

The Waterfall King: Part 10

“This is it,” Artus said. The revine was a narrow pass with a mess of vines covering the walls. The leafy boughs stretched over the gap overhead, casting the entire valley in shadow. Emerald moss and steel grey lichen covered the walls and it felt like a moist, hot exhale passed through Venn’s hair.

“So,” Das said, dismounting. “Are we going to go into the terrifying cave in a single file line or two by two?”

“The passage is too tight,” Corr said. “It’s the perfect place for an ambush.”

“The horses will have to stay out here,” Das said. “I’ll cover behind us. Artus, stay ahead and Venn and Corr will stay in the middle.”

“I don’t need defending,” Venn snarled. “I’ll take the lead. Artus, behind me. Corr and Das, take the rear.”

“It’s not up for debate, Princess,” Das said. “It’s our responsibility to protect the nobility.”

“Perhaps in the Waterfall Court,” Venn said, “but the Belle Mare protects the herd she leads. I brought you here; that makes what happens my responsibility. Now, if your duty is to follow orders, then do so.”

Corr smirked a little when Das turned to him to protest, but only offered a consolatory shrug. “She’s proven she’s not a helpless maiden.”

Venn led her proposed formation through the cave's mouth. Sound seemed to fade as she crossed the threshold and the shapes of bushes in shadow made her reach for the ax at her side. The group crept into the dark, but Venn was very aware of Artus staying in her periphery. Venn hated the cold feeling enclosing her, but couldn’t turn to Esper for support. The tunnel seemed to smother her and every instinct told her to run back to her horse. Artus kept a careful eye on her, always a step or two behind. It wasn’t the same confidence that Esper brought her, but his diligence gave her some comfort.

“I can barely see,” Das hissed over the shuffling of feet. “We should get out of here.”

“Maybe this isn’t a place for eyes,” Corr said. “According to Waterfall Court lore, Belen was a hero who moved through the pass completely in the dark. He did so by blindfolding himself.”

“In the dark?” Artus asked.

“He removed the temptation to view the world through his eyes,” Corr said. “I always thought it was a metaphor for traversing the darkness of ignorance, but maybe it’s literally about not seeing.”

Venn watched Corr tear a piece of his tunic off, the shredding sound as harsh as steel against steel. When he had a strip off the bottom, Corr tied the blindfold around his head and stood still. He took a deep breath and focused. “There’s something...movement.”

“Where?” Das asked, drawing an arrow.

“Nothing close. It’s the air itself. I can feel how it’s moving through the pass.”

“I felt it too,” Venn said. “I didn’t find it overly remarkable.”

“An air current would mean an opening,” Artus said. “Maybe it’s just the other end?”

“No, it’s...humid. It’s like the spray of a waterfall or morning mist. There’s a water source in here.”

“Not on any of our maps,” Das said. “Besides, what does a water source mean?”

“A likely place for someone to camp,” Venn said. “Corr, do you think you can lead us there?”

“I’ll stay by his side,” Artus said, a hand on Corr’s shoulder. “I think your Belen’s Pass story was partly luck. The path is treacherous.”

Corr stepped forward slowly, feeling the way with the toe of his shoe. Artus was able to guide him from the most obvious perils, but Corr explored every inch of the pass with the toe of his boot before putting pressure down. Venn and Das walked behind them, each watching their friend.

“Not for nothing, your highness,” Das whispered, just out of Corr’s ear, “but if it comes down to it? I’ll save Corr’s life over yours or your woodsman’s in a breath. He isn’t just my future king, he’s my friend.”

“I admire your courage and your strength,” Venn said. “It will be needed, but I bear no ill will to your court. Corr trusts me.”

“Corr has lived a charmed life. I have been a tracker and—as needed—spy. I was taught that no one can be trusted.”

“Then you’ve succeeded in teaching yourself that lesson, but diplomacy is about trust forged through actions. This is his attempt to earn my trust. I would hope, as his friend, you would respect that?”

“I respect him. I will follow him until my death, if I must. All I ask is that you do not hurt him. Whatever game you’re playing? I don’t want him hurt.”

“No harm will come to him,” Venn said. “Knowingly or unknowingly, through my action or inaction. I have no intention to hurt Corr.”

Das only grunted, surprisingly neutral from both admiration and disdain. Venn understood his meaning, but hoped Das wouldn’t vehemently live up to his words. Corr’s pathway was steady and led them further into the crevice. He turned right sharply and started towards the wall.

“Corr?” Venn asked.

Corr raised his hand and felt along the wall, pushing through a canopy of thick vines. He fumbled a few minutes longer, but eventually pulled the plants apart into an open tunnel. Venn felt a rush of cool, moist air and could see a faint light.

“A secret passage within the pass?” Artus asked. “Will oddities never cease?”

“I doubt it,” Corr said. “Stay close. The air feels…different here.”

“Remarkable sense you have for it,” Venn said.

“The Kings of Corriban Falls—and all princes—are connected with the waterfalls,” Das explained. “It’s supposed to be a legend, but Corr really does sense things that other people can’t. The rivers, the waterfall…it all speaks to him.”

“How?”

“You’d have to ask him,” Das shrugged. “I don’t have waterfall in my blood.”

The group walked in silence, Corr leading them towards the light. The side cavern opened into a small clearing, thick grass and moss covering the ground. There were a few circles of stones and a small spring with water bubbling up from deep underground.

“Das?” Corr asked. “Any idea where we are?”

“I have no idea. South of Belen’s Pass…looks naturally made, apart from the stone formations.”

“These are Tarring Rings,” Artus said, kneeling by one of the circles. “This was a Clan’s End.”

“Tarring Rings?” Venn asked.

“Druid circles,” Artus said. “They were also places where communities would come together to share food, stories...they’re the centers of our Clan’s End. If this place was abandoned? It would be seen as cursed by the Woodsmen.”

“Is armor part of your Clan’s End?” Das asked. He lifted a chest plate and showed the group. “Looks well-made.”

“That’s my father’s!” Venn said, taking the chest plate and looking it over. “The two horses on the shoulders were his.”

“There’s a lot more armor over here,” Corr said. “Too many pieces for one man.”

“That means they took the armor of the other men!”

“But there’s no evidence of any bodies.”

“Not helpful, Das.”

“This is his sword,” Venn said, picking up the blade.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Artus shook his head. “If this were woodmen—as you say—we wouldn’t have left this just lying here. Good metal and fine weapons.”

“And what about the horses?” Venn said. “Keeping those would be too much effort.”

“Unless they used them for meat.”

“Das!” Corr snapped.

Venn looked through the armor pieces, rebuilding the sets with Artus and setting out enough full suits for each of the men in their unit. She kept her father’s sword on her waist, tightening the belt. Corr took a few steps towards one of the Tarring Rings and looked around. There was evidence of food and fires in the circles, as well as holes for tent poles and posts.

“If we came yesterday,” Das said, examining a fire. “We might have met them in the pass.”

“Can you track where they went?”

“No,” Das shook his head. “They were thorough.”

“Not thorough enough,” Corr said, looking to one of the other Tarring Rings. He knelt down by it and picked up a shiny object that had caught his attention. The knife was short, the blade

only about as long as Corr's hand and as thin as two of his fingers. "Parrying knife," Corr said. "Not exactly a favorite tool of the Woodsmen."

"From the Plainsmen?"

"No, they fight on horseback. A parrying blade like this wouldn't do them any good. Only Waterfall soldiers would carry this."

"Taken from a hunter?"

"Hunters wouldn't carry these. Look at the hilt: twin lions."

"What does twin lions mean?" Venn asked. She stood close by with one hand on her axe handle. Corr frowned and stood, approaching her with the dagger.

"The twin lions are a symbol of very specific soldiers. We call them the Waterfall Elite. They take orders directly from...from the Waterfall King."

"Your father," Venn said, coldly. Her hand jumped to the ax and she pulled it from the loop, catching the handle. "He ordered the men!"

"Venn, please, listen to me."

"Your father ordered the attack on our people! Why?"

"He wouldn't! Venn, this doesn't make any sense. The Waterfall Elite should only take orders from the king, but he wouldn't order this! If we go back to Corriban's Palace, we can talk with my father and—"

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" Venn snarled. "I'm going back to the Plains and I'm bringing every rider with me."

"You would threaten war against us?" Das said, raising his bow and setting an arrow on the string. Corr's hand snapped up and knocked Das's bow downward, knocking the arrow away. He stood between Das and Venn, raising his empty hands.

"Listen to me," Corr said calmly. "I said we wouldn't take you anywhere you didn't want to go. I intend to honor that promise. I don't have an alternative solution, but this doesn't tie into my father at all, I swear on the Falls."

"Your oaths mean little to me," Venn snarled.

“Then my actions will,” Corr knelt on the ground, calmly setting his hands, palms down, on his thighs. “You are free to go. We won’t pursue you, make whatever assurances or conditions you want. We won’t resist.”

“Corr...”

“We won’t resist, Das! That’s an order from your prince and a request from your friend. Am I clear?”

Das glowered, but dropped his bow and lowered to his knees, mirroring Corr’s stance. Corr looked up at Venn, opening his body to an attack, should she choose. “You have my word...and my actions to follow as your proof.”

“Artus,” Venn said, not taking her eyes off Corr. “We’re going. I need you to take me to the border south. Do you know the way?”

“I do,” Artus nodded. “What about them?”

“Leave them here,” Venn said. “They haven’t broken their word so far, but if they follow us, I have some ideas.”

“I beg you, Venn,” Corr said, before the princess could turn away. “Please consider working with us. Our nations have always coexisted as neighbors, but we need not turn into enemies. Work with my father and we can find King Miros. And if you must turn your thoughts to war? Attack Corriban’s Palace and the Waterfall Court...no innocent people.”

“I’ll respect your request,” Venn said. “I don’t want anyone getting hurt who doesn’t have to. But if you continue to keep my father from me when all evidence points to your king? I will do what I have to to find him.”

“You’ll meet no resistance, I swear it.”

Venn watched Corr carefully, her grip on the ax tightening before sliding the weapon back into the loop on her belt and walking back toward the passageway.

“Artus...” Corr said. “I still intend to honor our oath. You’ll find the boars where we met in four days’ time. That’s enough for you to get to the Plains and back.”

“I thank you, your highness,” Artus said.

“And I hope you realize I include your people among the innocent. Don’t let our war turn towards your children.”

“I hope there is no war. Whatever the outcome, Corr? I respect you as King of the Waterfall.”

“I’m just a prince.”

“Not in my mind,” Artus bowed his head. He pressed a hand to his chest and turned away, following Venn out through the passage.

“Leave them,” Corr said before Das could fully get to his feet. “I intend to honor our word. Let them go.”

“If she gets to the border, she’ll bring an army into the Waterfall Lands! They’ll burn our fields, slaughter our people. . .quarter our men!”

“I said, leave them, Das!” Corr snapped. He stood and walked over to one of the Tarring Rings. Sitting on one of the long, flat stones, Corr folded his hands together and looked at the ground. “Just leave them be.”

“Corr, you don’t think your father—”

“He wouldn’t send masked assassins under someone else’s banner, but the knife puts the Elites here where we found the Plainsmen armor. I have to admit it seems damning, but I don’t have an alternative. I don’t blame her for leaving.”

“She’ll bring war.”

“I’m taking a risk, Das, but I don’t think she’s going to hurt us. She’s scared and confused. Making her do anything right now would only make that worse.”

“Fine,” Das shook his head and sat on the stone next to Corr. “Well, imminent war aside, what’s next for you and me?”

“We do exactly what I suggested,” Corr said, lifting the dagger. “We talk to my father. The Waterfall Elite were here and they’re only meant to take orders from him. So either he gave the order that goes against what he believes—”

“Or there’s a corrupt person in court.”

“A rusty chain will break. We find out where the breaking point is and repair it. The order came from somewhere—no matter who—and if we find that, we’ll get the full story.”

“And we find King Miros,” Das nodded. “And if the princess finds him before us?”

“All the better,” Corr said. “She’d be more inclined to believe her father than you or I.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Not yet,” Corr shook his head. “Give Venn space to think and maybe she’ll come to her senses. And if not? I’ll sleep better knowing we did our best.”