

## The Waterfall King: Part 4

"It's nearly nightfall," King Corriban frowned, standing on the Overlook Balcony. "They should be here by now."

"Perhaps they were waylaid?" Queen Chervis suggested. The dinner they prepared had gone cold, but the queen remained optimistic enough to set places for dessert.

"No," King Corriban shook his head. "There would be a messenger or some sign. I have a feeling, Chervis. Deep in my gut...something is wrong. Commander Reffer? Any word from the scouts?"

"Nothing yet, sire."

"Double the search on the path. Send trackers out as well...if anything changed, I want to know about it."

"You think something happened?" Corr asked, arms folded in deep concern. "Maybe they...left?"

"No. Something happened."

"You are troubled, dear," Queen Chervis said. "This will not affect the people's opinion of you. I know you had high hopes for this visit, but—"

"It's not just about the visit. I worry something happened to Miros. He's an honest man and he wouldn't just disappear without saying something. And for no one in his party to arrive? It doesn't sit right. And it makes me think of one thing..."

"Woodsmen?" Corr asked. "Would they attack a noble house? A visiting king?"

"The Woodsmen have always been treacherous," Lord Ferren snarled, as though the thought left a sour taste in his mouth. "They have gotten bolder in the last year. I doubt they would be thrilled with 'invaders' to their lands. A king of horses or king of waterfalls is a king they would not bend the knee to."

"I want search parties," King Corriban said, addressing every available guard. "Every rock, every tree...if something happened to the Horse Masters, there has to be some evidence of it somewhere. Our goal is to find King Miros: this is a rescue, not a conquest."

"I'll lead the men, Father," Corr said, puffing out his chest. "I will find the king and princess and rescue them."

“A marvelous idea!” Lord Ferren said. “Think of what that would do for our relationship with the Plains Riders! Our young prince rescuing his lady love! It’s like an epic poem or a ballad!”

“No, Ferren! Corr, I need my troops searching the woods. You need to start asking around the villages. They wouldn’t have just vanished. You and Das will follow the route to the Plains, ask everyone you see, and search every inch of the path. If we know where they had been seen, perhaps we could narrow down our field of searching.”

“What will they do?” Corr asked. “If they have taken them?”

“The Woodsmen have no goodwill towards your family, your highness. Anyone who wears a symbol of royalty would be worth kidnapping. Ransom, perhaps? Or just plain murder?”

“Enough, Lord Ferren,” King Corriban snapped. “The Woodsmen are not cruel...they act to defend their lands, not start a war. Acting as if this were nothing but malicious invites conflict. Corr? Your duty is to find the princess. She is next in line for his throne and—no matter what happens to the king—her loss would mean civil war in Miros’s kingdom. Find her and bring her here for safety. Do you understand?”

“It will be done, father,” Corr bowed his head. He turned and made his way to the stables. He caught a servant to send after Das with no time to find him on his own. There was a true threat to both the Waterfall Kingdom and the Plains. Surely, this rescue would do more to solidify the budding alliance than any marriage.

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Venn rode for another hour until she found a small farmhouse as the sun began to set. The blades of a great windmill turned slowly, churning the wheat from the rolling fields in the valley below. An ox pulled a wagon, carting up large bushels of hay under the commands of a boy sitting on top of the harvest. Venn approached the house without being too standoffish. Her father had given her a primer on the local customs, but Venn hoped that court customs would translate well to the commonfolk.

“Good afternoon,” Venn said, trying to hide her Plains accent.

“Hello!” The boy waved. “That’s a fine horse!”

“Thank you. You have quite the ox.”

“Henlow is my father’s,” the boy said. “Are you a scout for the king’s army?”

"I'm just a messenger," Venn shrugged. "Can you tell me what town this is?"

"You don't know? Not much of a messenger, are you?"

"In my defense, I'm not a navigator."

"Erven? What's taking you so long, boy?"

A man strode out of the mill, his face red and his shirt stained with sweat. His brown hair was thinning over his brow and he had developed a bit of a gut. The miller wiped his hand on a rag and examined Venn critically. "Good afternoon."

"Afternoon," Venn said. "I'm afraid I'm a bit lost. Could you tell me what town this is?"

"Low Bend," the man said, "River Zarin is about a league that way."

Venn tried to hide her grin and nodded. The River Zarin could lead her back home easily. It wouldn't be the easiest trail to ride, but she could lead Esper through the water for a slightly easier ride and direction would mean more than speed. "Appreciate it..."

"You got somewhere to stay for the night?" The man asked.

"I just need to get back on the road."

"Nonsense," the miller shook his head. "You should spend the night in the barn. Young woman out on her own at night? My wife would hang me up by my ears if I let you go. I'm afraid she won't accept no for an answer."

"We have beef stew tonight!" The boy smiled brightly.

"Well," Venn looked longingly south and sighed. "I suppose it would be safer to ride in daylight. And who could say no to beef stew?"

"Erven? Go set up the bed in the hay loft and get the stall ready. Hay and grain, you know the drill." The boy hopped down off the ox cart and scrambled toward the barn. "And you can wash up inside, should you please."

"That's very kind," Venn smiled. "Thank you."

"Come. We see to our own out here in the wide world. My name is Rire. What should we call you?"

"Esper," Venn said without thinking. "And this is Miros."

"Very well," Rire smiled. "Miros will be quite comfortable in our barn while we eat."

Venn reluctantly stabled Esper and closed her into the stall. "I know," she whispered as the mare nuzzled her chest. "I'll be back soon. Mind your manners."

Rire's home was a small building attached to the mill. The first floor was open with a few beams to support the second level, where the family slept. Erven rushed up a ladder to get cleaned up while Rire stepped into the living space. A table stretched from one side of the room to the other, a beam going straight through it at the middle. The table seemed to divide the room into two sections: a sitting area around the fireplace and a place where food was prepared. A slender woman with black hair tied into a bun pattered around the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron when she saw the visitor.

"Tereas, we have someone joining us for dinner tonight. Esper, a lost messenger."

"Welcome to our home," the woman beamed. "Are you hungry?"

"I was told I couldn't refuse..." Venn smiled. "But you don't have to make special accommodations for me."

"Nonsense. The first virtue of Corriban II is Hospitality. It would be a disgrace not to follow those virtues."

After she had bathed and redressed, Venn helped where she could around the kitchen. She was not a cook and didn't fool herself into trying to be one, but she could at least chop vegetables and set a basic table. This set only included one spoon, a bowl and a plate for each person. It was all the easier to set since nothing in the house seemed to match. The stew was simple and served with fresh bread and decent enough butter.

"If I could be so bold," Rire said, as the family settled into the meal, "where is it you're heading, Esper?"

"Terivos," Venn said, naming the only city close to the border she could think of.

"Terivos? That whole city has been garrisoned."

"Are you a messenger for the army?" Morr asked eagerly. "Do you bring a message from the king?"

"Just...a letter from a wife to a soldier," Venn lied, stumbling for the first time since arriving.

"It's good of you to still deliver those messages. It's hard to think of things like romance when we seem so close on the eve of war."

"Tereas, you worry too much. In my mind, there is no threat of war with the Horse Masters."

"You don't think so?"

“King Corriban has only ever spoken positively of them. He’s even arranged for a royal envoy to come up to the castle. They’ve been very strict about security, though. No googly-eyed looky-loos, just the people who live there. And thank goodness for that, or everyone would be there. First anyone’s seen the Horse Masters since...ever, so far as I remember.”

Venn nodded. So not only was the route well known, but it was supposedly secure. More questions were coming up after the ambush. King Corriban allegedly cared for King Miros, but the path had been leaked to outside attackers. Either there was a leak in the king’s security or there had been a more sinister intention to the invitation.

“Have you been down south before, Esper?” Tereas asked. “Have you encountered the Horse Masters much on your travels?”

“Rarely, if ever,” Venn said. The official ruling had been a mutual distrust, but it had been honored so far. Neither the Waterfall Army nor the Plainsmen had dared cross the border from a desire to keep the peace.

“Can you tell us about them?” Morr pressed. “I’ve heard they can speak to their horses through an ancient language!”

“Well, anyone can speak to a horse,” Venn smiled. “Whether or not they listen is the real trick of it.”

“Sounds like you’re quite the accomplished rider,” Rire said, taking a sip from his water mug.

“I’ve been riding as long as I can remember,” Venn said, relieved to speak the truth to her hosts. “And each time I’ve bound with a horse is different than the last. They all have personalities just like people. It’s an honor to be part of the conversation.”

“That sounds quite lovely,” Tereas smiled. “Now, if only that old ox of ours were more willing to listen!”

The rest of the evening passed in easy company. The family never pushed Venn for information, but asked polite questions. She avoided anything too personal, such as where she was from or what she thought of certain areas she’d never heard of. Instead, the family was kind enough to focus on what she enjoyed, if the weather had muddied the roads, and probing for opinions on dinner. After the stew was finished, Tereas brought out a plate of lemon cookies with lavender icing.

“What about your parents, Esper?” Rire asked, nursing a cookie with one hand and upgrading his water to tea. “Are they still with us?”

“Yes,” Venn nodded. “They are.”

And Venn believed that with all her heart. Her mother was safe at home, no doubt handling the day-to-day. As for her father, she refused to believe he was dead until she saw a body.

Lying in the simple mattress in the hayloft above Esper, Venn let that ember of hope burn. Heading south towards home was certainly an option, but that hope lit a passion inside her. Perhaps, she thought, home could wait. Her father was still alive and she couldn't abandon him yet. The ambush had been large, Venn thought. Someone had to have seen something.