

The Waterfall King: Part 6

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...”