

The Waterfall King: Part 17

“Something is happening up there,” King Corriban said, looking up towards the courtyard. “It must be an army of thousands!”

“I guess Venn got to the border after all.” Corr smiled. The Waterfall Elite guard in the room had his axe drawn, focused on the stairs leading up to the fight.

“It hasn’t been nearly long enough,” King Corriban shook his head. “Where would she find an army that fast?”

There was a clatter from the staircase and a Waterfall Elite collapsed down the stairs. Queen Chervis rushed down with a pair of foot-long knives raised towards the room. The Waterfall Elite guard rushed towards her, but a young man in hide armor rushed into the room and carried the guard on his shoulder into the far wall. The scuffle that followed was quick, but the Woodsman managed to get behind him and lock an arm around his throat. They struggled for a bit, but Artus managed to strangle the man to the ground.

“Your highness,” Artus smiled to Corr, “your castle certainly knows how to welcome visitors.”

“Where’s Venn?” Corr said.

“Where you all should be,” Queen Chervis said, grabbing the guard’s keys and unlocking the gate. “Up in the courtyard, fighting alongside King Miros and your horses!”

“You heard the queen,” one of the Horse Masters yelled. “Let’s get up there!”

With a cheer, the Horse Masters rushed up the staircase, the energy coursing through their ranks. King Corriban rushed forward and hugged the queen, the couple embracing as if they hadn’t seen each other in years. Corr walked out of the dungeon and shook Artus’s hand. “We found Das,” Artus said, sadly. “I’m sorry, friend...”

“There will be time to grieve him later,” Corr said, picking up the Waterfall Elite’s sword from the ground. “Tonight, I want justice. I’m going to cut the rot out of this court...starting with Ferren.”

Corr rushed up the stairs with Artus right behind him. Sounds of panic and fighting filled the courtyard, echoing down the staircase as Corr took his first breath of fresh air. A Horse Master shouted commands to his horse, gripping the mane as his steed ran down three guards at once, crushing bones and breaking armor under its hooves. A woman with golden hair jumped from her horse’s back, hanging off the beast’s shoulder and kicking a

Waterfall Elite's helmet clean off their head. A Waterfall Elite charged forward with a broadsword, but arrows filled his body before he could get to Corr and Artus. Corr picked up his lost sword and joined the fray.

Corr was never much of a fighter, but anger fueled his attacks. He was quickly lost in the flurry of strikes, metal striking metal as men collapsed around him. It was hard to tell who was with him and who was against him, so Corr only dared to fight any of the soldiers who tried to attack him. His strikes were never meant to kill, only wound, hoping against all hope that he could save the men later.

A familiar whinny filled the air and Corr turned to see Esper plow through two guards while Venn hung from the side, slashing upwards with her axe. The mare charged through the courtyard, pausing to rear up from the center. The Horse Masters cheered as Venn shouted orders with her weapon held high. Esper slammed her hooves into the ground, splintering the flagstones before stomping over to Corr.

"What's this I heard about a wedding?"

"Don't start!" Venn snapped, pointing at Corr. "This is your castle and your kingdom. What's the plan?"

"Find Ferren," Corr said. "He's the one who organized this whole thing. He will be the one to end this...and I will end him."

"We'll keep the courtyard busy," Venn said, looking to her father. "We left him at the north tower. Find that snake and cut him down."

Corr nodded and charged over to the north. Artus followed close behind, whistling to other archers in matching leather gear. Two Woodsmen hunters jumped and rolled on the stone structures, sliding into formation behind Corr and Artus.

"Orid, Turen, this is Prince Corr. He's going to kill Lord Ferren and our job is to protect him."

"Your castle has quite a warm reception, your highness," the woman hunter grinned, swapping out her bow for a dagger and handaxe. "It's a wonder you get any visitors!"

Turen pushed his way ahead, grabbing a spear from his back and charging down the hall. Three guards tried to block his path, but struggled to push against him. The two on either side were brought down by arrows from Artus's bow and Turen swung his spear to take the man off his feet before bringing the point down on the man's neck and twisting.

Orid bounded off the wall and swung her dagger into an archer's neck while Corr swung his blades in unison against a Waterfall Elite's shield, knocking the man down. Another swing cut through the man's armor and left a bloody stump where his sword hand had been. Another strike pierced the man's helmet. Corr left the sword in the man's skull and picked up the other broadsword from the ground.

"Secure the hall!" Lord Ferren's voice shouted. "I don't want any of them getting through! Kill the horses, the riders, the archers...kill everyone!"

"Turen!" Corr shouted. "Cover this hall. No surprises from behind!"

The large hunter waited, a spear in one hand and a sword in the other. The remaining trio ran down the hall, encountering another brigade as they made it to the great hall. Lord Ferren stood behind them, protected by three Waterfall Elites.

"Ferren!" Corr shouted, his voice shaking the chamber. "You are hereby charged with treason, violent rebellion, and murder! How do you plead?"

"Kill him!" Ferren shouted, pointing at Corr and his companions. "Execute all of them!"

"Any man who fights," Corr said, a deep rumble of thunder in his voice, "you will be treated as hostile traitors. Lay down your weapons and there is a chance for survival...my fight is only with Ferren."

The brigade looked to one another, then back over their shoulders at the Waterfall Elite and Lord Ferren. One soldier stepped towards Corr with his sword low, turned to face the remaining guards and settled into a defensive position next to Artus. Others joined the line, weapons raised to defend one another in a long line. Only two men remained with Lord Ferren, but they weren't able to get behind the protection of the shields of the Waterfall Elite. One of the loyal Waterfall Guards turned to Corr and raised his sword, pressing his blade to his chestplate. "For Corriban Falls..."

Corr shouted and the men rushed towards the Waterfall Elite. Orid and Artus flanked Corr on either side as he charged and went straight for the center Waterfall Elite. Corr felt the impact of his shoulder against the guard's shield, Orid climbing up his shoulders and wrapping her arms around the man's helmet. He staggered back and Corr struck the man's chest with his shoulder, making him fall backward. Corr stabbed with both blades and dragged them across the stone floor, cutting the Elite's throat and spilling blood across the

mosaic. Corr looked up and saw Lord Ferren backing away as the remaining guards surrounded him.

“No!” Corr shouted as a guard stepped forward. “He’s mine!”

The guards backed away and formed a wall behind Corr, pressing close as Corr stepped toward Lord Ferren. The lord staggered back, moving further onto the Overlook Balcony with each step. When Corr could feel the spray of the waterfall, he raised a hand. The men behind him filled the doors, blocking Lord Ferren’s escape. Corr took one of his swords and tossed it, the metal rasping against the stone before stopping at Lord Ferren’s feet.

“Pick it up,” Corr said, pacing like a wild animal. “Either you fight me as a man or you jump off the Overlook. I’ll give you the honor of defending yourself.”

“My prince, I beg for your mercy.”

“Mercy is mine to give,” Corr said, not breaking his stride. “Not yours to beg for. You lost the right to my mercy when you killed Das. He was my brother...my Daswada.”

Awkwardly, Lord Ferren reached down and picked up the broadsword’s handle, barely able to lift it from the ground. He whirled upward with a roar, the blade cutting through the air and coming close to Corr’s face. Corr countered and knocked the blade aside, spinning away from Ferren’s blind lunge. Stabbing out, Corr felt the blade cut through something, but Lord Ferren twisted his cape around the blade and nearly ripped it from his hand. Corr rushed after his sword and ducked under Ferren’s swing, dropping to a roll and pulling his blade free of the cloak.

Holding his sword at eye level, Corr stared down the length of steel at Ferren. The pair circled, stepping towards each other until the tips of their swords nearly touched. Corr was the first to attack this time, thrusting straight for Ferren’s chest and swinging away from the block. Their blade’s crashed against each other and Ferren drew a short dagger from his waist. He thrust out to strike, but Corr grabbed the lord’s wrist with his free hand and set his leg behind Ferren’s leg. With a shove, Corr knocked Ferren down, sending him crashing onto the floor. Corr pressed one knee down on the knife hand and pressed both his hands down on his sword. Ferren’s last hand reached up and grabbed Corr’s hand, desperately trying to push the blade away. Lord Ferren fought until the blade pierced his chest and Corr pressed his weight into the pommel of his weapon.

“You don’t deserve death by the falls,” Corr said, standing over Ferren’s barely breathing body. “The ferryman won’t take your soul today.”

Ferren exhaled, blood bubbling from the corners of his mouth as his head lolled to one side. Corr dropped his sword and turned back to the other guards. “Back to the courtyard,” Corr said. “We’re not done.”

“What about Lord Ferren?” One of the men asked.

“Let the crows have him,” Corr said. “It’s better than he deserves.”

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Venn firmly believed that the strength of a cavalry rider was in their herd. Individually, she’d never be able to take back the castle, but riding with the other Horse Masters made controlling the courtyard a matter of minutes. It was hard to tell which of the Waterfall Court was fighting with Ferren and which served the king, but it was easier when King Corriban stepped out from the dungeon and over half the remaining fighters dropped their weapons and collapsed to their knees.

The Woodsmen dropped down from their hiding spots, taking the weapons away from those who resisted. Under the watchful gaze of the Horse Masters and Woodsmen, the men waited for the king’s judgment. Venn rode next to her father and they approached the King and Queen of the Waterfall.

“We are eternally in your debt, Princess,” King Corriban said. “I regret that things came to this.”

“It was not I alone who liberated you, your majesty. The Woodsmen played a role in this as well.”

“A contribution that will be taken into consideration,” King Corriban nodded. “And an alliance I should have forged much earlier. Where is Corr?”

“He went after Lord Ferren,” Venn said, stepping down from Esper and heading towards the North Tower. Before she could enter the building, Corr stepped out, ragged, but alive.

Queen Cheris rushed up the stairs and hugged her son as Artus and the others poured out into the courtyard. Corr hugged back, looking kind of numb and disconnected. Venn saw an emptiness in his expression that hadn’t fully been processed. Grief was there, but Venn hadn’t seen it when he came up from the dungeons. She only nodded her head calmly, knowing that the deed was done.

“Father, this is Artus,” Venn said, taking Artus’s hand and leading him over to the King of the Plains. “He’s been traveling with me for my time here in the Waterfall lands.”

“Your majesty,” Artus quickly dropped to a knee and bowed his head.

“Rise, my friend,” King Miros said. “You have no need to bow to me.”

“I want to assure you,” Artus explained. “My intentions were strictly honorable with your daughter. I had no intentions at any point to—”

“Esper hasn’t killed you yet,” King Miros said. “That’s good enough for me. You will always be an honored friend in my court.”

“I thank you, your majesty,” Artus said. “But my place is with my people. We will always be allies, but I was made for the woods.”

“Of course,” King Miros said. “But now, you need not hide.”

Venn walked over to Corr and joined him, the queen now giving orders to her servants to tend to the wounded while King Corriban began passing judgment against the men. “Are you alright?”

“I always hated that man,” Corr shook his head, “but I never thought of killing him. At the moment, it was so easy. Now, I feel it in my heart. He was the one who killed Das. I thought it would make me feel better. I still feel only anger at him.”

“He was important to you.”

“Your father said he was my Daswada.”

“Then he isn’t truly dead,” Venn said. “He will always be with you. We buried him when we found him. I can take you there if you want—”

“Tomorrow,” Corr said. “There’s enough to do now. We need to handle the traitors, tend the wounded, and bury the dead. If we’re introducing the Woodsmen into things as their own nation, we will have to negotiate all the borders again.”

“I have a proposal for that,” Venn said. “We get rid of the borders. No kingdoms, no single king...a united Eзера.”

“Eзера...I’ve heard that name. Do you think it would work?”

“My father’s advisors were trying to convince me to marry you to join our nations together,” Venn said. “If there isn’t a way we can unite three kingdoms, we have no business trying to unite two.”

“I agree,” Corr nodded. “As heir to the throne, I am willing to abdicate political power for the safety of our nation, if that’s what’s required.”

“There will still be roles for nobility in this future. What that looks like will be up to you and me to decide.”

Corr leaned back and rested against the wall, looking out over the courtyard. “It’s probably not what everyone was expecting.”

“Good,” Venn smiled. “Men like Ferren wanted to use us as pawns. Instead, we wipe the board clean.”