

The Waterfall King: Part 7

Das and Corr dismounted and looked around the riverbed. After getting a tip from a local family about a messenger on horseback, the boys felt like they were hot on the trail of the princess. When they reached the river, even Corr could make out the distinctive horseshoe prints that Das had pointed out.

“Heading downriver,” Das said, urging his horse off the road and onto the muddy riverbed. “I’d use it as a guide in unfamiliar terrain, too. But she swerved into the woods again. Why get off the closest thing to a road?”

“Something spooked her into the woods,” Corr shook his head. “No doubt one of those patrols we saw earlier. They’ve been getting orders faster than we can issue commands. She must have gone off the road to avoid detection.”

“We’re close, wherever she went,” Das said, dismounting and tying his horse to a tree. He knelt down and examined the hoofprint in the mud. “Still soft. I’d say less than a couple hours old.”

“If we press south, we can cut her off.”

“We can’t ride through the night, Corr. And neither can she if she’s choosing the woods over the riverbank. It’ll offer her cover, but there are too many obstacles in her way.”

“We can’t find the prints in the woods, though. Too much ground cover, you’d have to press your face through the underbrush.”

“I don’t need tracks.”

Das walked forward, wading into the greenery while Corr stepped down from his stallion and tied it to a branch. Das was walking through the woods, checking broken branches and flattened brush. “Something big—as broad as I am—was pushing through here like a plow through soil. Took a few bites along the way.”

Lifting a clump of grass with soil still attached, Das looked around further. He dropped the grass and rushed to a snapped tree branch and looked at a scuff against some bark. After following a few more markers and building his imaginary path through the forest, Das stopped.

“Well, that’s interesting.”

“Enlighten me, please,” Corr prompted. “We can’t all hear your thought process and you’re skipping ahead.”

“She dismounted.” Das stood in the brush, positioning his feet so that he mirrored what he thought was the princess’s stance. He skulked through the brush further and paused. He raised a sapling, running his hand along the severed edge. “Too smooth to be natural. Steel and human strength. She was cutting through the bushes.”

“Intentionally?”

“Hard to say. Whatever she was looking for, she only found leaves.”

Corr knelt in the dirt next to him and passed a hand over the brush. “Das, what is it they say about the Woodsmen?”

“They fight like demons and vanish like ghosts. You think this was Woodsmen?”

“Seems like. The tracks don’t go back out to the road. See? These go in towards the woods.”

“At a much slower pace...you don’t think she went with them willingly, do you? After they attacked her?”

“An awful lot of ‘ifs’ and ‘maybes’ are hindering this investigation. Our only lead was heading that way. So let’s go find things out. Leave the horses here, they’ll only slow us down.”

“Agreed. Something about all this is bugging me...”

“What?”

“Woodsmen would leave bodies, right? We didn’t find anything on that road. All the trails just...went into the woods. And Woodsmen have no reason to hold onto horses, so why take those?”

“Starting to question that Woodsmen were responsible?”

“Oh, I think the Woodsmen are responsible for the attack. My question: who is responsible for the reason behind the attack?”

“Woods Mercenaries? That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“It answers more of our questions than anything else.”

“But that makes me ask a few more,” Corr shook his head. “Lead on. The way I see it, the answers lie at the end of this trail: either with the princess or her captor.”

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Artus had a simple camp around the upturned base of a fallen tree, well hidden by moss, grass, and thick vines. If Venn had a year and a map, she wouldn’t have been able to find it.

“Horse stays outside,” Artus said. “It’s a bit cozy inside.”

“She doesn’t leave me...ever, if I can help it.”

“We can keep the door open,” Artus shrugged. “It’ll be colder, but that’s the best offer I can make.”

Artus grabbed a hidden handle and pulled the door upwards, two poles dropping down to form a little overhang. The actual camp inside was little more than a sleeping mat made of handfuls of grass and pine boughs, a rough wooden chair, and a small fireplace dug into the wood. The woodsman’s pack was on the chair, but he moved the chair outside and hung the pack on the back of it.

“You live here?” Venn asked.

“For the last few weeks,” Artus shrugged. “The Clans End is where I’ll probably winter, but it’s still warm enough that I can still hunt a bit. This will do fine for now. Might leave it after tonight though...old habits.”

“Worried I’ll come looking for you?”

“Yes,” Artus said, bluntly. He grabbed the blanket on the sleeping mat and spread it out on the floor. He stepped carefully around it and lit the fire, trying to urge some warmth into the chilly night. The woodsman sat on the chair and took off the filth-covered boots and jacket. “Not for nothing, but you’re a stranger to me still. And—should you not gut me in the middle of the night—there are no guarantees that you won’t be back tomorrow with more men.”

“You think I have an army at my command?”

“Five hundred soldiers or five angry brothers? I’d rather not be here if they think anything untoward happened between us.” Venn gave an amused chuckle and took the blanket off of Esper’s back. “I only trust people after they smile,” Artus smirked. “I was worried you wouldn’t be able to.”

“Well, in fairness, it’s been a few days.”

“Sounds like a story worth telling. I’ll trade you for some rations: hard cheese, jerky, and what could still count as bread.”

“What do I get for not telling the story?” Venn asked, letting Esper wander off to eat some grass.

“Same thing. I’m curious, not a monster.”

Venn took the offering of food and brought it into the shelter, sitting on the sleeping platform and looking at the fire. "I'm not just looking to get home. Someone kidnapped my father."

"Soldier?"

"A leader," Venn said. She wanted to be honest, but knew it would be foolish to give everything away right now. "I don't think he's dead. Or at least, I don't want to think that. I'm going home and I'm coming back for him with more men. We were attacked in the woods and he stayed to fight. I rode away, like a coward."

"If I may?" Artus asked, offering a bit more of his cheese. "The woodsmen have a saying: 'what makes prey smart is knowing the gleam of the wolf's teeth.'"

"That's not a great saying..."

"Well, we're not exactly known for poetry. Anyways, you running? That's not being a coward. All that means is that you knew you weren't going to make it and you survived. Now, you're coming back with a rescue party. I've seen so-called 'brave' men die for less. If you'd stayed and fought for valor? The only difference would be that you'd both be dead...or kidnapped."

Venn took a deep breath and nodded. She took another bit of her bread and chewed quietly. "You're a hunter?"

"Trying to collect for the winter months. Despite our most earnest prayers, jerky doesn't grow on trees."

"Woodsmen pray?"

"To different gods from Plains or Waterfall Men, but still gods. Gods of trees and birds and even a few gods for different kinds of rocks."

"Must get confusing."

"The gods we name are only for stories," Artus shrugged. "When we pray, they all listen. All things are connected."

"Even the deer for our jerky?" Venn asked.

"Especially the deer for our jerky. We eat it, then it becomes a part of us. As did the grass the deer ate before we hunted it and so on. The Woodsmen believe that all things are connected: all things come from the Star Rain that became the first trees, the first birds, the first deer...even the first men. Since that Star Rain, we've all just been trading what we were

all made from. It's a connection kind of like you and Esper. She matters to you because she's a part of you, like an extension of your spirit. You probably share Star Rain in your hearts."

"Is it like reincarnation? Living many lives over and over again?"

"Not really. Rainfall is thousands of drops of water, but it's water from different rivers, lakes, and ponds. It's never the same drops in the same storm clouds, but it's still rain."

"In the Plains," Venn said, "it's said that great people become great steeds in their next life. Not just war heroes, but also artists, politicians...just good, everyday people. So, we treat all of our horses as equals. They are different from us in many ways, but their hearts are still human."

"We fear horses," Artus said. "They didn't come from here."

"We've always had horses."

"Our ancients told tales that have been passed down for generations. We recall the first horses to come to Ezera."

"Ezera?"

"That's what we call it. For our people, there's no difference between the Waterfall Lands, the Plains, and the Woods. We've simply called it Ezera for as long as we've been here: before the Plains and the Waterfalls were claimed by kings. It was all one land and one people."

"Storm clouds are the same water."

Artus tapped his nose with a smile and nodded toward Venn. "Very good."

Venn settled deeper into the raised sleeping mat and ate her ration. She looked outside and saw Esper grazing not far from the entrance. Artus finished his rations, wiped his hands together and settled down on the floor. "We'll head south tomorrow. Should reach the border before sundown."

"Which town?"

"No town. There's a gap in the border. Small and you wouldn't know it was there."

"How do you know?"

"Our ancients made the paths," Artus smiled, settling onto his blanket. "But they didn't share it with everyone."