

The Waterfall King: Part 18

Corr stood over Das's grave. It had taken less than a day for them to exhume and move his body. Now, rather than rotting in the Waterfall Lake outlet, Das was buried in the graveyard normally reserved for the line of Corriban. A few of the other lords had shirked at the thought, but Corr declared that either Das would be buried in his family's graveyard or Corr would be buried away from his ancestors. The island graveyard was connected to the eastern shore by one bridge and to the Waterfall Castle by another. Venn's army had stormed by the graveyard weeks ago, but this was the first time Corr had taken a moment to be with his daswada.

"Things changed a lot, Das. I wish you could be here to see it. We took the castle back. Lord Ferren is dead and his body was left for the wolves. I killed him for you. I thought it would make things better, but I just feel empty. It was a good release, but I realized it didn't mean anything without you."

Corr sat on a stone bench that he'd set over his future plot. "Venn is coming back today. It's the first time we've seen each other since everything that happened. We've been sharing letters, much like our fathers. It feels like the foundation of something new. You'd struggle with all this change. No kingdoms, no borders...one big happy country of Ezera. We have regions: the Waterfall Kingdom will be called Corribus. I tried to convince them to make it Dasin or something similar, but even Venn said that wouldn't be appropriate. I think you would have hated it anyway.

"I wish I could hear your voice," Corr shook his head. "You were my best friend and I don't know if that will ever heal. King Miros says that a relationship like ours isn't broken by death. Maybe they aren't, but it is harder without you here to talk to me."

Corr closed his eyes and listened, the roar of the falls rumbling behind him. They felt stronger in recent days, the new world order giving strength to the falling river. "The mountains feed the waterfall," Corr said, opening his eyes again. "The waterfall feeds the forest river and the forest river feeds the streams of the plains. That's where Venn wants to go next: the mountains. She thinks there is potential for more to the north, for brotherhood, not conquest. Artus and I are going to go with her. Keep her from hurting herself...or accidentally starting a war."

A high-pitched nicker caught Corr's attention. He turned and saw Venn riding alone to the graveyard. Long tresses of dark hair blew back over her shoulders, a comet on the back of her chestnut. Both Venn and Esper were decked out in their formal armor, a blue sash around Venn's waist and blue ribbons wound into the mare's thick mane. "Speak of the devil," Corr said, standing. "I'll be back soon, brother. Stay well while we're gone. I love you."

He turned and walked back towards the bridge. He reached the bridge just as Venn was galloping over the stones, pulling Esper to a stop. The mare shook her head with a snort, nudging Corr slightly with excitement.

"She missed you," Venn said, sitting on top of her mare. "So did I."

"It's good to see you, too, Venn. Are you ready?"

"Yes. Artus is coming up behind us."

"How did you get a Woodsman to ride a horse? It goes against everything they believe."

"We spent some time camping in the Plains. Either he learned to ride a horse or he had to run faster than was fair. He said he could keep up, but he'd never seen Esper at a gallop before."

"Such a noble mentality," Corr chuckled. "How is he doing?"

"It's been...a difficult transition for him. Being away from his kin has been hard, even if we know it's to serve them."

Venn turned around and Corr followed her line of sight. Artus rode up the hill slowly, navigating his horse with increasingly strong pulls on the reins. Behind his white horse, a coal-black horse rode after them, saddled without a rider.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"You, Prince Corr. Did you think I'd come empty-handed to visit my dear friend?"

"Perish the thought," Corr smirked. Now on the straight road, Artus picked up a little more speed, guiding his horse uneasily over the waterfall. Corr bit back the urge to applaud when the Woodsman finally arrived astride his stallion. "Now there's as fine a rider as I ever did see."

"I'm no master," Artus said, "but Drega is a good horse. Besides, I'm actually riding now and not just letting the horse carry me. I'd mark that as improvement."

"Corr, this is a gift from my family to yours, specifically you. My father's horse, Ardent, is his sire and you couldn't ask for a better breed."

"I am honored, but this is surely too much."

"It is a gift, Corr. A symbol to join our two nations. Your river flows through both of our lands. Now, this is a symbol of the Plainsmen in your home."

Corr bowed his head and approached the horse. "A beautiful stallion deserves a great name."

"We've taken to calling him Das," Artus said. "Not to replace, but to honor."

"An honor indeed," Corr said, touching the horse's flank. Corr could barely see over the horse's shoulder, but he was able to step into the stirrup easily, swinging his other leg over the saddle. "Thank you."

"It will be better than waiting for you to catch up to us," Venn smirked. "The road to the mountains is no doubt long and a Plains Mule is faster than any of your Waterfall Horses!" Venn laughed and urged Esper on, kicking up dust behind her as she galloped away to the castle.

"Try not to take it too personally, Corr," Artus smiled. "She likes to be faster than anyone. Best to let her win every once in a while."

"My father would say that's the key to a happy marriage."

"We, uh...we haven't gotten that far yet. Power or not, she's still royalty and I'm just a backwoods hunter."

"Who saved her life," Corr said. "A fair bit better than I did. Don't sell yourself short. I think she does like you."

"In her way, I suppose," Artus said, allowing a smile. "Come on. The taunting is bad, but the gloating is worse. We can let her win, but we still need to keep our dignity."

Artus snapped the reins of his horse and followed Esper's trail to Corriban's Keep. Corr grasped the reins of his horse, the leather creaking in his hands. It was leather that had strength and experience to it, training and time that bound the animal to its gear. Corr leaned forward and touched the stallion's broad shoulder. "What do you say, friend? Care to show me what makes Plains Horses so superior?"

With a playful nicker, the stallion went smoothly from a trot to a gallop in the time it took Corr to settle onto the saddle. The world rushed by and the falls crashed around him. For a brief moment, Corr pretended that the wind rushing by his ears was the sound of his falls. Even the wind sang to him now.