

The Waterfall King: Part 5

“Here,” Corr said, kneeling in the dirt. His finger traced a print left by a massive horseshoe about as large as his splayed fingers. “I can barely make heads or tails of this, but this was the same hoofprint that we saw leading the column before it turned into a scramble.”

“Another horse stood with it,” Das confirmed, squatting next to him. “And they were flanked by more horses. Guards would be my guess.”

“That makes this the stallion of King Miros,” Corr nodded. “Has to be, right?”

“Or the princess?”

“Without seeing either horse, we can’t say if these even belong to the Horse Lords.”

Corr and Das had been traveling along the road for a few hours before they found the scuffle left behind in the mud. Too many riders to count, but more horses in one place than Corr had seen outside of a stable. The road after this point was unmarred by so many hooves, so Corr and Das decided to tie their horses to a tree and investigate the spot further. A trio of guards was still on horseback, waiting for orders.

“There was a big fight and then they moved further down the road,” Das said, following the hoofprints. He stalked out further down the road, bent at the waist and not looking up from the trail. After a few more yards, he stopped. “Two took off. The others shifted to a wall formation here and fought for the escaping pair.”

“Where are the bodies?” Corr asked.

“Who knows? We’d have to go further off the road for that. A lot of the prints head off into the woods, but there’s a set that rides out and down the road. Fast. That same pair that was being guarded.”

“Follow it,” Corr said, sticking close behind. He motioned to the other men for them to dismount. “Mark this area. I want to be able to find it if we have to backtrack. Search the immediate woods for any signs of woodsmen. We’ll come back in a minute.”

Das walked down the road a bit faster, the trail clearer now that he knew what to look for. Corr kept an eye on the side of the road, looking for anything that might indicate the attackers. The bushes were difficult to see through, but he couldn’t find any evidence of dead or injured soldiers. Even the Woodsmen weren’t present and their absence made Corr hope there would be clearer evidence down the road. “You’re sure this is the right way?”

“I know I’m not the best spy,” Das said, still focused on the road, “but I’ve led you on more than enough hunts. These prints all come from the same horse and I’m betting that this horse was important. Either it’s one of the royals or a survivor that might be able to explain things.”

“We’ll have to hope. What I don’t get is why the Woodsmen would do this. They’ve certainly never been peaceful, but political games have never been their way. They would rather face us in open combat.”

“Maybe they’ve gotten smarter?”

“It’s not about smarts. The Woodsmen have a strict code of honor that all but compels them to fight the army on an even playing field. My father said that they have had opportunities to force a conflict by taking whole villages hostage, yet they refuse to involve innocent women and children. The Horse Masters aren’t even from the Waterfall lands...so where’s the honor in that?”

“Honor is a noble thing, but it doesn’t win wars,” Das said, kneeling in the dirt to examine more prints. “They stopped here. One of the riders dismounted with their horse.”

“And the other?”

“Hesitated, but continued on. Not the big horse, the other one.”

“Another marker here!” Corr called down the road as Das followed the last remaining footprints.

It took them over twenty minutes to walk, searching for links in a chain of tracks that eventually led them to a fork in the road.

“They went west,” Das said. “A much easier pace from here. Why not go to Corriban Falls? If they escaped the woodsmen, wouldn’t they head towards safety?”

“Unless they didn’t think it was safe.”

Corr looked up and down the two sides of the road. A glint of metal caught his attention and he waded through the underbrush and pushed some sticks aside until he found a bound-up parcel. “Das! Get over here!”

“What is it?”

“Armor,” Corr said, pulling the parcel out onto the road. “Chest plate, bracers...and trappings of a Plainsland Warhorse.”

“This was all left here?”

“Stashed away,” Corr said, examining the chest plate. “And I’m guessing not by the Woodsmen. This has the hallmarks of the armor of a princess rather than a king.”

“So she stowed her armor and equipment here. What was her plan?”

“Hiding. She doesn’t trust the Court of the Waterfalls. She might be trying to head back to the Plains...”

“But why not trust the court?”

“Their first visit to our lands gets interrupted by an ambush? I wouldn’t trust the host either.”

“So she’s headed home. We should send a message to the border patrol.”

“No, we need to find her before she gets to the border. If we start making moves to bulk up our forces in their sight, the Horse Masters will be suspicious and it might make things worse.”

“Then we need to focus our forces to—”

“This can’t be a manhunt either, Das. If we seek her out like a criminal, she’ll feel threatened and then we’re playing with fire. Can you still track her?”

“Very distinctive horseshoes,” Das nodded. “Should be good as long as the trail stays fresh.”

“Commander!” Corr called out to the senior member of his guard party.

“Sir?”

“Take this parcel back to the Waterfall Castle,” Corr instructed, putting the wrapped armor and equipment into the commander’s arms. “Tell my father that Das and I are on the trail of finding the princess, but we need to handle the situation delicately. We’re going after her alone, hoping to find her before she makes it back to the border. We need to let her know this wasn’t an act of the Waterfall Kingdom.”

“What about the Woodsmen?”

“I’m not sure they’re involved either. Keep searching for them, but we don’t want to scare the princess away by thinking she is going to be attacked. A smaller group will be better: just Das and me.”

“Is that wise, sire?”

“Perhaps not,” Corr shrugged. “All I know is that I wouldn’t want to have a thousand people I don’t trust searching for me. I have to follow my instincts here.”

“If you command it, your highness, we will obey. Our search will continue for the king and the woodsmen. I will tell your father that you seek out the princess.”

Corr nodded sharply and took the reins of his horse from an attendant. “Das, we’re going to head towards the river.”

“Why the river? Why not south?”

“The River Zarin is a reliable road to the border,” Corr said. “She wouldn’t have to worry about getting lost as long as she sticks to the water.”