

## The Waterfall King: Part 15

Esper was uneasy as they got closer to the waterfall. Venn felt that it was the roar of the water in the pitch-black night, every few steps ending with a sharp jolt as the mare spooked. Despite her best attempts to soothe her, Venn couldn't keep Esper from trying to bolt off. Artus kept a careful eye on her, but didn't try to intervene. Venn pulled Esper to a stop when Orid called her and Artus toward the water.

"Turen found him," Orid said, leading Venn and Artus to the pool. "A few hours old...no bloat yet."

"Drowned?" Artus asked.

"He was attacked first, but he definitely went down fighting. The Overlook Balcony is overhead, but it looks like they forced him off."

Venn followed behind them, holding back a few steps when she saw the two hunters pulling the body out of the water. Artus noticed his face first, but Venn gasped when she saw Das's face staring blankly at the sky.

"You knew him?" Orid asked.

"He was a companion of Prince Corr," Artus explained. "We saw them together before we came to the Clan's End."

"Would the prince kill his ally?"

"No," Venn said. "I know he wouldn't. This has something to do with the treachery of the Waterfall Court."

"Then we can't rely on Prince Corr," Orid shook her head. "We need a new plan."

"It's too dark to keep moving," Artus said. "We can make camp tonight."

"We should bury him," Venn said. "He was a good man...even if we didn't get along. He deserves more than a floating grave."

"It will take time," Orid said.

"He deserves to be buried," Artus said. "Let him return to the cycle."

The Woodsmen hunters quickly dug a grave and respectfully lowered the remains into the ground. Artus said a few words over the grave, but Venn turned away once he was finished. Venn went back to tend to Esper, but stopped as she heard Artus coming up behind her.

"Are you alright?"

“It feels...real,” Venn said, holding Esper’s reins as the mare fidgeted. “Seeing someone we know...how could this have happened?”

“It puts war into a new perspective.”

Venn couldn’t think of anything to say that would encapsulate her feelings. She tried to busy herself with Esper, but the mare kept tossing her head and calling out into the dark. Venn tried to quiet her, but she struggled to keep Esper in line. “Something is bothering her.”

“She might sense the dead. Even if she didn’t see it—”

“No, this is different,” Venn said. She focused carefully, pulling Esper’s nose close to her and shushing her with careful words. “What is it? What are you trying to tell me?”

Esper pulled away, lunging towards the woods. Venn released the reins a little and Esper stopped rearing, waiting for Venn and looking between her and the dark woods in turn.

“She wants us to follow her,” Venn said. She dropped the reins and the horse bolted into the forest. “Come on!”

The other hunters scrambled, most staying behind to pack up the camp while Orid and two others ran with her and Artus after Esper. The chestnut mare glided through the forest, bounding over branches and brush and bobbing through trees. The horse would pause before turning, letting Venn catch up before she changed direction too suddenly. Eventually, Venn caught up to Esper, breathless at the horse’s side. She tried looking through the dark, but a low whinny caught her attention.

Venn crept up to the glade and saw a dozen horses hobbled around the ankles or tied up to trees lining the mouth of a cave. They had no gear on them, but Venn knew her father’s horse by his strong gaze and regal posture. There were six dead wolves surrounding the bound herd, but three were still doing their best to attack the horses. Venn was about to charge in, but a flash of light caught her attention as Artus swung a torch towards the wolves.

“Away with you!” Artus yelled, swinging the flame to separate the wolves and horses. “Go on! Back to your den! Better hunting in the woods once we clear the way! Get on!”

The wolves growled and snarled, but fell back into the cave. Artus tossed the torch at the cave mouth, letting the fire light the glowing eyes of the remaining wolves until they retreated out of the fire.

“Ardent!” Venn rushed forward, wrapping her arms around her father’s horse. “Oh, I’ve never been so happy to see you!”

Ardent wrapped his large neck around Venn’s shoulders, folding around the girl like a fatherly embrace. Other horses called out to her and she ordered the Woodsmen to unbind them all while she worked on her father’s horse. The hunters were wary, but were emboldened when Artus approached a horse by a tree and gently untied her muzzle from a branch.

“Looks like they were hoping the wolves would eat them,” Orid said, looking at the mangled corpses. “These Plainsmen horses didn’t want to die, it seems.”

“That’s all twelve,” Venn nodded. “Good. If the horses are alive, it probably means their riders made it as well.”

“You think?” Another hunter asked.

“It would be easier to slaughter the horses than lead them here and trap them,” Artus said. “I certainly wouldn’t waste the effort on horses if I were going to kill the prisoners.”

“Without their horses, the Plainsmen wouldn’t know how to fight,” Venn said. “Even if we outnumbered our attackers, a rider off his horse would not be as effective. Maybe the Waterfall Court are using the horses as leverage against the Plainsmen fighters. In our culture, this would be equal to holding a family member hostage.”

“Now that we have them, what do we do with them?”

“Can any of you ride?” Venn asked.

“Ride? On one of those monstrosities?” Orid scoffed. “No offense meant, but I’d sooner ride a log down the waterfall.”

“Careful, Orid,” Artus said, “you may get your wish. Safe to say we have more horses than hunters, and only one rider among us. Will they listen to your spoken commands? Like Esper did?”

“There are only a few shared commands that all riders use and it’s hardly enough to command them all myself. Besides, that many horses would be impossible to keep track of.”

“If we can get them back to their riders, would that be enough to take back the Waterfall Fortress?” Artus asked.

“I pity the man who dares to stand in the way of one of these things,” Orid said, shying away as a horse sniffed her curiously.

"I have an idea," Venn said. "We're going to need the horses."

"But none of us know how to ride, Venn."

"You may not need to know."

###

Corr's mother had 'defected' the following evening. When the morning gruel was passed around, she and King Corriban had a very believable spat that evolved into a full argument by lunch. Guards would pass by and catch snippets, but Corr never let anything betray their gambit. He had heard his parents fight before and these petty squabbles were overacted and dramatic by comparison. Still, his mother kept a determined front, accusing the king's pride of threatening their family. The act lasted all day, bouts of arguing interrupted by sulking. Around dinner, Lord Ferren came down himself.

"Your majesties," Lord Ferren smiled with a mock bow. "I hope you have all been comfortable."

"Trey," Queen Chervis said, approaching the bars, "I beg you to reconsider. My husband's...vanity has poisoned his judgement!"

"Vanity?" King Corriban bellowed. "That's rich coming from you! All the trappings of royalty stripped away and you go crawling to the first man with a title! Did our vows mean nothing to you?"

"Those vows were meant to protect us from ill fortune, not blindly bind us through your poor choices! Trey, I would do anything to protect my family, you know this! Please, don't let my son die because of the crimes of his father!"

Lord Ferren pursed his lips and looked over at Corr. It took everything in his power not to bound at the bars and throttle the man, but Corr had to play his part, too. His mother was a traitor, his father a fool, and he was to be broken by grief.

"It does...sadden me to see you so low, my lady," Lord Ferren said. "Truly, you were always very kind to me in court. But to let your family walk free? That is asking too much. I would, however, enjoy your company at a meal more fitting of your station. For our old friendship, perhaps we could adjourn to the study? It seems wrong for a lady as lovely as yourself to be forced amongst these foul vipers."

"Chervis, don't you—!"

King Corriban's rage was cut short when a guard pressed the blunt end of his spear through the bars into the king's stomach. Corr bit back his rage, remembering the man's face for when all the parts had been played. He didn't look at the rest of the exchange, but sensed Lord Ferren appraising the situation. While the blind offer was a tease, the true bait of their trap was Lord Ferren seeking to make the king lower than he was.

"I would accept this meal," Queen Chervis nodded. Corr could hear the crack in her voice as tears no doubt formed at the corners of her eyes. "If you would grant me time to prepare?"

"Of course," Lord Ferren said. The gate opened and there was a scuffle of guards bracing against the men. Corr's father had wanted to use this moment to strike, but King Miros had cautioned against it, urging that they only needed to buy Venn more time. After the gate closed again, Corr waited a long, quiet moment as things settled back into monotony. Corr heard his father sit on the bed across from him, straight as an iron rod and not betraying the slightest emotion.

"She played her part well here," King Miros said, sitting beside him. "She will play it well up there."

"It feels wrong," King Corriban shook his head. "Leaving my wife alone with that viper."

"She is the love of your life," King Miros said. "And a master bladeswoman. From what I understand, she will be safe."

Other platitudes were heaped onto the pile, but Corr tuned them out. He focused on the middle distance, only half aware of the day passing. He watched the Horse Masters drill in exercises as the kings talked strategy, but Corr didn't move from his spot for the rest of the day. He just listened.

The falls felt wrong now: out of pitch in the static roar that enveloped him. As the sun set through the waterfall, Corr reached through the window to touch the radiant red water, trying to ease the current.

"You feel it too?" King Corriban said, joining Corr's side. "That discordant shift?"

"It feels like the waterfall is angry," Corr said.

"And that will fall down onto the people in our valley. If the war doesn't kill him, then the people will slaughter *King* Ferren. Trust me, Corr: his little play for royalty is doomed to fail."

“At what cost? Will the waterfall run red with blood before we see it again?”

“It may take time, but the waters have cleared before. One man’s blood cannot stain our legacy.”

Corr bowed his head and pressed his temples against the iron bars. A cool mist sprayed off the waterfall and gently touched his face. It was a gesture that felt spiritual: the waterfall telling him not to worry. This too would pass through the current.

The sun set and the men lit candles, filling the prison with light. At what felt like midnight, there was a ruckus at the gates of the dungeons. Four Waterfall Elite came down with spears at the ready, surrounding a well-dressed noble like towers protecting a castle. They entered as a unit and forced the men back. The noble strode in and scowled.

“King Miros...” Lord Ferren’s man said. “Come with me...”

“Where are you taking him?” One of the Horse Masters said, stepping between them. Spear tips bristled towards him, but the Horse Master didn’t back down until King Miros pulled him away by the shoulder.

“It’s alright,” King Miros said, “there’s no need for any unrest.”

“We deserve to know,” King Corriban said, puffing out his chest. “If any of you have any loyalty left—any love for your king and kingdom—I implore you to tell us where you’re taking him.”

The Elite Guard were still, but Corr noticed a wave of unease pass through them. Lord Ferren’s man looked away at Corr’s gaze, trying to focus on the King of the Plains. “Move, Horseman. We need to get you dressed.”

King Miros bowed his head graciously and stepped out, assuring his men as he went. “Am I to dine with Lord Ferren then?”

“In a way, yes. You’ll be attending his wedding.”

“Wedding?” King Corriban scoffed as the guards closed the door. “What woman would dare accept his hand?”

“A familiar face to some,” Lord Ferren’s man beamed. “After all, why wouldn’t we invite the father of the bride?”