

The Waterfall King: Part 13

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 Ezerá. Waterfall, Plains, and Woods: rejoined for the modern age.”

“Ezerá 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. Ezerá 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 Ezerá—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 Ezerá. 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.