

The Waterfall King: Part 12

The rest of the ride felt thrilling to Venn. Artus was eager to bring her back to the border and was able to keep a few strides ahead of the mare. They made good time, using hunting paths and even riding along the streams where they were able to move faster to make up lost time. After running for most of the afternoon, Artus slowed to a jog and raised a hand to stop Venn.

“What is it?” Venn asked, slowing Esper to a trot.

“That smoke...” Artus pointed to a black cloud drifting up behind the tree line. “It shouldn’t be there. This path I’m taking you on shouldn’t have a town this close.”

“Where is it coming from?”

“Stay here...” Artus said. He reached up and pulled himself into the nearest tree. Venn clicked her tongue and moved Esper closer. Esper stopped under a branch and Venn stood up on her back, climbing up the branches right after Artus, following his grunts. He stopped when he got about three-quarters of the way up, panting and looking around. Venn climbed up and positioned herself on the other side of the trunk from Artus.

“What happened to ‘stay here?’” Artus asked.

“I want to see what you’re talking about.” Venn looked out towards the south. The Plains stretched on towards the horizon, cities dotting the river with farms stretching out like wings from every bend in the river. Venn couldn’t help but smile when she saw her home in the distance, the Plains House and the Great Stable blending into one massive fortress. “It looks like the map we have in my father’s hall. It feels like it goes on for leagues...”

“I’m more interested in what’s close to us,” Artus said, pointing down below. Venn followed his finger downwards and saw the camp spread out along the border. There were four tents with at least a dozen soldiers milling about, blocking their path. She had to squint, but Venn could see that they were wearing the colors of the Waterfall Court.

“Why are they there?”

“No idea,” Artus shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense for the king to set up a camp here... or any of those.”

Venn looked west and saw more smoke from more fires. The entire border, as far as she could see, was overrun with the thin city of tents. “There must be at least a thousand of them...”

“That we can see. I’d bet there’s at least twice as many patrolling the woods.”

“Can we slip by them?”

“Not by any paths I know. It feels weird. Why are they defending the whole border and not just the roads? It’s not like an army would slip by unnoticed through the woods.”

“I feel like they’re not looking for an army, just me. And no, I don’t think it was Corr. This is too much to organize in less than a day. This has been a move going on for a while.”

“No doubt the same architect who ambushed your party.”

“This is a lot of effort to go through for one person. Should I be flattered?”

“I don’t think this is about one person. Whoever is doing this has a bigger play and you’re only a part of it: prize or bait, I’m not sure. What now?”

“There has to be some way to get to the Plains. What about the river?”

“They have outposts dotting every mile or so along the woods. They’ll have more guards at the river than there are fish in the water. They don’t want you getting back, not without them letting you go and that won’t be for free.”

“We need to go to Corriban Falls, find Corr, and get to the root of all this.”

“We can’t go alone,” Artus shook his head and started climbing down the tree. “If this is what they have waiting for you at the border, they will be expecting you at the castle.”

“I don’t plan on going alone.”

“As always, I appreciate your faith in me, but I am not a one-man army.” Artus reached the lower branches and stopped when Venn was closer to him. “I know where to go from here... for guidance if nothing else.”

“Where?”

“My Tarring Ring...” Artus said. “Come on. You should meet the Woodsmen properly.”

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“What is the meaning of this?” King Corriban yelled, stepping forward to defend his family. “Lord Ferren, you have grown far too bold of late!”

“Your majesty, please. This is an opportunity we can’t let slip by.”

“The only thing this ‘opportunity’ of yours will bring is war!”

“That’s exactly what I’m expecting. We’ve been trying to root out the Woodsmen for as long as we have held Corriban Falls. Yet, year after year, they keep appearing in greater numbers. If the Plainsmen think that their king was kidnapped by the Woodsmen, we would have a greater army. Their numbers combined with our knowledge will be the final nail in the casket of the Woodsmen. Every Clan’s End, every Tarring Ring...we’ll tear it all apart.”

“You want to turn the Plainsmen against the Woodsmen?” Queen Chervis said.

“The Woodsmen live in your forest, my lady, yet they pay no taxes. They offer no tribute; they don’t participate in our ways. They are parasites that we have never been able to rid ourselves of.”

“So, you sent Waterfall Elites after the Plainsmen,” Corr said, his realization sharpening into an accusation.

“Disguised as Woodsmen...” King Corriban said. “You planned the ambush?”

“A necessary gambit, but yes. I had hoped for less bloodshed, but the Plainsmen proved powerful fighters. They’ll be good to have on our side.”

“Under what authority did you command my Waterfall Elite?” King Corriban roared, pushing forward. “You have no right to—!”

“There have been times when the people were not powerless against the will of their king. And so, we made moves for the good of the people.”

“We?” Corr asked.

“The House of Lords,” Queen Chervis sneered. “I wonder, do you act to free the people from the will of the king or do you just wish to free yourself from your oaths?”

“What we do is for the good of the Waterfall Kingdom. Your majesty, those woods are potential: wood, food, furs, ore...and the Woodsmen have fought to keep us out for generations. But if we combined forces with the Horse Masters? Imagine absolute control and proper respect paid to us.”

“Paid to you, you mean...” Corr said.

“Which goes to the king and the royal family.”

“This is treason!” King Corriban said. “I order you, as King of the Waterfalls, to lay down your weapons and stop this foolishness!”

“I had hoped that you would agree with me, your majesty,” Lord Ferren said, “but if it means protecting our kingdom? I will do what I must.”

“Guards! Seize Lord Ferren! Take him to the dungeon!”

“The Waterfall Guard doesn’t owe loyalty to the king.” Lord Ferren raised a hand and more Waterfall Elites stepped out and surrounded the royal family. “They owe their loyalty to the Waterfall Kingdom. If you won’t cooperate, you should wait out of the way, your majesty...just until this is over.”

“You can’t do this!” Corr snapped, rushing forward. Two guards grabbed him by the arms and held him. A third came forward and took Corr’s weapons while more guards surrounded his parents.

“If you had only agreed to marry her,” Lord Ferren sighed and shook his head, “our armies would be joined by love rather than a common enemy. We could have done this without all the cloak and dagger, but you had to fight so earnestly for your choice...selfish.”

“You won’t turn this on me!”

“Take the king and queen to their chambers,” Lord Ferren said. “I believe Prince Corriban would do well with some time in the dungeon.”

“If you plan to put one of us in the dungeon,” Queen Chervis said, shoving the guards to stand by Corr, “you will take all of us.”

“Or you’ll face a personal wrath, twice over,” King Corriban said, holding his wife’s hand.

“Very well,” Lord Ferren said, “a family affair...to the dungeon with them all.”

“Bet your life on it?”

Corr turned to see Das standing in the doorway, an arrow drawn back in his bow. The Waterfall Elite pressed in on him, but he quickly slipped around them and raised his bow again.

“Let them go! The King of the Waterfalls gave you an order!”

“Put that away, boy,” Lord Ferren said, annoyed rather than afraid. “You’re outnumbered and outmatched.”

“Maybe,” Das said, “but I just need to cut out the rot in the House of Lords. Do you think you’re faster than a speeding arrow, Lord Ferren?”

“If you try, these men will kill you.”

“And I would die with honor rather than as some traitorous rat!”

“Das, don’t—!” Corr pressed forward, but the Waterfall Elite pulled back hard on his shoulder and tightened his grip. In the flurry, Das loosed his first arrow.

The Waterfall Elite to Lord Ferren’s right turned his body so his back blocked the arrow, the metal tip striking the guard’s shoulder. One of the Waterfall Elite rushed at Das, closing the distance with his sword drawn. Das fired two more arrows, but only one hit the charging guard, striking a narrow gap in his elbow. The guard’s sword arm dropped to his side, but he didn’t slow down.

The man rushed forward and slammed his full body into Das, throwing the young hunter over his shoulder. Das struck the Overlook Balcony and gasped for air, but the guard’s heavy boot struck Das’s stomach before he could catch his breath. Das swung his bow and smacked at the guard’s open face plate, striking him between the eyes. The Elite snarled and grabbed the bow, snapping it over his knee and throwing it aside. In the brief moment, Das grabbed a dagger from his boot and cut the man’s throat. With a roll to the side, Das was on his feet with his blade in his hand.

“I’ll say it again,” Das said, less forcefully with the wind knocked out of him. “Let them go!”

Lord Ferren waved a hand and two Waterfall Elites moved in, one from each side. Das fought them off, but he was winded and staggering. He swung the blade at the men when they got close, but Corr felt like the Elites were toying with him rather than fighting with honor. When one goaded him, the other would strike, sometimes with the flat of his blade rather than the edge as if to make the pain last longer. A deep cut in the bicep dropped Das’s knife hand to his side, but he picked up the blade with his other hand. The Elites slowly closed in on Das, herding him to the edge of the Overlook Balcony. The bigger of the two smashed his armored glove into Das’s knee and Das toppled to the floor, still wielding his dagger.

“You have heart,” Lord Ferren said, stepping forward with one of the guards beside him. “You care for this kingdom, I can tell. You would make a fine Elite if you could focus that heart on the right cause.”

“I’m not loyal to the kingdom,” Das shook his head, wheezing. “I’m loyal to my friend.”

“Potential is a terrible thing to waste. Attempting to kill a lord is punishable by death. Are you willing to die for your friend?”

“For my king? Without question. You may have the Elites, you may have the House of Lords, you may even have the armies of both kingdoms. But you will never be a king...only a warlord.”

Lord Ferren turned and looked back at Corr. Corr couldn't help but feel pride in his friend, but his heart was pounding when Lord Ferren turned back to Das. Lord Ferren raised his foot and kicked Das hard in the chest. Das toppled backwards, tumbling over the Overlook Balcony and falling.

“You bastard!” Corr thrashed, pulling the two men restraining him until a third grabbed his shoulders. Lord Ferren turned back to the royal family, a hard scowl shaping his face.

“You once told me the philosophy of Corriban II was worth reading. I followed your advice and found a passage that spoke to me: ‘Like the falls, all things come crashing down.’”

“‘Under the weight of great force,’ not pathetic worms!” Corr snarled. “When this is over, death will be too kind for you.”

“Take them to the dungeon,” Lord Ferren said, turning his back to Corr. “Perhaps cooler heads will prevail once his highness has had a chance to think about the future of our kingdom.”

Corr fought as hard as he could manage, requiring all three men to carry him down the hall. King Corriban was forcefully led down, but Queen Cheris kept gentle composure while staring venom at the traitorous Elites. They were all brought down to the dungeon, a damp stone chamber three levels beneath the castle. The guards dropped Corr hard on the floor and forced his parents in behind him. Before Corr could get all the way up to his feet, the door slammed and the Elites locked it behind him. “When I get out, I’ll gut you both like fish!” Corr slammed a fist on the prison door and seethed. “Face me like a man of honor, you coward!”

“Corr, save your strength,” King Corriban said, putting a hand on Corr’s shoulder. “We need a plan, not just anger.”

Corr slammed a hand on the door and squeezed his eyes shut. He pressed his head against the iron bars again and bit back a sob. His mother hugged him and pulled him close. “Das was your brother,” Queen Cheris said. “He loved you as his king, but as his friend first. Don’t waste his sacrifice. Use that anger, but focus it through righteousness.”

Corr took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. He cleared his throat and looked around the dungeon. The cell was roughly hewn stone with the only window revealing water rushing in a deluge from the falls outside. There was a collection of buckets in one corner and a roughly made bed with ragged blankets. As he adjusted to the light, Corr saw a dozen other men waiting in the room.

“We haven’t used the dungeons in years,” Corr said, turning to his father. “Since when did we have prisoners?”

“We shouldn’t,” King Corriban said, blocking the queen from the men. “Lord Ferren has been busy.”

“Busier than you’d think, your majesty,” a man spoke up. He was wearing simple clothes of a dark brown fabric. He had dark hair and bulky shoulders, but his demeanor was different from the others. The men were all standing straight and collected, but the speaker was recognized by them as a leader. Even then, his strong jaw and careful eyes caught Corr’s attention with a sudden familiarity.

“King Miros?” Corr asked.

“My friend Corriban,” King Miros smiled. “I would have words about the hospitality of your countrymen...”