

## The Waterfall King: Part 8

Corr stumbled, snapping through the trees and cursing. “How do the woodsmen move through this?”

“They’re ghosts,” Das whispered, only a few steps ahead. “They don’t need to walk.”

“Forget the campfire stories. These are flesh and blood men. They can’t fly and they don’t turn into animals. Their weapons are steel and wood, nothing special.”

“Then how come we can’t find any of their towns?”

“They don’t use towns,” Corr said. “They have a Clans End where they meet and trade, but that place is impossible for us to find. The rest of them hunt, gather, and build small shelters that they tear down as soon as we can find them. They aren’t ghosts; they’re just smart.”

“Well, ghosts or not, they can see in the dark better than me. Not much of a trail left. We should hold up and wait until morning.”

“No, this could be our best chance to catch up to the princess.”

“Or it could be our best chance to get exhausted and lost,” Das said. He looked up and turned back to Corr. “We need to be smart about this. We got no trail, no light, and—not for nothing—no plan for when we find her.”

“We’re going to explain the situation and bring her to the Waterfall Castle.”

“And that sounds nice, but what if she says no? Princess Venn isn’t just a royal of a nation we have tenuous relations with. She’s a warrior and it’s a known fact that she’s killed people.”

“In defense of her kingdom and herself.”

“But she’s not some delicate flower we can tuck away in the tower. We need a plan...or at least a direction.”

“That way.”

“What?”

Corr pointed behind Das’s shoulder and started walking forward towards a soft glow in the forest and a small trail of smoke caught in the moonlight. Corr was able to focus more on being quiet, hunting rather than tracking. His steps were careful, over fallen logs and into gaps between branches. They closed in slowly on the camp as more things came into

view. An upturned tree had the bottom carved out and there was a dull, orange light shining from it, with a roughly hewn wooden chair at the door.

Corr motioned to the camp and spread his fingers, pointing Das towards the far side of the camp. Trying not to make a sound, Corr drew his sword from his hip with a soft scrape of steel against the sheath. Confidently, he walked into the clearing in front of the camp, trying to make sense of the inhabitants: one on the floor and the other on a raised platform. When he was less than fifteen steps from the shelter's entrance, the one on the floor shot up with his knife drawn and rushed out towards Corr.

Their blades struck together, the ring shattering the silence in the forest. Corr swung his blade, trying to spin around the woodsman's back. The knife was small, but the woodsman attacked with precision that cut into Corr's leather vest. The other sleeper was on their feet now: a young woman with long hair.

"Princess Venn!" Corr shouted, holding his free hand up with the fingers spread out. "My name is Prince Corriban IX. I'm here to help you!"

"Princess?" The man asked, turning around. "What is he going on about?"

"You have me confused with someone else."

"We have your armor and weapons. I followed your horseshoe prints from the site of the attack. My father sent me to help you."

"I'm still not sure your father wants to help."

"Prince?" The man said. "I clearly don't have the whole story here! My people had nothing to do with this fight. I heard you sneaking up on us and I defended myself. You leave? We're all going to get along fine."

"That's not your call to make." Das was standing on the top of the tree trunk, an arrow drawn and pointing down at the woodsman. "Drop your weapon and you can still survive."

"Try and you're just as dead as your prince," Venn said, sliding the handle of her hatchet into her grip.

"Speak for yourself," the man shook his head and dropped his knife, raising his hands.

"You're outmatched," Das said.

Venn whistled and shouted a command. Corr felt the hooves pounding on the ground before he heard a horse panting behind him. He rushed back a few steps and the horse

rushed past them. The horse bent around Venn and glared at Corr with her ears pinned back. "Now you're outnumbered."

"We're not looking for a fight, princess," Das said, setting his sword in the sheath. "We just want to know what happened."

"We were attacked!" Venn snapped.

"By the woodsmen!" Das said. "The same people as the guy you're with."

"We had nothing to do with this!" The woodsman said. "I will swear on anything, I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Princess, what do you think?" Corr asked.

"I feel that he's telling the truth," Venn said, looking between Corr and the woodsman. "But so are you."

"Then we both have the same questions," Corr said. "Das, stand down."

"Corr—"

"Now, damn it!" Corr yelled. "We're on the same side, all of us. Someone attacked the Plainsmen: my father thinks it's the Woodsmen and you accuse our kingdom. The only way to know for sure is to find the survivors."

"Survivors?" Venn asked.

"We examined the crime scene," Corr said. "There were no signs of bodies and I'd wager all the blood we found wasn't your men?"

"We defended ourselves."

"And I think that means your father is still alive and there's a reason for that. I want to help you get your people to safety and we do that by working together."

"I still don't trust you."

"Then tell us where you want to go," Corr said. "We won't make any decisions or influence you in any way. You want to come back to Corriban Falls? We'll lead you there. You want to find the people who took your father? We're with you. You want to go back to the Plains? We'll give you an escort."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch. This is a sign of trust: you choose."

Venn looked around, pausing longest when she looked at the horse's eyes. Her ears were calm now, attentive and pointed towards the group. "We find my father."

“Then we’ll help you.”

“Artus stays with me.”

“Me?” The woodsman asked. “This isn’t my war.”

“It could be, if we’re not careful,” Corr said. “There are members of the Waterfall Court who believe that the Woodsmen are responsible for this. But if you help us find the truth? We can agree that you didn’t do it.”

“Nothing changes, though,” Artus shook his head. “The Woodsmen and the Waterfall Court have been fighting for decades...ever since you built the castle on the hill and claimed our lands.”

“I am Prince Corriban. You have my word, I will secure your Clans End as your territory. You and I could be the first steps to ending the conflict between our peoples.”

“It’s a nice dream, prince, but still a dream.”

“Artus?” Venn asked, turning to him. “Please, I need your help. I still don’t know if I can trust them, but I trust you. They’re accusing you, I’m accusing them...you’re the only one who is saying that they’re innocent. You have the most to lose in this fight and I need you to help.”

“It’s a dream, Artus,” Corr said. “But we can make it a reality.”

Artus sighed and looked around. “Damn it, fine. But I’m not interested in losing out on good hunting.”

“Three boars,” Corr said. “Salted and good enough to last your Clan the winter.”

“I don’t know, we got a pretty big Clan.”

“What if I threw in a herd of goats? Not for meat alone, but milk and wool?”

“We’re not farmers, prince.”

“Five boars,” Venn said. “And I’ll add one of my father’s heifers, freshly butchered for a feast.”

“It’s a sad world when a man’s price can be broken up into pounds of flesh,” Artus said. “But war will make us hungrier than winter. Fine. But we should stay here for the night.”

“I’ll keep watch,” Das said, dropping down and setting his bow aside. “Hardly a good hiding spot.”

“She wanted the door open for the horse,” Artus said. “And I was already keeping watch, clearly.”

“Then get some rest,” Corr said.

The pair moved back inside, Artus taking his spot on the floor with a knife in his hand. Venn hesitated a moment and looked over to Corr. “If you betray me,” Venn said, “there will be war.”

“If we don’t work together, there will be war. I want peace...it’s what our fathers have been working for.”

“I know that’s what my father wanted,” Venn said. “And that’s what drives us both.”

Corr nodded and Venn went back inside. She said a quick word to the mare and the horse positioned herself in front of the door, lying down and glaring at Corr.

“Charming one, isn’t she?” Das whispered.

“I’d rather work with her than against her.”

“And the woodsman? What about him?”

“I believe him. He knows nothing about what’s going on and he wants peace. We’ll work with them.”

“For now...”

“Until she decides she isn’t interested in it any longer,” Corr said. “She’s not a prisoner.”

“Get some sleep,” Das said, frowning. “We’re gonna need fresh eyes in the morning. I’ll keep a lookout for any of his friends.”

Corr settled on the forest floor, a small space in the clearing outside the tree trunk fort. He settled onto his side, resting his head on his arm. The last thing he saw as he drifted off to sleep was the mare’s intense stare.