

The Waterfall King: Part 11

The woods were quiet apart from the flutter of leaves on the breeze and Esper's soft hooves on the ground. Venn had left Belen's Pass so angry that she nearly set the other horses free, but Artus stayed her hand by just walking south. She had mounted quickly and followed while stewing on her anger. After they had moved for an hour, Venn stopped checking over her shoulder for the Prince or his friend.

Artus didn't say anything, only walking forward at a steady and easy pace. Venn didn't care for the quiet, but couldn't think of anything to say. They didn't stop their march until Artus silently brought them to a river and set his gear down before sitting. Venn dismounted and let Esper drink and graze while she ate some hard rations.

"He didn't have to keep his word."

"Hmm?" Venn asked, looking for clarity more than repetition.

"We were outmatched and alone. Das could have shot me before you could swing your axe. And Corr could have overpowered either—or both of us—without breaking a sweat. Still, he stayed his hand and the hand of his friend. They didn't chase us out of the cave or follow us. And you're still thinking of war?"

"With the Waterfall Kingdom," Venn reasoned. "You're right. Corr didn't attack us, but he's blinded by—"

"He isn't the only one who is blind. Why is violence the only solution for any of you so-called 'civilized' nations? Corr wanted to take you to the King of the Waterfall! He could have helped you!"

"Don't the Woodsmen hate the Waterfall Court?"

"We have our history," Artus said, "but it's been earned. And even then, actions are more valuable than words. King Corriban VIII has exercised peace with us despite his court's desire to wipe us out. I think he is a good man...and Prince Corriban moreso."

"I'll give you the boars he promised, if—"

"It's not about boars, Venn! You needed help and he was willing to, but you didn't even try to trust him."

"I trust you!"

“And because he didn’t give you what you wanted immediately, you turn to war.”

“This is my father we’re talking about!”

“And if it were anyone else’s father? Would war be your first instinct?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Your passion clouds your wisdom. If your father were here, would he want you to spit in the face of those who would help you?”

Venn frowned and looked over to Esper. The mare had stopped drinking and was watching the interaction with her ears forward. Water flowed from the stream, a quiet murmur that punctuated the silence. Her father’s sword was heavy on her waist, but her hand rested easily on the rounded hilt with her thumb rubbing the sapphire at the base of the pommel.

“My father would always tell me: the strength of a man is his heart, not his hand. Maybe my heart is too strong and it overrides my head. I’m too angry at times. I know it clouds my judgment. I just want my father back.”

“Then we get him back. And the best way to find him will be by working with the Waterfall King...not the Court, the King.”

“They won’t let me just walk up to the king’s throne.”

“Corr will get you there. All you’d have to do is ask him.”

“You think he’d listen? After I nearly put an ax in his stomach?”

“You could have done worse.”

“I trust Corr, but not the court. We go back to the Plains and get more riders...not an army, but security.”

“Heaven forbid you travel alone,” Artus grinned. “Are you ready?”

Esper nudged Venn and exhaled sharply, hot breath blowing her hair back. Venn pressed her forehead onto Esper’s snout and stroked the mare’s neck. “Come on, old girl,” Venn said, hopping up onto the horse’s saddle. “Let’s ride...if Artus can keep up.”

Artus smiled and collected his things. Without another word, he started running through the woods, bounding off the trunks of trees and heavy branches. Esper took off after him without needing a command, her hooves steadily running through the forest.

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Corr and Das rode up to the Waterfall Keep, taking the west bridge across the falls and galloping through the forward gate. Corr's horse had barely stopped before he dismounted and handed the reins off to an attendant.

"Prince Corr!" A guard ran up and walked alongside Corr into the castle. "Your mother was getting worried and was preparing a search party. Did you find the princess?"

"I need to speak to my father," Corr said harshly. He caught himself and blinked. "I'm sorry, I need to talk with him."

"Of course," the guard explained. "He and your mother are on the Overlook Balcony."

Corr nodded and rushed through the halls of his home. Das stayed behind and tended to his own horse, reporting to his own superiors. There were a few servants working and attendants trying to look busy. The great hall was filled with other soldiers eating and resting after a long night of searching. The commanders were in the great room under a large taxidermy bear, debating and arguing over a map. People would bow and salute when Corr walked by, but he barely noticed them.

King Corriban and Queen Chervis stood as Prince Corr strode out onto the Overlook Balcony. "We've been worried sick about you!" Queen Chervis said, hugging Corr. "I kept having horrible visions of you dead in the woods!"

"I'm sorry, but the situation changed. Father, I need to talk with you."

"The princess?"

"She was alive when I last saw her. She's heading back to the Plains now."

"You didn't offer to bring her back to the castle?"

"I did," Corr said. He looked around the balcony, hoping the venue would be private from prying eyes while the falls drowned out the sound of their conversation. Corr took the dagger from his satchel and held it out to his father.

"The Waterfall Elite?" King Corriban said, taking the blade. "Where did you find this?"

"With a lot of discarded Plainsmen armor. Father, I have to ask, would anyone else have access to the Elites?"

"Absolutely not! You don't mean to suggest—"

“I’m not, but someone gave the order. Princess Venn wouldn’t come back to the castle because she’s convinced that we arranged the ambush in the woods. She met up with a woodsman and they’re heading south now.”

“You left her alone with a woodsman?” Queen Cheris asked.

“She wouldn’t have come back. He seemed like an honorable sort, but forcing her to come would have only made things worse.”

“I agree,” King Corriban said, “you made the right call. Where did you find the armor?”

“There’s a Woodsmen Tarring Ring inside Belen’s Pass. It’s completely grown over, but I can find it again if you want.”

“We’ll go out tomorrow and find it,” King Corriban said. “As for this dagger, are we certain it was because the Elites were there?”

“I’m not sure,” Corr said. “Only the Elites can carry these daggers. They basically act as your seal to get anything they need from the armory and the quartermasters. It doesn’t make sense for them to be lost so easily.”

“And to end up lost in an old Tarring Ring? That doesn’t make any sense. I didn’t even know that there was a Tarring Ring in Belen’s Pass.”

“I’ll talk with the commanders and find out who would know about the pass. And restrict the Elites to the Keep!”

“Check them for their daggers. If anyone is missing theirs, that’s where we need to begin our investigation.”

“Corr?” Queen Cheris stopped him from leaving with a gentle hand on his arm. “The princess: do we need to worry about her?”

“She seemed...upset. She seemed intent on bringing soldiers back, but I don’t know if war is her first choice. If she does bring an army, we can’t offer any resistance.”

“I agree,” King Corriban said. “There would be nothing to gain from going to war with our neighbors from the south.”

“Or everything to gain...” Lord Ferren stood in the doorway flanked by a pair of guards in red-tinged armor. “Your majesty, I implore you to briefly indulge my proposition.”