

Leorneth, Slarnath, and Fieraneth didn't make much headway toward the waterfall before they heard the angry howls echoing through the night.

The three stopped, listening to the howls. There were just a few at first, not far off, then moments later more, fainter howls. Then even more. Over the next few moments, the howls filled the night as more and more Kiernane joined in until the three couldn't even make out when new howls began and when others stopped, then they trailed off into eerie silence.

"We need to pick up our pace," Leo said and turned to Slarn. "Can you go any faster?" Slarn stood straight, grimacing.

"If it means keeping ahead of those howls, I can." Leo nodded.

"Okay, first thing is covering our scents again. If we can make it to the mushroom patch, we might be able to rest a few minutes there."

"We'll have to change Slarn's bandage too," Fiera said.

Leo nodded. "Let's go."

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Morlithis awoke and instantly felt the throbbing agony of the Kiernane bite at his shoulder. He felt as well the sharp stinging from the hundreds of cuts and scrapes beneath his sweat-soaked fur on his legs, arms, and even his face, though the pain paled in comparison to his shoulder.

He screamed from the sudden onslaught of pain pulsing throughout his body that instantly wrenched his mind out of the confusion and cloudiness that usually accompanied waking. Instead, his mind jolted to alertness, and he noticed that he was lying on a cold hard rock ledge that jutted out of the cliff he had just fallen over and overlooked the treetops. He lie flat on his stomach, staring out into the vast canyon forest before him that stretched out hundreds of yards, and he could just barely see the other side of the canyon cliffside with his night vision.

He knew the Yeshen Valley had no canyons, and he knew of only one canyon near his people's land: the Lithara Canyon. If what he looked at now was the Lithara Canyon, then his journey home would indeed be dangerous.

Morlithis pushed himself up, hollering out again as he lifted himself, then clutched his wounded shoulder. He felt something warm, and when he withdrew his hand, he saw a bloodied palm. He noticed then, as well, the pool of blood on the ledge where he had been lying.

He was losing blood. He needed to dress his wound. His pack hadn't come loose during his battle, nor his fall, thankfully, and he was glad that he packed his medical kit in his pack. He shifted his weight and held back a scream as his shoulder erupted in fresh agony. With his good hand, he gently slid the pack strap off his wounded shoulder. Every movement and every touch sent another wave of pain through his arm, and it took his all not to cry out.

When the strap slid below his wound, he pulled the strap off his good shoulder, letting the pack plop to the ground. He grabbed the travel pack's strap with his good arm and slid it around onto his lap, trying not to move his injured shoulder.

Fresh surges of pain pulsed through his shoulder with every minuscule movement, and he fought the urge to scream out every time, forcing himself to focus on finding his medical kit in his pack.

He found it quickly, despite his slowness, and set it on the ground beside him, unstrapping the leather tie holding the rolled, bulky leather piece closed. It flopped open, revealing the half dozen tied pouches and a roll of cloth.

Morlithis untied the cloth and opened the pouch right next to the fabric with his good arm. He pulled out a vile that contained a green paste from the pocket and yanked the cork out with his teeth, then tossed his pack to the side with a gasp. Setting the vile on his lap, he unfolded the cloth strip, then snatched up the vile again and shook out its contents onto the center of the cloth.

The paste fell in a thick clump onto the cloth, and Morlithis carefully slid his palm under the fabric, holding the paste up, and took a deep breath, knowing what was to come.

He let out a long breath and smashed the paste-filled cloth onto his wounded shoulder, howling in pain and leaning back against the cliff wall.

He whimpered and closed his eyes, forcing his mind away from the pain, then he felt the paste working as he pressed his hand against his wounded shoulder.

The paste had started numbing the bite wound, and he could feel the tingle of the healing properties of the paste working where the numbness hadn't begun working fully. The pain lessened, and he opened his eyes, reveling in the relief a moment as he looked over the canyon. He started gently wrapping the cloth around his shoulder, wrapping the length of the strip around his shoulder a couple of times, then unstrapped his cuirass. The medicine had started working even more, numbing the pain enough and allowing him to move his shoulder freely with only a heavy throbbing. He knew the medication wouldn't fully numb the pain, but it would allow him to move without excruciating agony, and that was enough.

Once the cuirass was off, he wrapped the cloth across his chest to secure the bandage in place, wrapping the last of the strip back around his back under his armpit and around his shoulder one last time, and tied it off under his arm.

When he was satisfied that the bandage was secure, he donned his cuirass, noticing the leather armor's scratches. It had indeed saved his life; even where the Kiernane had bitten him, he could see teeth marks at the edge of the shoulder, and he knew that if he had not been wearing it, he would surely be dead.

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Leo, Slarn, and Fiera reached the mushroom patch soon after the howling stopped and squished mushrooms all over their fur and armor, then shoved more into their packs for later use.

When they finished, they rested for a few minutes and redressed Slarn's nub, applying healing paste from Leo's medical kit, and then continued their journey.

They were exhausted, but they knew that they couldn't stop for long, not while they were being hunted, and not while they were in this valley so close to their mortal enemy.

Slarn's injuries, though now not as severe as before due to the healing salve they applied, were slowing the group down, and they all knew it was just a matter of time before the Kiernane found them, even with the mushrooms masking their scents.

They were finally nearing the waterfall when Fiera pulled on Leo's arm, pointing to Kiernane footprints.

Leo spotted the tracks almost immediately, and the three followed the Kiernane footprints, discovering several more sets and even more footprints meeting up with the ones they were tracking.

When the three grew closer, following the footprints to the waterfall, they could hear the subtle rumble of a small encampment, and when they reached the tree line, their suspicions were indeed confirmed when they saw the small army at the base of the waterfall.

"There is no way we'll be able to fight past that many," Fiera said as the three crouched behind a thick bush.

"We will have to take the long way around," Leo replied.

"That will add another two days," Fiera said.

"Three at our current pace." Leo turned to Slarn. "Can you make the journey?" he asked.

"Do I have a choice?"

"No, I guess not."

They noticed several of the Kiernane start sniffing the air.

"It's time for us to go, quickly," Leo ordered, and the three disappeared back into the dense forest.

The three traveled as fast as they could for as far as they could before resting under a tree with thick and full low-hanging branches, surrounded by heavy brush.

“We will rest here only a short while,” Leo said. “We can set camp when we get farther from Kiernane territory. We must try to reach the pass of Crial before we stop again. There, it will be safer to camp.”

Slarn and Fiera nodded in agreement, and soon the three were heading for the pass.

They traveled through the rest of the night and into the morning before they reached the pass, and when they finally came to it, they set up camp on a ridge at the mouth of the pass, which allowed them to see in both directions amongst the heavy brush.

Leo remembered the pass from his days in the war before they had made the secret waterfall trail. He had camped many times in the pass with the army. It was the perfect encampment for a sizable army. The steep, treeless slopes on either side made it impossible for anyone to sneak up on them, let alone traverse it. If there were lookouts posted at the tree line, there was no chance of a surprise attack from those who might safely find a way down.

It was the mouth of the pass that needed the attention. With an entire army at one’s disposal, simple guard posts and lookouts were warning enough. However, with the three of them, they needed a much more secure camp, so they camped on the ridge.

They were somewhat concealed under a large tree atop the ridge, and the slope of the hill was clear of trees, so that allowed for a clear line of sight for at least a few yards. It was enough of a warning to wake the others up if any Kiernane attacked, and they didn’t have to worry about bowmen because the Kiernane never used bows. They liked to see their victims up close as they killed them, the savages that they were.

“Slarn, you rest while Fiera and I set up camp,” Leo ordered.

Slarn would have objected at not pulling his own weight setting up camp, but he doubted he would be much use anyway. He was exhausted—more than he should have been—and although the healing salve was doing its job of numbing the pain, it only numbed so much.

Slarn didn't argue, and he was asleep in minutes.

"I'll stay here and keep watch over Slarn while you forage for food," Leo said. "There should be plenty of food in the pass to fill us, but stay alert, just in case."

Fiera nodded and made her way down the ridge in search of food, returning minutes later, cradling an armful of various fruits.

"You weren't kidding about having plenty of food," she said as she neared, dropping them onto the ground.

Leo smiled as he snatched a fruit from the pile and woke Slarn up.

"Here, Slarn, eat. You need energy."

Slarn groggily opened his eyes and sluggishly grabbed the round green fruit.

The three ate their fill, then Leo volunteered to take the first watch, allowing both Fiera and Slarn to sleep, waking Fiera several hours later for her watch, and soon falling asleep himself.

Fiera had been on watch only a few hours when she saw six Kiernane warriors step out into the open and howl.

She didn't need to wake Leo or Slarn, as the howling did that for her.

Leo jumped to his feet, unsheathing his battle-axes as Slarn sluggishly stood.

"Stay behind us, Slarn, you are in no condition to fight," Leo ordered.

The Kiernane rushed up the ridge with their own axes drawn and their vicious growls leading their charge.