

The Waterfall King: Part 1

At the highest peak of the Corriban Falls, the Waterfall Castle loomed dangerously over the ledge. Down below, the falls foamed and kicked up a glorious mist, as the chilly mountain water met the head of a river. The falls provided the current king with a rolling view of his kingdom, everything south of the falls to the plains of Horse Masters. A lush, vibrant forest spread out before him, dotted with a few larger villages, but nothing that dared sit too close to the throne.

The story of the castle's construction held its own legacy. Massive barges were built at the foot of the Ivory Hills and loaded up with great bricks as tall as a man before being guided towards the island where the king's castle would be built. Once they delivered the precious cargo, the barges were set adrift to topple over the edge. Rather than fight the roaring current on either side of the royal home, the builders sent the rafts toppling off the precipice, collected what was salvageable, and carried it back to the foot of the mountain, where the barge would be rebuilt again. The years of construction filled the forest with thunderous crashes and cracks of the great timbers being ripped apart by the force of the falls. Ghost stories in the villages told of the Barge Man, a wayward soul who was sent over the cliffs and now serves to drive a phantom barge of unfortunate travelers over the falls.

Walls lined the outside of the island, and the castle stretched out dangerously over the raging waters. Two towers stood watch over either side of the island fortress. Bridges from either side of the falls were passed by travelers daily, all stopping to pay their respects to the Waterfall King. Red banners fluttered from every corner of the dozen or so buildings that made up the castle grounds, leading up to the four-story, square fortress that threatened to topple over with the slightest breeze. But in over two hundred years, the Waterfall Castle had stayed rooted to the cliff.

The royal family had moved in centuries ago, and eight generations of kings had held their court at the peak overlooking Corriban Falls. Old kings would force prisoners and those to be executed to either lean forward to bend the knee or lean backward over the falls. King Corriban I had held that a man's fate should be left to his actions and would allow prisoners to choose their destiny. The last person to take the plunge willingly had been Corriban V's sister. She'd been betrothed to a monster of a man, but chose her own fate. Her

resolute stance and dignified composure had swayed the hearts of the people away from the practice.

At the balcony where the executions had once taken place, a young man sat on the edge, leaning back on a stone altar with his feet hanging over the edge. He was just barely eighteen, his invisible-blond peach fuzz had finally filled out into the beginnings of a beard. He casually munched through the skin of a peach, idly rolling the pit over the edge of the castle as an offering to the falls. Taking out a spyglass, the young man pressed his green eye to the lens and looked out past his future kingdom.

Corriban IX could barely hear the falls anymore. Travelers would shout to be heard over the sounds of rushing water and the crash of the occasional wood against rock, but Corriban IX could hear even the softest whisper by the falls. He could also hear Das trying to creep up on him.

“You’re not a very good spy, are you, Das?”

“How?” Das said, hopping over the altar and sitting next to the prince. “How can you, of all people, hear my coming?”

“The Falls are my constant companion and brother: patient enough to carve rivers over millennia and powerful enough to shatter felled trees into kindling. They would never betray me to such a childish attempt to startle me.”

“Show off,” Das scoffed, scowling. “And you’re not that much older than me, so it’s hardly childish!”

“We’ll see if you feel the same way in two years,” Corriban said, putting the lens back up to his eye.

“Do you see them yet?” Das asked. “The Horse Masters?”

“All in their armor, three by three...” Corriban said, watching the approaching battalion through his spyglass. “Not much more than smudges, but there’s no mistaking the blue banners riding across the plains.”

“Been almost fifty years since we’ve seen any of the Horse Masters at the falls,” Das shook his head. “And now they’re coming in friendship? It stinks of a trap.”

“It stinks of marriage,” Corriban corrected. “King Miros no doubt has plans to try to arrange me with his daughter.”

“Why, though?”

“The Waterfall King and the Queen of Stallions? Our kingdoms combined would be enough of an army to bring any other nation to heel: navy, cavalry, and the finest soldiers this side of the globe. The Queen of Stallions will probably have grand ambitions placed on her by her father.”

“So, we’re letting them in?”

“The Horse Masters have no interest in genuine violence, but would choose to fight rather than suffer an indignity like a slight from our kingdom. It’s much more polite to tell them I’m not interested in his daughter, but we respect the old truce all the same.”

“You’re not really gonna marry her, are you, Corr?”

“Never met her,” Corr shrugged. “If she were attractive enough, I could be persuaded. However, based on the rumors, she would have to be very beautiful to make up for some of her crimes.”

“I heard she quartered a man,” Das said. “Strung him up between four horses and scattered them all. The man got torn to pieces, except for one arm that stayed on his body.”

“That arm also stayed attached to a horse,” Corr said. “And dragged the man screaming for three miles. Ghastly stuff, but our own history isn’t clear of sin. How many men—guilty or innocent—had taken the plunge to the Barge Man? How many people did Corriban III put to his sword before kicking them over the edge?”

“Corriban III was a mad lunatic...no offense to your family, of course.”

“Naturally not. But he was cruel and killed a great many people.”

“Be that as it may, that was your ancestor. You have no reputation as such a monster.”

“I’m young.”

“So is she.”

“We should know by tomorrow morning.” Corr raised his spyglass to his eye and glared down the length of it. “The company just passed into the woods. They’re on their way.”

###

Princess Venn had learned to ride a horse before she could walk. Since she was a little girl, she had taken three horses. One had died due to old age, and the second had fallen ill. Esper was gentle with an even temper; a chestnut mare with soulful eyes and blue ribbons in her mane and tail. A massive charger, Venn’s mother bemoaned how unfitting it was for a princess to ride a war horse.

“Esper would make a fine ruler,” King Miros said, setting a hand on Esper’s flank. “A gentle disposition, but won’t yield to blunt force. Strong, but wise. The wisdom of horses is the wisdom of kings.”

Esper had been a birthday gift when Venn turned seventeen. She’d spent the year training and bonding with the chestnut, and now they were inseparable. Esper even had a small portion of Venn’s tent to bed down in at their campsite. On their third night on the road, deep in the Waterfall King’s lands. Despite the invitation, King Miros had called for guards around the camp and no fire was lit besides a small flame to cook by. Most of them were glad for the warm food, but Venn felt especially blessed with Esper’s warm flank by her side.

Sitting in a small travel chair, Venn ran a comb through her long, red hair, fighting with the gnarls that had come up on their journey. If she were to be presented tomorrow, she would ride up as a War Angel with her hair flowing behind her like a comet. Her riding armor was already hanging on the rack by her sleeping mat and Esper was a glory to behold in her blue ribbons. A wagon party a day ahead of them had prepared the campsite, with piles of hay in the tents interspersed with practical furniture for the royal family to travel with.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Venn grumbled, discussing her concerns with Esper while the horse lounged on the hay-strewn ground. “Arranged marriages...it’s archaic! And to the King of the Waterfall? What’s so special about him anyway? A few tracts of land along a river that can’t even be used as a trade route?”

“And a kingdom twice the size of ours...”

Venn stood quickly, dropping her brush and bowing to her father. Esper lowered her head, though Venn could see her eyeing the ground for loose hay. “I’m sorry, father, I—”

“There is nothing to apologize for,” King Miros put a gentle hand on his daughter’s shoulder and led her to the bed on the other side of the room. “You’re very right. An arranged marriage is not fair to you. I am not forcing you to make any decisions soon, my dearest. The advisors in our party are pushing for marriage as political leverage, but I would be surprised if the Waterfall Prince would express a similar interest.”

“Yet we’re in their lands?”

“By invitation,” King Miros nodded. “It’s a diplomatic mission we’re on. This meeting of the two kings will be a show of good faith. While we’ve never been at open war, our kingdoms have never been true allies. There are no treaties to sign, no one to conquer, and no one to bend the knee to. There are no stakes to our visit.”

“Then why make the trip?”

“True alliances are in what is not said. We could certainly drum up some pact of brotherhood, King Corriban and I. Make a big festival out of it and tear down old walls that represent ancient wounds or some such nonsense. But in the end, apart from the politics, it wouldn’t mean anything. Twenty-five years of trading letters back and forth: celebrations of the births of our children, sympathies for deceased parents...it’s strange, but I feel I do know him. But traveling into his land? Shaking his hand? That will be the measure of the man.”

“And he couldn’t come to our Plains?”

“Someone had to make the first concession. Truthfully, we’ve each been trying to invite the other across the Waterfall Kingdom since he succeeded his father on the throne. Something about this time? I finally decided to cave, if only to satisfy my own curiosity.”

“And his son? Corriban IX?”

“I haven’t met him, but I only ask that you show him the courtesy you would extend to a guest of our court.”

“I’ve heard terrible histories. Something in my gut tells me this is a mistake.”

“If there is any such tomfoolery? That will be poorly reflected on the Waterfall King. General Stansin is waiting. One week without hearing from me? And he’ll send an army to lay siege on the Waterfall Castle.”

“What if it can’t be taken? Too much of this feels like a trap.”

“Then expect it to be a trap. Don’t agitate the trappers and don’t touch anything that looks like bait.”

“Like sudden marriage proposals?”

“It never hurts to keep a weather eye out,” King Miros smiled. “Just...promise me that you won’t try to rile up any of the Waterfall Court? The Prince included?”

“A mare knows when to kick if it keeps a rowdy stallion off her back.”

"A bell mare knows the importance of the herd. This is a chance to grow ours. This is not about resources or land deals...nothing is a loss from this trip. We are extending a hand in friendship. Whatever follows? That will be for another day."

"I understand."

"I'll tell my advisors to put all notions of marriage out of their heads," King Miros rose and walked toward the opening of the tent. "Sleep well."

Venn bowed to her father again and set a hand on Esper's shoulder. Her attention turned to tending the horse's long mane, gently untwisting the gnarled hair and rewrapping the ribbons into the mare's mane. The process was meditative and simple, putting Venn into a gentle trance that let her hands work while her mind drifted in and out of all the possibilities. By the time she finished brushing out Esper's tail, Venn let out a long yawn and moved towards her bed. Blowing out the candle on her nightstand, Venn climbed into bed and pulled the blanket over herself. Esper groaned as she lowered herself to the ground, exhaling as she settled into the ground for the night. Venn fell asleep to the sounds of the men patrolling the camp and Esper's gentle breathing.

###

"The crimson banners with the golden falls should come up tonight. The Horse Masters should get a showing of our best!"

"Even if they only stay in the stables?" Lord Ferren said. "My spies tell me that they sleep with their horses. Should we lay down some fresh hay for them?"

"Mind your tone!" King Corriban snarled. It was a voice Corr had heard a few times too many, a rumble of thunder with a hard scowl. "King Miros is to be treated as finely as any other dignitary. I don't care if his court shows up riding bareback and naked, we will offer them the best we have. And if they wish for other accommodations, we will provide."

"Would a man sleep with his own horse?" Corr asked. "I can't think that would be very comfortable."

"It is a tradition," King Corriban explained. "The Horse Masters are not masters by mistake. They have a unique bond with their horses: rooted in trust and unspoken words. They raise their horses from the moment they are born and treat them as well as any family member. So, yes:

they do sleep in the presence of their horses, but it is the horse sleeping in luxury rather than their rider living in squalor.”

King Corriban had cleared the day to tend to any last-minute details before the visit. Queen Cheris was preparing the dining room and discussing dinner with the cook. Joras, the stable master, demanded the services of every groom and stablehand available to prepare the stalls to the standards of the Horse Masters. The Court Chamber was last on King Corriban’s list for the day, overseeing the final touches that would mark the meeting of two great rulers. The large, twelve columns lined the great chamber, each carved to represent one of the Twelve Divines. Golden light filtered in through the dome overhead, a yellow glass masterwork supported by a lattice of iron vines. Black and white tiles led into the room, but a mosaic of the sun and raging water made up the majority of the floor. The three thrones were carved from solid ivory, artfully crafted to resemble a trio of cascading waterfalls.

King Corriban, light blonde hair tucked under a circlet of gold with a red gem over his brow, walked calmly through the room. If he hadn’t been born king, Corr thought his father would have been an actor with a strong presence and the deep, rolling voice meant for great monologues. He strode through the Court Chamber in a simple coat and trousers, dark blue with white accents along the sleeves.

“All the preparations are in place,” King Corriban said, standing on the balcony overlooking the falls. Corr stood next to him, looking out over the rolling forests of the kingdom below them. “After all this time, it feels like an old friend is coming home. Yet, I’m also quite nervous.”

“Are you expecting treachery?”

“I expect nothing. It’s more fretful anticipation. Miros and I have been exchanging letters for some time now. I think he truly does want our nations to have peace...maybe even an alliance.”

“By means of my marriage?”

“If you like her, that’s a possibility,” King Corriban said. “And she must like you, of course. A marriage would make both of our kingdoms stronger, but there are other ways that don’t involve marriage games. However, for what it’s worth, I’ve been told she’s quite pretty.”

“Das said she quartered a man who treated her rudely.”

“We both can agree, Das would make a terrible spy. His information may be...spotty, at best. Regardless, treat her well. If you disrespect the princess, your mother will do worse than quarter you; that’s a promise.”

King Corriban chuckled and went to speak with the servants. It was a good sign that marriage was far from his father’s mind. Corr grinned at having avoided that fate, for now. He leaned against the railing and looked down at the raging falls. Corr listened to the water, the roar rumbling out a song that only a Waterfall King could hear. Tilting his head back and closing his eyes, Corr felt like he could hear the prophecies of the Corriban Falls in the voices of his ancestors.

“My prince...”

Corr turned around and met Lord Ferren’s gaze. Since Corr was a child, Lord Ferren felt like a harsh school teacher. Tall and lanky, the lord had greasy black hair and sharp features. Despite his scowling contempt, Lord Ferren always treated Corr with respect and adoration. The reasoning became especially apparent when Corr was crowned heir on his sixteenth birthday.

“Lord Ferren,” Corr nodded, distant yet respectful. “My family and I appreciate everything you’ve helped arrange for our visitors.”

“Anything for the Waterfall King: present and future.”

“Does something trouble you?”

“I only seek your best interest, your highness. My concerns are for these visitors of your father.”

“If you suspect some kind of treachery, I can assure you it would be ill-conceived. It would be beyond foolish for anyone to try and harm my father in his own castle...especially when the only ways out are either a bridge or a death sentence.”

“And I would never wish any treachery on your family,” Lord Ferren set a hand on his chest in dramatic surprise. “But these Horse Masters? We know so little about them as a people. I worry they seek to take our kingdom.”

“War is not their intention,” Corr said firmly. “My father trusts King Miros...as such, so do I.”

“There is an army amassing on the border between our kingdoms: seventy phalanxes of seventy riders each. They’re all gathering in the Great Plains that King Miros calls home. There has been no other movement yet, but they are preparing for something.”

“You suspect hostilities? Then why make the journey alone?”

“The show of it will mean more than the action. Mark my words, your highness, these Horse Masters? They are plotting something.”

“A gathering could easily be a celebration as much as an army. Whatever their reasons, I would not assume ill-will.”

“Until it was too late?”

“You speak out of turn,” Corr snapped. “The king may not be here to tell you that, but his wisdom tells me that you mean to propose something. Get to it and do not waste my time.”

“As you said, your highness, a gathering could easily be a celebration or an army. I say, we choose the meaning of the gathering. If we were to propose marriage—”

“I’ll save you considerable time, Lord Ferren. I will not marry someone I have never met and not on some bureaucratic whim. She—nor I—will not be a bargaining chip in politics. If there is something that happens between us? I will personally deliver an invitation to you. This is not about me or Princess Venn. This is about my father and King Miros: two friends and allies.”

“I would never question your wisdom or your father’s. I simply ask that you consider the option for the future of our nation.”

“Are you at all familiar with the philosophy of Corriban II?”

“Your highness?”

“Corriban II was born here when the castle was little more than a single watch tower with a few walls. As he grew, he watched his father make a kingdom from nothing and—in his twilight years—he wrote poetry about what he had learned from a lifetime at the falls. Some call it the greatest philosophy of our age.”

“It is truly worth praising, your highness.”

“He believed in the wisdom of the falls. No matter the terrain, no matter the season, the river toiled away and eroded its path alone. It was not two rivers forced together by men to make a stronger flow, but a lone river made from the foundation of a great mountain. And that, Lord

Ferren, is the kind of man I strive to be. Working towards my own great falls and not playing marriage as some token in a game.”

“I apologize if I’ve offended you—”

“You haven’t, Lord Ferren. I am simply telling you that the future of our kingdom rests with me to build as I see fit. It is not a destiny that you will have to worry about, only one you will serve. Good day.”

Corr left the agape lord on the balcony. His mother would be horrified that he spoke harshly to such a powerful noble. His father would have a more approving view of his words. For his own part, Corr wouldn’t have changed anything.

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The woods were not good for riding. The roads were maintained by the Waterfall Kingdom, but the sightlines and constant twists made galloping impossible. Even Esper kept trying to take Venn off the trail to eat the leaves from the bushes and grass. Venn was able to take control again with a gentle pull of the reins, but others were struggling with keeping their mounts on track.

“Such greenery,” King Miros said, riding next to her. He was taken in by the leafy boughs hanging over the road, watching the birds flutter from branch to branch.

“The plains are green,” Venn said, a little sour. “And blue, yellow, red...”

“That is true, but nothing in these varieties. Look how full these trees are! Oak, I believe they’re called.”

“How do you know?”

“King Corriban and I have exchanged much about our lands. He once sent me a parcel of leaves from the Waterfall Kingdom with sketches of each of their trees.”

“They are...majestic, I’ll admit, but they’re too big. I like being able to see my surroundings. You can’t get any speed in these woods.”

“We should make for open road soon,” King Miros assured her. “Then we can have one last strong push for the waterfall and Corriban’s Castle. Lieutenant!”

“Sire?” A young soldier rode up alongside the king and his daughter.

“Send word ahead: once we clear the tree lines, I want double time to the falls. Understood?”

"It shall be done, your majesty."

The rider rushed off at a strong trot, his gelding rushing past the others. Venn had to rein Esper in, though the mare wanted to move faster.

"My leige," an aide rode up suddenly to Venn's left and ignored her completely. "Would it not be prudent to send word ahead?"

"The king knows we're coming. We've been coming for days..."

"I meant to go to the next town. Surely, they should know of your coming so they can prepare for our arrival?"

"A road will do well," King Miros said. "There is no need for anything special on our account."

"But, as visiting dignitaries, do we not deserve—"

"Visiting, yes. We are guests, Fenri. It would be rude of us to demand a parade in every town we ride through. There will be more than enough luxuries when we reach Corriban's Castle."

"At the very least—"

The arrow pierced Fenri's jaw before he could finish speaking. Gagging, he clutched for the arrow stuck through his cheeks, wheezing as the second arrow struck the back of his head.

"It's an ambush!" A soldier yelled, rearing up his horse and drawing a blade. "Protect the king and princess! Defensive formation!"

Arrows darted out of the forest, and Venn turned Esper in a tight circle to avoid being an easy target. She reached down to her left and drew her short axe, ready for the first attacker to charge them. Her father's broad shield rose up as another soldier fell into position by Venn's other side with his shield raised high. The horses fell into a circle around her and her father, backing them into the center to protect them. A few of the soldiers fired arrows into the woods, blindly shooting for any target.

With a roar, a dozen men charged out of the woods with swords in hand. They wore long cloaks adorned with leaves as if the forest itself had sent the attackers. Venn watched the first man bound through the air, launching himself off a tree and nearly bounding over their protective circle. He landed on one of the riders, pulling him off his horse and stabbing him once they were on the ground.

“Spread out!” King Miros ordered. “Draw them into single combat where their numbers will do them no good!”

With a loud screech, the horses bolted at the command of their riders, scattering along the dense forest road. The explosion of movement surprised the ambushers, knocking some of them off their feet to be trampled by powerful hooves. Venn raised her axe and charged, swinging down and making contact with one of their attackers. Esper weaved through the ambush, forcing the attackers aside with a loud whinney and a shove from her rump. Venn grabbed for her hand shield and knocked blades aside, using it to deliver a few blows as a metal fist.

The ambush had taken them by surprise, but the advantage remained with those on horseback. Venn had been riding her entire life and Esper knew to anticipate her needs before she could command the mare through the reins. The ambushers took heavy losses, but the archers from the trees still fired through the crowd.

“Venn!” King Miros rode up to her side and blocked an arrow with the flat of his shield. “With me! We have to get to the falls.”

“But the men!”

“We’ll cover your escape, your Highness,” a soldier said, riding to their side. “For the Plains!”

The soldiers roared and charged towards their attackers, making a wall of muscle to delay the ground troops. Shields rose and Venn could hear the twang of arrows striking metal as she and her father rode off.

Venn focused on her riding, only able to truly appreciate a few dozen feet at a time. Esper tore through the terrain, the chestnut mare keeping pace with the king’s black charger. The woods felt like a trap now, drawing them closer together until the tightness of the path forced them to ride single-file with her father in front. They turned a sharp corner and a trio of ambushers jumped out and raised their arms high with a yell.

They had never encountered a well-trained war charger.

King Miros’s horse crashed through their line, the loud snap of a man’s leg beneath the charger’s massive hoof followed by a pained scream. One of the men jumped up and grabbed King Miros while another reached for Venn.

Her axe blade hit the man's arm and cut clean through, the hand still holding a sword a few yards from the rest of the man. The man attacking King Miros was more successful, pulling the king down from his horse and landing a blow with his fist. King Miros rebounded, hoisting the man off the ground by his shoulders and dropping him hard against the ground. The rasp of steel against steel as King Miros drew his sword from its place in his shield was the hiss of a deadly serpent. The black charger stood behind the king, serving as a final shield against any attackers trying to strike from behind.

"Venn, go! Get to the castle!"

"I'm not leaving without you!"

"Stop arguing and go! I'm right behind you."

Venn turned Esper and yelled, jabbing at the horse's ribs with her heels. Esper went at a full gallop, only slowing long enough for Venn to order more speed. They charged without stopping, without looking back, and only the changing terrain marked the passage of time. After a moment, Venn slowed her horse to catch her breath. There was no one following her and the forest had regained its false serenity.

Pacing Esper in a tight circle, Venn waited for her father to come riding up the trail after her. She'd convinced herself that he would only need a moment to mount up and he could defend himself against ten men, easily. But as the minutes crept on, she began to worry more. There were a lot more than ten men in those woods. And she had left without making sure her father was safe.

"Don't," Venn shook her head, pulling free of the guilt. "It doesn't matter. I have to get to Corriban's Falls. They're expecting us—"

The words rang in Venn's mind too loud for her to ignore. The Waterfall King and all his soldiers had been expecting the Horse Masters for days. They knew the route, their stops, every part of their plan. It was everything someone would need for an ambush. While Venn's father refused to believe it would be possible, the whole visit could have been a trap. It may not have been King Corriban, but there was a weak point in the security of the Waterfall Guard. They couldn't be trusted.

Venn quickly turned west and put Esper in a full gallop. She had to move as far from the Waterfall Castle as she could for now. A direct retreat back to the Plains would get her captured and the last thing she wanted was to walk right into enemy hands. Even though

she didn't know who her enemy was, she wasn't going to make things easy for them. She rode hard, focused only on the road ahead of her, finding a stride along the more prepared roads. The long, flat stretch made for good riding and she was able to get a far distance between her and the ambushers.

After riding until Esper was wheezing for breath, Venn pulled her over to the side of the road and into the woods. She found water and let Esper drink from the stream. As her mare drank, Venn removed the emblems of her house: the armor, her jewelry, anything that might place her for anything but a local rider. She tied her hair into a tight braid and adjusted her riding clothes to be something more casual.

Venn spent some time removing the ribbons from Esper's tail and mane, making her as plain as she could manage. She even rubbed some dirt into Esper's coat and smeared the white blaze on her forehead with mud. "Sorry, Esper. But we both need a disguise in unfamiliar lands. They'll be looking for a princess and her mount: now we can pass off for any rider."

Esper snorted and shook her head, unbinding some of the braids that Venn couldn't reach from the ground. Venn nodded and took off Esper's saddle, opting instead to use only the riding rug. The remaining pack was too heavy and large to take with her, so Venn decided to leave behind what she couldn't take. She took her axe and a small pack of supplies: nothing more than rations for the road and her waterskin. Venn bundled everything else together and hid it beneath a tree with a burned-out trunk.

"It's not a great disguise," Venn said, rubbing a bit of dirt on her riding clothes, "but it will keep anyone from giving us away."

Venn mounted back up on Esper, the lighter rug putting her in direct contact with the mare's huge flanks. She could feel Esper's breathing, once ragged and frantic, now calm and steady. Venn took a calming breath of her own and led Esper back onto the main road.

Esper kept a steady pace, not going too fast as to look suspicious and not going so slow as to be an easy target. Venn resisted the urge to charge onward, using her desire to escape as her main balance between the two speeds.

###

"It's nearly nightfall," King Corriban frowned, standing on the Overlook Balcony. "They should be here by now."

"Perhaps they were waylaid?" Queen Cheris suggested. The dinner they prepared had gone cold, but the queen remained optimistic enough to set places for dessert.

"No," King Corriban shook his head. "There would be a messenger or some sign. I have a feeling, Cheris. Deep in my gut...something is wrong. Commander Reffer? Any word from the scouts?"

"Nothing yet, sire."

"Double the search on the path. Send trackers out as well...if anything changed, I want to know about it."

"You think something happened?" Corr asked, arms folded in deep concern. "Maybe they...left?"

"No. Something happened."

"You are troubled, dear," Queen Cheris said. "This will not affect the people's opinion of you. I know you had high hopes for this visit, but—"

"It's not just about the visit. I worry something happened to Miros. He's an honest man and he wouldn't just disappear without saying something. And for no one in his party to arrive? It doesn't sit right. And it makes me think of one thing..."

"Woodsmen?" Corr asked. "Would they attack a noble house? A visiting king?"

"The Woodsmen have always been treacherous," Lord Ferren snarled, as though the thought left a sour taste in his mouth. "They have gotten bolder in the last year. I doubt they would be thrilled with 'invaders' to their lands. A king of horses or king of waterfalls is a king they would not bend the knee to."

"I want search parties," King Corriban said, addressing every available guard. "Every rock, every tree...if something happened to the Horse Masters, there has to be some evidence of it somewhere. Our goal is to find King Miros: this is a rescue, not a conquest."

"I'll lead the men, Father," Corr said, puffing out his chest. "I will find the king and princess and rescue them."

"A marvelous idea!" Lord Ferren said. "Think of what that would do for our relationship with the Plains Riders! Our young prince rescuing his lady love! It's like an epic poem or a ballad!"

"No, Ferren! Corr, I need my troops searching the woods. You need to start asking around the villages. They wouldn't have just vanished. You and Das will follow the route to

the Plains, ask everyone you see, and search every inch of the path. If we know where they had been seen, perhaps we could narrow down our field of searching.”

“What will they do?” Corr asked. “If they have taken them?”

“The Woodsmen have no goodwill towards your family, your highness. Anyone who wears a symbol of royalty would be worth kidnapping. Ransom, perhaps? Or just plain murder?”

“Enough, Lord Ferren,” King Corriban snapped. “The Woodsmen are not cruel...they act to defend their lands, not start a war. Acting as if this were nothing but malicious invites conflict. Corr? Your duty is to find the princess. She is next in line for his throne and—no matter what happens to the king—her loss would mean civil war in Miros’s kingdom. Find her and bring her here for safety. Do you understand?”

“It will be done, father,” Corr bowed his head. He turned and made his way to the stables. He caught a servant to send after Das with no time to find him on his own. There was a true threat to both the Waterfall Kingdom and the Plains. Surely, this rescue would do more to solidify the budding alliance than any marriage.

###

Venn rode for another hour until she found a small farmhouse as the sun began to set. The blades of a great windmill turned slowly, churning the wheat from the rolling fields in the valley below. An ox pulled a wagon, carting up large bushels of hay under the commands of a boy sitting on top of the harvest. Venn approached the house without being too standoffish. Her father had given her a primer on the local customs, but Venn hoped that court customs would translate well to the commonfolk.

“Good afternoon,” Venn said, trying to hide her Plains accent.

“Hello!” The boy waved. “That’s a fine horse!”

“Thank you. You have quite the ox.”

“Henlow is my father’s,” the boy said. “Are you a scout for the king’s army?”

“I’m just a messenger,” Venn shrugged. “Can you tell me what town this is?”

“You don’t know? Not much of a messenger, are you?”

“In my defense, I’m not a navigator.”

“Erven? What’s taking you so long, boy?”

A man strode out of the mill, his face red and his shirt stained with sweat. His brown hair was thinning over his brow and he had developed a bit of a gut. The miller wiped his hand on a rag and examined Venn critically. "Good afternoon."

"Afternoon," Venn said. "I'm afraid I'm a bit lost. Could you tell me what town this is?"

"Low Bend," the man said, "River Zarin is about a league that way."

Venn tried to hide her grin and nodded. The River Zarin could lead her back home easily. It wouldn't be the easiest trail to ride, but she could lead Esper through the water for a slightly easier ride and direction would mean more than speed. "Appreciate it..."

"You got somewhere to stay for the night?" The man asked.

"I just need to get back on the road."

"Nonsense," the miller shook his head. "You should spend the night in the barn. Young woman out on her own at night? My wife would hang me up by my ears if I let you go. I'm afraid she won't accept no for an answer."

"We have beef stew tonight!" The boy smiled brightly.

"Well," Venn looked longingly south and sighed. "I suppose it would be safer to ride in daylight. And who could say no to beef stew?"

"Erven? Go set up the bed in the hay loft and get the stall ready. Hay and grain, you know the drill." The boy hopped down off the ox cart and scrambled toward the barn. "And you can wash up inside, should you please."

"That's very kind," Venn smiled. "Thank you."

"Come. We see to our own out here in the wide world. My name is Rire. What should we call you?"

"Esper," Venn said without thinking. "And this is Miros."

"Very well," Rire smiled. "Miros will be quite comfortable in our barn while we eat."

Venn reluctantly stabled Esper and closed her into the stall. "I know," she whispered as the mare nuzzled her chest. "I'll be back soon. Mind your manners."

Rire's home was a small building attached to the mill. The first floor was open with a few beams to support the second level, where the family slept. Erven rushed up a ladder to get cleaned up while Rire stepped into the living space. A table stretched from one side of the room to the other, a beam going straight through it at the middle. The table seemed to divide the room into two sections: a sitting area around the fireplace and a place where

food was prepared. A slender woman with black hair tied into a bun puttered around the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron when she saw the visitor.

"Tereas, we have someone joining us for dinner tonight. Esper, a lost messenger."

"Welcome to our home," the woman beamed. "Are you hungry?"

"I was told I couldn't refuse..." Venn smiled. "But you don't have to make special accommodations for me."

"Nonsense. The first virtue of Corriban II is Hospitality. It would be a disgrace not to follow those virtues."

After she had bathed and redressed, Venn helped where she could around the kitchen. She was not a cook and didn't fool herself into trying to be one, but she could at least chop vegetables and set a basic table. This set only included one spoon, a bowl and a plate for each person. It was all the easier to set since nothing in the house seemed to match. The stew was simple and served with fresh bread and decent enough butter.

"If I could be so bold," Rire said, as the family settled into the meal, "where is it you're heading, Esper?"

"Terivos," Venn said, naming the only city close to the border she could think of.

"Terivos? That whole city has been garrisoned."

"Are you a messenger for the army?" Morr asked eagerly. "Do you bring a message from the king?"

"Just...a letter from a wife to a soldier," Venn lied, stumbling for the first time since arriving.

"It's good of you to still deliver those messages. It's hard to think of things like romance when we seem so close on the eve of war."

"Tereas, you worry too much. In my mind, there is no threat of war with the Horse Masters."

"You don't think so?"

"King Corriban has only ever spoken positively of them. He's even arranged for a royal envoy to come up to the castle. They've been very strict about security, though. No googly-eyed looky-loos, just the people who live there. And thank goodness for that, or everyone would be there. First anyone's seen the Horse Masters since...ever, so far as I remember."

Venn nodded. So not only was the route well known, but it was supposedly secure. More questions were coming up after the ambush. King Corriban allegedly cared for King Miros, but the path had been leaked to outside attackers. Either there was a leak in the king's security or there had been a more sinister intention to the invitation.

"Have you been down south before, Esper?" Tereas asked. "Have you encountered the Horse Masters much on your travels?"

"Rarely, if ever," Venn said. The official ruling had been a mutual distrust, but it had been honored so far. Neither the Waterfall Army nor the Plainsmen had dared cross the border from a desire to keep the peace.

"Can you tell us about them?" Morr pressed. "I've heard they can speak to their horses through an ancient language!"

"Well, anyone can speak to a horse," Venn smiled. "Whether or not they listen is the real trick of it."

"Sounds like you're quite the accomplished rider," Rire said, taking a sip from his water mug.

"I've been riding as long as I can remember," Venn said, relieved to speak the truth to her hosts. "And each time I've bound with a horse is different than the last. They all have personalities just like people. It's an honor to be part of the conversation."

"That sounds quite lovely," Tereas smiled. "Now, if only that old ox of ours were more willing to listen!"

The rest of the evening passed in easy company. The family never pushed Venn for information, but asked polite questions. She avoided anything too personal, such as where she was from or what she thought of certain areas she'd never heard of. Instead, the family was kind enough to focus on what she enjoyed, if the weather had muddied the roads, and probing for opinions on dinner. After the stew was finished, Tereas brought out a plate of lemon cookies with lavender icing.

"What about your parents, Esper?" Rire asked, nursing a cookie with one hand and upgrading his water to tea. "Are they still with us?"

"Yes," Venn nodded. "They are."

And Venn believed that with all her heart. Her mother was safe at home, no doubt handling the day-to-day. As for her father, she refused to believe he was dead until she saw a body.

Lying in the simple mattress in the hayloft above Esper, Venn let that ember of hope burn. Heading south towards home was certainly an option, but that hope lit a passion inside her. Perhaps, she thought, home could wait. Her father was still alive and she couldn't abandon him yet. The ambush had been large, Venn thought. Someone had to have seen something.

###

"Here," Corr said, kneeling in the dirt. His finger traced a print left by a massive horseshoe about as large as his splayed fingers. "I can barely make heads or tails of this, but this was the same hoofprint that we saw leading the column before it turned into a scramble."

"Another horse stood with it," Das confirmed, squatting next to him. "And they were flanked by more horses. Guards would be my guess."

"That makes this the stallion of King Miros," Corr nodded. "Has to be, right?"

"Or the princess?"

"Without seeing either horse, we can't say if these even belong to the Horse Lords."

Corr and Das had been traveling along the road for a few hours before they found the scuffle left behind in the mud. Too many riders to count, but more horses in one place than Corr had seen outside of a stable. The road after this point was unmarred by so many hooves, so Corr and Das decided to tie their horses to a tree and investigate the spot further. A trio of guards was still on horseback, waiting for orders.

"There was a big fight and then they moved further down the road," Das said, following the hoofprints. He stalked out further down the road, bent at the waist and not looking up from the trail. After a few more yards, he stopped. "Two took off. The others shifted to a wall formation here and fought for the escaping pair."

"Where are the bodies?" Corr asked.

"Who knows? We'd have to go further off the road for that. A lot of the prints head off into the woods, but there's a set that rides out and down the road. Fast. That same pair that was being guarded."

"Follow it," Corr said, sticking close behind. He motioned to the other men for them to dismount. "Mark this area. I want to be able to find it if we have to backtrack. Search the immediate woods for any signs of woodsmen. We'll come back in a minute."

Das walked down the road a bit faster, the trail clearer now that he knew what to look for. Corr kept an eye on the side of the road, looking for anything that might indicate the attackers. The bushes were difficult to see through, but he couldn't find any evidence of dead or injured soldiers. Even the Woodsmen weren't present and their absence made Corr hope there would be clearer evidence down the road. "You're sure this is the right way?"

"I know I'm not the best spy," Das said, still focused on the road, "but I've led you on more than enough hunts. These prints all come from the same horse and I'm betting that this horse was important. Either it's one of the royals or a survivor that might be able to explain things."

"We'll have to hope. What I don't get is why the Woodsmen would do this. They've certainly never been peaceful, but political games have never been their way. They would rather face us in open combat."

"Maybe they've gotten smarter?"

"It's not about smarts. The Woodsmen have a strict code of honor that all but compels them to fight the army on an even playing field. My father said that they have had opportunities to force a conflict by taking whole villages hostage, yet they refuse to involve innocent women and children. The Horse Masters aren't even from the Waterfall lands...so where's the honor in that?"

"Honor is a noble thing, but it doesn't win wars," Das said, kneeling in the dirt to examine more prints. "They stopped here. One of the riders dismounted with their horse."

"And the other?"

"Hesitated, but continued on. Not the big horse, the other one."

"Another marker here!" Corr called down the road as Das followed the last remaining footprints.

It took them over twenty minutes to walk, searching for links in a chain of tracks that eventually led them to a fork in the road.

"They went west," Das said. "A much easier pace from here. Why not go to Corriban Falls? If they escaped the woodsmen, wouldn't they head towards safety?"

“Unless they didn’t think it was safe.”

Corr looked up and down the two sides of the road. A glint of metal caught his attention and he waded through the underbrush and pushed some sticks aside until he found a bound-up parcel. “Das! Get over here!”

“What is it?”

“Armor,” Corr said, pulling the parcel out onto the road. “Chest plate, bracers...and trappings of a Plainsland Warhorse.”

“This was all left here?”

“Stashed away,” Corr said, examining the chest plate. “And I’m guessing not by the Woodsmen. This has the hallmarks of the armor of a princess rather than a king.”

“So she stowed her armor and equipment here. What was her plan?”

“Hiding. She doesn’t trust the Court of the Waterfalls. She might be trying to head back to the Plains...”

“But why not trust the court?”

“Their first visit to our lands gets interrupted by an ambush? I wouldn’t trust the host either.”

“So she’s headed home. We should send a message to the border patrol.”

“No, we need to find her before she gets to the border. If we start making moves to bulk up our forces in their sight, the Horse Masters will be suspicious and it might make things worse.”

“Then we need to focus our forces to—”

“This can’t be a manhunt either, Das. If we seek her out like a criminal, she’ll feel threatened and then we’re playing with fire. Can you still track her?”

“Very distinctive horseshoes,” Das nodded. “Should be good as long as the trail stays fresh.”

“Commander!” Corr called out to the senior member of his guard party.

“Sir?”

“Take this parcel back to the Waterfall Castle,” Corr instructed, putting the wrapped armor and equipment into the commander’s arms. “Tell my father that Das and I are on the trail of finding the princess, but we need to handle the situation delicately. We’re going after

her alone, hoping to find her before she makes it back to the border. We need to let her know this wasn't an act of the Waterfall Kingdom."

"What about the Woodsmen?"

"I'm not sure they're involved either. Keep searching for them, but we don't want to scare the princess away by thinking she is going to be attacked. A smaller group will be better: just Das and me."

"Is that wise, sire?"

"Perhaps not," Corr shrugged. "All I know is that I wouldn't want to have a thousand people I don't trust searching for me. I have to follow my instincts here."

"If you command it, your highness, we will obey. Our search will continue for the king and the woodsmen. I will tell your father that you seek out the princess."

Corr nodded sharply and took the reins of his horse from an attendant. "Das, we're going to head towards the river."

"Why the river? Why not south?"

"The River Zarin is a reliable road to the border," Corr said. "She wouldn't have to worry about getting lost as long as she sticks to the water."

###

The woods were dense, but Venn was able to take things slowly, so Esper was able to navigate the terrain easily. While the river was more appealing, being out in the open was a dangerous risk. She had a clear line of sight, but every bird, squirrel, and fish made her jump. When being out in the open got to be too much, Venn headed into the woods and at least had the cover of trees. Finding her exact position was hard, but she'd gotten a map from Rire and his family, as well as a couple of pastries for the road from Tereas. She'd appreciated the couple, but could overstay her welcome.

While she had wanted to go straight for the Woodsmen, she had no idea where their base of operation would be. Rire didn't offer any ideas, only a few idle grunts that guided her to the river. But, Venn figured that even the woods folk needed water, so there was a good chance she would find some sign of their coming and going if she stayed close to the water. She was making decent time, but she was very aware of her timeline. There was a week before her father's army would overwhelm the Waterfall Kingdom.

Esper took the trail well. It was unfamiliar, but the mare was able to find a path that was manageable. She was occasionally curious about the patches of bushes and grass, but followed Venn's directions.

"Keep moving, girl," Venn whispered. "I know I'm anxious, but we just gotta keep moving. Dad's out there. And if we can't find him, then the army will. They'll level the forest before we let our king die."

Esper was unimpressed, taking a bite of a bush as she walked by.

Yelling caught Venn's attention and she led Esper deeper into the woods as a group of riders charged by the river. The banners of the Waterfall Kingdom fluttered behind them. That was the third patrol she'd spotted that day. One had ridden right past her in the early morning and another had crossed the bridge right after Venn and Esper left the road.

"They're getting nervous," Venn said. "What is it, I wonder, that makes them ride so? I'm betting they don't want me escaping."

Esper snorted and shook out her mane. Venn kept focusing on the forest around her; the sounds of woodland creatures skittering made her miss home. For a moment, she longed for the plains again. Her mother would be alving from the high tower, her voice echoing across the flat expanse and calling Venn home. She would be riding with her father or one of her friends from court. Her heart would beat in time with Esper's hooves, pounding in her chest as she urged her horse on. It felt like freedom, but the reality of the forest trapped her in.

Venn reached behind her and undid her braid, letting her hair flow freely in the woods. She had no plans to meet other strangers on the road and it was a small taste of freedom that she longed for.

Esper stopped with her eyes locked ahead of her. Venn leaned over and touched the mare's neck, feeling for her heartbeat. The pulse was elevated slightly and Esper's neck was tense. Venn followed the mare's gaze and saw only trees and bushes. Still, Venn trusted Esper's instinct.

"Stand..." Venn ordered, dismounting and sliding off her horse's back. She took up her axe, her grip tight around the handle as she pulled the small shield off her saddle. Slowly, Venn crept through the brush. The bushes were up over her knees and she felt like she was crashing through sticks with every step. Venn paused a moment and watched the leaves

around her. She turned back to Esper, still standing tall in the woods. Her ears were pinned back as she glared into the underbrush. Venn followed her eyes almost to where she stood.

Venn swung her axe down, hacking at the brush and throwing bush pieces aside. Her technique was more meant for striking from horseback, but she could adapt it for the new terrain. Her grip tightened around the leather grip of her weapon and the saplings nearby toppled over with the clean cut.

After her strike, Venn waited and listened. There was no blood on her axe blade and the forest seemed untouched beyond her reach. Still, Venn held her stance and waited, listening for signs of trouble.

A hand grabbed Venn's ankle and pulled, ripping her off her feet and making her yelp in surprise.

The man was about her age with a rough, brown stubble and shaggy hair. Layers of leather had been shaped into armor, protecting his shoulders and chest with thicker pieces of hardwood. His eyes were a dark green like the forest with an intensity that felt like the edge of the blade he held to her throat.

"Scream and you're dead!"

"Stavas!" Venn yelled, holding the man's dagger in her grip. Esper reared and charged towards her, hoofbeats pounding as she closed the distance between them. The attacker looked up long enough to see Esper charging towards them before the horse's body smashed into him. Esper ran a few paces forward, her steps barely missing the man, but battering him against her legs. After she'd dragged the attacker away, Esper returned to Venn's side, folding her body around her rider to protect her.

The man groaned on the ground and slowly pushed himself up. Sitting up on his knees, the man looked up at Venn and panted. "You're not from the Waterfall lands..."

"What makes you say that?"

"No Waterfall Rider can command a horse like that..." The man spat on the ground and stood, his knife hanging loose in his grip. Venn braced herself for a throw, but he didn't move to throw. "You're from the Plains..."

"Maybe I just know how to handle a horse..."

"That command you said? They only use that in the Plains."

"You've been that far south?"

"The woods are everywhere. I don't know your business here, but I'm pretty sure it isn't mine. Is whatever you're after against the Waterfall Kingdom?"

"Is yours?"

"Asking a lot of questions doesn't earn my trust," the woodsman said, sliding his knife into a sheath at his hip. "So, let's find some truth between the two of us. My name is Artus."

Venn looked back over her shoulder at Esper. The mare's ears were relaxed again and she held her head even with her shoulders. There was no anxiety or stress in Esper's look, only curiosity.

"I'm Venn. This is Esper."

"Nice to meet you," Artus said. "You're heading downriver?"

"I am. You?"

"You've been crashing through the woods a few steps behind me the whole way. If nothing else, you could use someone to help you figure out how to move without getting caught. Woodsmen have been slipping the Waterfall Guards for as long as the fourth Corriban tried to round us all up. If you're heading down to the border, I can get you there."

"We can only go as fast as Esper."

"Then the river is your best bet. But there are hideouts you can use...night will fall before you get to the border and the woods aren't exactly welcoming to easy prey."

Venn turned and looked over her shoulder. The sun was starting to set, already beginning to cast long shadows over the forest. "Fine. But if you betray me? You might learn a few more Plainsman Horse Commands...and not all of them will let you walk away."

Artus bowed his head and raised his hands. "This way," he explained. "I have a camp less than a league away. We'll be safe there for tonight."

"I thought you said the woods weren't welcoming to easy prey?"

"You just need to know the predators..."

###

Das and Corr dismounted and looked around the riverbed. After getting a tip from a local family about a messenger on horseback, the boys felt like they were hot on the trail of the princess. When they reached the river, even Corr could make out the distinctive horseshoe prints that Das had pointed out.

"Heading downriver," Das said, urging his horse off the road and onto the muddy riverbed. "I'd use it as a guide in unfamiliar terrain, too. But she swerved into the woods again. Why get off the closest thing to a road?"

"Something spooked her into the woods," Corr shook his head. "No doubt one of those patrols we saw earlier. They've been getting orders faster than we can issue commands. She must have gone off the road to avoid detection."

"We're close, wherever she went," Das said, dismounting and tying his horse to a tree. He knelt down and examined the hoofprint in the mud. "Still soft. I'd say less than a couple hours old."

"If we press south, we can cut her off."

"We can't ride through the night, Corr. And neither can she if she's choosing the woods over the riverbank. It'll offer her cover, but there are too many obstacles in her way."

"We can't find the prints in the woods, though. Too much ground cover, you'd have to press your face through the underbrush."

"I don't need tracks."

Das walked forward, wading into the greenery while Corr stepped down from his stallion and tied it to a branch. Das was walking through the woods, checking broken branches and flattened brush. "Something big—as broad as I am—was pushing through here like a plow through soil. Took a few bites along the way."

Lifting a clump of grass with soil still attached, Das looked around further. He dropped the grass and rushed to a snapped tree branch and looked at a scuff against some bark. After following a few more markers and building his imaginary path through the forest, Das stopped.

"Well, that's interesting."

"Enlighten me, please," Corr prompted. "We can't all hear your thought process and you're skipping ahead."

"She dismounted." Das stood in the brush, positioning his feet so that he mirrored what he thought was the princess's stance. He skulked through the brush further and paused. He raised a sapling, running his hand along the severed edge. "Too smooth to be natural. Steel and human strength. She was cutting through the bushes."

"Intentionally?"

“Hard to say. Whatever she was looking for, she only found leaves.”

Corr knelt in the dirt next to him and passed a hand over the brush. “Das, what is it they say about the Woodsmen?”

“They fight like demons and vanish like ghosts. You think this was Woodsmen?”

“Seems like. The tracks don’t go back out to the road. See? These go in towards the woods.”

“At a much slower pace...you don’t think she went with them willingly, do you? After they attacked her?”

“An awful lot of ‘ifs’ and ‘maybes’ are hindering this investigation. Our only lead was heading that way. So let’s go find things out. Leave the horses here, they’ll only slow us down.”

“Agreed. Something about all this is bugging me...”

“What?”

“Woodsmen would leave bodies, right? We didn’t find anything on that road. All the trails just...went into the woods. And Woodsmen have no reason to hold onto horses, so why take those?”

“Starting to question that Woodsmen were responsible?”

“Oh, I think the Woodsmen are responsible for the attack. My question: who is responsible for the reason behind the attack?”

“Woods Mercenaries? That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“It answers more of our questions than anything else.”

“But that makes me ask a few more,” Corr shook his head. “Lead on. The way I see it, the answers lie at the end of this trail: either with the princess or her captor.”

###

Artus had a simple camp around the upturned base of a fallen tree, well hidden by moss, grass, and thick vines. If Venn had a year and a map, she wouldn’t have been able to find it.

“Horse stays outside,” Artus said. “It’s a bit cozy inside.”

“She doesn’t leave me...ever, if I can help it.”

“We can keep the door open,” Artus shrugged. “It’ll be colder, but that’s the best offer I can make.”

Artus grabbed a hidden handle and pulled the door upwards, two poles dropping down to form a little overhang. The actual camp inside was little more than a sleeping mat made of handfuls of grass and pine boughs, a rough wooden chair, and a small fireplace dug into the wood. The woodsman's pack was on the chair, but he moved the chair outside and hung the pack on the back of it.

"You live here?" Venn asked.

"For the last few weeks," Artus shrugged. "The Clans End is where I'll probably winter, but it's still warm enough that I can still hunt a bit. This will do fine for now. Might leave it after tonight though...old habits."

"Worried I'll come looking for you?"

"Yes," Artus said, bluntly. He grabbed the blanket on the sleeping mat and spread it out on the floor. He stepped carefully around it and lit the fire, trying to urge some warmth into the chilly night. The woodsman sat on the chair and took off the filth-covered boots and jacket. "Not for nothing, but you're a stranger to me still. And—should you not gut me in the middle of the night—there are no guarantees that you won't be back tomorrow with more men."

"You think I have an army at my command?"

"Five hundred soldiers or five angry brothers? I'd rather not be here if they think anything untoward happened between us." Venn gave an amused chuckle and took the blanket off of Esper's back. "I only trust people after they smile," Artus smirked. "I was worried you wouldn't be able to."

"Well, in fairness, it's been a few days."

"Sounds like a story worth telling. I'll trade you for some rations: hard cheese, jerky, and what could still count as bread."

"What do I get for not telling the story?" Venn asked, letting Esper wander off to eat some grass.

"Same thing. I'm curious, not a monster."

Venn took the offering of food and brought it into the shelter, sitting on the sleeping platform and looking at the fire. "I'm not just looking to get home. Someone kidnapped my father."

"Soldier?"

"A leader," Venn said. She wanted to be honest, but knew it would be foolish to give everything away right now. "I don't think he's dead. Or at least, I don't want to think that. I'm going home and I'm coming back for him with more men. We were attacked in the woods and he stayed to fight. I rode away, like a coward."

"If I may?" Artus asked, offering a bit more of his cheese. "The woodsmen have a saying: 'what makes prey smart is knowing the gleam of the wolf's teeth.'"

"That's not a great saying..."

"Well, we're not exactly known for poetry. Anyways, you running? That's not being a coward. All that means is that you knew you weren't going to make it and you survived. Now, you're coming back with a rescue party. I've seen so-called 'brave' men die for less. If you'd stayed and fought for valor? The only difference would be that you'd both be dead...or kidnapped."

Venn took a deep breath and nodded. She took another bit of her bread and chewed quietly. "You're a hunter?"

"Trying to collect for the winter months. Despite our most earnest prayers, jerky doesn't grow on trees."

"Woodsmen pray?"

"To different gods from Plains or Waterfall Men, but still gods. Gods of trees and birds and even a few gods for different kinds of rocks."

"Must get confusing."

"The gods we name are only for stories," Artus shrugged. "When we pray, they all listen. All things are connected."

"Even the deer for our jerky?" Venn asked.

"Especially the deer for our jerky. We eat it, then it becomes a part of us. As did the grass the deer ate before we hunted it and so on. The Woodsmen believe that all things are connected: all things come from the Star Rain that became the first trees, the first birds, the first deer...even the first men. Since that Star Rain, we've all just been trading what we were all made from. It's a connection kind of like you and Esper. She matters to you because she's a part of you, like an extension of your spirit. You probably share Star Rain in your hearts."

"Is it like reincarnation? Living many lives over and over again?"

"Not really. Rainfall is thousands of drops of water, but it's water from different rivers, lakes, and ponds. It's never the same drops in the same storm clouds, but it's still rain."

"In the Plains," Venn said, "it's said that great people become great steeds in their next life. Not just war heroes, but also artists, politicians...just good, everyday people. So, we treat all of our horses as equals. They are different from us in many ways, but their hearts are still human."

"We fear horses," Artus said. "They didn't come from here."

"We've always had horses."

"Our ancients told tales that have been passed down for generations. We recall the first horses to come to Ezera."

"Ezera?"

"That's what we call it. For our people, there's no difference between the Waterfall Lands, the Plains, and the Woods. We've simply called it Ezera for as long as we've been here: before the Plains and the Waterfalls were claimed by kings. It was all one land and one people."

"Storm clouds are the same water."

Artus tapped his nose with a smile and nodded toward Venn. "Very good."

Venn settled deeper into the raised sleeping mat and ate her ration. She looked outside and saw Esper grazing not far from the entrance. Artus finished his rations, wiped his hands together and settled down on the floor. "We'll head south tomorrow. Should reach the border before sundown."

"Which town?"

"No town. There's a gap in the border. Small and you wouldn't know it was there."

"How do you know?"

"Our ancients made the paths," Artus smiled, settling onto his blanket. "But they didn't share it with everyone."

###

Corr stumbled, snapping through the trees and cursing. "How do the woodsmen move through this?"

"They're ghosts," Das whispered, only a few steps ahead. "They don't need to walk."

“Forget the campfire stories. These are flesh and blood men. They can’t fly and they don’t turn into animals. Their weapons are steel and wood, nothing special.”

“Then how come we can’t find any of their towns?”

“They don’t use towns,” Corr said. “They have a Clans End where they meet and trade, but that place is impossible for us to find. The rest of them hunt, gather, and build small shelters that they tear down as soon as we can find them. They aren’t ghosts; they’re just smart.”

“Well, ghosts or not, they can see in the dark better than me. Not much of a trail left. We should hold up and wait until morning.”

“No, this could be our best chance to catch up to the princess.”

“Or it could be our best chance to get exhausted and lost,” Das said. He looked up and turned back to Corr. “We need to be smart about this. We got no trail, no light, and—not for nothing—no plan for when we find her.”

“We’re going to explain the situation and bring her to the Waterfall Castle.”

“And that sounds nice, but what if she says no? Princess Venn isn’t just a royal of a nation we have tenuous relations with. She’s a warrior and it’s a known fact that she’s killed people.”

“In defense of her kingdom and herself.”

“But she’s not some delicate flower we can tuck away in the tower. We need a plan...or at least a direction.”

“That way.”

“What?”

Corr pointed behind Das’s shoulder and started walking forward towards a soft glow in the forest and a small trail of smoke caught in the moonlight. Corr was able to focus more on being quiet, hunting rather than tracking. His steps were careful, over fallen logs and into gaps between branches. They closed in slowly on the camp as more things came into view. An upturned tree had the bottom carved out and there was a dull, orange light shining from it, with a roughly hewn wooden chair at the door.

Corr motioned to the camp and spread his fingers, pointing Das towards the far side of the camp. Trying not to make a sound, Corr drew his sword from his hip with a soft scrape of steel against the sheath. Confidently, he walked into the clearing in front of the camp,

trying to make sense of the inhabitants: one on the floor and the other on a raised platform. When he was less than fifteen steps from the shelter's entrance, the one on the floor shot up with his knife drawn and rushed out towards Corr.

Their blades struck together, the ring shattering the silence in the forest. Corr swung his blade, trying to spin around the woodsman's back. The knife was small, but the woodsman attacked with precision that cut into Corr's leather vest. The other sleeper was on their feet now: a young woman with long hair.

"Princess Venn!" Corr shouted, holding his free hand up with the fingers spread out. "My name is Prince Corriban IX. I'm here to help you!"

"Princess?" The man asked, turning around. "What is he going on about?"

"You have me confused with someone else."

"We have your armor and weapons. I followed your horseshoe prints from the site of the attack. My father sent me to help you."

"I'm still not sure your father wants to help."

"Prince?" The man said. "I clearly don't have the whole story here! My people had nothing to do with this fight. I heard you sneaking up on us and I defended myself. You leave? We're all going to get along fine."

"That's not your call to make." Das was standing on the top of the tree trunk, an arrow drawn and pointing down at the woodsman. "Drop your weapon and you can still survive."

"Try and you're just as dead as your prince," Venn said, sliding the handle of her hatchet into her grip.

"Speak for yourself," the man shook his head and dropped his knife, raising his hands.

"You're outmatched," Das said.

Venn whistled and shouted a command. Corr felt the hooves pounding on the ground before he heard a horse panting behind him. He rushed back a few steps and the horse rushed past them. The horse bent around Venn and glared at Corr with her ears pinned back. "Now you're outnumbered."

"We're not looking for a fight, princess," Das said, setting his sword in the sheath. "We just want to know what happened."

"We were attacked!" Venn snapped.

"By the woodsmen!" Das said. "The same people as the guy you're with."

"We had nothing to do with this!" The woodsman said. "I will swear on anything, I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Princess, what do you think?" Corr asked.

"I feel that he's telling the truth," Venn said, looking between Corr and the woodsman.

"But so are you."

"Then we both have the same questions," Corr said. "Das, stand down."

"Corr—"

"Now, damn it!" Corr yelled. "We're on the same side, all of us. Someone attacked the Plainsmen: my father thinks it's the Woodsmen and you accuse our kingdom. The only way to know for sure is to find the survivors."

"Survivors?" Venn asked.

"We examined the crime scene," Corr said. "There were no signs of bodies and I'd wager all the blood we found wasn't your men?"

"We defended ourselves."

"And I think that means your father is still alive and there's a reason for that. I want to help you get your people to safety and we do that by working together."

"I still don't trust you."

"Then tell us where you want to go," Corr said. "We won't make any decisions or influence you in any way. You want to come back to Corriban Falls? We'll lead you there. You want to find the people who took your father? We're with you. You want to go back to the Plains? We'll give you an escort."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch. This is a sign of trust: you choose."

Venn looked around, pausing longest when she looked at the horse's eyes. Her ears were calm now, attentive and pointed towards the group. "We find my father."

"Then we'll help you."

"Artus stays with me."

"Me?" The woodsman asked. "This isn't my war."

"It could be, if we're not careful," Corr said. "There are members of the Waterfall Court who believe that the Woodsmen are responsible for this. But if you help us find the truth? We can agree that you didn't do it."

"Nothing changes, though," Artus shook his head. "The Woodsmen and the Waterfall Court have been fighting for decades...ever since you built the castle on the hill and claimed our lands."

"I am Prince Corriban. You have my word, I will secure your Clans End as your territory. You and I could be the first steps to ending the conflict between our peoples."

"It's a nice dream, prince, but still a dream."

"Artus?" Venn asked, turning to him. "Please, I need your help. I still don't know if I can trust them, but I trust you. They're accusing you, I'm accusing them...you're the only one who is saying that they're innocent. You have the most to lose in this fight and I need you to help."

"It's a dream, Artus," Corr said. "But we can make it a reality."

Artus sighed and looked around. "Damn it, fine. But I'm not interested in losing out on good hunting."

"Three boars," Corr said. "Salted and good enough to last your Clan the winter."

"I don't know, we got a pretty big Clan."

"What if I threw in a herd of goats? Not for meat alone, but milk and wool?"

"We're not farmers, prince."

"Five boars," Venn said. "And I'll add one of my father's heifers, freshly butchered for a feast."

"It's a sad world when a man's price can be broken up into pounds of flesh," Artus said. "But war will make us hungrier than winter. Fine. But we should stay here for the night."

"I'll keep watch," Das said, dropping down and setting his bow aside. "Hardly a good hiding spot."

"She wanted the door open for the horse," Artus said. "And I was already keeping watch, clearly."

"Then get some rest," Corr said.

The pair moved back inside, Artus taking his spot on the floor with a knife in his hand. Venn hesitated a moment and looked over to Corr. "If you betray me," Venn said, "there will be war."

"If we don't work together, there will be war. I want peace...it's what our fathers have been working for."

"I know that's what my father wanted," Venn said. "And that's what drives us both."

Corr nodded and Venn went back inside. She said a quick word to the mare and the horse positioned herself in front of the door, lying down and glaring at Corr.

"Charming one, isn't she?" Das whispered.

"I'd rather work with her than against her."

"And the woodsman? What about him?"

"I believe him. He knows nothing about what's going on and he wants peace. We'll work with them."

"For now..."

"Until she decides she isn't interested in it any longer," Corr said. "She's not a prisoner."

"Get some sleep," Das said, frowning. "We're gonna need fresh eyes in the morning. I'll keep a lookout for any of his friends."

Corr settled on the forest floor, a small space in the clearing outside the tree trunk fort. He settled onto his side, resting his head on his arm. The last thing he saw as he drifted off to sleep was the mare's intense stare.

###

Morning was quiet. Venn woke up with her fingers still touching her ax handle. Esper still guarded the front door, though she had spread out and was lying flat on the forest floor. Prince Corr and his friend Das were still outside, the non-royal man holding the reins of a pair of horses that had been recovered in the early hours of the morning. Artus was sitting in his chair and tying up his boots.

"What time is it?" Venn asked.

"Morning," Artus grunted. "That's all I know."

"Artus—"

"You lied to me. You told me you wanted to go home and I promised I would get you there. I didn't ask to be in the middle of this fight."

"I didn't know if I could trust you."

"Yeah, me neither," Artus said, "but I did because you asked. And now I'm in the middle of this fight between the two of you! Horse Lords and Waterfall Court, leaving the Woodsmen in the middle as always."

"Everything I told you was true, but I couldn't tell you the part about being a princess. I'd like to think it wouldn't matter."

"Not to you," Artus said. "But your father's army is five million strong."

"And I thought you were equally afraid of five angry brothers."

Artus allowed a small smile and shook his head. "I'm trying not to be mad, honestly. I get it: I'm a no one. You're a princess. You needed help and I was your only option."

"Hey," Venn said, leaning closer. "You are not a no one, alright? You agreed to help me when I was a no one. That's worth more than any royal-loyal bowing and offering their lives for my cause."

Artus grinned again. He looked out to the other two in the camp and glowered. "What do you think about them?"

"We want the same thing for now. I think having the resources of a prince will be helpful in our fight. And for the record? I trust you more than them."

Artus nodded and sighed. "If we have to lose them? You're getting the three boars...and the other shit you promised."

"Deal," Venn said. "Let's go shake hands with the enemy."

Corr and Das were talking in quiet voices when Venn approached. As the princess stepped out, Esper rose up with a groan and shook her mane out before walking with Venn. The Waterfall Court horses backed away a little and bowed their heads. Venn hid the small smile that came with a swell of pride. These horses knew a bellemare when she approached. The prince and his friend would have to learn the same thing about her.

"We can check the abduction scene," Corr said. "See if it brings up any new clues?"

"Artus, let's assume these men aren't with the Woodsmen. Is there somewhere they might hide?"

"We protect the Clans End fiercely. And while there are plenty of places that they could hide, I know that the Under Valley could be useful."

"Under Valley?" Corr asked.

"You might call it Belen's Pass? It's a narrow, stone passageway that's overgrown from the top. We like staying away from it because there's not a hunter who hasn't fallen down there chasing prey. It's practically a rite of passage."

“Lead on,” Corr said, climbing up on his horse and looking down at the hunter. “Do you need a horse?”

“I’ll be faster than your horses,” Artus said. He looked back at his shelter and bowed his head to the tree trunk. After a final breath, he dropped the door of his shelter and walked over a fallen tree at a steady pace.

Venn took a few steps and climbed up onto Esper’s back. She looked at Prince Corr in the sunlight and considered him. He was handsome enough with the slightly rugged look of a hunter. His eyes were sharp and intelligent and Venn realized he was sizing her up, too.

“Prince Corr,” she bowed her head. “I wish our first meeting had been more productive for our nations.”

“Princess Venn, I don’t doubt that this will be as productive as any treaty. We find your father and set him free. That’s all there is to it.”

“My father spoke very highly of your father. I think they would have been fast friends.”

“I hope they still would be.”

“They will be,” Venn said. She clicked her tongue and followed Artus into the woods. He was only ever a few steps ahead, but the horses never outpaced him.

Around midday, Artus called for a break. He was able to keep a few steps ahead of the horses, but Corr was very quick to acknowledge that the road was harder on him than the riders. The horses were set free, both of the Waterfall horses acknowledging the strength of the Plains horse. Corr handed Artus his waterskin, noting that Artus’s had leaked out in their journey.

“Thank you, your highness,” Artus nodded, bowing his head.

“Woodsmen haven’t been affiliated with the Waterfall Court since we first encountered one another. You don’t need to call me any title.”

“Titles have always mattered,” Artus said. “I say it to respect your family’s lineage.”

“Respect should be earned, not given. I would ask for your trust for now. We can be equals.”

Artus took a sip from the waterskin and nodded appreciatively. “Equals it is.”

With a friendly nod, Corr stood and looked around. Das was standing a few paces away, looking towards the forest. Corr approached him and followed his gaze. "Do you see anything?"

"Nothing," Das shook his head. "But I'm ready."

"I've noticed. Be careful, Das. This is way too tenuous for our past to cloud things up."

"We're going into the middle of the woods—with a Woodsman—to find Princess Venn's father. For all we know, this is a trap."

"Or it's exactly what she says," Corr said. "Keep an eye out for threats, but I don't want to skew your vision towards woodsmen...or allies."

"You mean Plainsmen?"

"I mean, anyone who might be able to help us. I'm trusting your eye to see the truth: track for it."

"Understood," Das said. There was a neutral detachment to his voice, but Corr didn't sense any hostility. He accepted Das's response and walked over to where Princess Venn was tending to her horse.

"Magnificent mare," Corr said, approaching. "The Plains horses are revered the world over. I've never seen a horse react to a verbal command."

"We teach our horses to respond to multiple types of commands," Venn explained. "Words, reins...our archers can command their horses' direction with just their heels."

"Your archers go on horseback?"

"It's the fastest way to control the battlefield," Venn said. "We have a general and an Alving Master to coordinate the field from one tent."

"Truly? That's fascinating. I've heard of alving: a kind of singing?"

"Their voices carry much farther across the battlefield and they can sing commands."

"Efficient," Corr said. "We still rely on signal flares and messengers."

"We have the advantage of the plains. I doubt alving would be as effective in the woods. It may sound more like a ghost. My mother was practicing to become an alving master. That's how she met my father, actually. She was the daughter of one of the great houses and was training to be an alver. She was singing one day and she captured my father's ear, like a siren."

"My mother and father met in court," Corr said, smiling. "They were an arranged marriage, but they actually did love each other. In the tradition, they were allowed a few encounters before they would be wed. The first time they met, my mother met my father at Fall's Meet, where the falls strike the river below. They dueled with blades for the afternoon."

"I had heard a story about the War Queen!"

"War Queen?" Corr laughed. "No, my mother wouldn't touch a blade in anger. Dueling with Blades is actually more like dancing."

"Dancing?"

"There's an old court dance that requires swords. The striking of metal is actually part of the music."

"Quite beautiful. So much for the dream of a War Queen."

"That's not what I've heard," Corr said, "we have stories of you quartering men for looking at you the wrong way."

Venn laughed, a light and gentle giggle. "That's a gross overstatement. The truth is that an obnoxious suitor and I were on a ride. He said something coarse, so I called him out on it. I'll admit I was...harsher than I should have been. He fell off his saddle, but his foot was caught in a stirrup. He ended up getting dragged for a bit and busted his face a few times. Needless to say, we don't talk to each other anymore. He spread the quartering rumor, but no one in the Plains believes him."

"I like your version of the story better."

"We can keep going," Artus said, suddenly standing by Corr's shoulder. "If you're all ready?"

"How much further?" Das asked, already on his horse and riding over.

"One more long stretch. The Under Valley isn't far now."

Corr climbed onto his horse and rode beside Venn. The princess seemed a little brighter, though she fought the urge to gallop.

###

"This is it," Artus said. The revine was a narrow pass with a mess of vines covering the walls. The leafy boughs stretched over the gap overhead, casting the entire valley in shadow.

Emerald moss and steel grey lichen covered the walls and it felt like a moist, hot exhale passed through Venn's hair.

"So," Das said, dismounting. "Are we going to go into the terrifying cave in a single file line or two by two?"

"The passage is too tight," Corr said. "It's the perfect place for an ambush."

"The horses will have to stay out here," Das said. "I'll cover behind us. Artus, stay ahead and Venn and Corr will stay in the middle."

"I don't need defending," Venn snarled. "I'll take the lead. Artus, behind me. Corr and Das, take the rear."

"It's not up for debate, Princess," Das said. "It's our responsibility to protect the nobility."

"Perhaps in the Waterfall Court," Venn said, "but the Belle Mare protects the herd she leads. I brought you here; that makes what happens my responsibility. Now, if your duty is to follow orders, then do so."

Corr smirked a little when Das turned to him to protest, but only offered a consolatory shrug. "She's proven she's not a helpless maiden."

Venn led her proposed formation through the cave's mouth. Sound seemed to fade as she crossed the threshold and the shapes of bushes in shadow made her reach for the ax at her side. The group crept into the dark, but Venn was very aware of Artus staying in her periphery. Venn hated the cold feeling enclosing her, but couldn't turn to Esper for support. The tunnel seemed to smother her and every instinct told her to run back to her horse. Artus kept a careful eye on her, always a step or two behind. It wasn't the same confidence that Esper brought her, but his diligence gave her some comfort.

"I can barely see," Das hissed over the shuffling of feet. "We should get out of here."

"Maybe this isn't a place for eyes," Corr said. "According to Waterfall Court lore, Belen was a hero who moved through the pass completely in the dark. He did so by blindfolding himself."

"In the dark?" Artus asked.

"He removed the temptation to view the world through his eyes," Corr said. "I always thought it was a metaphor for traversing the darkness of ignorance, but maybe it's literally about not seeing."

Venn watched Corr tear a piece of his tunic off, the shredding sound as harsh as steel against steel. When he had a strip off the bottom, Corr tied the blindfold around his head and stood still. He took a deep breath and focused. “There’s something...movement.”

“Where?” Das asked, drawing an arrow.

“Nothing close. It’s the air itself. I can feel how it’s moving through the pass.”

“I felt it too,” Venn said. “I didn’t find it overly remarkable.”

“An air current would mean an opening,” Artus said. “Maybe it’s just the other end?”

“No, it’s...humid. It’s like the spray of a waterfall or morning mist. There’s a water source in here.”

“Not on any of our maps,” Das said. “Besides, what does a water source mean?”

“A likely place for someone to camp,” Venn said. “Corr, do you think you can lead us there?”

“I’ll stay by his side,” Artus said, a hand on Corr’s shoulder. “I think your Belen’s Pass story was partly luck. The path is treacherous.”

Corr stepped forward slowly, feeling the way with the toe of his shoe. Artus was able to guide him from the most obvious perils, but Corr explored every inch of the pass with the toe of his boot before putting pressure down. Venn and Das walked behind them, each watching their friend.

“Not for nothing, your highness,” Das whispered, just out of Corr’s ear, “but if it comes down to it? I’ll save Corr’s life over yours or your woodsman’s in a breath. He isn’t just my future king, he’s my friend.”

“I admire your courage and your strength,” Venn said. “It will be needed, but I bear no ill will to your court. Corr trusts me.”

“Corr has lived a charmed life. I have been a tracker and—as needed—spy. I was taught that no one can be trusted.”

“Then you’ve succeeded in teaching yourself that lesson, but diplomacy is about trust forged through actions. This is his attempt to earn my trust. I would hope, as his friend, you would respect that?”

“I respect him. I will follow him until my death, if I must. All I ask is that you do not hurt him. Whatever game you’re playing? I don’t want him hurt.”

“No harm will come to him,” Venn said. “Knowingly or unknowingly, through my action or inaction. I have no intention to hurt Corr.”

Das only grunted, surprisingly neutral from both admiration and disdain. Venn understood his meaning, but hoped Das wouldn’t vehemently live up to his words. Corr’s pathway was steady and led them further into the crevice. He turned right sharply and started towards the wall.

“Corr?” Venn asked.

Corr raised his hand and felt along the wall, pushing through a canopy of thick vines. He fumbled a few minutes longer, but eventually pulled the plants apart into an open tunnel. Venn felt a rush of cool, moist air and could see a faint light.

“A secret passage within the pass?” Artus asked. “Will oddities never cease?”

“I doubt it,” Corr said. “Stay close. The air feels...different here.”

“Remarkable sense you have for it,” Venn said.

“The Kings of Corriban Falls—and all princes—are connected with the waterfalls,” Das explained. “It’s supposed to be a legend, but Corr really does sense things that other people can’t. The rivers, the waterfall...it all speaks to him.”

“How?”

“You’d have to ask him,” Das shrugged. “I don’t have waterfall in my blood.”

The group walked in silence, Corr leading them towards the light. The side cavern opened into a small clearing, thick grass and moss covering the ground. There were a few circles of stones and a small spring with water bubbling up from deep underground.

“Das?” Corr asked. “Any idea where we are?”

“I have no idea. South of Belen’s Pass...looks naturally made, apart from the stone formations.”

“These are Tarring Rings,” Artus said, kneeling by one of the circles. “This was a Clan’s End.”

“Tarring Rings?” Venn asked.

“Druid circles,” Artus said. “They were also places where communities would come together to share food, stories...they’re the centers of our Clan’s End. If this place was abandoned? It would be seen as cursed by the Woodsmen.”

“Is armor part of your Clan’s End?” Das asked. He lifted a chest plate and showed the group.
“Looks well-made.”

“That’s my father’s!” Venn said, taking the chest plate and looking it over. “The two horses on the shoulders were his.”

“There’s a lot more armor over here,” Corr said. “Too many pieces for one man.”

“That means they took the armor of the other men!”

“But there’s no evidence of any bodies.”

“Not helpful, Das.”

“This is his sword,” Venn said, picking up the blade.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Artus shook his head. “If this were woodmen—as you say—we wouldn’t have left this just lying here. Good metal and fine weapons.”

“And what about the horses?” Venn said. “Keeping those would be too much effort.”

“Unless they used them for meat.”

“Das!” Corr snapped.

Venn looked through the armor pieces, rebuilding the sets with Artus and setting out enough full suits for each of the men in their unit. She kept her father’s sword on her waist, tightening the belt. Corr took a few steps towards one of the Tarring Rings and looked around. There was evidence of food and fires in the circles, as well as holes for tent poles and posts.

“If we came yesterday,” Das said, examining a fire. “We might have met them in the pass.”

“Can you track where they went?”

“No,” Das shook his head. “They were thorough.”

“Not thorough enough,” Corr said, looking to one of the other Tarring Rings. He knelt down by it and picked up a shiny object that had caught his attention. The knife was short, the blade only about as long as Corr’s hand and as thin as two of his fingers. “Parrying knife,” Corr said. “Not exactly a favorite tool of the Woodsmen.”

“From the Plainsmen?”

“No, they fight on horseback. A parrying blade like this wouldn’t do them any good. Only Waterfall soldiers would carry this.”

“Taken from a hunter?”

“Hunters wouldn’t carry these. Look at the hilt: twin lions.”

“What does twin lions mean?” Venn asked. She stood close by with one hand on her axe handle. Corr frowned and stood, approaching her with the dagger.

“The twin lions are a symbol of very specific soldiers. We call them the Waterfall Elite. They take orders directly from...from the Waterfall King.”

“Your father,” Venn said, coldly. Her hand jumped to the ax and she pulled it from the loop, catching the handle. “He ordered the men!”

“Venn, please, listen to me.”

“Your father ordered the attack on our people! Why?”

“He wouldn’t! Venn, this doesn’t make any sense. The Waterfall Elite should only take orders from the king, but he wouldn’t order this! If we go back to Corriban’s Palace, we can talk with my father and—”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” Venn snarled. “I’m going back to the Plains and I’m bringing every rider with me.”

“You would threaten war against us?” Das said, raising his bow and setting an arrow on the string. Corr’s hand snapped up and knocked Das’s bow downward, knocking the arrow away. He stood between Das and Venn, raising his empty hands.

“Listen to me,” Corr said calmly. “I said we wouldn’t take you anywhere you didn’t want to go. I intend to honor that promise. I don’t have an alternative solution, but this doesn’t tie into my father at all, I swear on the Falls.”

“Your oaths mean little to me,” Venn snarled.

“Then my actions will,” Corr knelt on the ground, calmly setting his hands, palms down, on his thighs. “You are free to go. We won’t pursue you, make whatever assurances or conditions you want. We won’t resist.”

“Corr...”

“We won’t resist, Das! That’s an order from your prince and a request from your friend. Am I clear?”

Das glowered, but dropped his bow and lowered to his knees, mirroring Corr's stance. Corr looked up at Venn, opening his body to an attack, should she choose. "You have my word...and my actions to follow as your proof."

"Artus," Venn said, not taking her eyes off Corr. "We're going. I need you to take me to the border south. Do you know the way?"

"I do," Artus nodded. "What about them?"

"Leave them here," Venn said. "They haven't broken their word so far, but if they follow us, I have some ideas."

"I beg you, Venn," Corr said, before the princess could turn away. "Please consider working with us. Our nations have always coexisted as neighbors, but we need not turn into enemies. Work with my father and we can find King Miros. And if you must turn your thoughts to war? Attack Corriban's Palace and the Waterfall Court...no innocent people."

"I'll respect your request," Venn said. "I don't want anyone getting hurt who doesn't have to. But if you continue to keep my father from me when all evidence points to your king? I will do what I have to to find him."

"You'll meet no resistance, I swear it."

Venn watched Corr carefully, her grip on the ax tightening before sliding the weapon back into the loop on her belt and walking back toward the passageway.

"Artus..." Corr said. "I still intend to honor our oath. You'll find the boars where we met in four days' time. That's enough for you to get to the Plains and back."

"I thank you, your highness," Artus said.

"And I hope you realize I include your people among the innocent. Don't let our war turn towards your children."

"I hope there is no war. Whatever the outcome, Corr? I respect you as King of the Waterfall."

"I'm just a prince."

"Not in my mind," Artus bowed his head. He pressed a hand to his chest and turned away, following Venn out through the passage.

"Leave them," Corr said before Das could fully get to his feet. "I intend to honor our word. Let them go."

“If she gets to the border, she’ll bring an army into the Waterfall Lands! They’ll burn our fields, slaughter our people...quarter our men!”

“I said, leave them, Das!” Corr snapped. He stood and walked over to one of the Tarring Rings. Sitting on one of the long, flat stones, Corr folded his hands together and looked at the ground. “Just leave them be.”

“Corr, you don’t think your father—”

“He wouldn’t send masked assassins under someone else’s banner, but the knife puts the Elites here where we found the Plainsmen armor. I have to admit it seems damning, but I don’t have an alternative. I don’t blame her for leaving.”

“She’ll bring war.”

“I’m taking a risk, Das, but I don’t think she’s going to hurt us. She’s scared and confused. Making her do anything right now would only make that worse.”

“Fine,” Das shook his head and sat on the stone next to Corr. “Well, imminent war aside, what’s next for you and me?”

“We do exactly what I suggested,” Corr said, lifting the dagger. “We talk to my father. The Waterfall Elite were here and they’re only meant to take orders from him. So either he gave the order that goes against what he believes—”

“Or there’s a corrupt person in court.”

“A rusty chain will break. We find out where the breaking point is and repair it. The order came from somewhere—no matter who—and if we find that, we’ll get the full story.”

“And we find King Miros,” Das nodded. “And if the princess finds him before us?”

“All the better,” Corr said. “She’d be more inclined to believe her father than you or I.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Not yet,” Corr shook his head. “Give Venn space to think and maybe she’ll come to her senses. And if not? I’ll sleep better knowing we did our best.”

###

The woods were quiet apart from the flutter of leaves on the breeze and Esper’s soft hooves on the ground. Venn had left Belen’s Pass so angry that she nearly set the other horses free, but Artus stayed her hand by just walking south. She had mounted quickly and followed while

stewing on her anger. After they had moved for an hour, Venn stopped checking over her shoulder for the Prince or his friend.

Artus didn't say anything, only walking forward at a steady and easy pace. Venn didn't care for the quiet, but couldn't think of anything to say. They didn't stop their march until Artus silently brought them to a river and set his gear down before sitting. Venn dismounted and let Esper drink and graze while she ate some hard rations.

"He didn't have to keep his word."

"Hmm?" Venn asked, looking for clarity more than repetition.

"We were outmatched and alone. Das could have shot me before you could swing your axe. And Corr could have overpowered either—or both of us—without breaking a sweat. Still, he stayed his hand and the hand of his friend. They didn't chase us out of the cave or follow us. And you're still thinking of war?"

"With the Waterfall Kingdom," Venn reasoned. "You're right. Corr didn't attack us, but he's blinded by—"

"He isn't the only one who is blind. Why is violence the only solution for any of you so-called 'civilized' nations? Corr wanted to take you to the King of the Waterfall! He could have helped you!"

"Don't the Woodsmen hate the Waterfall Court?"

"We have our history," Artus said, "but it's been earned. And even then, actions are more valuable than words. King Corriban VIII has exercised peace with us despite his court's desire to wipe us out. I think he is a good man...and Prince Corriban more so."

"I'll give you the boars he promised, if—"

"It's not about boars, Venn! You needed help and he was willing to, but you didn't even try to trust him."

"I trust you!"

"And because he didn't give you what you wanted immediately, you turn to war."

"This is my father we're talking about!"

"And if it were anyone else's father? Would war be your first instinct?"

"I...I don't know."

“Your passion clouds your wisdom. If your father were here, would he want you to spit in the face of those who would help you?”

Venn frowned and looked over to Esper. The mare had stopped drinking and was watching the interaction with her ears forward. Water flowed from the stream, a quiet murmur that punctuated the silence. Her father’s sword was heavy on her waist, but her hand rested easily on the rounded hilt with her thumb rubbing the sapphire at the base of the pommel.

“My father would always tell me: the strength of a man is his heart, not his hand. Maybe my heart is too strong and it overrides my head. I’m too angry at times. I know it clouds my judgment. I just want my father back.”

“Then we get him back. And the best way to find him will be by working with the Waterfall King...not the Court, the King.”

“They won’t let me just walk up to the king’s throne.”

“Corr will get you there. All you’d have to do is ask him.”

“You think he’d listen? After I nearly put an ax in his stomach?”

“You could have done worse.”

“I trust Corr, but not the court. We go back to the Plains and get more riders...not an army, but security.”

“Heaven forbid you travel alone,” Artus grinned. “Are you ready?”

Esper nudged Venn and exhaled sharply, hot breath blowing her hair back. Venn pressed her forehead onto Esper’s snout and stroked the mare’s neck. “Come on, old girl,” Venn said, hopping up onto the horse’s saddle. “Let’s ride...if Artus can keep up.”

Artus smiled and collected his things. Without another word, he started running through the woods, bounding off the trunks of trees and heavy branches. Esper took off after him without needing a command, her hooves steadily running through the forest.

###

Corr and Das rode up to the Waterfall Keep, taking the west bridge across the falls and galloping through the forward gate. Corr’s horse had barely stopped before he dismounted and handed the reins off to an attendant.

“Prince Corr!” A guard ran up and walked alongside Corr into the castle. “Your mother was getting worried and was preparing a search party. Did you find the princess?”

“I need to speak to my father,” Corr said harshly. He caught himself and blinked. “I’m sorry, I need to talk with him.”

“Of course,” the guard explained. “He and your mother are on the Overlook Balcony.”

Corr nodded and rushed through the halls of his home. Das stayed behind and tended to his own horse, reporting to his own superiors. There were a few servants working and attendants trying to look busy. The great hall was filled with other soldiers eating and resting after a long night of searching. The commanders were in the great room under a large taxidermy bear, debating and arguing over a map. People would bow and salute when Corr walked by, but he barely noticed them.

King Corriban and Queen Cheris stood as Prince Corr strode out onto the Overlook Balcony. “We’ve been worried sick about you!” Queen Cheris said, hugging Corr. “I kept having horrible visions of you dead in the woods!”

“I’m sorry, but the situation changed. Father, I need to talk with you.”

“The princess?”

“She was alive when I last saw her. She’s heading back to the Plains now.”

“You didn’t offer to bring her back to the castle?”

“I did,” Corr said. He looked around the balcony, hoping the venue would be private from prying eyes while the falls drowned out the sound of their conversation. Corr took the dagger from his satchel and held it out to his father.

“The Waterfall Elite?” King Corriban said, taking the blade. “Where did you find this?”

“With a lot of discarded Plainsmen armor. Father, I have to ask, would anyone else have access to the Elites?”

“Absolutely not! You don’t mean to suggest—”

“I’m not, but someone gave the order. Princess Venn wouldn’t come back to the castle because she’s convinced that we arranged the ambush in the woods. She met up with a woodsman and they’re heading south now.”

“You left her alone with a woodsman?” Queen Cheris asked.

“She wouldn’t have come back. He seemed like an honorable sort, but forcing her to come would have only made things worse.”

“I agree,” King Corriban said, “you made the right call. Where did you find the armor?”

“There’s a Woodsmen Tarring Ring inside Belen’s Pass. It’s completely grown over, but I can find it again if you want.”

“We’ll go out tomorrow and find it,” King Corriban said. “As for this dagger, are we certain it was because the Elites were there?”

“I’m not sure,” Corr said. “Only the Elites can carry these daggers. They basically act as your seal to get anything they need from the armory and the quartermasters. It doesn’t make sense for them to be lost so easily.”

“And to end up lost in an old Tarring Ring? That doesn’t make any sense. I didn’t even know that there was a Tarring Ring in Belen’s Pass.”

“I’ll talk with the commanders and find out who would know about the pass. And restrict the Elites to the Keep!”

“Check them for their daggers. If anyone is missing theirs, that’s where we need to begin our investigation.”

“Corr?” Queen Cheris stopped him from leaving with a gentle hand on his arm. “The princess: do we need to worry about her?”

“She seemed...upset. She seemed intent on bringing soldiers back, but I don’t know if war is her first choice. If she does bring an army, we can’t offer any resistance.”

“I agree,” King Corriban said. “There would be nothing to gain from going to war with our neighbors from the south.”

“Or everything to gain...” Lord Ferren stood in the doorway flanked by a pair of guards in red-tinged armor. “Your majesty, I implore you to briefly indulge my proposition.”

###

The rest of the ride felt thrilling to Venn. Artus was eager to bring her back to the border and was able to keep a few strides ahead of the mare. They made good time, using hunting paths and even riding along the streams where they were able to move faster to make up lost time. After running for most of the afternoon, Artus slowed to a jog and raised a hand to stop Venn.

“What is it?” Venn asked, slowing Esper to a trot.

“That smoke...” Artus pointed to a black cloud drifting up behind the tree line. “It shouldn’t be there. This path I’m taking you on shouldn’t have a town this close.”

“Where is it coming from?”

“Stay here...” Artus said. He reached up and pulled himself into the nearest tree. Venn clicked her tongue and moved Esper closer. Esper stopped under a branch and Venn stood up on her back, climbing up the branches right after Artus, following his grunts. He stopped when he got about three-quarters of the way up, panting and looking around. Venn climbed up and positioned herself on the other side of the trunk from Artus.

“What happened to ‘stay here?’” Artus asked.

“I want to see what you’re talking about.” Venn looked out towards the south. The Plains stretched on towards the horizon, cities dotting the river with farms stretching out like wings from every bend in the river. Venn couldn’t help but smile when she saw her home in the distance, the Plains House and the Great Stable blending into one massive fortress. “It looks like the map we have in my father’s hall. It feels like it goes on for leagues...”

“I’m more interested in what’s close to us,” Artus said, pointing down below. Venn followed his finger downwards and saw the camp spread out along the border. There were four tents with at least a dozen soldiers milling about, blocking their path. She had to squint, but Venn could see that they were wearing the colors of the Waterfall Court.

“Why are they there?”

“No idea,” Artus shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense for the king to set up a camp here... or any of those.”

Venn looked west and saw more smoke from more fires. The entire border, as far as she could see, was overrun with the thin city of tents. “There must be at least a thousand of them...”

“That we can see. I’d bet there’s at least twice as many patrolling the woods.”

“Can we slip by them?”

“Not by any paths I know. It feels weird. Why are they defending the whole border and not just the roads? It’s not like an army would slip by unnoticed through the woods.”

“I feel like they’re not looking for an army, just me. And no, I don’t think it was Corr. This is too much to organize in less than a day. This has been a move going on for a while.”

“No doubt the same architect who ambushed your party.”

“This is a lot of effort to go through for one person. Should I be flattered?”

“I don’t think this is about one person. Whoever is doing this has a bigger play and you’re only a part of it: prize or bait, I’m not sure. What now?”

“There has to be some way to get to the Plains. What about the river?”

“They have outposts dotting every mile or so along the woods. They’ll have more guards at the river than there are fish in the water. They don’t want you getting back, not without them letting you go and that won’t be for free.”

“We need to go to Corriban Falls, find Corr, and get to the root of all this.”

“We can’t go alone,” Artus shook his head and started climbing down the tree. “If this is what they have waiting for you at the border, they will be expecting you at the castle.”

“I don’t plan on going alone.”

“As always, I appreciate your faith in me, but I am not a one-man army.” Artus reached the lower branches and stopped when Venn was closer to him. “I know where to go from here...for guidance if nothing else.”

“Where?”

“My Tarring Ring...” Artus said. “Come on. You should meet the Woodsmen properly.”

###

“What is the meaning of this?” King Corriban yelled, stepping forward to defend his family. “Lord Ferren, you have grown far too bold of late!”

“Your majesty, please. This is an opportunity we can’t let slip by.”

“The only thing this ‘opportunity’ of yours will bring is war!”

“That’s exactly what I’m expecting. We’ve been trying to root out the Woodsmen for as long as we have held Corriban Falls. Yet, year after year, they keep appearing in greater numbers. If the Plainsmen think that their king was kidnapped by the Woodsmen, we would have a greater army. Their numbers combined with our knowledge will be the final nail in the casket of the Woodsmen. Every Clan’s End, every Tarring Ring...we’ll tear it all apart.”

“You want to turn the Plainsmen against the Woodsmen?” Queen Cheris said.

“The Woodsmen live in your forest, my lady, yet they pay no taxes. They offer no tribute; they don’t participate in our ways. They are parasites that we have never been able to rid ourselves of.”

“So, you sent Waterfall Elites after the Plainsmen,” Corr said, his realization sharpening into an accusation.

“Disguised as Woodsmen...” King Corriban said. “You planned the ambush?”

“A necessary gambit, but yes. I had hoped for less bloodshed, but the Plainsmen proved powerful fighters. They’ll be good to have on our side.”

“Under what authority did you command my Waterfall Elite?” King Corriban roared, pushing forward. “You have no right to—!”

“There have been times when the people were not powerless against the will of their king. And so, we made moves for the good of the people.”

“We?” Corr asked.

“The House of Lords,” Queen Cheris sneered. “I wonder, do you act to free the people from the will of the king or do you just wish to free yourself from your oaths?”

“What we do is for the good of the Waterfall Kingdom. Your majesty, those woods are potential: wood, food, furs, ore...and the Woodsmen have fought to keep us out for generations. But if we combined forces with the Horse Masters? Imagine absolute control and proper respect paid to us.”

“Paid to you, you mean...” Corr said.

“Which goes to the king and the royal family.”

“This is treason!” King Corriban said. “I order you, as King of the Waterfalls, to lay down your weapons and stop this foolishness!”

“I had hoped that you would agree with me, your majesty,” Lord Ferren said, “but if it means protecting our kingdom? I will do what I must.”

“Guards! Seize Lord Ferren! Take him to the dungeon!”

“The Waterfall Guard doesn’t owe loyalty to the king.” Lord Ferren raised a hand and more Waterfall Elites stepped out and surrounded the royal family. “They owe their loyalty to the

Waterfall Kingdom. If you won't cooperate, you should wait out of the way, your majesty...just until this is over."

"You can't do this!" Corr snapped, rushing forward. Two guards grabbed him by the arms and held him. A third came forward and took Corr's weapons while more guards surrounded his parents.

"If you had only agreed to marry her," Lord Ferren sighed and shook his head, "our armies would be joined by love rather than a common enemy. We could have done this without all the cloak and dagger, but you had to fight so earnestly for your choice...selfish."

"You won't turn this on me!"

"Take the king and queen to their chambers," Lord Ferren said. "I believe Prince Corriban would do well with some time in the dungeon."

"If you plan to put one of us in the dungeon," Queen Cheris said, shoving the guards to stand by Corr, "you will take all of us."

"Or you'll face a personal wrath, twice over," King Corriban said, holding his wife's hand.

"Very well," Lord Ferren said, "a family affair...to the dungeon with them all."

"Bet your life on it?"

Corr turned to see Das standing in the doorway, an arrow drawn back in his bow. The Waterfall Elite pressed in on him, but he quickly slipped around them and raised his bow again. "Let them go! The King of the Waterfalls gave you an order!"

"Put that away, boy," Lord Ferren said, annoyed rather than afraid. "You're outnumbered and outmatched."

"Maybe," Das said, "but I just need to cut out the rot in the House of Lords. Do you think you're faster than a speeding arrow, Lord Ferren?"

"If you try, these men will kill you."

"And I would die with honor rather than as some traitorous rat!"

"Das, don't—!" Corr pressed forward, but the Waterfall Elite pulled back hard on his shoulder and tightened his grip. In the flurry, Das loosed his first arrow.

The Waterfall Elite to Lord Ferren's right turned his body so his back blocked the arrow, the metal tip striking the guard's shoulder. One of the Waterfall Elite rushed at Das, closing the

distance with his sword drawn. Das fired two more arrows, but only one hit the charging guard, striking a narrow gap in his elbow. The guard's sword arm dropped to his side, but he didn't slow down.

The man rushed forward and slammed his full body into Das, throwing the young hunter over his shoulder. Das struck the Overlook Balcony and gasped for air, but the guard's heavy boot struck Das's stomach before he could catch his breath. Das swung his bow and smacked at the guard's open face plate, striking him between the eyes. The Elite snarled and grabbed the bow, snapping it over his knee and throwing it aside. In the brief moment, Das grabbed a dagger from his boot and cut the man's throat. With a roll to the side, Das was on his feet with his blade in his hand.

"I'll say it again," Das said, less forcefully with the wind knocked out of him. "Let them go!"

Lord Ferren waved a hand and two Waterfall Elites moved in, one from each side. Das fought them off, but he was winded and staggering. He swung the blade at the men when they got close, but Corr felt like the Elites were toying with him rather than fighting with honor. When one goaded him, the other would strike, sometimes with the flat of his blade rather than the edge as if to make the pain last longer. A deep cut in the bicep dropped Das's knife hand to his side, but he picked up the blade with his other hand. The Elites slowly closed in on Das, herding him to the edge of the Overlook Balcony. The bigger of the two smashed his armored glove into Das's knee and Das toppled to the floor, still wielding his dagger.

"You have heart," Lord Ferren said, stepping forward with one of the guards beside him. "You care for this kingdom, I can tell. You would make a fine Elite if you could focus that heart on the right cause."

"I'm not loyal to the kingdom," Das shook his head, wheezing. "I'm loyal to my friend."

"Potential is a terrible thing to waste. Attempting to kill a lord is punishable by death. Are you willing to die for your friend?"

"For my king? Without question. You may have the Elites, you may have the House of Lords, you may even have the armies of both kingdoms. But you will never be a king...only a warlord."

Lord Ferren turned and looked back at Corr. Corr couldn't help but feel pride in his friend, but his heart was pounding when Lord Ferren turned back to Das. Lord Ferren raised his foot and

kicked Das hard in the chest. Das toppled backwards, tumbling over the Overlook Balcony and falling.

“You bastard!” Corr thrashed, pulling the two men restraining him until a third grabbed his shoulders. Lord Ferren turned back to the royal family, a hard scowl shaping his face.

“You once told me the philosophy of Corriban II was worth reading. I followed your advice and found a passage that spoke to me: ‘Like the falls, all things come crashing down.’”

“‘Under the weight of great force,’ not pathetic worms!” Corr snarled. “When this is over, death will be too kind for you.”

“Take them to the dungeon,” Lord Ferren said, turning his back to Corr. “Perhaps cooler heads will prevail once his highness has had a chance to think about the future of our kingdom.”

Corr fought as hard as he could manage, requiring all three men to carry him down the hall. King Corriban was forcefully led down, but Queen Cheris kept gentle composure while staring venom at the traitorous Elites. They were all brought down to the dungeon, a damp stone chamber three levels beneath the castle. The guards dropped Corr hard on the floor and forced his parents in behind him. Before Corr could get all the way up to his feet, the door slammed and the Elites locked it behind him. “When I get out, I’ll gut you both like fish!” Corr slammed a fist on the prison door and seethed. “Face me like a man of honor, you coward!”

“Corr, save your strength,” King Corriban said, putting a hand on Corr’s shoulder. “We need a plan, not just anger.”

Corr slammed a hand on the door and squeezed his eyes shut. He pressed his head against the iron bars again and bit back a sob. His mother hugged him and pulled him close. “Das was your brother,” Queen Cheris said. “He loved you as his king, but as his friend first. Don’t waste his sacrifice. Use that anger, but focus it through righteousness.”

Corr took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. He cleared his throat and looked around the dungeon. The cell was roughly hewn stone with the only window revealing water rushing in a deluge from the falls outside. There was a collection of buckets in one corner and a roughly made bed with ragged blankets. As he adjusted to the light, Corr saw a dozen other men waiting in the room.

“We haven’t used the dungeons in years,” Corr said, turning to his father. “Since when did we have prisoners?”

“We shouldn’t,” King Corriban said, blocking the queen from the men. “Lord Ferren has been busy.”

“Busier than you’d think, your majesty,” a man spoke up. He was wearing simple clothes of a dark brown fabric. He had dark hair and bulky shoulders, but his demeanor was different from the others. The men were all standing straight and collected, but the speaker was recognized by them as a leader. Even then, his strong jaw and careful eyes caught Corr’s attention with a sudden familiarity.

“King Miros?” Corr asked.

“My friend Corriban,” King Miros smiled. “I would have words about the hospitality of your countrymen...”

####

The ride to Artus’s Tarring Ring was steady and uneventful. He led the way back to the river and crossed at a shallow break in the current. Artus took Venn sharply north toward a break in the cliff marking where the waterfall cascaded further east. Venn navigated Esper up through a set of switchbacks until Artus stopped. He waited for Venn on a taller rock so they were at eye level.

“The Woodsmen have survived only by keeping our location a secret. They won’t like you... or me for bringing you here, but there are ways to do this without either of us getting killed.”

“Tell me what to do.”

“Answer questions directly and clearly: no half-truths or dancing around answers. Be straight to the point and don’t talk down to anyone—especially any of the elders. Your goal is to convince them to take the Waterfall Castle, but you’re not doing it out of malice or anger. This is for your father and his freedom, not war. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“If they deny you, I swear I will find a way to take you to the Plains, as promised. All I ask is that you remember us. If this does become a conquest, we are still between you and the waterfalls. Peace is the only option. I’ll argue for you as best I can, but...the Woodsmen have much to lose.”

“All I ask for is an audience and their ear. Thank you. You told me Woodsmen fear horses. Should I dismount?”

“Not until they see you riding the creature,” Artus nodded. “It will make you more than a woman in their mind...they need to see the grace of the war queen.”

Artus led Venn up the path and turned into the cliff face, seamlessly disappearing between two large stones. The passage was narrow and Venn’s knees almost scraped against the rock walls as she navigated the corridors. Artus waited for her at each turning, silently signaling when she would need to adjust Esper’s course. After a few moments in the corridors, Venn felt the channel opening.

The Tarring Ring was clearly visible, but this site was more complex than the last Venn had seen. Where the last had felt dark and cold, this was alight with joy and community. The Woodsmen had built a massive camp around the stones: cooking fires boiled pots of soup in front of tents made of hide that each looked large enough for a dozen people. There were hundreds of men, women and children who all stopped and watched Venn ride in on her horse.

Artus led the way, clearing their path with a raised hand. Venn watched the people on both sides of her. The adults looked on with concern and many children hid behind their mothers. Still, Venn caught a few of the youngest looking up at Esper with awe. Artus stopped in front of a tent marked by a pair of enormous antlers of a long extinct giant. Without an announcement, three old men came out of the tent.

The men weren’t wizened or bent like the ones Venn knew from her palace. They had white beards and thinning white hair, but they stood tall and strong with broad shoulders. The leader of the group, with a squared-off head and a scowl, stopped a few paces for Artus and stamped a walking stick into the dirt.

“Artus, you bring an outsider to our home?”

“I have reasons, Elder Morr. She is not of the Waterfall Court.”

“Where do you hail from, girl?” Elder Morr said, looking up at Venn.

“I am Princess Venn, daughter of King Miros of the Horse Masters.”

A murmur went through the surrounding crowd and Venn heard a few whispers of ‘Horse Master’ with reverence. Elder Morr hushed the crowd with a loud hiss. There was still some

unrest, but people shied away from Venn's gaze. It seemed more out of fear of the elders than of Venn.

"Princess," Elder Morr bowed his head. "You have our respect and we are honored by your grace. But this is not your place. Artus should not have brought you here. We will grant you a reprieve and ask you to leave. We will relocate our Clan Hold again for the safety of our people. Artus, bring the Princess back where she belongs. And then, do not return. Do not seek us out."

"There is a far greater threat to your safety," Venn said. "I will leave, out of respect for your people, but first I ask for an audience."

Elder Morr exhaled slowly, looking around. "Mind our patience, Princess. We will grant your audience, but this is not your court."

Venn dismounted and stepped a few paces away from Esper. Esper took a cautious step forward, but stopped at Venn's verbal command, making the youngest of the group look up at her with awe. Venn harnessed the tiny spark of her hope and focused it into confidence.

"Elders," Venn said, clearing her throat, "I come to you not as a conqueror, but as your ally. The Waterfall Kingdom is not well."

"We need no outsider to tell us this," Elder Morr snapped. "You of the Plains are no better."

Venn bit back the urge to argue. "There will come a day I will reckon with that. I come seeking your aid."

"Another King," a second elder spat. "She insults us. We will not be pawns in your royal games for territories! You and the Waterfall Court fight for land, but you cannot own the land! We know this well and you would insult us by asking us to fight for you."

"You're already a pawn in the games of the Waterfall Court."

The village buzzed in confusion and fear. Elder Morr raised a hand and the crowd silenced. "We are not fools, Horse Woman."

"Even now," Venn said, addressing the entire village, "the Waterfall Court deceives for their gain by framing you for a horrible crime."

"What crime?"

"They kidnapped my father dressed as your people."

"We would never do something so underhanded!"

“Though we would not know. I myself assumed that the Waterfall Court would have brought you to kidnap him in my anger. I was wrong. Artus was kind enough to set me on the right path and he blocked my anger from sweeping through the kingdom without remorse. I now know that only the Waterfall Court is to blame. I believe there are those in the court who would mean you harm and would use this as their reason. I ask you all to help me save my father.”

“The Woodsmen will not fight for the Plains! We will—”

“My father would see peace and justice, not war. If we can free him, my kinsmen will ride to the Waterfall Court and seek out the truth. We won’t fight, only talk.”

“And if we don’t? Do you threaten violence?”

“I will go alone if I must, but my uncle comes in three days. And he knows nothing of the truth.”

“So if we do nothing,” Elder Morr said, “your kin would endanger us?”

“The Horse Masters are not your enemy,” Venn explained. “We came to the Waterfall Kingdom seeking allies. You could be counted among our friends.”

“For what purpose?” Elder Morr asked.

“Community,” Venn said, “brotherhood...friendship. All the reasons you keep to your Tarring Rings. But that dream won’t come to pass without my father. I would propose Ezera. Waterfall, Plains, and Woods: rejoined for the modern age.”

“Ezera was a distant dream,” Elder Morr said. “Though I remember stories of how things used to be. That was before your time and before the time of Plainsmen or Waterfall Courts. Ezera was our dream, not yours.”

“A dream we could share and rekindle,” Venn said. “I will heed your command and leave. But if your people will help me—for a united Ezera—I hope they will join me as the sun sets.”

“We have heard your words,” Elder Morr said. “Now leave us to our deliberations.”

“Of course,” Venn bowed her head. Returning to Esper, she stepped on the stirrup and swung her leg over the saddle. With a turn of the reins, Venn turned the horse and parted the crowd a few paces ahead of her. Artus nodded his head to her as she glanced back, but he made no move to follow her until sunset.

The younger kids looked up at her with awe, some new hope sparkling in their eyes. A warrior queen on a dreaded horse rode to their Tarring Ring with a dream of a united Ezera. It had all the hallmarks of a story told around the fire and Venn hoped it would reach the ears of the elders with the same fire as the younglings.

###

"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.”

###

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...”

###

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."

###

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 Cheris 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."

"Cheris, 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?”

###

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 Cheris? 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 Cheris 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 Cheris? 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 Cheris 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 Cheris bawked. "Your father said you would have a plan!"

"You've seen my father?"

"He's with my son and husband," Queen Cheris 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 Cheris 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 Cheris 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 Cheris, 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 Cheris 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 Cheris 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 Cheris 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!"

###

"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 Cheris 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 Cheris 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."

###

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 Ezera."

"Ezera...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.”

###

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.