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THE CHILDREN OF CHEIRON

by

James Charles Rau

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Warning and Advisory!

Adult Content!

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CHAPTER 1: TOO MANY CENTAURS

Jacob shuddered. The centaurs were moving at a hard gallop. The pounding hooves were like sharp knives in his ears. They were upon him. They would not see him! Fear grabbed him by the throat, choking him.

Their menacing forms barreled around the dark corner. Their eyes went wide. They swerved to avoid him. The one on the left clipped him. A stench of sweat, moldy hay, and offal punched Jacob in the nose. The sideswipe sent him into a violent spin. A painful jolt shot through his legs as his knees struck the wet cobblestones.

The colt and filly turned and approached the fallen man. The filly extended her hand, but jerked it away when Jacob abruptly stood.

"By the gods!" the colt said. "Sir, are you hurt?"

Jacob blinked to clear the dancing stars from his sight. He patted his legs, arms, and chest to ensure that nothing was broken. He calmly smoothed the wrinkles from his linen tunic and knee breeches. He deftly laced the jean cord that served as a belt about his waist. He straightened his gray woolen cloak over his shoulders.

"No harm done," said Jacob with a tight grin. *These two are nothing but trouble. I'd best retreat.*

"Are you sure?" the filly asked. "Maybe we should find a doctor."

"No," Jacob said. "I don't want a centaur healer poking and prodding me." *Curse all centaurs!* They could have saved his parents from the plague if they had been so inclined. *So much for their legendary medicinal skills.* Where in Tartarus had the centaurs been when the Dark Death had his parents within its fatal grip?

He gave them a taut stare, but relaxed when he saw the genuine concern on their faces. They were maybe fourteen or fifteen years of age. No doubt brother and sister; the family resemblance was striking. But from whence had they come? They were not members of the local herd that dwelt in the foothills surrounding the village. The comely filly was like a flower about to bloom in expectation of spring. Her walnut eyes seemed to rhyme with her long, dark brown hair that fell just past her waist. But Jacob knew that when she matured she would indeed be a dangerous force. The colt had thick, curly hair that was as black as coal. His hazel eyes held a mischievous spark. He was fit and foursquare.

By the gods, he'll be a fierce warrior when he's grown. But the colt's innocent, gentle smile placed Jacob at ease. "I guess we gave each other quite a scare."

"We're very sorry," said the colt. "We were running too fast."

"You'll break your hooves running on these cobblestones," said Jacob, tapping a small paving stone with the toe of his leather sandal. "I'm to blame. If I hadn't been daydreaming, I would've heard you coming." He looked up and gazed at the clock tower at the end of the avenue. It was 21:11 centaur time or 9:11 if using the human scale.

"It's after curfew," Jacob said. "This quaint little village isn't safe after dark. It's best if you return to your camp."

"Why are you out?" the filly asked.

Jacob scowled anew. He didn't like being questioned, especially by centaurs. "My contract allows me one night off to do as I please after the harvest season. *The Treaty of Salamis* guarantees centaurs safe passage through the cooperatives, but you must respect our laws. Humans can't prance through centaur camps anytime they want. We're restricted to our towns, villages, and farms. Don't abuse the privileges that you enjoy."

"Well said," the filly pouted, "for a barbarian."

The colt bared his teeth. "I don't need a history lesson from you, two-legs."

Jacob blew a disgusted snort. *They're as arrogant as ever.* "I'm not about to stand here and argue. If the police catch you violating curfew, they'll have no choice but to take you into protective custody. No excuses. For your sake and my peace of mind, please go home."

"Why should you care?" the colt said.

"There are humans who have strange ideas about right and wrong," Jacob said. "I don't want their attention and neither do you. I say live and let live." *Let the dead bury their own dead.*

The filly studied the colt's angry visage. She stroked his shoulder, and then took hold of his forearm. "Come, he's not worth it. Let's leave him in peace."

Capitulation spread over the colt's face. He nodded as if he were acknowledging a major defeat, rather than standing his ground and fighting hard. They turned about and trotted away, the mist gyrating in their wake.

Jacob waited until their hoof beats faded. He shivered again, but not from the cold. Had he been so inclined, the colt could have strangled him with his bare hands. Fortunately, the filly, like most *Kentaurides*, had ample good sense.

By the gods, have I lost my mind? I should know better than to tangle with centaurs. Such impertinence will get me killed!

Jacob tried to relax his tense stride as he approached the inn, the ground beneath his sandals spongy, rather than solid. The young hayseeds had stirred his anger. They never change, and neither do we. *Someday we'll destroy them or they'll destroy us.*

* * *

Charon and Myrrha waited for Amycus. The centaurs stood near the edge of the clearing and surveyed the dense, dark woods. Myrrha swished her tail nervously and Charon felt it sting against his hindquarters. He held out his hand and the mare gladly took it. She smiled with relief as Charon gently squeezed her delicate fingers.

"How strong and handsome you are," said Myrrha, running her fingers through his curly, silver mane. "You're like the high mountains after a snowfall."

"And how lovely you are," Charon whispered. "You're like the midnight sky when full of stars."

"Do you think Amycus will come?" Myrrha asked.

"Yes. He's a faithful servant. My wild cousin has never failed me yet."

The rustle of bushes and the beat of weighty hoof steps drew their attention to the forest once more. Soon their eyes beheld the dark, wild, and imposing figure of Amycus. The swarthy centaur emerged from the forest and trotted into the clearing.

Amycus bowed slightly and spread his hands. "My respects and greetings to the *basilissa* and *basileus*. How may I serve you?"

"My greetings and respects to you," Charon said. "Please lift up your eyes and gaze upon this pitiful creature."

Amycus smiled. "What troubles you? Do you want me to mate with Myrrha again?"

Charon heaved a defeated sigh. "If only it were that easy. No, we desire no more children for adoption. It's a shame that your union with Myrrha bore no fruit, as she wanted—." He stroked Myrrha's back.

Myrrha caressed Charon's wide, golden chest. She gave him a demure smile. They broke their reverie and directed their undivided attention to the wild man once more.

"I fear that I've become tame," Charon said. "I need your instinct."

"How bad is it?" Amycus asked.

"Adramelech turns his face against me again," Charon said. "He threatens to lead the Lamioi to war."

"My herd will be utterly destroyed," Myrrha said. "Can't you defeat him?"

"No," Amycus said. "Adramelech is too strong."

"Then what can be done?" Charon asked.

"It's simple," Amycus said. "You must reverse the policies of containment and segregation. The humans must be taught to lead. Some are natural-born leaders. Nearly two thousand, nine hundred and seventy-six years have passed, and the two-legs have behaved themselves. Cheiron made his promise—*and we must keep it*—lest we disgrace ourselves. The humans are worthy of their inheritance. They have earned the legacy we have so diligently held for them."

"But there's been peace—," Charon said.

Amycus snorted. He shook his head, and his black mane swirled like dense smoke about his ruddy neck and shoulders. *Why do the tame ones forget Cheiron's wisdom?*

"Most of the prophecy has been lost to the ages," Amycus said. "Now it's but tatters."

"Recite it now," Charon said.

"Are you sure?" Amycus asked. "You might not like—."

"Recite it!"

"As you wish," Amycus said. He sang:

"Born a centaur...raised a human...he that would seize power comes from the dark woods...the Lord of the West...wounded spirit will...deny the truth...the children will choose...adore their teacher...an equal amongst us...brave the Lord of the West shall be...a leader of leaders...bound to follow us...to change the unchangeable...forge a new path...fires of chaos...a

maker of archons...and the children of the earth, and the children of the clouds shall play on the hills of peace forever and forever...."

"There's nothing more," Amycus whispered.

Charon frowned. "How do I overcome our people's reluctance to treat with a race of two-legged cowards?"

"I'll help you," said Amycus with a nod, "but you must trust me. I'll test the man. I'll prove to our people that he's not a coward."

Myrrha's face turned crimson. "I won't have any more of those two-legged serpents living in my garden!"

Amycus gave the mare a grave stare. "Lady Myrrha, verily I say unto you that your obstinate stance will result in the death of humans and centaurs alike." The wild centaur lifted his eyes. "The old path must be destroyed before it destroys us."

* * *

Jacob's thoughts became cool and practical. He was twenty-two. Big boys don't cry. Logic and reason. More light and less heat! The centaurs could take their dubious penchant for instinct and shove it under their tails!

The harvest report sat unfinished on his desk. He would have to return to the schoolhouse tonight to finish it. Archon Koprilla would be angry. The archon was always in a rush, errors be damned.

However, Chief Phoebe always encouraged Jacob to compile a precise account. The mare wanted every bushel counted to last grain. "*Take the time to do it right the first time,*" was her dictum.

But he wanted to learn new songs tonight. Jacob had spotted three trireme-class freighters moored in the harbor, and that meant that the off-duty crews would be at the inn, enjoying a hot meal and fresh wine. The sailors always brought the latest hearsay from the peninsula. They also brought their music. He would have lost his wits years ago if it hadn't been for music. Music was the sweet sound of mathematics. It proved that harmony existed in the universe. Somehow, it had made him smarter—and calmer.

The inn had been built after the cooperative received its charter a few generations ago. Patches of white plaster crumbled from the thick adobe walls. The sturdy roof, made of red tile, held steadfast against the rain, but the rafters would creak in protest if laden with thick snow. The thick fog dispersed the flickering light that filtered through the two stained glass windows along the wall. The old planks beneath his feet sank as he stepped onto the porch. He pushed the heavy oak door inward and walked through the foyer that separated the kitchen and office from the dining hall. He turned into the mudroom, where he hung his cloak on a rack peg. He checked his appearance one last time in the small mirror that hung on the wall. His parents had taught him to try to blend into the crowd, so Jacob had always taken pains not to draw attention. Like most humans, he chose simple fabrics, colors, and patterns. His best tunic was made of brushed wool, dyed the deepest blue, held in reserve for official functions, the harvest festivals, and religious holidays.

Jacob massaged his chin and cheeks. The stubble was like a currycomb beneath his fingers. Jacob liked that, for it gave him a rustic, outdoor shade that complimented his hard-planned face. Memories of his days at the teaching cooperative flashed through his mind, but he quickly squashed them. He wanted to forget those unhappy years.

He surveyed the dining area. The place was packed, with every oak table and bench occupied and all the stools at the bar taken by wine and beer enthusiasts alike. Argus Paraskos—owner, master innkeeper, and barkeep—served a fresh round of drinks for the patrons sitting at the bar and waited the tables. While they were the same age, Argus appeared older due to his balding head, baggy eyes, heavy jowls, and thick mustache.

Jacob shut his eyes, bowed his head, and exhaled. He combed back his mop of brown hair. He strode across the room to the empty oak chair next to the fireplace, enjoying the warmth of the crackling fire. A guitar stood nestled against the chair. He smiled as if he were meeting an old, trustworthy friend. His parents had given him the guitar on his fourteenth birthday during their travels through the Catalonian territories.

A sporadic round of applause arose from the regulars as Jacob lifted the guitar. He smiled and waved. He sat on the leather cushion and shifted until he felt comfortable. He flexed his fingers, waiting for the tension to release and the creative energies to flow.

He began to play.

There was that moment that everyone stopped, turned, and took notice of him.

He always cherished that moment. He did not worry about attracting attention. Some, captivated, would not divert their focus from the magic. Others would bounce their scrutiny like an errant palaestra ball. Most would ignore him completely. But Jacob did not perform for them. He played for those that enjoyed doing nothing but listening.

He gave the avid listeners much pleasure. His fingers danced upon the strings, drawing texture, rhythm, harmony, and melody. He would shift from major to minor key spellings to create light and melancholy moods, or syncopate the accents. Chords flowed, washed, and ebbed like the ocean tide, and melodies flew and banked, dove and soared like gulls on the wing. He would play for hours, improvising themes, motives and counterpoint.

He played until the fire burned low in the hearth. He rose, balanced the guitar within the chair, and then heaved another log atop the glowing embers. The seasoned wood smoked heavily but soon caught aflame. The fire would roar again. His stomach growled. A hunger pang, sharper than a lance, poked him under the ribs. Jacob thought that a late night snack was in order. His mouth watered and he smacked his lips as he ambled to the bar.

A firm hand grasped his forearm as he passed a table. Jacob stopped and gazed at the shiny bronze drachma that a sailor pinched between his thumb and forefinger. A thin mustache and pointed beard framed the man's windswept face.

"Sir, a thousand pardons," said the sailor with a meek smile. He eyed the drachma and then gazed at Jacob once more. "A token of our thanks. You play well."

"You're too generous," Jacob said. "No offense, but I play for myself. If others enjoy my playing, then that's fine by me. I can't accept your hard-earned pay. It's better spent on a round of beers."

The sailor slipped the drachma into a leather purse in playful resignation. He spread his hands in mock defeat. "Who am I to argue with such logic?"

"Make sure the man gets a beer!" said another sailor from across the table. He turned towards the bar and whistled at the innkeeper. "Hey, make sure this man gets a beer! It's on us!"

"Then allow Teacher Jacob to cross the room!" Argus cried. "Can't you see that the man's starving? By the gods, let him have his supper!"

Jacob gave the sailors a respectful nod and a quick smile before departing. He found an empty stool at the far end of the bar next to several untapped oak kegs.

Argus poured beer into a pewter stein and set it before Jacob. "Greetings, Teacher Jacob."

"Greetings, Master Argus," Jacob said.

"Would you rather have wine? The beer is fresh. The cooperative delivered it this morning."

"No, I'll have a beer," said Jacob, giving the sailors sitting nearby a side-glance. "Let's try to keep the patrons happy."

"I suppose you want your usual?" Argus asked.

"Yes, please," said Jacob.

Argus nodded, turned on his heel, and walked through the kitchen door. He returned a few moments later with a wooden soup bowl and spoon. He set the yogurt before Jacob, and retrieved a clean linen napkin from beneath the countertop.

Jacob's mouth watered afresh as he picked up the spoon and stirred the yogurt, evenly folding the sliced cucumber, onion, and dill through the creamy delight. He placed a spoonful in his mouth. The yogurt was cool and tart as it melted over his tongue. Jacob washed the yogurt down with a swig of beer.

"Excellent as usual," Jacob said.

"Thanks," Argus said.

Jacob gave Argus an expectant look. "And when do I get the recipe?"

Argus chortled. "Come on, Jacob. It's only yogurt. It's not an ancient family secret. Oh, and by the way, happy birthday."

"Thank you, Argus," Jacob said.

Argus absently slapped his cheek. "By the gods, I nearly forgot your gift."

Jacob groaned. "Gift?"

"Close your eyes," said Argus, "and soon you'll see a big surprise."

Jacob reluctantly shut his eyes and listened while Argus rummaged behind the bar. He winced when he heard the clanging of pots and pans. He chuckled in disbelief. Why did Argus treat him as if he were someone special?

"Okay," Argus said.

Jacob gasped in delight. An abacus! He nearly squealed in delight as he grasped it. It was elegant simplicity, consisting of a wooden rectangular frame made of oak, with a perpendicular crossbar separating two groups of beads. The beads had been cast from bronze, and slid along nine parallel wires that had been drawn from copper. He fondly recalled the day when a centaur mathematician had visited the teaching collective and demonstrated how the abacus was a visual placeholder for performing calculations. It would prove handy when he tallied the crops for the cooperative next year.

"Thanks, Argus," said Jacob with a grateful nod, "but how did you manage to get your hands on one?"

"Chief Phoebe gave it to me and told me to give it to you with her compliments." Argus leaned forward and winked. "That mare must really like you."

Jacob absently fingered a bead. "That was nothing."

Argus snorted. "Nothing?" He was baffled by Jacob's reticence. "Give yourself credit. If it hadn't been for you, the centaurs would've revoked our charter and stationed a garrison here, or worse, they might have wiped us from the face of the protectorate."

"I swore an oath," Jacob said. "I did what I thought was best in everyone's interest. Chalk is my sword and the blackboard my shield. It's with these weapons that I battle ignorance and stupidity, I guess."

"Speaking of stupidity," said Argus, "how that village idiot became archon is beyond me."

"As I recall, Koprilla was elected," Jacob said.

Argus rolled his eyes heavenward. "He should be recalled. I'm sorry to spoil your supper, but Koprilla is here." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Back room."

"And he wants to see me?" Jacob said.

"I'm afraid so," Argus said.

Jacob nodded. He shoved the last spoonful of yogurt in his mouth and gulped the last of the beer. He belched loudly as he dismounted the stool. He sauntered through the dark corridor leading to the private booth in the rear.

Argus watched until Jacob turned the corner. He frowned and his nostrils flared in a disgusted sniff. *Why couldn't Koprilla let Jacob do his time in peace?*

Jacob could hear muted voices beyond the heavy pine door. He hesitated while curling his hand into a fist. He rapped three times.

The curt reply was as sour as spoiled grapes: "Enter!"

Jacob gingerly turned the iron latch and slowly pushed the door inward. He saw the archon first, but spied two sailors in the dim candlelight. The sailors wore the blue pea jackets of merchant navy officers. The gold and silver anchor insignia on the epaulettes indicated that the two men were the captain and first mate respectively. They had just finished a late dinner. The empty plates were stained with the remnants of gravy. Red wine pooled at the bottoms of the crystal goblets. Breadcrumbs littered the tabletop.

Jacob gave the officers a respectful nod and then turned to Koprilla. "Pardon me, archon. You have guests. I'll return later."

"No," Koprilla said. "Our business is finished."

The officers rose from their chairs and buttoned their pea coats. Jacob stood aside as they retreated. He shut the door quietly after them.

"Don't just stand there," Koprilla said. "Sit down."

Jacob sat opposite Koprilla. The chair uttered a rude squeak when the teacher shifted it on the floor. He pushed the plates and goblets to the side while at the same time trying to avoid eye contact with Tyrone Koprilla.

Koprilla was wearing his formal dress uniform. The gray double-breasted tunic and ankle-length trousers were pressed to perfection. Jacob easily imagined the sharp creases slicing through the toughest side of beef. The brooch pinned to the right lapel bore the insignia of the archon's office: A golden centaur archer set against a field of blue enamel.

But by the gods! That face! Koprilla always had a twisted, perpetual grimace, as if he were overcome by constipation. Jacob could not recall Koprilla smiling or laughing. The archon always claimed that he was a serious man for serious times. Jacob dismissed it as absurd vanity. *The centaurs were in charge and knew it!*

Koprilla folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "I've heard disturbing news."

"Disturbing?" Jacob asked.

"Yes. Little Nicky. He asked you if Cheiron was a pervert and had taken maidens as lovers."

Jacob recalled the question, and did his utmost to stifle a chuckle. Nicholas Demetrious was a precocious student and the boy could be a handful at times. But his test scores were promising! Jacob wanted to nominate the youth for placement in one of the teaching academies. The protectorate had been in short supply of good teachers for far too long.

"Yes, I remember," said Jacob. "I gave him the standard answer. I told him that Cheiron had enemies that tried to spread vicious rumors and lies about him."

Koprilla glared. "You shouldn't have answered the question at all!"

Jacob returned the glare and gave the tabletop a resounding slap. "Cheiron, in his wisdom, said that there are no forbidden questions."

Koprilla curled his lips and blew a disgusted grunt. "But there are forbidden answers. I expect you—a teacher—to be more discreet."

"I teach *The Law* as it was taught by Cheiron," Jacob said. "I teach *The History* as Cheiron taught it. I add nothing and I withhold nothing."

Koprilla stared at the floor. "Next you'll want a commendation for loyalty. You've caused nothing but trouble since you came here."

Jacob's mouth fell agape. "You're calling me a troublemaker?"

"You're attracting the wrong kind of attention," Koprilla said. "Two centaurs came to my office this morning. They wanted to see your dossier."

A lump formed in Jacob's throat and he had to gulp hard to force it down. "A colt and filly?"

"No!" Koprilla growled. "Lord Charon and Lady Ianthe."

Lord Charon? Lady Ianthe? But those titles were reserved for—.

"I think it's time that you moved on," said Koprilla with a jubilant smirk. "You constantly undermine my authority."

"Archon, that's not true and you know it," Jacob said. "Is it my fault that the common folk mistakenly believe that just because I'm educated that I'm wise? I haven't a clue as to why people seek me out. They just do. I try to—."

"Don't play innocent with me."

"It would help if you would listen to what the common folk have to say!"

"No, you listen," said Koprilla with a fierce scowl. "A cooperative can't have two archons. Do you know why I was meeting with those two officers?"

Jacob winced. "You booked passage for me on their ship? How dare you—."

"They sail tomorrow for the peninsula. You'd best be aboard."

"But I wanted to petition Chief Phoebe for residency when she returned from the isthmus," Jacob said. "I want to settle down. I want to have a family. This is my home now. I'll have your ruling overturned on appeal. My contract—."

"I declare your contract null and void! You exceeded your authority." Koprilla abruptly leapt to his feet, knocking his chair to the floor. He stormed for the door, threw it open, and strode through the jamb.

All because I dared ask the centaurs if we could expand our orchards. Archon Koprilla did not want to ask. What a fool. It may be our land, but the centaurs are the landlords!

CHAPTER 2: AN OFFER OF ESCAPE

Jacob slumped on his stool like a sheaf of wet barley. He lifted the guitar into his lap. He played an arpeggio and then began to strum. The song was a deep blue, churned melancholy gray like the sea during a storm. Not that anyone cared. Most of the sailors had departed the inn for their ships. The few seamen that remained were engaged in an animated dispute over how to split the check. Jacob heard the door creak ajar and shivered as an icy draft swept over him. He glanced at the entrance.

The stallion and mare cast indifferent stares about the dining hall and then approached the bar with measured hoof steps. Upon seeing the centaurs, the sailors quickly resolved their monetary squabble. They hurriedly dropped their money onto the table and beat a hasty retreat.

Jacob winced as if a wasp now threatened him with a nasty sting. *By the gods, I'm seeing too many centaurs tonight! First, it was that colt and filly, and now these two. What's happening?*

He felt puny. Adult centaurs were impressive from any angle. Jacob, however, felt intimidated, rather than inspired. While he considered Chief Phoebe an ally, he never forgot his place. He was just one man.

Argus greeted the centaurs with a respectful nod. As was the custom, he addressed the mare first. *Centaur mares always came first.*

"What would my lady like?"

"Blush wine, please," said the mare.

"And for you, sir?"

"Ale," said the stallion.

Argus poured their drinks and set the mugs before them. "Please excuse me. I must see to my dusting and sweeping. If you need anything, just give me a shout."

"Thank you, master innkeeper," said the mare.

"See to your duties," said the stallion.

Argus withdrew into the kitchen. Jacob resumed playing. He could not escape and did not want to try. The centaur form had a beguiling appeal to humans. Human philosophers had described the noble symbolism of the reasoning mind over the animal instinct. The centaurs were proof that their civilization was superior to that of human tribalism.

Again, Jacob cast an inconspicuous glance. The mare had the normal, olive-skinned complexion of her kind. Her long chestnut mane fell past her bare breasts down to her knees. Her pelt was tawny and shimmered with every twitch of muscle, as if brushed with a fine coat of oil.

Jacob wagered that the stallion always caused an excited stir wherever he went. His physique was like that of a marathon runner. His mane was like a crown of curled silver, and his beard trimmed to a neat point. Skin like a sheet of translucent, warm gold wrapped his upper torso and arms. His hide was like a snowdrift, his tail like a sweeping cloud. His hooves were as black as obsidian and just as sharp.

They were naked, save for the leather utility satchels tied about their humanoid waists, and the crossbows and quivers full of arrows slung across their backs. The centaurs were a hardy race, and needed few garments to protect them from the natural elements. They were born naked and died naked.

Jacob became aware that the centaurs were conducting an intense study of him. They would stare over their shoulders, turn their heads and shift their torsos together, converse in hushed tones, then inspect him from head to toe once more. He could not hear what they were saying, but it made Jacob tremble to know that they had taken notice of him. Once, when their eyes met, he gave them a thin smile and courteous nod. Both centaurs reciprocated with smiles of their own, the stallion bashfully cocking his head and swishing his tail. There was also something familiar about the smile on his lips: Sweet, childlike, and innocent.

Jacob swallowed hard. *That colt and filly—he's their father!*

He watched as Argus emerged from the kitchen carrying a straw broom and copper dustpan. His interest peaked when the mare placed a hand on the innkeeper's shoulder to stop him. The mare pointed in his direction and then asked Argus a question. The innkeeper nodded and Jacob stopped playing to devote his full attention to his friend.

Argus looked furtively over his shoulder at the centaurs, and pinched his bushy mustache between his thumb and forefinger. "Do you know those two?" he whispered.

"No," Jacob said.

"They want to buy you a drink."

"And?"

"I eavesdropped," Argus said. "They want to make you an offer."

"A glass of red, if you would please," said Jacob, rising from the chair. He secured the guitar and sauntered to the bar.

Argus hurriedly returned to his station and uncorked a fresh bottle of red wine. He filled a crystal wineglass to the brim and set it before Jacob. Argus excused himself and set about with his sweeping.

Jacob sat next to the mare. There was ample space between them, but he wanted to keep a sharp eye on the stallion. Stallions could prove unpredictable and he wanted an emergency escape route.

"Greetings Lady Ianthe," Jacob said. "Greetings, Lord Charon. You wish to speak to me?"

Charon cocked an eyebrow. "You know who we are?"

"Who else would you be?" asked Jacob with a forced smile. He fidgeted on the stool. It could be bad news if centaurs were looking for you. Centaurs might hate humans, but they detested cowardice. To show the slightest fear would give offense. *The Children of Cheiron* were, on rare occasion, reasonable, but if they thought that a human had wronged them, nothing but a generous bloodletting satisfied their honor. They also had the nasty reputation of hunting the descendants of ancient enemies to exact revenge.

Jacob knew of black sheep amongst his long dead ancestors, but his parents had died before they could reveal the gory details. If the centaurs were going to kill him, then he would die with dignity and grace. He was not about to fall to his knees and beg for mercy. He would deny them that pleasure. Since they had not slain him on mere sight, Jacob realized that he was safe.

Safe for the moment.

"Archon Koprilla told me that you read my dossier."

"I find it disturbing that Archon Koprilla is so blatantly indiscreet," Charon said. "Ianthe, please make note of it."

Ianthe nodded somberly, and then fixed an eagle's gaze upon Jacob. "We'll come straight to the point. Charon has almost completed his inspection tour. We're returning to Pelion."

"Then may you have a safe journey," Jacob said. "I sail for the peninsula tomorrow."

"I don't understand," said Charon with a puzzled frown.

"My lord should know that Archon Koprilla has banished me," Jacob said. "I embark on the tide, final destination unknown. He dissolved my contract with the cooperative." He grinned remorsefully. Why in Tartarus was he burdening them with his problems? "Sorry, I shouldn't flout the chain of command—."

Charon raised an impatient hand and Jacob shut his mouth. It was always best not to bore the centaurs with too many details.

"Archon Koprilla doesn't know *The Law*," Charon said. "While he has the authority to dissolve your contract, he cannot banish you without the consent of the local chief or territorial governor. As a teacher, you're an agent of the state and therefore have the right to appeal. I'll have a word with him in the morning. I'll remind him that circumventing *The Law* can have serious consequences."

"Thank you, my lord," Jacob said.

Charon smiled. "My pleasure. Shall we continue with our business?"

"Please," Jacob said.

"Questions," Ianthe said.

"Yes, my lady?"

"You declare the Black Forest as your birthplace, yet neglected to mention the name of the cooperative, township, or village. Where were you born?"

"I don't know, my lady," Jacob said. "I was born while my parents were traveling between the northern and western territories."

"I know the tribes of the Black Forest," Charon said. "I conducted an inspection tour of that region some twenty-odd years ago. The humans speak plainly and work hard." He gave Jacob an appreciative nod. "You speak plainly enough."

"You've served this cooperative as its teacher for many years," Ianthe said. "We've made inquiries. Many folk think highly of you. Some suggested that you would make a good archon."

"I wanted to apply for permanent residence," said Jacob, "but my latest tangle with the archon won't sit well with Chief Phoebe. She'll have no choice but to agree to the transfer."

"You can appeal—," Charon said.

"No," Jacob said. "I owe Chief Phoebe my life. I could've disappeared. Instead, she listened to what I had to say. I won't slap her face with an appeal. There would be an official inquiry and she could face a court martial."

"You need a new contract," Ianthe said.

Jacob hesitated before bringing his drink to his lips and then silently damned himself for doing so. *I'm like an open, dusty tome.* "Begging your pardon, my lady, but am I to understand-."

"We offer you tenure," Ianthe said.

"There are centaurs better qualified," Jacob said.

"I have other ideas," Charon said. "First, it will set the proper example. All centaurs are deeply involved with their children's education. You know that we sometimes engage itinerant tutors, especially if we lack any particular skills ourselves."

Jacob fought to keep a sour frown from rising on his face. *As do we, my fine centaurs.* We barbaric humans are just as devoted to our children as you centaurs are to yours. You have no monopoly on that aspect of civilization.

It was not so much what Charon had said, but how he had said it, as if humans allowed their children to run wild. Jacob thought it best to be ignored. His race preferred the wisdom of quiet anonymity. Was that too much to ask? To attract the attention of the centaurs could prove fatal. The centaurs knew they were superior, but did not feel it necessary to hide their dominance behind a veil of false modesty. Human sensitivities seemed alien to them. There was no give and take. Jacob wondered if the centaurs were even aware of it. Did they not call themselves *The Children of Heaven*?

"Then I would be teaching—?" Jacob asked.

"Yes," Charon said. "Arcas and Orithyia are interested in learning *binary logic*. Do you know it?"

"I know it fairly well," Jacob said.

"What was it that I read in your dossier?" Charon said. "Teaching Academy 333 awarded you honors for mathematics, with special recognition for your work in *binary logic*. That academy is renowned for producing excellent teachers. The professors don't bestow praise lightly."

Jacob shrugged. "Numbers do fascinate me, I guess."

"The children should understand humans," Ianthe said. "You would be a teacher and companion."

"I shouldn't waste your time," Jacob said.

"Pardon?" Ianthe leaned forward, and Jacob felt a fresh pang of fear, as if the mare was not about to take no for an answer.

He realized that he was slouching on the stool and sat upright. Jacob took a long swig of wine. The time had come to end the farce.

"I've met the children," Jacob said. "We quarreled earlier this evening. I didn't want to tie their tails all in a twist, but—."

Charon winced in anger, as if a currycomb had been drawn against the natural lay of his pelt, but his wrath subsided as quickly as it had arisen. He heaved a sigh, but then smiled.

"Thank you for seeing to their welfare," Charon said. "My daughter, Orithyia, was impressed with your courage. Arcas was angry, but colts will be colts."

"You're welcome," said Jacob, suppressing the urge to gulp. *I'll be damned!*

"It's late," said Charon. He yawned loudly and stretched his arms high over his head. "Why don't you sleep on it? We'll talk again tomorrow."

Jacob bowed slightly. "If it pleases you."

"Tomorrow then," Ianthe said. "We'll see you after lunch." She took hold of Charon's forearm just as he was reaching for the remainder of his ale. He growled softly but then gave her a resigned smile. As the centaurs turned and trotted for the door, Charon swished his tail upward. Jacob had to stop himself from gasping aloud at what he saw, or rather, what he did not see.

A gelding! Charon had been stripped of his stones! Jacob felt a sympathetic pang surge through his gonads, but the implication was extremely unpleasant. *I pray he's not one of those perverts!* Centaurs were liberal when it came to sexual matters, but like humans, they were horrified by rape and incest. Castration was rarely inflicted on those stallions that wandered off the moral trail. There were ugly whispers that some stallions preferred the company of fair maidens and handsome youths alike. It was said that some mares enjoyed the thrill of seduction! The centaurs felt that to mate with a member of an inferior race reflected badly on them all. The punishment for humans was far more severe. A man might lose his head if he cast one admiring glance too many at a pretty filly.

Jacob spun about on the stool and drew his finger along the top edge of the wineglass. The crystal sang a sweet song. Argus tiptoed from the kitchen and poured himself a mug of ouzo.

"What do you think?" Argus asked.

The heady aroma of anise that wafted from the innkeeper's mouth made Jacob's eyes water. "To be honest, I don't know. I can hardly believe it. It's not an order. It's not a command. They're giving me a choice."

"They must want you badly," Argus said.

A derisive laugh choked in Jacob's throat. "Beware of centaurs bearing gifts! That ouzo has gone straight to your head. *Who am I?* I'm nothing special." He shook his head in disbelief. "Sorry, Argus. Too much wine. I'll sleep on it."

"Don't worry," Argus said. "What's the worst that can happen? Chief Phoebe will approve your transfer."

Jacob slipped off the stool. "Goodnight Argus."

"Goodnight Jacob."

* * *

The soldier saluted smartly, swinging his right arm prone against his chest, clenching his fist. "My apologies, sir," said the stallion, "it was not my intention to intrude."

"At ease," Charon said. He returned the salute. "Never apologize for following orders."

"Yes, sir," said the officer.

"Return to camp and make your report," Charon said.

"Thank you, sir." The officer gave a respectful nod to Charon, and then to Ianthe. "Goodnight, my lady." He trotted about and cantered out of sight.

"Tereus must be worried," Charon said.

"It's his job to worry," Ianthe said.

"Yes, but he's like a smothering dam. He's not the only one capable of defending our interests."

They cantered along the street, heading for the outskirts of the village, the click-clop of their hooves against the cobblestones echoing through the night like distant gunfire.

Ianthe caressed Charon's shoulder. "What do you think, my brother?"

"I don't know what to think," Charon said. "Although the humans are very adaptable, Teacher Jacob does concern me. Perhaps I should've made it an order, rather than a boon. Still, we must take great care. No harm must befall him. It would dishonor our herd." He halted in his tracks and slapped his forehead.

"What's the matter?" Ianthe asked.

"I'm such an idiot," Charon said. "I forgot about the special option in the tenure contract."

"You can discuss it tomorrow—."

"No," Charon said. "Humans have a bad habit of making decisions before hearing all the facts. Teacher Jacob may decide to decline our offer. It's important that he know about it. He may sleep easier knowing that he is free to resign his commission."

"He's quartered in the schoolhouse," Ianthe said. She pulled a map from her satchel and unfolded it before Charon. "It isn't far. We can catch him."

Charon smiled ruefully. "Remember the good old days, when our people could outflank humans by tracking their scent? Now we're spoiled by fancy toys."

"I wouldn't think of it as a plaything," Ianthe said. "It's merely a tool."

"That map was made by human cartographers," said Charon, giving the chart an impatient poke. "Surveying is a human specialty."

Ianthe refolded the map. "We've nothing to fear. Teacher Jacob has sworn to obey. He must obey. Centaurs lead and humans follow. It's always been that way."

* * *

Jacob shuffled along the main street until he came to the marketplace. The streets were deserted and the flickering torches nearly spent. The villagers had thought it best to retire to warm, safe beds. It was better to stay inside if centaurs were around.

He paused before the weaver's shop and peered through the cantilevered bay window. Master Weaver Joseph had proudly installed his new purchase just within the storefront for all to see. There was a bright, complex pattern of a centaur archer emerging on the woolen sheet. The weaver had announced the arrival of the strange loom by posting a handbill on the public stele situated in the village triad. The output of the loom was determined by a series of punched cards. Jacob wondered if it would be possible to program other machines using the same method.

The fog had lifted, and Jacob could now see the schoolhouse perched along cliff's edge overlooking the harbor. He began to ascend the switchback trail. Jacob liked the sense of security his modest quarters gave him. The walls were solid masonry a half cubit thick. The foundation was two cubits wide. It seemed to mock every earthquake, swaying gently when the ground trembled, like a jolly man laughing at a good joke. The classroom occupied the first floor and his quarters, the second. He knew that the schoolhouse would still be standing long after he was but dust in the ground.

The children only attended school after the harvest and before the planting season. Most often, Jacob would teach in the fields, or visit the families on the outskirts of the cooperative to gather the homework assignments he had given out at the start of the year.

But Jacob realized that he was only deluding himself. Now that Koprilla had dissolved his contract, he would have to vacate the schoolhouse. Maybe he could trade the sweat of his brow for room and board. He knew that most of the farmers were sympathetic to his plight. He could not stay at the inn, as that would only make trouble for Argus.

He trudged along the concrete stairs, the wooden handrail cold and damp beneath his fingers. Jacob stepped off the second floor landing onto the recessed porch. A thick cement wall facing the stairs created a visual barrier, yet served as a comfortable perch on which to sit. An iron gate guarded the entrance to the porch. The rusty hinges squeaked as he closed the gate behind him. He swore in frustration as he fumbled to retrieve his key from his pants pocket. He silently damned himself. Too much wine and beer. A teacher was to be sober and serious while on station. He shouldn't drink like a centaur. Drunken bastards, all of them!

Jacob stepped into the inky alcove. He stopped dead in his tracks. A man lay on the floor, curled into the fetal position. Jacob drew a startled gasp as his heart skipped a beat. He regained his composure and studied the man.

The stranger wore rumpled and ragged clothing. He had a scruffy beard, wiry mustache, and unkempt black hair. He clutched a half-empty bottle. He certainly was not some drunken sailor who had wandered away from his ship. Just who was this outsider? If the police had found this forsaken soul asleep on the streets, they would have hauled him off to the fields, or assigned him to a work detail. Idle hands made for a starving body.

Jacob crouched and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry sir, but you'll have to sleep elsewhere." The guilt itched like a mosquito bite. "Maybe I can make you a sandwich?"

The man muttered an obscene suggestion. He rolled over and pulled his tattered coat over his head. Jacob winced in frustration. *Trouble! Nothing but trouble!* He drew cold air between

clenched teeth. He was tired. Damn it all, he wanted to go to bed. His sympathy evaporated into steaming anger.

"Shall I request your usual cell?" Jacob said. He retreated to the porch. He would call the police and let them deal with this slimy flotsam.

The vagrant leaped into a dark, undulating tower. He swung the bottle at Jacob's head. The teacher jumped back. Jacob felt chilly air rush past his face. The bottle missed his nose by a hair. It slipped from the tramp's hand and flew into the wall. Jacob raised his hands to shield his eyes from the flying shards. He turned and ran for the gate. The thief reached into his jacket and withdrew a butcher knife. He swung the blade.

Jacob tried to open the gate, but the rusty latch stuck fast and would not budge. The robber grabbed him by the back of his collar and threw him onto the icy floor. Jacob landed flat on his belly and grunted as a wave of pain crashed through his body.

"My lord sends his compliments," growled the cutthroat. He gave the butcher knife a menacing wave. "You'll regret the day you were born."

Jacob managed to get to his hands and knees. He stared into his attacker's eyes and saw pure rage. The loose clothing had hid the lunatic's burly physique. *But what was this maniac saying about a lord and regret about having been born?* It was utter nonsense. Jacob knew he could not beat him in fight. He would die over the few drachmas in his pocket.

The thief lumbered toward Jacob, the butcher knife high over his head. The gleaming blade began to arc downward. Jacob caught his foe by the wrist. The teacher yelped as the dull edge sliced the back of his left hand. He began to kick and scream wildly as he and his attacker spun frantically about the porch in a grotesque dance.

The robber punched him in the stomach. The blow knocked the wind from Jacob's lungs and he doubled over, gasping for breath. Again, the burglar shoved him to the ground. He began a vicious rain of kicks to ribs.

Jacob desperately tried to force his mind to wade through the thick mud of fear, panic, and misery. Then, in a moment of clarity, it came to him. It did not scream. No, it was a mere whisper amongst the brutal concerto. The melody of it was so sweet that he forgot his pain and humiliation.

Play dead.

He instantly went limp. The bandit, puzzled by his victim's sudden stillness, halted his attack. Jacob knew he had but a split second. He twisted his pelvis and landed a devastating kick squarely upon the robber's groin. His attacker folded in half, his eyes bulging from the sockets. He dropped the knife, clutched his testicles, and bellowed in anguish.

Jacob felt a bizarre elation rush through every fiber of his being. The numbing terror melted away. He spotted the butcher knife next to the bandit's foot. His assailant was now bending over, his chunky fingers extended, to grasp the handle. Jacob scrambled across the floor and tried to jump on top of the knife.

An intense, white flash blinded Jacob. A hammer knocked him across the face. The thief had been faster with his fist. Jacob reeled backward. Thunder rang through his ears. He tried to rise, but his head spun.

"You'll pay for that," said the mugger, raising the butcher knife. "I'll cut your—."

Jacob heard rotten melons dropping on the wooden planking: *Thump. Thump. Thump.* Slowly, the ashen light faded. His head stopped gyrating and he gazed upward.

The maniac dumbly inspected the three arrows that protruded from his chest. Agony and bewilderment spread on his face. He coughed. Blood spurted from his mouth. He staggered back and fell to the floor in a heap. He twitched and then became still.

Jacob struggled to stand. He cautiously peered over the porch wall. Below on the trail facing the stairs stood Charon and Ianthe, cradling their longbows. Jacob saw the sweet, childlike smile on Charon's face. Thick darkness enveloped him. His eyes rolled. He fainted.

CHAPTER 3: TROUBLEMAKER

Jacob's face wrinkled in revulsion as the smelling salts were waved beneath his nose. His eyes fluttered as he pushed a soft, warm hand away. "No more," he coughed.

The reply was feminine but firm: "Relax!"

The blur slowly fell from his eyes. For a moment, Jacob thought he was seeing a centaur mare. But no, the woman who knelt next to him had long, auburn hair and a chiseled nose. Her piercing green eyes sparkled with intelligence. Her bantam physique was enshrined in a white linen blouse and a knee skirt of blue cotton. A caduceus was pinned to her collar. *She was a healer!* The winged staff was made of gold and the snakes entwined about it were silver, signifying that she held the rank of chief physician. She pulled a stethoscope from a gray backpack. She fitted the ear bud and shoved the diaphragm under Jacob's tunic. She pressed it against his breast.

She listened to the tempo of life. "You'll live. Your heart rate is a little fast, but that's expected. You've some bruised ribs, but nothing's broken. You'll want to keep watch on that wound. I cleansed it as best I could and dressed it. It isn't deep, but there's always the danger of infection."

"Do you know your name?" she asked.

"Jacob Walden." He inspected his neatly bandaged hand. "Thanks." His eyes met hers. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"No." She smiled. "I'm Hope Bentham."

"You're a good doctor," Jacob said.

"I should be," Hope said. "I graduated from Medical Academy 911."

"That's the top medical school in the entire protectorate," Jacob said. "You're from the northern isles. You're a long way from home, Dr. Hope."

She smiled again. "So are you, Teacher Jacob."

He saw the two constables in their black uniforms standing behind her. Sergeant Ballios and Corporal Soukis were rarely seen. They often patrolled the outskirts of the cooperative to ensure that no one inadvertently strayed into centaur territory. Jacob heaved a relieved sigh. The officers answered only to the territorial governor and not to Archon Koprilla.

"What happened to the centaurs?" Jacob asked.

"They returned to their camp," said Sergeant Ballios.

"Would you like to get up?" Hope asked.

Jacob realized that he was still flat on his back. His lumbar muscles ached in protest. He started to rise, but the pain from his damaged ribs hampered him. Ballios and Soukis grasped Jacob underneath his armpits and helped him to stand. He looked around him, and saw that the body of the cutthroat was gone, a pool of congealing blood silently testifying to his fate.

"Questions, gentlemen?" Jacob asked of Ballios and Soukis.

Soukis shrugged. "We're here to secure the scene and make a report."

"Charon and Ianthe are concerned," Hope said. "What should I tell them?"

"That I'll keep my appointment," Jacob said.

He thanked Dr. Bentham and the two constables. They parted company. Jacob retreated to his quarters. He thought it strange that he could not suppress the visage of the good doctor floating around in his head.

Okay, she's beautiful and you're attracted to her. Forget it. She won't be giving you any second looks. The musings were bittersweet. Was the good doctor traveling with the centaurs? Why were they taking her to the peninsula?

He checked the driftwood clock hanging on the kitchen wall. Jacob had found the piece of worm-eaten wreckage on the beach below the schoolhouse. The village cooper was also a talented woodcarver, and had fashioned the flotsam into a stylized centaur stallion. The clockmaker had installed a good movement with polished brass fixtures. They had owed him a favor. Jacob had audited their account books and reduced their tax debt. He fell into bed. The straw mattress was lumpy and the woolen blanket scratchy as he pulled it over his head.

* * *

The village bell tolled. Jacob groaned to the bell's undulating beat. His ribcage was sore! He was thankful that there was no school today. He doubted that he could survive a whole day standing before a chalkboard. He wanted to relax so he would look his best before meeting with Charon and Ianthe.

He rekindled the fire in the hearth. He turned the crank over the kitchen sink and pumped water to fill two large steel buckets and a copper kettle. The buckets he placed on the hearth near the fire to reduce the chill. He often spent his mornings at the village bathhouse to enjoy a hot soak, but there was no time for such luxury today. He hooked the kettle onto an iron swing and prodded it over the licking flames.

He breakfasted on pickled eggs, lamb sausage, bread, and olives. He brewed a cup of rosemary tisane. A trip to the outhouse to answer the call of nature. Jacob poured the water from the buckets into a shallow oak tub. He always enjoyed the lather of the olive oil soap. He was rinsing his hair when a stray thought stood out like a ham actor in a tragedy.

Three arrows, but only two centaurs.

The centaurs were renowned for their archery skills. Was it possible for Charon or Ianthe to knock that quickly and fire the third arrow? *No. Impossible.* From whence had the third arrow come? *Who had shot it?*

He toweled and donned his best cotton shirt and knee breeches. His ribs ached anew when he pulled the leather jerkin over his head and laced it.

One last item required attention. Jacob pulled a pine footlocker from the closet. A cloud of dust arose and he sneezed as he knelt before the lid. He turned the key in the padlock and removed it from the staple. He flipped the hasp. The lid creaked as he opened it.

The small oak jewel case was nestled amongst several computer theory tomes. It had once belonged to his mother. Jacob pulled it free. The sides and top were inlaid with mother-of-

pearl. He opened it, revealing the brass insignia nestled within the recesses of the deep purple velvet. His insignia. Two letters. *Alpha and Omega. First and Last.* His duty. Centaurs first and humans last. Damn his oath! He thought that by swearing eternal allegiance to the centaurs that he would stay out of trouble.

He pinned the *Alpha* to the right collar of his tunic and the *Omega* to the left as dictated by regulation. He wondered if he would ever wear the silver insignia of a senior teacher. He was certain that he would never be promoted to master teacher and awarded the gold emblem. *Too much trouble!*

Jacob snatched his cloak from the door peg and draped it over his arm. He ambled down the stairs to the classroom. The warm morning light was streaming through the windows. But a revolting message, scrawled in red chalk on the blackboard, made him shiver:

TEACHER JACOB WAS A PERVERT!

He heaved a frustrated sigh. Archon Koprilla and his foolish antics. Jacob grabbed a damp sponge and erased the offensive slur.

What worried him was that the message was written in the past tense. Was someone trying to justify his demise? That someone would be disappointed. He was thankful that the children had not seen it.

He sat behind the desk adjacent to the blackboard and pulled a thick vellum scroll from a drawer. He double-checked the figures. It had been a good year. The cooperative would turn a tidy profit. Satisfied, Jacob wrote the official oath, stating that to the best of his knowledge, the report was true and accurate. He then signed and secured it in the top drawer.

He wrote a letter to Chief Phoebe, thanking her for all her kindness and patience. Jacob was apologetic. It was nothing personal. It was strictly business. He suggested that Nicky Demetrious would make an excellent teacher and that it would be in the best interests of the protectorate in furthering the boy's education. He then wrote a letter to Nicky's parents, encouraging them to seek an audience with Chief Phoebe.

Finally, Jacob addressed his resignation to Archon Koprilla. He wished he could write, "*I quit!*" and be done with it, but instead suppressed the urge to fill the letter with immature ranting. It would be filed with the official record and he did not want it to haunt him like a dark wraith. One had to be careful nowadays.

He folded the letters and pressed the official seal into the warm red wax. He glanced at the sundial situated in the school courtyard. The shadow cast by the gnomon on the dial plane indicated that it was high noon.

Jacob wrapped his cloak about his shoulders, tucked the letters into the crook of his arm, and started for the inn. He was determined to have a good lunch before he met with the centaurs. After all, as a condemned man, he was entitled to a hearty meal.

He found the inn deserted. The usual crowd was absent. Where were the merchants, farmers, and tradesmen? Perhaps Charon and Ianthe had wanted it that way, and what the centaurs wanted, they usually got. The heady aroma of beef stew and freshly baked bread made his mouth water. He closed the door quietly and took a few timid steps into the dining room.

Jacob looked about warily. "Argus?"

"Kitchen," Argus said.

Argus ladled stew from an iron pot into a silver tureen. There were also three large silver bowls, spoons, and a reed basket stuffed with loaves of bread. The innkeeper cocked a dismayed brow when he spotted the bruised and battered Jacob. "So, what I heard—."

"Yes," said Jacob with a tight smile.

"What happened to the thug?" Argus asked. "I trust you got in one good punch."

"He's dead. The centaurs killed him."

"By the gods," Argus gasped. He plucked a mug and bottle off a nearby shelf. He filled the mug to the brim with ouzo and pressed it into Jacob's hand. "This should kill the pain."

"Thanks." Jacob took but a sip. He wanted to keep his mind clear. He pulled the letters from beneath his cloak and presented them to Argus. "I need to ask a favor."

Argus shuffled the folded letters through his hands and noted the names scripted on the outside flaps. "I understand," he said. He secured the letters in an iron strongbox. "Brewmeister Nicholas should be in tomorrow. He'll be pleased that you think highly of Nicky. Chief Phoebe will no doubt pay me a visit. I'll deliver the one addressed to Koprilla last."

"Thanks," Jacob said.

"My pleasure," Argus said.

Jacob gave the spread an approving nod. "Nice."

"I'm glad you think so," Argus said. "You're invited."

"Where are they?" Jacob asked.

"They're staying in the livery," Argus said. "I was just about to serve them."

"Let me help you," Jacob said.

"Thanks," Argus said. "Grab the serving bowls and bread if you please." He placed a lid over the tureen, grasped the wooden handles, and grunted as he hoisted it from the table.

Jacob nestled the bowls and spoons in the basket. He held the rear door open for Argus. They walked the gently winding trail that led to the guest stable. The woods were thick and dark.

"I'd better get used to serving," Jacob said.

"You've decided to go with them?" Argus asked.

"If I accept their offer—."

"I'd be happy for you," Argus said. "Listen, there's nothing for you here. Koprilla doesn't like you. Never has and never will. Chief Phoebe will throw a fit when she hears about all your troubles."

"But can I teach centaurs anything?" Jacob asked.

"You're a natural," Argus said. "A good teacher. Follow your bliss."

"There's little bliss to be found here," Jacob said. "But why would the centaurs go to such extreme measures to protect me? Any poor bastard could've taken my place."

Argus frowned. "It's very strange."

"It's downright bizarre," Jacob said.

The livery was a converted barn. Jacob had submitted the cost estimate for the villagers. He had never seen the inside of it, but he knew that it had all the latest amenities. Two showers, a hot tub, and six private stalls. A tack room allowed the centaurs to secure their bows, quivers, and firearms.

Charon and Ianthe were sitting on a large woven ground mat near the entrance. They had already finished one bottle of wine, and Charon was turning a corkscrew into the stopper of a second. When he saw Jacob and Argus approach, he pulled the cork from the bottle and spread his arms outward as if celebrating a magnificent triumph.

"Another battle won!" Charon said. He gave the raised bottle a respectful nod.

Ianthe rolled her eyes. "And such a worthy opponent too!"

The two men stopped and bowed. Argus set the tureen before the centaurs. Jacob placed the basket on the mat and retrieved the serving bowls.

"I want to thank you," Jacob said. "You saved my life last night, and I—."

"Come and sit by me," Charon said.

Jacob managed to land softly on his rump. He nearly lost his balance as the gelding pressed a fresh goblet of wine into his hand.

"We were unnerved by it," Ianthe said. "We didn't want to kill him, but—."

"It's the first time I've had to kill," Charon said. "I pray that it's the last."

"Please excuse me," Argus said. "I must finish taking inventory." He gave the centaurs a respectful nod, turned smartly, and retreated along the path.

"How do you feel?" Ianthe asked. She lifted the lid from the tureen and began to ladle generous portions of stew. She passed a bowl and spoon to Charon, who in turn passed it and a plate of bread to Jacob.

"My ribs are sore, but otherwise I'm fine." Jacob kept a straight face. *Why were the centaurs serving him?* He began to doubt his sanity.

"Did you know," said Charon with a roguish grin, "that Cheiron would, on occasion, serve his servants?"

"You're most kind," said Jacob, "but you'll spoil your humble servant."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Ianthe said. "Serving centaurs can prove an arduous task."

Charon lifted a loaf from the basket and broke it in half. "Did your assassin say anything to you?"

Jacob cocked a skeptical brow. "Assassin, my lord? Who'd want to assassinate me? I believed the fool mad with drink. But yes, he did utter something odd."

"What did he say?" Ianthe asked.

Jacob struggled to recall. It had all happened so fast and his memory was as murky as a patch of mud. There was the cold and calculating assertion: "*My lord sends his compliments.*"

Charon nodded. "I had Tereus, my security chief, show the body to everyone who was in the village that night. No one recognized him. He was a stranger. Did you know him?"

"No, my lord," Jacob said. He took a swig of wine. "But he seemed to know me. He said that I would regret the day that I was born."

Ianthe heaved a relieved sigh. "May the gods be praised that you still live."

"Thank you, my lady," Jacob said.

"You fought well last night," Charon said.

"Yes, until I fainted," Jacob said.

Charon laughed. "That doesn't mean you're a coward. It's said that Cheiron won many battles, but swooned at the sight of his own blood. He also suffered from seasickness. We centaurs are creatures of the land, I suppose."

"*The History* omits those details," Jacob said.

Charon smiled. "I don't want a sycophant. I want someone who will tell me what I need to know, rather than what I want to hear."

"Then you've made your decision?" Ianthe asked.

"Yes, my lady." Jacob gazed into the half-empty crystal tumbler and swirled the wine. "I tried to find my own path and failed miserably. Perhaps it's better to follow you instead."

"Are your affairs in order?" Charon asked.

"Most of what I possess belongs to the cooperative. I have a few books, mathematical instruments, and spare clothes that I won't miss. If necessary, I can leave tomorrow. I'd like to say goodbye to my students. Some of them are young, and I want to spare their feelings. I don't want them to believe that I just vanished into vapor."

Charon nodded. "I'll send porters to your quarters to help you pack and commission a cargo vessel."

"Thank you, my lord," Jacob said.

"I'll send the contract and your travel papers to the schoolhouse tomorrow," Ianthe said.

"Very well, my lady."

"But do bring your guitar," Charon said. He gave Jacob's forearm a gentle squeeze. "We could use some music while on our journey, and your playing did sooth my troubled heart."

Ianthe gave Charon a playful nudge. "Music does calm the savage beast."

Charon ignored her. A peculiar, intense stare spread over his face. "Any questions?"

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Three arrows.

Two centaurs.

It did not compute!

Jacob wanted to trust the centaurs. The centaurs were good. The centaurs were wise. They knew what was best. But something deep inside Jacob told him to—*lie*.

Why had neither Charon nor Ianthe mentioned the third arrow? If they did not care about the truth, then why should he? A lie for a lie.

"No, my lord," Jacob whispered. "No questions."