

The Waterfall King: Part 2

“The crimson banners with the golden falls should come up tonight. The Horse Masters should get a showing of our best!”

“Even if they only stay in the stables?” Lord Ferren said. “My spies tell me that they sleep with their horses. Should we lay down some fresh hay for them?”

“Mind your tone!” King Corriban snarled. It was a voice Corr had heard a few times too many, a rumble of thunder with a hard scowl. “King Miros is to be treated as finely as any other dignitary. I don’t care if his court shows up riding bareback and naked, we will offer them the best we have. And if they wish for other accommodations, we will provide.”

“Would a man sleep with his own horse?” Corr asked. “I can’t think that would be very comfortable.”

“It is a tradition,” King Corriban explained. “The Horse Masters are not masters by mistake. They have a unique bond with their horses: rooted in trust and unspoken words. They raise their horses from the moment they are born and treat them as well as any family member. So, yes: they do sleep in the presence of their horses, but it is the horse sleeping in luxury rather than their rider living in squalor.”

King Corriban had cleared the day to tend to any last-minute details before the visit. Queen Cheris was preparing the dining room and discussing dinner with the cook. Joras, the stable master, demanded the services of every groom and stablehand available to prepare the stalls to the standards of the Horse Masters. The Court Chamber was last on King Corriban’s list for the day, overseeing the final touches that would mark the meeting of two great rulers. The large, twelve columns lined the great chamber, each carved to represent one of the Twelve Divines. Golden light filtered in through the dome overhead, a yellow glass masterwork supported by a lattice of iron vines. Black and white tiles led into the room, but a mosaic of the sun and raging water made up the majority of the floor. The three thrones were carved from solid ivory, artfully crafted to resemble a trio of cascading waterfalls.

King Corriban, light blonde hair tucked under a circlet of gold with a red gem over his brow, walked calmly through the room. If he hadn’t been born king, Corr thought his father would have been an actor with a strong presence and the deep, rolling voice meant for great monologues. He

strode through the Court Chamber in a simple coat and trousers, dark blue with white accents along the sleeves.

“All the preparations are in place,” King Corriban said, standing on the balcony overlooking the falls. Corr stood next to him, looking out over the rolling forests of the kingdom below them. “After all this time, it feels like an old friend is coming home. Yet, I’m also quite nervous.”

“Are you expecting treachery?”

“I expect nothing. It’s more fretful anticipation. Miros and I have been exchanging letters for some time now. I think he truly does want our nations to have peace...maybe even an alliance.”

“By means of my marriage?”

“If you like her, that’s a possibility,” King Corriban said. “And she must like you, of course. A marriage would make both of our kingdoms stronger, but there are other ways that don’t involve marriage games. However, for what it’s worth, I’ve been told she’s quite pretty.”

“Das said she quartered a man who treated her rudely.”

“We both can agree, Das would make a terrible spy. His information may be...spotty, at best. Regardless, treat her well. If you disrespect the princess, your mother will do worse than quarter you; that’s a promise.”

King Corriban chuckled and went to speak with the servants. It was a good sign that marriage was far from his father’s mind. Corr grinned at having avoided that fate, for now. He leaned against the railing and looked down at the raging falls. Corr listened to the water, the roar rumbling out a song that only a Waterfall King could hear. Tilting his head back and closing his eyes, Corr felt like he could hear the prophecies of the Corriban Falls in the voices of his ancestors.

“My prince...”

Corr turned around and met Lord Ferren’s gaze. Since Corr was a child, Lord Ferren felt like a harsh school teacher. Tall and lanky, the lord had greasy black hair and sharp features. Despite his scowling contempt, Lord Ferren always treated Corr with respect and adoration. The reasoning became especially apparent when Corr was crowned heir on his sixteenth birthday.

“Lord Ferren,” Corr nodded, distant yet respectful. “My family and I appreciate everything you’ve helped arrange for our visitors.”

“Anything for the Waterfall King: present and future.”

“Does something trouble you?”

“I only seek your best interest, your highness. My concerns are for these visitors of your father.”

“If you suspect some kind of treachery, I can assure you it would be ill-conceived. It would be beyond foolish for anyone to try and harm my father in his own castle... especially when the only ways out are either a bridge or a death sentence.”

“And I would never wish any treachery on your family,” Lord Ferren set a hand on his chest in dramatic surprise. “But these Horse Masters? We know so little about them as a people. I worry they seek to take our kingdom.”

“War is not their intention,” Corr said firmly. “My father trusts King Miros...as such, so do I.”

“There is an army amassing on the border between our kingdoms: seventy phalanxes of seventy riders each. They’re all gathering in the Great Plains that King Miros calls home. There has been no other movement yet, but they are preparing for something.”

“You suspect hostilities? Then why make the journey alone?”

“The show of it will mean more than the action. Mark my words, your highness, these Horse Masters? They are plotting something.”

“A gathering could easily be a celebration as much as an army. Whatever their reasons, I would not assume ill-will.”

“Until it was too late?”

“You speak out of turn,” Corr snapped. “The king may not be here to tell you that, but his wisdom tells me that you mean to propose something. Get to it and do not waste my time.”

“As you said, your highness, a gathering could easily be a celebration or an army. I say, we choose the meaning of the gathering. If we were to propose marriage—”

“I’ll save you considerable time, Lord Ferren. I will not marry someone I have never met and not on some bureaucratic whim. She—nor I—will not be a bargaining chip in politics. If there is something that happens between us? I will personally deliver an invitation to you. This is not about me or Princess Venn. This is about my father and King Miros: two friends and allies.”

“I would never question your wisdom or your father’s. I simply ask that you consider the option for the future of our nation.”

“Are you at all familiar with the philosophy of Corriban II?”

“Your highness?”

“Corriban II was born here when the castle was little more than a single watch tower with a few walls. As he grew, he watched his father make a kingdom from nothing and—in his twilight years—he wrote poetry about what he had learned from a lifetime at the falls. Some call it the greatest philosophy of our age.”

“It is truly worth praising, your highness.”

“He believed in the wisdom of the falls. No matter the terrain, no matter the season, the river toiled away and eroded its path alone. It was not two rivers forced together by men to make a stronger flow, but a lone river made from the foundation of a great mountain. And that, Lord Ferren, is the kind of man I strive to be. Working towards my own great falls and not playing marriage as some token in a game.”

“I apologize if I’ve offended you—”

“You haven’t, Lord Ferren. I am simply telling you that the future of our kingdom rests with me to build as I see fit. It is not a destiny that you will have to worry about, only one you will serve. Good day.”

Corr left the agape lord on the balcony. His mother would be horrified that he spoke harshly to such a powerful noble. His father would have a more approving view of his words. For his own part, Corr wouldn’t have changed anything.