

Morlithis climbed his way up the waterfall path. It was slow going, like it was on his way into the valley. He kept his eyes darting in all directions as he inched his way up the sloping path, keeping an eye out for any Kiernane.

Night fell fully, and he continued, not needing the daylight to see. Though colors dulled with his night vision, he could see almost just as well as if it were daylight.

He could see movement above, and he knew that there were indeed Kiernane on this path. He only hoped that they wouldn't be able to smell him. The mist had soaked his fur and had undoubtedly washed off the mushrooms by now, but he hoped that the stench of the squished fungi was still potent enough to cover his scent.

Morlithis had become used to the foul odor a long time ago and, as a result, had no idea if the mushrooms were still working or not.

He reached around his back, feeling for the hilt of his small battle-axe, and felt the wet, cold steel in his palm. At least he had his axe, he thought.

It wouldn't make much of a difference if he came across the Kiernane. He was confident that he could hold his own in battle, but if Leo and Slarn were right—and from his experience fighting them so far, they were—the Kiernane fought in packs, and he knew that he couldn't fend off an entire pack of these creatures. He only hoped that he could make it back to the safety of his people before the Kiernane found him. That, and he needed to somehow scale this cliff, climb back onto flat ground, and get past them all without being caught—and he had no idea how he was going to do it.

His bow had been broken during the initial fight with the Kiernane back in the valley. Now all he had was his small battle-axe.

He spent the rest of the climb continually glancing up toward the Kiernane above him. His hands were numb from the nighttime cold, and the mist that now soaked through his fur made him miserable in the cold of the night.

He was more than halfway up the zigzagging trail, and as he looked up toward the Kiernane above him, he could now see two. He was gaining on them, but it didn't appear that they had noticed him yet, so he waited until the two enemy warriors were beyond his vision.

He slowed his pace, ensuring that he wouldn't catch up to his foes before reaching the top of the waterfall. When Morlithis finally reached the cliff top, he slowly peeked his head over the edge, just enough to search the edge of the forest. He saw no signs of his enemy, but he knew if they had caught his scent, then it was likely that they were waiting in ambush for him.

He checked the pouch he had stuffed the catnip into and gripped the hilt of his battle-axe one more time, then he climbed up off the cliff and ventured into the night forest. He crept through the forest slowly at first, scanning for any hints that the Kiernane were nearby. The deafening roar of the waterfall drowned out all other sounds, and he felt vulnerable not being able to hear.

He wouldn't be able to hear the enemy trying to sneak up on him. He couldn't hear the crunching of leaves or the cracking of twigs, and that unnerved him.

His training had never prepared him for this, and he felt, now, wholly inadequate for a warrior of the Feleine.

With every scurrying critter that he saw or the sudden movement of branches, he froze, waiting for the Kiernane to attack.

He thought he heard growling behind him, and when he spun around, he thought he saw a form, but as he stared, he saw no more movement, even with his dark vision.

He turned back around and continued toward the Feleine borders, picking up his pace to a slow jog.

He didn't make it much farther before he started hearing the growling again. This time he knew that it wasn't his mind playing tricks on him, so he started running.

He didn't make it a hundred feet before the growls became louder and more threatening. He heard them all around him now, and he heard the cracking of twigs from all around him.

He ran faster, his heart pounding in his chest, and his breath came heavy as he ran at a full sprint now. He ran until his throat hurt and his nostrils flared with dryness. He could barely breathe, though he gulped in air like he had just come up from a long stint underwater. His chest hurt with every breath, and his legs felt more like rubber now than anything, and his hand was numb from gripping his small axe so tightly.

The growls sounded as if they were right on top of him, and he could hear tree branches slapping something behind him as he pushed through them.

He ignored the thousands of scratches and cuts from his careless barreling through the brush and branches. The scratches and cuts were the least of his worries as he fled through the forest. As he ran for his life.

He finally gained the nerve to glance toward the sound of his pursuers, both to his right and his left. To his left, he saw in the dulled colors of his night vision the gray furred silhouettes of two Kiernane only yards away as they pushed past tree branches, and when he looked to his right, fear engulfed him as he saw three more.

He didn't bother glancing behind him, as there was no doubt there was at least one more giving chase.

Six Kiernane warriors!

He wouldn't last a minute against six without his bow.

He looked over again at the three warriors to his right and noticed one staring at him as it ran. When it saw Morlithis look at him, it smiled, sending a shiver down Morlithis's spine.

They were taunting him. They were playing with him.

He was trained with the axe, but he knew that he couldn't defeat so many on his own. Morlithis panicked then, bringing his axe up as he rushed the taunting enemy, twisting around to swing a wild swing at his foe.

The Kiernane warrior responded with an attack of his own, knocking Mortlithis's axe out of his hand and slamming hard into the calico cat.

The two tumbled to the forest floor in a heap, and Morlithis felt the sting of his foe's deadly teeth sink into his unprotected shoulder where his cuirass did not cover.

Morlithis squirmed out of his enemy's grasp, ripping his shoulder from the maw of the vicious Kiernane, and the enemy warrior jumped to his feet as Morlithis scrambled to his, and the rest of the pack surrounded him.

Morlithis did the only thing that he could, then, without a weapon. He charged the recovering Kiernane again.

In an instant, the surrounding pack rushed Morlithis as the Kiernane warrior dodged and attacked Morlithis's reckless assault with a clawed hand slicing across the back of Morlithis's leather cuirass.

Morlithis's armor saved his life, but the Kiernane's attack sent the already panicked Feleine warrior into further panic, and he spun in mid-stride, swinging a clawed hand of his own out wide in an attempt to slash a gash in his enemy's unarmored chest. However, as he spun around wildly, he caught a glimpse of the rest of the pack rushing in, distracting him from his attack, which fell short as he stumbled backward in terror. Morlithis fell to his back as a result of a sudden shift of the terrain into a descending slope, which sent him tumbling down a hillside with such dizzying speed that he could neither find a handhold to stop his roll nor steady himself enough to prevent him from falling off of the cliff rushing up at him.