

The Waterfall King: Part 16

Esper plodded along the bridge, tired from the long hike up the mountainside. Orid's goat path had been useful, but it was much longer than expected. It had been a hard ride to the top of the waterfall, but she had made it. Only now, she rode alone.

The stone bridge spanned the distance between the rocky islands that dotted the waterfalls. Each bridge was only wide enough for two horses to walk side by side, but the walls that protected Esper from falling off the edge were only about as high as Venn's shin. The four spires of the Waterfall Keep pierced the spray that floated off the falling waters. Venn wasn't even halfway through the third of six bridges before she heard shouts and saw guards running along the walls.

Esper's hooves were drowned out by the waterfall as Venn approached, and three rows of men with crossbows waited for her. Venn pulled Esper to a stop and looked up at the fortress. "I am Princess Venn of the Horse Masters. My father is King Miros. I seek an audience with King Corriban."

Within minutes, Venn was brought within the walls of the castle. She dismounted, but kept a tight grip on the reins and glared at anyone who tried to take Esper from her. Another few minutes went by before a slim, gangly man strode into the courtyard. He had dark hair and a slim, hawkish nose. His pace was rushed, but Venn held her ground as the man approached.

"You are not King Corriban," Venn said. It was certainty and rage that filled her voice.

"I am Lord Ferren, your highness," the man bowed. "It is an honor for you to grace the Court of the Waterfall."

"I said I wanted to speak to the king."

"The king is...indisposed at the moment. I have taken over management of Corriban Castle, the Waterfall Kingdom, and all things to do with this land. I am so relieved to see you alive and well, Princes."

Lord Ferren seemed the only one at ease out of everyone present. As Venn looked around, she caught his eyes darting away from her's. She finally spoke again, indifferent and angry. "What news do you have of my father?"

"I only know he was taken by the Woodsmen. They are a plague in this land, your highness. But rest assured, if we combine our efforts, we can wipe them out before—"

“You’re not a very good liar,” Venn said. Esper’s ears were tipped back almost completely flat against her neck and Venn could see through the lord’s careful smile. “I know the Waterfall Elites were sent to kidnap my father. And if you’re going to pretend not to be aware of that, you’re either someone who can’t help me or you’re the one responsible.”

Lord Ferren’s smile faded. “What an astute observation.”

“My father?”

“Safely tucked away until we need him. As are your other men: we took no blood in that conflict.”

“Bring them to me.”

“You are not in a position to be making demands,” Lord Ferren smirked. “As it stands, I have your father, his men, and King and Prince Corriban as bargaining chips. What’s more, I have all of the Waterfall Elite at my disposal and the entire Waterfall Army awaiting my orders. You have a horse and an axe.”

“All you truly have is a life to live or a life to lose,” Venn said. “Is that a risk you’re willing to take?”

“Is that a threat?”

“A warning,” Venn said. “You must know that the Plainsmen are assembling for war. They’ll be marching on your fortress in a couple of days to find my father and me. Holding us hostage is hardly a way to win them over.”

“Bygones to be forgiven. They’ll move through the forests, fight the Woodsmen and make their way here. There will be losses on both sides, but the Waterfall Kingdom can rebuild.”

“I offer an alternative. No losses to either side. You are to gain everything.”

“I already gained everything.”

“You have the army and the Elites for as long as you can hold the royal family. Wouldn’t you rather have an army that is truly yours?”

“What are you proposing?”

“I am proposing our nations unite in marriage.”

“So taken with our prince?” Lord Ferren laughed. “I’m afraid his hand won’t save you.”

“It is your hand I offer to take.”

Lord Ferren blinked. Venn tried to keep calm, but her stomach was in knots. "Look at me, my lord. I have nothing: no great army, no firepower, no allies...just an axe and a horse. The Horse Masters intend to ride on the Waterfall Lands to find our king, but if we meet them together? As husband and wife? Whatever comes of this coup with the Corribans, you will have another kingdom at your disposal. Let my father and his men go."

"This is...sudden," Lord Ferren said.

"It is...a good plan," a woman stepped forward. She had light, pale yellow hair tied up in an elaborate bun and a simple dress made of silk with metal clasps down one side. "Lord Ferren, there is a way all of this works for you: the Waterfall Kingdom under my control and the Plains under yours? You could unite two great kingdoms using the wild woods as a bridge."

"And you would take the throne here, Queen Cheri? What about your family?"

"My son can be reasoned with in time," the queen said. Looking at her, Venn could see a similarity to Corr in her nose and cheekbones. She could also see a mask hiding confusion. Esper's ears relaxed slightly and Venn trusted the mare's instinct. "My husband cannot. Neither you nor I has a true claim to the throne if he and I are no longer married, but I have the confidence of the Waterfall Court and can lead in your stead. For you and the Princess... for you and your queen."

Lord Ferren looked between Queen Cheri and Princess Venn. It was an unexpected gambit, but that offer alone had been enough to throw him off balance. Venn could tell he was considering it: giving him sway over two great kingdoms through puppet queens was appealing. Venn tried to keep her face soft, not betraying any emotion.

"I told Corr this visit would end with a wedding," Lord Ferren smiled. "Queen Cheri? See if you can find my bride something suitable to wear. We'll be wed in the courtyard at sunrise."

"If I may?" Venn stepped forward. "It's Plains tradition that a marriage takes place somewhere high. Perhaps we could get married there, at that high tower? My father could officiate for us and it would offer a perfect place for the Alving Ceremony."

"Alving Ceremony?"

"A short song," Venn said. "Asking the gods for luck. We could do it today...at sundown?"

“I suppose there’s nothing wrong with today,” Lord Ferren relaxed his face, trying to hide annoyance, “but tomorrow we ride to the Plains and join up with your father’s army.”

Venn bowed her head and nodded. A man came forward and took the reins from Venn carefully, shirking back a little as Esper was turned away. Venn didn’t look back, only kept her eyes forward, head still low.

Queen Chervis stepped forward and led Venn out of the courtyard and up a few stairs. They stopped in a small dressing room and closed the door behind them. “Are you mad?” Queen Chervis bawked. “Your father said you would have a plan!”

“You’ve seen my father?”

“He’s with my son and husband,” Queen Chervis said. “They’re all down in the dungeon. You can bring your father up, but you’re only giving Lord Ferren another gambling piece!”

“If you are an ally, I need to know,” Venn said. “I know your son, but not you. I trust that—as the woman who raised him—he learned well from you. Am I right to trust you?”

“Of course,” Queen Chervis sighed. She stepped forward and hugged Venn unexpectedly. It was gentle and kind, far from what Venn was used to. It felt good to have that gentleness after days of violence and riding.

“Your Highness,” Venn said, suddenly remembering all her courtly manners and curtsying. “I need your help with the plan.”

“Anything,” Queen Chervis said, “but we’ll have to talk and dress at the same time. Tell me your plan and we’ll take back the castle before Lord Ferren’s war comes to pass.”

###

Princess Venn climbed the steps of the High Tower. She was dressed in a beautiful white gown with no sleeves and a beaded bodice covering her chest. Her hair was brushed and loose, waves cascading beneath a veil that looked like mist. She was led up by Queen Chervis, but only staggered a little when she saw her father standing next to Lord Ferren. He took a few steps forward and Lord Ferren didn’t move to intercept him.

“I thought I’d lost you,” King Miros said. “Venn, what are you doing?”

“Do you trust me?” Venn said.

“With all my heart...”

“Then will you walk me up so I may sing the Alving. I would have my voice heard across the Plains like mother’s.”

King Miros nodded and hugged Venn again. He pressed his face close to her shoulder and whispered into her hair. "I'm right behind you."

Together, King Miros and Princess Venn walked up to Lord Ferren. With a begrudging bow, King Miros presented Venn's hand to the smaller lord. Venn took Lord Ferren's hands and positioned herself so that her father was just in her left periphery.

"As is the ancient rite of our traditions," King Miros said. "The bride will now sing the Alving, so that the world may witness her voice."

Venn released Lord Ferren's hands and took a few steps up. Between the two stones of the parapet, Venn pushed up so that she was the tallest over everyone there. She had never been much of an Alving Singer, but her mother had taught her the notes long ago. Her voice echoed over the waterfall.

Venn took a deep breath in for one final Alving and yelled, projecting her voice across the waters and shaking her very soul. It was the only word that she truly knew of her Alving and the only word that mattered.

"Stavas!"

As her voice settled and the echo faded from the mountain, Venn heard the first shrill whinny from the east. Another one shortly followed and a low roll of thunder mixed with the wild waterfall.

"What magic is this?" Lord Ferren asked. He grabbed Venn by the arm and yanked her down from her perch. "What did you do?"

"She sang the Alving," King Miros said, taking one step forward and pulling Lord Ferren off Venn's shoulder. "It would do you better to learn more about your neighboring countries before seeking to rule them."

Venn turned and saw the herd thundering across the bridge as men below scrambled to defend the front gate. The horses of the plains charge in formation, hooves clattering like thunder. Venn could make out the shape of the hunters: clinging desperately to the ropes holding them to the horses rather than truly riding. They yelled and whooped in equal parts fear and elation as they crossed the first of the bridges in minutes.

Lord Ferren reached out to grab Venn, but her father ripped the man off the ground, dropping him heavily on the stone floor. Queen Chervis called for them to follow her as they

rushed down the stairs. King Miros grabbed a torch off the wall and led down, ready to defend against the men who might be coming up the stairs.

“Your majesty!” Venn yelled. “We need to get to the gatehouse!”

“This way!” Queen Cheri said. “Was this always the plan or were you suddenly inspired?”

“Would you believe a bit of both?” Venn smiled. Their trio made it down a floor and Venn paused to rip some of the fabric off her skirt and follow down the next set of steps. Three men in armor were standing at the base of the stairs, but they didn’t attack as Venn made it down the stairs. One of the men nodded to the queen in an abbreviated bow.

“Lord Ferren doesn’t command all of us, my queen,” the man said. “What do you need?”

“The front gate,” Venn said. “Make sure it remains open or at least unlocked! Make sure those horses get through to the main courtyard!”

“Do as she says!” Queen Cheri said. The men quickly rushed off, drawing their weapons and heading to the gate. The queen started leading them away. “We need to let the others out of the dungeon!”

Running, Venn could hear the sounds of conflict at the gate: swords scraping against each other as the conflict within the walls of the castle began to press against the main entrance. Venn could feel hooves pounding against the bridge as the gate stopped closing just long enough for the horses to rush through. Ardent was at the lead, plowing through the first soldiers who tried to form a barricade against him. Artus jumped down from the massive, black charger and ran beside him as he drew a bow and fired at an archer on the top of the wall. The other hunters jumped or fell off, avoiding the hooves as the horses with them charged against the Waterfall Elites.

“Ardent!” King Miros called, rushing forward. He touched the horse’s muzzle and pressed his head to the stallion’s long face. “Dalvoras, brother...it is good to feel your breath.”

“Artus, follow the queen!” Venn ordered. “She’s going to take you down to the dungeon. Free Corr and the others there!”

“Where are you going?” Artus asked, standing by the queen.

“My place is here,” Venn said, running already, “and Esper needs to join the fray!”