

The Waterfall King: Part 9

Morning was quiet. Venn woke up with her fingers still touching her ax handle. Esper still guarded the front door, though she had spread out and was lying flat on the forest floor. Prince Corr and his friend Das were still outside, the non-royal man holding the reins of a pair of horses that had been recovered in the early hours of the morning. Artus was sitting in his chair and tying up his boots.

“What time is it?” Venn asked.

“Morning,” Artus grunted. “That’s all I know.”

“Artus—”

“You lied to me. You told me you wanted to go home and I promised I would get you there. I didn’t ask to be in the middle of this fight.”

“I didn’t know if I could trust you.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Artus said, “but I did because you asked. And now I’m in the middle of this fight between the two of you! Horse Lords and Waterfall Court, leaving the Woodsmen in the middle as always.”

“Everything I told you was true, but I couldn’t tell you the part about being a princess. I’d like to think it wouldn’t matter.”

“Not to you,” Artus said. “But your father’s army is five million strong.”

“And I thought you were equally afraid of five angry brothers.”

Artus allowed a small smile and shook his head. “I’m trying not to be mad, honestly. I get it: I’m a no one. You’re a princess. You needed help and I was your only option.”

“Hey,” Venn said, leaning closer. “You are not a no one, alright? You agreed to help me when I was a no one. That’s worth more than any royal-loyal bowing and offering their lives for my cause.”

Artus grinned again. He looked out to the other two in the camp and glowered. “What do you think about them?”

“We want the same thing for now. I think having the resources of a prince will be helpful in our fight. And for the record? I trust you more than them.”

Artus nodded and sighed. “If we have to lose them? You’re getting the three boars...and the other shit you promised.”

“Deal,” Venn said. “Let’s go shake hands with the enemy.”

Corr and Das were talking in quiet voices when Venn approached. As the princess stepped out, Esper rose up with a groan and shook her mane out before walking with Venn. The Waterfall Court horses backed away a little and bowed their heads. Venn hid the small smile that came with a swell of pride. These horses knew a bellemare when she approached. The prince and his friend would have to learn the same thing about her.

“We can check the abduction scene,” Corr said. “See if it brings up any new clues?”

“Artus, let’s assume these men aren’t with the Woodsmen. Is there somewhere they might hide?”

“We protect the Clans End fiercely. And while there are plenty of places that they could hide, I know that the Under Valley could be useful.”

“Under Valley?” Corr asked.

“You might call it Belen’s Pass? It’s a narrow, stone passageway that’s overgrown from the top. We like staying away from it because there’s not a hunter who hasn’t fallen down there chasing prey. It’s practically a rite of passage.”

“Lead on,” Corr said, climbing up on his horse and looking down at the hunter. “Do you need a horse?”

“I’ll be faster than your horses,” Artus said. He looked back at his shelter and bowed his head to the tree trunk. After a final breath, he dropped the door of his shelter and walked over a fallen tree at a steady pace.

Venn took a few steps and climbed up onto Esper’s back. She looked at Prince Corr in the sunlight and considered him. He was handsome enough with the slightly rugged look of a hunter. His eyes were sharp and intelligent and Venn realized he was sizing her up, too.

“Prince Corr,” she bowed her head. “I wish our first meeting had been more productive for our nations.”

“Princess Venn, I don’t doubt that this will be as productive as any treaty. We find your father and set him free. That’s all there is to it.”

“My father spoke very highly of your father. I think they would have been fast friends.”

“I hope they still would be.”

“They will be,” Venn said. She clicked her tongue and followed Artus into the woods. He was only ever a few steps ahead, but the horses never outpaced him.

Around midday, Artus called for a break. He was able to keep a few steps ahead of the horses, but Corr was very quick to acknowledge that the road was harder on him than the riders. The horses were set free, both of the Waterfall horses acknowledging the strength of the Plains horse. Corr handed Artus his waterskin, noting that Artus's had leaked out in their journey.

"Thank you, your highness," Artus nodded, bowing his head.

"Woodsmen haven't been affiliated with the Waterfall Court since we first encountered one another. You don't need to call me any title."

"Titles have always mattered," Artus said. "I say it to respect your family's lineage."

"Respect should be earned, not given. I would ask for your trust for now. We can be equals."

Artus took a sip from the waterskin and nodded appreciatively. "Equals it is."

With a friendly nod, Corr stood and looked around. Das was standing a few paces away, looking towards the forest. Corr approached him and followed his gaze. "Do you see anything?"

"Nothing," Das shook his head. "But I'm ready."

"I've noticed. Be careful, Das. This is way too tenuous for our past to cloud things up."

"We're going into the middle of the woods—with a Woodsman—to find Princess Venn's father. For all we know, this is a trap."

"Or it's exactly what she says," Corr said. "Keep an eye out for threats, but I don't want to skew your vision towards woodsmen...or allies."

"You mean Plainsmen?"

"I mean, anyone who might be able to help us. I'm trusting your eye to see the truth: track for it."

"Understood," Das said. There was a neutral detachment to his voice, but Corr didn't sense any hostility. He accepted Das's response and walked over to where Princess Venn was tending to her horse.

"Magnificent mare," Corr said, approaching. "The Plains horses are revered the world over. I've never seen a horse react to a verbal command."

"We teach our horses to respond to multiple types of commands," Venn explained.

"Words, reins...our archers can command their horses' direction with just their heels."

“Your archers go on horseback?”

“It’s the fastest way to control the battlefield,” Venn said. “We have a general and an Alving Master to coordinate the field from one tent.”

“Truly? That’s fascinating. I’ve heard of alving: a kind of singing?”

“Their voices carry much farther across the battlefield and they can sing commands.”

“Efficient,” Corr said. “We still rely on signal flares and messengers.”

“We have the advantage of the plains. I doubt alving would be as effective in the woods. It may sound more like a ghost. My mother was practicing to become an alving master. That’s how she met my father, actually. She was the daughter of one of the great houses and was training to be an alver. She was singing one day and she captured my father’s ear, like a siren.”

“My mother and father met in court,” Corr said, smiling. “They were an arranged marriage, but they actually did love each other. In the tradition, they were allowed a few encounters before they would be wed. The first time they met, my mother met my father at Fall’s Meet, where the falls strike the river below. They dueled with blades for the afternoon.”

“I had heard a story about the War Queen!”

“War Queen?” Corr laughed. “No, my mother wouldn’t touch a blade in anger. Dueling with Blades is actually more like dancing.”

“Dancing?”

“There’s an old court dance that requires swords. The striking of metal is actually part of the music.”

“Quite beautiful. So much for the dream of a War Queen.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard,” Corr said, “we have stories of you quartering men for looking at you the wrong way.”

Venn laughed, a light and gentle giggle. “That’s a gross overstatement. The truth is that an obnoxious suitor and I were on a ride. He said something coarse, so I called him out on it. I’ll admit I was...harsher than I should have been. He fell off his saddle, but his foot was caught in a stirrup. He ended up getting dragged for a bit and busted his face a few times. Needless to say, we don’t talk to each other anymore. He spread the quartering rumor, but no one in the Plains believes him.”

“I like your version of the story better.”

“We can keep going,” Artus said, suddenly standing by Corr’s shoulder. “If you’re all ready?”

“How much further?” Das asked, already on his horse and riding over.

“One more long stretch. The Under Valley isn’t far now.”

Corr climbed onto his horse and rode beside Venn. The princess seemed a little brighter, though she fought the urge to gallop.