

The Waterfall King: Part 3

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.