

Leorneth Led Morlithis and Fieraneth through the Yeshen Valley. They could hear behind them the vicious yearning growls for blood of the Kiernane as they hunted them.

They were beginning to tire, and Leo knew that they wouldn't be able to keep running much longer. The Kiernane had their scents now, so they knew they couldn't hide. Even if they did outrun them, it would only manage to delay the inevitable.

He knew there was only one way to lose these ferocious enemies. They had to mask their scents long enough to escape.

He frantically searched the forest floor for something that would be able to give them an advantage. A patch of mint or a dead carcass—anything that would throw off their scent.

His eyes darted back and forth as he ran, scanning the forest so fast that he almost missed them: a patch of mushrooms several yards away.

"Come on!" he ordered and darted toward the large mushroom patch.

The instant he came to the edge of the patch, Leo dropped to his knees and started grabbing mushrooms, smearing them on his leather armor and fur.

"Come on. We have to cover our scents. Squish as many as you can on you," he said.

The two didn't need Leo to explain. They had already followed suit, knowing that they needed to mask their scents.

They spent the next few seconds frantically squishing and rubbing the mushrooms all over their bodies, then dropped flat and started rolling and rubbing against the mushrooms, all the while inching their way farther into the center of the mushroom patch.

"Leo, look," Morlithis said and pointed to a small ditch just a few feet away.

Leo nodded, and the three crawled their way through the patch and took cover in the ditch.

The pack came into view then, just as they scrambled into the ditch. They poured into view like a title wave smashing against a wall as, one by one, they suddenly stopped and sniffed the air, smacking into each other as they skidded to a halt.

The three ducked behind the ditch and waited, ready to make their stand. Several of their enemies stepped closer, sniffing the air around them, and the three crouched lower. They heard the sniffs of the Kiernane. They heard the growls. They heard the steps closer, but they dared not look. Then they heard huffs and growls, followed by footsteps fading away into the forest.

They waited several moments, hearing more footsteps padding away, then returning. Hearing the guttural growls of the Kiernane as they moved about, growing louder, then softer to one side, then the other side. They still dared not move an inch, fearing that the slightest noise would reveal their location to the bloodthirsty hounds.

After what seemed like hours, they finally heard the last of their hunters give up. As quietly as he could, Leo slowly peeked his head out over the ditch. The pack had left.

Although the threat was gone, none of the three moved from their concealment for several more minutes until, finally, Leo cautiously stood to his feet, raising his battle-axes in preparation for battle.

He waited.

No attacks came, and he relaxed his grip.

Morlithis and Fiera both relaxed as they saw Leo release his axes.

“Looks like we are clear,” Leo said. “But I don’t know how long this will work. We will need to keep moving. They will surely be searching for us.”

The three companions traveled without rest for the remainder of the day, and as dusk fell, they neared the waterfall, quickly spotting two dozen of the Kiernane standing guard around the entrance.

“How do they know about the entrance?” Leo asked.

“Leo, look.” Fiera pointed to the left of the waterfall.

Leo’s heart pounded in both excitement and horror as he saw his best friend lying on the ground, tied and beaten. His left wrist was wrapped in a dirty and bloodied cloth. His fur was matted and bloodied. Patches of fur had been yanked out and were now bloodied bald patches where the fur had once been. His face was swollen, and it appeared as though his eyes were bloated shut and his right ear was missing.

“Slarn’s alive! We have to save him,” Leo hollered and charged the enemy before Fiera or Morlithis could stop him.

“Come on!” she ordered and followed Leo. Morlithis quickly fell in behind her.

Leo rushed into battle, unsheathing his axes, and was upon his first two enemies in seconds. He downed them quickly, catching them off guard, and continued with a fierceness that unnerved even the Kiernane.

He brought swing after swing down on his next foe. The warrior frantically dodged swing after swing as Leo pressed in with no regard for his own safety, leaving opening after opening

for a retaliating strike, but his enemy was too preoccupied with keeping Leo's axes at bay to attempt any attack.

Fiera and Morlithis each downed a foe of their own before the rest guarding the waterfall reached them.

"I'm coming, Slarn! I'm coming!" Leo yelled as he finally dispatched his foe, meeting head-on two more of his warriors, throwing an axe into the chest of one and charging full speed into the second.

Leo's axe barely came up in time to block his opponent's axe as he barreled into his attacker. The two tumbled to the ground. Only Leo returned to his feet.

Fiera and Morlithis fought through the dozen Kiernane. The only reason they survived was their skill with the blade, downing six attackers between parries and dodges, but they could not gain ground.

The last two of the six they downed were dispatched by mere luck as Morlithis tripped, avoiding a fatal blow, causing his enemy to lose balance, and knocking into one of the last four left.

Fiera took advantage of the clumsiness and brought her axes down upon the two Kiernane struggling to find their balance.

One of the Kiernane warriors was just about to dispatch Morlithis as he was easy prey, clumsily scrambling back to his feet, when one of the warriors guarding Slarn ordered a retreat, and their opponents fled.

Leo cut down the last of his opponents with the same careless abandon as he did the first four, but before he could reach Slarn, one of the Kiernane ordered a retreat, and the rest of the pack fled into the forest, the last dragging Slarn behind him.

“Nooo!” Leo screamed and chased after the five, only to be stopped by three who hid in the shadows of the trees. Leo cut them down swiftly, but not before the rest of the fleeing Kiernane disappeared into the brush.

“Leo!” Fiera yelled. “Wait!”

Leo looked back at her.

“He’s gone. We will go after him, but you have to think with a clear head.”

Leo nodded.

“Okay, we still need to get the catnip to the king before it’s too late.” Fiera looked at Morlithis. “Morlithis will take the catnip while we rescue Slarn.”

Leo nodded in agreement.

“Okay, Morlithis, you start back. Be careful. There might be some of the Kiernane who have climbed up the cliff. We have no idea if any of them left the valley.”

“Good luck,” Morlithis said and began his trek back up the waterfall.

“Leo, I know you want to charge after Slarn, but we need to rest. We can’t rescue Slarn if we are dead.”

Leo stared at Fiera, who locked gazes with him defiantly. Finally, Leo strode past her to the cliff edge and plopped down, staring off into the forest. Fiera sat down beside him.

The two sat keeping a keen eye on the trees only yards away as they rested.. Fiera rummaged through her pack and handed Leo a tied-off food wrap. "Eat," she ordered.

Leo took the wrap frustratedly and yanked the tie off, then began tossing the small squares of cheese and bread into his mouth, staring into the fast-approaching night as Fiera found another food wrap and started eating as well. When they finished their food, Leo finally stood.

"We have rested enough," he said. Fiera didn't argue but stood to her feet. "Let's find Slarn," she said, and the two ventured into the dark forest.

It wasn't hard to track the pack dragging Slarn as they left a very profound path. They had been tracking Slarn's captors for half of the night when they happened upon a patch of mushrooms.

"Leo," Fiera said, pointing to the mushrooms. "We had better hide our scent again."

Leo nodded in agreement, and the two took the next few minutes squishing and wiping the mushrooms all over their armor and bare fur until it was matted down with the foul-smelling paste of the crushed fungus.

When they finally caught up with the pack, the two knew that they were close to the Kiernane village as they had passed several totems symbolizing warnings to venture no farther into the tribe's land.

Leo and Fiera crawled low, keeping to the tall grass and shrubbery, upwind from the pack.

The Kiernane were resting, it appeared, and eating. Slarn sat against a tree on the far side, bleeding, bruised, and swollen. His bandage around his nub was soaked in blood.

Leo burned with rage at the sight of his best friend so savagely beaten. He clenched his fists so tightly that he drew blood with his claws, growling a low guttural growl.

The Kiernane began sniffing the air, glancing around as they smelled the mushroom and blood.

Leo jumped to his feet, drawing his axes and throwing one after the other into the chests of the two nearest enemies, felling them as quickly as they'd leapt to attack him. Fiera leapt to her feet, throwing an axe into the chest of a third foe, and quickly dispatched her next opponent as Leo rushed the last members of the pack, his deadly claws slashing and slicing. Leo's first enemy was dead before he even hit the ground. The two finished off all the remaining Kiernane in similar brutal fashion, both scanning their surroundings for any signs of more foes before rushing to Slarn's side.

"Slarn, are you okay?" Leo asked. Slarn weakly smiled, his white teeth showing brightly in contrast to his midnight-black fur.

"Come on, let's get you home," Fiera said and untied Slarn's rope. The two helped him to his feet and began their trek back to the waterfall, yanking their weapons out of their dead enemies' corpses on the way.