

The Waterfall King: Part 1

At the highest peak of the Corriban Falls, the Waterfall Castle loomed dangerously over the ledge. Down below, the falls foamed and kicked up a glorious mist, as the chilly mountain water met the head of a river. The falls provided the current king with a rolling view of his kingdom, everything south of the falls to the plains of Horse Masters. A lush, vibrant forest spread out before him, dotted with a few larger villages, but nothing that dared sit too close to the throne.

The story of the castle's construction held its own legacy. Massive barges were built at the foot of the Ivory Hills and loaded up with great bricks as tall as a man before being guided towards the island where the king's castle would be built. Once they delivered the precious cargo, the barges were set adrift to topple over the edge. Rather than fight the roaring current on either side of the royal home, the builders sent the rafts toppling off the precipice, collected what was salvageable, and carried it back to the foot of the mountain, where the barge would be rebuilt again. The years of construction filled the forest with thunderous crashes and cracks of the great timbers being ripped apart by the force of the falls. Ghost stories in the villages told of the Barge Man, a wayward soul who was sent over the cliffs and now serves to drive a phantom barge of unfortunate travelers over the falls.

Walls lined the outside of the island, and the castle stretched out dangerously over the raging waters. Two towers stood watch over either side of the island fortress. Bridges from either side of the falls were passed by travelers daily, all stopping to pay their respects to the Waterfall King. Red banners fluttered from every corner of the dozen or so buildings that made up the castle grounds, leading up to the four-story, square fortress that threatened to topple over with the slightest breeze. But in over two hundred years, the Waterfall Castle had stayed rooted to the cliff.

The royal family had moved in centuries ago, and eight generations of kings had held their court at the peak overlooking Corriban Falls. Old kings would force prisoners and those to be executed to either lean forward to bend the knee or lean backward over the falls. King Corriban I had held that a man's fate should be left to his actions and would allow prisoners to choose their destiny. The last person to take the plunge willingly had been Corriban V's sister. She'd been betrothed to a monster of a man, but chose her own fate. Her

resolute stance and dignified composure had swayed the hearts of the people away from the practice.

At the balcony where the executions had once taken place, a young man sat on the edge, leaning back on a stone altar with his feet hanging over the edge. He was just barely eighteen, his invisible-blond peach fuzz had finally filled out into the beginnings of a beard. He casually munched through the skin of a peach, idly rolling the pit over the edge of the castle as an offering to the falls. Taking out a spyglass, the young man pressed his green eye to the lens and looked out past his future kingdom.

Corriban IX could barely hear the falls anymore. Travelers would shout to be heard over the sounds of rushing water and the crash of the occasional wood against rock, but Corriban IX could hear even the softest whisper by the falls. He could also hear Das trying to creep up on him.

“You’re not a very good spy, are you, Das?”

“How?” Das said, hopping over the altar and sitting next to the prince. “How can you, of all people, hear my coming?”

“The Falls are my constant companion and brother: patient enough to carve rivers over millennia and powerful enough to shatter felled trees into kindling. They would never betray me to such a childish attempt to startle me.”

“Show off,” Das scoffed, scowling. “And you’re not that much older than me, so it’s hardly childish!”

“We’ll see if you feel the same way in two years,” Corriban said, putting the lens back up to his eye.

“Do you see them yet?” Das asked. “The Horse Masters?”

“All in their armor, three by three...” Corriban said, watching the approaching battalion through his spyglass. “Not much more than smudges, but there’s no mistaking the blue banners riding across the plains.”

“Been almost fifty years since we’ve seen any of the Horse Masters at the falls,” Das shook his head. “And now they’re coming in friendship? It stinks of a trap.”

“It stinks of marriage,” Corriban corrected. “King Miros no doubt has plans to try to arrange me with his daughter.”

“Why, though?”

“The Waterfall King and the Queen of Stallions? Our kingdoms combined would be enough of an army to bring any other nation to heel: navy, cavalry, and the finest soldiers this side of the globe. The Queen of Stallions will probably have grand ambitions placed on her by her father.”

“So, we’re letting them in?”

“The Horse Masters have no interest in genuine violence, but would choose to fight rather than suffer an indignity like a slight from our kingdom. It’s much more polite to tell them I’m not interested in his daughter, but we respect the old truce all the same.”

“You’re not really gonna marry her, are you, Corr?”

“Never met her,” Corr shrugged. “If she were attractive enough, I could be persuaded. However, based on the rumors, she would have to be very beautiful to make up for some of her crimes.”

“I heard she quartered a man,” Das said. “Strung him up between four horses and scattered them all. The man got torn to pieces, except for one arm that stayed on his body.”

“That arm also stayed attached to a horse,” Corr said. “And dragged the man screaming for three miles. Ghastly stuff, but our own history isn’t clear of sin. How many men—guilty or innocent—had taken the plunge to the Barge Man? How many people did Corriban III put to his sword before kicking them over the edge?”

“Corriban III was a mad lunatic...no offense to your family, of course.”

“Naturally not. But he was cruel and killed a great many people.”

“Be that as it may, that was your ancestor. You have no reputation as such a monster.”

“I’m young.”

“So is she.”

“We should know by tomorrow morning.” Corr raised his spyglass to his eye and glared down the length of it. “The company just passed into the woods. They’re on their way.”

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Princess Venn had learned to ride a horse before she could walk. Since she was a little girl, she had taken three horses. One had died due to old age, and the second had fallen ill. Esper was gentle with an even temper; a chestnut mare with soulful eyes and blue ribbons in her mane and tail. A massive charger, Venn’s mother bemoaned how unfitting it was for a princess to ride a war horse.

“Esper would make a fine ruler,” King Miros said, setting a hand on Esper’s flank. “A gentle disposition, but won’t yield to blunt force. Strong, but wise. The wisdom of horses is the wisdom of kings.”

Esper had been a birthday gift when Venn turned seventeen. She’d spent the year training and bonding with the chestnut, and now they were inseparable. Esper even had a small portion of Venn’s tent to bed down in at their campsite. On their third night on the road, deep in the Waterfall King’s lands. Despite the invitation, King Miros had called for guards around the camp and no fire was lit besides a small flame to cook by. Most of them were glad for the warm food, but Venn felt especially blessed with Esper’s warm flank by her side.

Sitting in a small travel chair, Venn ran a comb through her long, red hair, fighting with the gnarls that had come up on their journey. If she were to be presented tomorrow, she would ride up as a War Angel with her hair flowing behind her like a comet. Her riding armor was already hanging on the rack by her sleeping mat and Esper was a glory to behold in her blue ribbons. A wagon party a day ahead of them had prepared the campsite, with piles of hay in the tents interspersed with practical furniture for the royal family to travel with.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Venn grumbled, discussing her concerns with Esper while the horse lounged on the hay-strewn ground. “Arranged marriages...it’s archaic! And to the King of the Waterfall? What’s so special about him anyway? A few tracts of land along a river that can’t even be used as a trade route?”

“And a kingdom twice the size of ours...”

Venn stood quickly, dropping her brush and bowing to her father. Esper lowered her head, though Venn could see her eyeing the ground for loose hay. “I’m sorry, father, I—”

“There is nothing to apologize for,” King Miros put a gentle hand on his daughter’s shoulder and led her to the bed on the other side of the room. “You’re very right. An arranged marriage is not fair to you. I am not forcing you to make any decisions soon, my dearest. The advisors in our party are pushing for marriage as political leverage, but I would be surprised if the Waterfall Prince would express a similar interest.”

“Yet we’re in their lands?”

“By invitation,” King Miros nodded. “It’s a diplomatic mission we’re on. This meeting of the two kings will be a show of good faith. While we’ve never been at open war, our kingdoms have never been true allies. There are no treaties to sign, no one to conquer, and no one to bend the knee to. There are no stakes to our visit.”

“Then why make the trip?”

“True alliances are in what is not said. We could certainly drum up some pact of brotherhood, King Corriban and I. Make a big festival out of it and tear down old walls that represent ancient wounds or some such nonsense. But in the end, apart from the politics, it wouldn’t mean anything. Twenty-five years of trading letters back and forth: celebrations of the births of our children, sympathies for deceased parents...it’s strange, but I feel I do know him. But traveling into his land? Shaking his hand? That will be the measure of the man.”

“And he couldn’t come to our Plains?”

“Someone had to make the first concession. Truthfully, we’ve each been trying to invite the other across the Waterfall Kingdom since he succeeded his father on the throne. Something about this time? I finally decided to cave, if only to satisfy my own curiosity.”

“And his son? Corriban IX?”

“I haven’t met him, but I only ask that you show him the courtesy you would extend to a guest of our court.”

“I’ve heard terrible histories. Something in my gut tells me this is a mistake.”

“If there is any such tomfoolery? That will be poorly reflected on the Waterfall King. General Stansin is waiting. One week without hearing from me? And he’ll send an army to lay siege on the Waterfall Castle.”

“What if it can’t be taken? Too much of this feels like a trap.”

“Then expect it to be a trap. Don’t agitate the trappers and don’t touch anything that looks like bait.”

“Like sudden marriage proposals?”

“It never hurts to keep a weather eye out,” King Miros smiled. “Just...promise me that you won’t try to rile up any of the Waterfall Court? The Prince included?”

“A mare knows when to kick if it keeps a rowdy stallion off her back.”

“A bell mare knows the importance of the herd. This is a chance to grow ours. This is not about resources or land deals...nothing is a loss from this trip. We are extending a hand in friendship. Whatever follows? That will be for another day.”

“I understand.”

“I’ll tell my advisors to put all notions of marriage out of their heads,” King Miros rose and walked toward the opening of the tent. “Sleep well.”

Venn bowed to her father again and set a hand on Esper’s shoulder. Her attention turned to tending the horse’s long mane, gently untwisting the gnarled hair and rewrapping the ribbons into the mare’s mane. The process was meditative and simple, putting Venn into a gentle trance that let her hands work while her mind drifted in and out of all the possibilities. By the time she finished brushing out Esper’s tail, Venn let out a long yawn and moved towards her bed. Blowing out the candle on her nightstand, Venn climbed into bed and pulled the blanket over herself. Esper groaned as she lowered herself to the ground, exhaling as she settled into the ground for the night. Venn fell asleep to the sounds of the men patrolling the camp and Esper’s gentle breathing.