

The Waterfall King: Part 14

"After that? They put us here," King Miros said. He'd explained everything as Corr understood it: the ambush, Belen's Pass, and their internment right beneath the Waterfall Castle. Even dressed in plain clothes, the King of the Plains held a very noble bearing with a kind smile. After introductions between the Plainsmen and the Waterfall Royal Family, King Miros commanded that a separate space be prepared for the queen, blocked off with blankets. While Queen Cheris rested, the kings and Corr spoke about the events leading up to their imprisonment. "After they had overwhelmed us, they separated us from the horses and tied them up in the woods somewhere. Without our horses, we were outmatched. It is a shame you could not meet Ardent in person."

"Is he—?"

"No," King Miros said. "They knew we could command the horses with our voices and did well to keep us away from them. However, I know Ardent is still alive."

"And so is Venn," Corr spoke up. "Whatever they've told you, she is still alive."

"You've seen her?"

"As of a few hours ago, yes. I'm sorry to say we got separated."

"I'm not," King Miros smiled. "If she'd stayed with you, we would have been reunited, but no better off. I thank you for letting me know the truth."

"She's not alone," Corr said. "Artus, a Woodsman we met in her company, left with her. I think she was heading towards the border."

"I fear she may not make it," King Corriban said. "Lord Ferren has been working with the generals to control the flow of troops. If all of this is his doing, he won't let her go easily."

"We can't affect that from here," King Miros said. "Trust me, Venn will not make things easy for them. It does me no good to fret over her well-being when there's nothing I can do from here."

"So, how do we take back the castle?" Corr asked. "Lord Ferren has the Waterfall Elite and the whole army at his command."

"My brother is the general of our army," King Miros said. "In a few days, he's been instructed to come with a force to see to my security."

"You don't trust me?" King Corriban asked.

"Corriban, it wasn't you I worried about. And now it seems my fears were warranted."

“Lord Ferren would anticipate an attack. I dare say, he wants that for his goal to slaughter the Woodsmen.”

“We need to get Lord Ferren off his guard,” Corr said. “He’s a plotter and schemer, so he has lots of plans in place. His attention to detail is his best advantage. We need something to throw off his balance. Did you tell him anything we could use?”

“We did our very best not to speak to him or his men,” King Miros said. “They refused to answer our questions, so we refused him anything he wanted.”

“So our best hope is Princess Venn?” King Corriban said. “Is there anything we can do to help her from here?”

“There must be a way to distract him,” Corr said. “If his attention is split, it will trip up his efforts. We don’t know where Venn is, but we know where she isn’t. When I was in the woods with—when we were in the woods, we found her at a Woodsman Camp that’s probably abandoned by now. Ferren won’t trust me and I doubt he’ll trust King Miros.”

“He won’t listen to me either,” King Corriban said.

“But he will listen to me,” Queen Cheris said, stepping out from her hastily constructed room. “Forgive me, gentlemen, but blankets don’t offer great privacy on either side.”

“You think he’ll listen to you?” Corr asked.

“He won’t trust any of the line of Corriban. I still have flexibility that none of you do. He will think your focus is retaliation. My specialties in court have always been social. Right now, that’s something he could use.”

“Would he believe you’re willing to turn against us?” King Corriban asked.

“He would believe I’d do whatever it takes to protect my family. He knows your pride will push you—and Corr—to do dangerous things, but I will do anything to protect my husband and my son.”

“Not right now,” King Miros shook his head. “You need to sow distrust between you and King Corriban. Turn too quickly and he’ll know something is amiss.”

“I just hope we can act quickly enough,” King Corriban said. “His next move will be to try to root out the princess. And if she’s not careful, she’ll walk right into his trap.”

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Venn hated waiting. She wanted to be in the room where discussions were happening, but also had to respect the fact that she was an outsider to the Woodsmen. In the hours

after, Venn had settled on a rock and let Esper graze along the river. While she waited, Venn ground her axe against a whetstone. The meticulous work kept her busy and protected her from her thoughts.

The sun began to set over the ridge, long shadows reaching out towards the woods. In the east, the Waterfall Fortress loomed as if it would tear a hole in the sky. Venn wondered if Corr was there, trying to convince others not to fight and seeking out her father. With more time to think, she wished that she hadn't forced him away. Despite being with Artus, she wished that she had the influence of a prince on her side.

Esper appeared beside her, nuzzling her with her snout. "I'm sorry, darling," Venn said, stroking the mare's nose. "We'll find him. And then we can go home. What happens after that? I don't care. We'll find a spot in the Plains and camp out for a week...nothing but the sun and the sound of the wind."

Esper exhaled, blowing hot air into Venn's face. The mare perked up and looked towards the stone wall. Venn followed her gaze and saw Artus coming back out through the narrow pass. Just as her heart was dropping, another figure followed after him and another followed them. By the time everyone filed out of the stone corridor, a group of a dozen people stood around them. Most were close to Artus's age and there were four women mixed in amongst the men.

"It may not mean much," Artus said, looking around, "but we managed to recruit twelve hunters on the right side of reckless. A handful of them know the area above the falls well and Orid here has spent time hunting by the waterfall itself."

"The Elders agreed to help?"

"In the end," Orid stepped forward, her dark hair bound into a single braid that went down her back, "the Elders acknowledged that what you were offering us was the choice. We never get that when it comes to kings. So, they agreed that anyone who wanted to help should have that same choice."

"And are you exiled?" Venn asked.

"Only if we're taken prisoner," Artus explained. "We will be welcomed back if we succeed, but we also will have to find them again."

"Even you?"

"I fight with you either way, but yes. They'll welcome me back if we succeed."

“Thank you,” Venn said, looking around. “All of you.”

“For Ezera,” Orid said, nodding her head. “What’s the plan?”

“Well,” Venn said, “I’m open to suggestions, but we need to get into the castle. Corr might be able to tell us some new information now.”

“Do we think he’s with us?” A man asked.

“He’s with Ezera,” Artus said. “I think he’s worth trusting and he can ask questions of people that we can’t. He’s a strong ally.”

“There’s a passage to the east,” Orid said. “It’s an old switchback that was used to herd goats up and down the mountain face before the farms had trade routes established. It’s not much, but it’s a way up.”

“Then you’re going to take the lead,” Venn said. She climbed up onto Esper’s saddle and looked down at the others. Orid took a few tentative steps around Esper and started leading the group. The other hunters took off after her, but Artus waited with Venn.

“Thank you,” Venn said, looking down at him. “This is the first time something has felt like hope in a while.”

“You have fire, Venn. Fire can forge a sword or burn down a forest. You’ll need a sword for this foolish adventure of yours.”

“All the better for a warrior queen,” Venn smiled. “Lead on, Artus of Ezera...”

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Corr slept a little, but the prison was far from comfortable. In the end, he sat on his cot and bowed his head, holding his fingers together.

“Can’t sleep?”

Corr looked up at King Miros and smiled up at him. “Despite my best efforts. You either?”

“In all honesty? I haven’t slept well at all of late. I am normally an early riser, but being trapped inside has left those hours feeling anxious and empty. I fear you are troubled as well...”

“Das...he was my friend. And for his loyalty, he was killed by Lord Ferren.”

King Miros bowed his head and closed his eyes. He sat on the bed across from Corr and folded his hands together. “I am so sorry. Grief like that is a poison that only time can cure.”

"I see him in my dreams," Corr said. "It's always his last moments: on the Overlook Balcony, wounded after fighting and defiant to the end."

"A man of honor..."

"He and Venn didn't get along. They bickered and fought the whole time he knew her." Corr laughed a little. "Sorry..."

"Don't be," King Miros smiled back. "Grief will follow tragedy, but the only power we have is what memories we choose to share. I am honored you would share a pleasant memory with me."

"Venn is...passionate."

"I've heard men call my daughter worse than passionate," King Miros said, looking at the opening obscured by the cascade of the waterfall. "She was well when you saw her last?"

"Yes," Corr nodded. "She was still with Esper."

"I would be shocked if they were separated. When Esper was born, Venn was only about ten years old. She was there for Esper's birth and once the foal was weaned, she never left Venn's side. In our culture, we call such a bond 'Daswada': the split heart. Perhaps you and Das were daswada as well, a bond like brothers."

"We were," Corr nodded, touching his chest just above his heart. "It's hard to believe he's gone."

"Daswada is not so easily broken," King Miros said. "It can span lifetimes and hardships. He will rest easy with your memory. His death was not your fault, Corr. He died a loyal friend and a man of honor. Grief is your right, but justice is his."

Corr nodded and looked out the window. "Do you have a Daswada?"

"I have several. And one of mine is out there now...preparing to help us somehow."