

They stood on the rock ledge facing the cliff with the waterfall to their backs. Leo led the four down a sloping path that zigzagged back and forth from one side of the waterfall to the other. The progress was slow but steady. Fiera and Morlithis noticed hand grips carved into the cliffside through the more difficult sections of the climb down. This confirmed, in their minds, the question the two had been silently asking themselves: Had this path been made, or was it natural?

They had finally reached the bottom of the waterfall, which held a deep cavern behind the cold sheet of water. They had to wade through a thigh-deep pool to get to a dry portion of the massive cave, but they were already soaked to the bone, so none of them thought twice about it.

"I hate getting wet," Fiera complained once they were finally on the dry surface of the cave.

"Don't we all?" Slarn replied. The four shook off the excess water from their fur as best they could, flinging it in all directions.

"Morlithis, we're going to need some firewood and dinner," Leo said. "You can use the small opening over there to come and go." He pointed to the corner of the cave, just past the opening behind the waterfall from which they entered. "Fiera will go with you. We need

firewood first. Get a lot of wood. After that, you can hunt for food. Slarn and I will make sure the cave is safe while you are gathering wood.”

Thanks to their night vision that granted them sight even in the depths of the cavern’s blackness with little light, they quickly determined the cave vacant and returned to the entrance to prepare the fire while Fiera and Morlithis hunted.

\*\*\*

“So, remind me again what this special herb is called and why it’s so special,” Morlithis requested as he bit into a large piece of cooked rabbit.

Slarn tossed a sliver of meat at him. “Weren’t you listening at all during the council meetings?” he replied.

“It’s called catnip. It is very potent,” added Fiera. “We need to get as much of it as possible to take back.”

“It has extraordinarily strong healing properties,” Leo reported. “It can only be found down here, but not many want to risk their lives for it, though it is precious. If anything can heal King Phrenth, then it can.”

“What do you mean? How dangerous is it in this valley?” Morlithis asked.

Slarn set his meal down. “This is the Kiernane’s region. They are a dangerous and vicious race and will not hesitate to kill you,” Slarn replied.

“So don’t hesitate to kill them,” added Leo.

“They are savages and travel in packs. Though there are many factions, they do not like strangers in their land and will unite if threatened,” Slarn continued.

“They wield weapons, but their clawed hands are a weapon of their own, even more deadly than our own claws. They use their maws, as well, in battle just as often as their weapons and claws,” Leo continued.

“They are not skilled fighters,” Slarn added. “But they always travel in packs, and because of their sheer numbers and fierceness, they are formidable.”

“Their strength lies in their numbers, but their weakness is that they are sloppy fighters. If you find yourself in battle with them, it is best to fight one-on-one. They are easily defeated in small numbers,” Leo said.

Morlithis nodded, and the four ate in silence after that, the atmosphere no longer feeling conducive to lighthearted conversation. When they finished their meal, they readied for bed, Leo taking the first watch at the mouth of the cave just to one side of the waterfall so he could see both the small opening to the side of the falls as well as beyond the water.

\*\*\*

At dawn, Morlithis ended his watch by waking the rest of his counterparts, and they gathered their supplies, soon continuing in search of the catnip. Leo and Slarn had explained what to look for and the areas in which it grew in the valley. They traveled through the valley with no opposition, and though they could sense each other’s nervousness, they never voiced their concerns, and they each knew that they all could feel the eyes watching them.

A half day’s journey found each of them on edge as they began hearing the faintest growling and cracking of twigs, and whenever one of their party startled, the rest instantly readied for an attack, but nothing came. When they heard nothing, it seemed even worse than hearing the cracking or growling. They kept their weapons up, and they didn’t speak as they

traveled deeper into the forest. They felt the eyes always on them. When they heard noises, they could feel the eyes glaring at them between the growling. When they heard silence, they felt the eyes staring. The day crept on, and they crept even deeper into the forest, scanning the forest floor for the catnip.

Finally, Morlithis spotted the fuzzy heart-shaped leaf that Leo and Slarn had described to him.

“Look!” he exclaimed, running over to the weed, forgetting in his excitement for finding the catnip about the danger lurking in his surroundings.

“Morlithis, wait!” hollered Slarn. It was too late. Morlithis had already made his way to the weed several yards from the rest of the group.

Suddenly, the valley around them erupted in a blur of gray motion and blood-curdling growls. A dozen Kiernane attacked Morlithis. Caught unprepared and off guard, he panicked, scrambling for his battle-axe behind his back and falling to his back as a dozen attackers barreled down on him.

The first of the Kiernane raised his battle-axe for a fatal blow, then fell backward with a knife sunk deep into his forehead. Morlithis saw a second knife down a second foe and two more felled by axes, and, taking advantage of the few seconds he now had, he quickly recovered, crawling to his knees and kneeling back against a tree beside him. Lightning fast, he unshouldered his crossbow and fired. Firing shot after shot, he reloaded arrow after arrow with blurring speed.

Leo, Fiera, and Slarn raced forward the moment the fierce enemy revealed themselves. Slarn had thrown his two long knives with precision, sending them deep into the skulls of the

first two attacking Morlithis. Leo and Fiera didn't hesitate to fling an axe at the next two, downing them as well. Before their weapons hit their targets, they were already racing to retrieve them. Fiera and Leo still had their second axes, and Slarn, empty-handed, extended his claws—now his only weapon.

Both Leo and Fiera downed two more attackers easily with a quick parry and an axe to their respective attacker's leg. The two Kiernane fell to their backs, clutching their gushing stumps, their severed legs lying beside them.

Slarn had a more difficult time dispatching his next few foes but did so quickly. The first attacker opened himself up for an attack as he swung his battle-axe down at Slarn. Slarn sidestepped and tore a chunk out of his attacker's throat with his clawed fingertips. The attacker dropped his axe and stumbled backward, clutching his bleeding jugular, the blood pouring through his fingers.

His next foe was more cautious as he attacked, swinging with short, controlled slashes and keeping his guard up with his free arm or his axe. Slarn shuffled back, barely dodging the ferocious swings until his back found a tree. The attacker, seeing an opportunity, swung one last blow. Slarn dropped to his knees as the blade passed inches from his head and lodged deep into the tree with a thud. Slarn rolled as he slashed both his attackers' Achilles' heels. The Kiernane fell to the valley floor, and Slarn struck once more across his enemies' chests as he stood, slicing deep gashes in the creatures' them.

He saw an opening to retrieve his knives and darted toward the two dead foes that his blades now rested in. He then noticed half a dozen of the enemy pack advancing on Leo, who was busy holding his own with three Kiernane warriors.

“Morlithis!” Slarn hollered as he pointed at the half dozen Kiernane advancing on Leo and Fiera. Morlithis immediately understood and began firing arrow after arrow into the pack. Slarn dodged a sloppy attack from another enemy, rolled over the two corpses containing his knives, and yanked them free, dispatched his newest foe, then noticed Morlithis deflecting wild swings from three Kiernane warriors with his battle-axe. He was keeping his attackers at bay, but they were pushing him back. Slarn hurled his knives into the back of the heads of the first two, then turned around to see how Leo and Fiera were doing. They were also being pushed back.

“Morlithis, get the catnip!” Slarn ordered and darted toward several more of the enemy who were advancing on Leo from behind.

“Leo!” Slarn yelled as one of the Kiernane crept up behind Leo, bringing his axe down for a fatal blow. Leo spun around just in time to see the axe head descending. A black blur flashed across his vision. Then he was lying on his back. He heard Slarn scream, and then a pitch-black hand fell beside him.

“Slarn!” Leo yelled, scrambling back to his feet.

“Leo, get out of here!” Slarn yelled as he snatched up an axe with his good hand, holding his bleeding stump under his armpit, and ferociously pressed in on the Kiernane unlucky enough to be caught in his wake.

Slarn pressed forward, forcing the Kiernane away from Leo and Fiera with ferocity as more enemy warriors advanced on Slarn.

“Slarn!” Leo hollered as Fiera grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Leo!” Slarn yelled as he chopped down a foe. “Go!”

“Slarn!” Leo screamed as Slarn pushed the enemy forces even farther away.

Morlithis appeared by Leo’s side with a handful of catnip then.

“I have the catnip!” he reported.

“Leo, we have what we came for. We need to leave!” Fiera said.

“No!” Leo replied.

“Leo, don’t let his death be in vain!” Fiera nodded for Morlithis to leave. “Make your choice, but we need your help getting back,” she said and then ran off after Morlithis.

Leo looked back at Slarn then at Fiera as she ran. Then back at Slarn. He finally darted off after Fiera. He would not let Slarn’s death be for nothing. He would ensure that Fiera and Morlithis would get the catnip back to save the king if it was the last thing he did.