

READBEAST

BEASTIALITY STORIES



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Kendor braced himself against the roll of the ship as he idly scanned the sea. Two hands rose out of the water together, maybe twenty meters to port, and Kendor stopped his scanning to watch. The hands were attached to arms, and a man's torso, with head, clean shaven and hair trimmed close, followed. Kendor started, though, as the skin turned grey at the waist, and, in place of legs, the body tapered smoothly to a transverse, fish-like tail.

"Hey, Boss!" Kendor called out, pointing, as the merman held himself out of the water with powerful strokes of his tail. When he noticed Kendor, he started in his turn, and dove back into the water to surface so close to the ship that he'd have been under the oars if they hadn't been under sail, and gave the ship and its passengers a close inspection. Cheiron had joined Kendor at the rail at his call.

"Welcome back, my Lord," the merman called, when he noticed Cheiron. "I'll tell Her you're coming!"

"Thanks, Wastak!" Cheiron called back. "We'll see you there!"

The merman rolled back onto his face, and struck off, across the tacking run the ship was making.

"No wonder we're not drawing so many stares," Kendor mused. "People must be used to half-human's, with natural mermen in the area."

"You haven't seen anything yet," Valkar put in, walking up beside Kendor. He looked ahead, the way the merman had headed, his tail twitching in poorly concealed eagerness. He folded his four legs under his red-pelted equine body to rest on the deck for stability, as Kendor was, and Cheiron joined them. The human crew paid their three passengers little mind, as though they always carried centaur's. Cheiron was the oldest of the three, though there was little physical difference between him and Valkar, his eyes showed the experience of more years than his body should have lived. He was basically a black, in forequarters, legs, tail, long hair, and full beard, with a white patch spotted with black across his hindquarters. Valkar was tallest, his red hair matching his roan pelt, and clean-shaven. Kendor looked so much younger that he did not need to shave, and was a brown in hair and pelt. Their hairless upper torsos were uniformly bronzed by the sun, their nudity in the heat, save for belts and the shoes the brown and the sable-and-ermine wore, seeming their normal state of undress.

"Was the Her Wastak mentioned the Beast Lady people keep asking us about?" Kendor asked.

"Aye, and I'll introduce you when we get to her island," Cheiron replied. "She's an old friend and ally, and this is more or less her territory."

"Master," Kendor broke out of his thoughts, "You once told me that mermen were magical creatures, like dragons and griffins. Yet, I couldn't sense any of that kind of magic on Wastak. He is being kept young by magic, but the mana around him feels no different than around anyone under such a spell."

"If he were half fish, he'd need to be magical," the sable-and-ermine replied. "Actually, he's half porpoise, which is compatible enough with human to survive without magic."

"Porpoise?" Kendor asked.

"A mammal, like human's, centaur's, dogs, or horse's, that lives in the sea," Valkar put in. "It lives like a fish, so it looks like one, but it breathes air, bears its young alive, and suckles them."

Another tack brought the ship to an island, and they swung into the harbor and dropped sail. The crew leapt to the oars, and rowed the ship close enough to the pier for a line to be tossed. A centaur, the same sable and ermine colors as Cheiron, on the dock caught the line, and made it fast to the cleat. Then he helped the crew pull the ship up to the dock.

"You'd never said anything about more centaur's down here," Kendor said, watching the dockhand. "I'd have expected you, of all stallion's, to stay away from the mare's."

"He's not mine," Cheiron answered. "His colors are his mistress's way of honoring me, I expect. You haven't needed to know about the herd here yet. They don't really figure into our herd's plans or policies. We'll tell you all about them when we meet our hostess. Let's get our gear and get ready to go ashore."

"He's a natural," Kendor returned, as they scrambled to their hooves. "As though he was born with four legs and spots. He's staying young with magic, but that's all."

"Is he now?" the sable-and-ermine replied, looking back at the dockhand. "We'll have to ask his mistress about him."

By the time the three centaur's had retrieved their gear, bundling it across their withers, the ship was at the dock, and a gangplank was laid. A wolf got lazily off a coil of rope and followed the centaur's. The captain met them at the rail.

"Here you are, your wisdoms," the captain said. "Would you want us to await your return?"

"You may go on your own way," Cheiron answered. "We'll borrow a barge from our hostess here when we decide to move on."

"Besides, this is no place for shore leave for your crew," Valkar commented.

"True, your wisdoms, and thank you," the captain replied.

"Welcome back to Aiaia, my Lord," the dockhand greeted them when the three centaur's and the wolf had crossed the gangplank. "Go on in, and She is coming to greet our honored visitors."

"Thank you, Rondal, isn't it?" Cheiron replied.

"Aye, my Lord," the other sable-and-ermine said, as he bent down to unfasten the rope from the cleat, to cast the ship off again.

As the four new arrivals walked down the dock towards a large house at one end, a woman, with long brown hair, and even from a distance, a real beauty, wearing brown and white patched robes, walked out of the door. She hailed them happily, with an exuberant wave, that she ended with the gestures of a spell. Kendor winced, involuntarily, as she turned into a centaur, with brown and white patched pelt under the skirts of her robes. She was such an enticing mare that all three stallion's were five-legged, as she trotted happily to meet them. She took Cheiron in a passionate welcoming embrace, that he returned with nearly equal fervor. Had he been as passionate as her, he would have climbed on her back to mount then and there.

"Welcome back, Stud," she said, when they came up for air. "And you, too, Red."

Her greeting for Valkar was nearly as intense, and met the same eager reaction.

"And hello, Martin," she continued, bending down to touse the wolf's fur with a distinctly erotic affection. "You can go back to two legs once we're out of view of the harbor, or they sail. Now, who's this handsome young stud?"

"Kendor Malconson," Cheiron introduced, and the brown bowed, bending forward from the transition from human to horse. "I apprenticed him last year, and he's also working in my bodyguard. The Lady Kirke, Independent Sorceress of the Island of Aiaia."

"I am honored, my Lady," Kendor said.

"A mannerly young stallion is always welcome to my home and bed," she replied, bowing and touching one foreknee to the dock as she extended the other forward, a centaur curtsey. "Come, drop your gear, and we can talk over wine until dinner. Genkal!"

A large lion had followed her out of the house, and had waited patiently, watching intelligently, as she greeted her guests. Then, he walked lazily up, and rubbed against her legs, affectionately, as she reached down to touse his mane. He gave the same greeting to all three visiting centaur's, and rubbed muzzles with the wolf. Kendor reached tentatively down to pat him. He returned to the centaress, sniffed her hindquarters, especially under her tail, then reared up to rest his forepaws on her rump, his tail wagging happily, a question in his look.

"Not now, lad," she said, looking back, though her tail went over. "I'll be busy with my guests. I'll see you after they leave. Say 'Hello' to our guests, Zerlat."

She gestured quickly, as the lion dropped back to the dock, and he spoke, in human voice, "Welcome back to Aiaia, my Lord, and your herdsmen."

"Zerlat?" Cheiron asked, and the lion nodded, "I'd heard you found a woman, and left your Lady."

"And died at a venerable age," Valkar put in.

"Lost at sea, somewhere around here, I'd wager," the sable-and-ermine commented.

"Aye, my Lord," Zerlat continued. "As our ship foundered, I became a sea lion again once I was fully in the water. Our Lady sent her mermen to help, and they helped me get my love to shore here. We could as easily not return as return, so I asked to rejoin our Lady's service, if she would keep my love with me."

A lioness walked out of the woods, and rubbed against the lion, affectionately and enticingly, though not in heat. He nuzzled her with equal love, as she looked the visitors over, intelligently.

"You two show our guests to our guest stable," Kirke said, gesturing dismissal, "And then to my chamber. Then, run on and enjoy yourselves. As I said, I'll come looking for you, lad, after they leave."

The two lions nodded. A centaur came out of the house, and turned back when Kirke waved him off. She wheeled to take Cheiron's arm, and led the whole party into the house. Once they were out of direct sight through the door, in the courtyard, Martin suddenly shimmered, and stood up onto his hind paws. He turned from wolf to wolf-man, in a suit of mail under an ermine-trimmed black surcoat. He still had a short muzzle, and his canine teeth still showed. His ears remained pointed. His pelt remained, though not his tail. His hands bore claws, and his feet were so much like paws it seemed he could barely stand upright.

"Thank you, my Lady," he said, in a guttural growl, much less human than the voice she'd given Zerlat.

"I'll see you all shortly," she said, ruffling his shaggy hair, affectionately, and trotting off into the house proper. Kendor looked around in wonder. Most of the beings working around the house were centaur's, but only a minority were half horse. The rest included half bulls, stags, bears, lions, tigers, and others Kendor could not name. The lions led the visitors to a comfortably-furnished set of stables, where they all left their gear, and Martin shed his armor. When they found Kirke again, she was still half mare, and had shed her own robes. "Come, join me, and take a load off your hooves," she invited, gesturing at the cushions that covered the floor, and that she was already lying on. The three stallion's dropped to their sides, Kendor carefully as far from her as he could manage, and Martin sat down, resting his back against Valkar's flank. The lions, dismissed, trotted off, him chasing her with clear intention. A bull-centaur and a stag-centaur poured wine and served them cakes.

"Once you went fully public, I figured it was safe to let my studs show their true breeds," Kirke said.

"So I gathered," Cheiron replied. "Just don't lead the people to expect that I will come unconditionally to your defense, or theirs. On that, where did Rondal come from? I figured you were trying to flatter me by having a stallion of my colors in your service, and didn't realize before now that he was naturally those colors. I'd not heard we'd made any sable-and-ermine for you, and I'd warned you about your stallion's and true mare's. The colors aren't that common this side of Stallion Valley anyway."

"You gave him the colors yourself, stud," she replied. "Perhaps through that great-grandson of yours you had with you that first time. You lied to me, stallion. Rondal's my own son, most likely by you or Ronchon. When you told me your kind couldn't give me a foal, I let you and your stallion's take their chances. I kept your secret, and my healer won't talk. I don't usually feel motherly, but in memory of you and your stallion's, I chose to keep him, especially when we learned he'd bear spots. Would you like to meet him?"

"Of course," the sable-and-ermine answered. "Anyway, one more son makes little difference to me. I am effectively lead stallion, you know, though the mare's wouldn't put up with any kind of possessiveness on my part. I'm having trouble finding fillies who aren't too close kin. If you'd allow, I'd like to take him to Stallion Valley. He really should gain his birthright as a centaur. Your stable is not a normal herd, and he might have much to relearn."

"If he's willing," she answered. "I'd hope he'd come home to see me, as any mother would, but he should live the life he was born for. Come on in, son, and join us."

"Yes, Mother," the dockhand said, stepping in, and kneeling, more erect than the other relaxing centaur's.

"The Lord Cheiron wishes to take you with him back to Stallion Valley," Kirke began.

"Oh, my Lord?" Rondal asked, his eyes lighting, "I thank you, if my mother will permit it."

"You passed the need to ask my permission before I stopped your aging," the centaress said. "I want you to go, besides. A young stallion needs to live in a herd, with all the fillies he can service."

"I expect you can pull your weight, too," Cheiron commented. "I gather you inherited at least some of your mother's and my powers."

"Yours, my Lord?" the younger black-and-white stallion asked. "Am I your son, then?"

"So your mother says," Cheiron replied, "Or else, my great-great-grandson. It doesn't matter that much to us. If you can pull your weight, you should stay welcome."

"Her healer's been training me," Rondal said. "I've some general magic of my own, as well."

"Since I'm traveling light, we could use a fully trained healer," Cheiron said. "I expect you've had a lot of training in your long life. We won't be back to Stallion Valley for a few months, so you can see more of the world with us. If you haven't armor or barding, we'll get you some. So soon after the war, it's not entirely safe, even for our coven."

"As for how you came to be, I wasn't all that surprised, colleague, when I did realize it, and my humblest apologies. A year ago, we'd have said the same thing we did back then. However, Ken sired a fine little filly on a granddaughter of mine, and she was almost on her hooves before he was on his own. He did the work to figure out what was going on, so, lad, if you would."

"My Lady," Kendor began, giving Kirke a most odd look, "Val had actually come up with the idea, not long after he first met Avala. I just managed to find the evidence to confirm it. True cross-race breeding, between centaur's and human's or animals, is inherently magical. However, the natural magic involved is so sensitive that a shape-shift on either partner is enough to interfere, and prevent conception. My lady, you are a most remarkable woman, to be willing to try to conceive a centaur foal. As for me and Maggie, things went a bit too far to take care of the mismatch that first time."

"And you must have been a remarkable young man," Kirke said. "I wish I'd have met you then. You must have been hung like a horse already, or there would not have been a second time. I'm surprised the mare's let you be trimmed down to normal size when you became a stallion."

"Maggie would say that it was quality, not quantity, that counted," Valkar put in, and Kendor blushed down to his waist. "They've also been madly in love since they met."

"Ken's had a bale of questions to ask since he spotted Wastak," Cheiron said. "I don't know how much your mother's told you, lad, either. Let's start at the beginning, some 1,100 years back."

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It was a hot, sweltering summer, and I was paying our way around the Archipelago with wind spells. We were under the masquerade, of course, so we dared not abandon our mounts, though our horse's drew stares nearly everywhere we went. Just four of us, Val, me, and two guards, and Martin as a wolf and our horse's. The rest have all died in the years since. My mount was of my colors, since we weren't spying, and Val had his customary grey. We reached Padolan, a few miles north of here, and disembarked. We'd spend at least a night, though the ship we'd taken passage in was headed onward that afternoon. While Val dealt with the innkeeper and the guards settled our mounts in the stables, I made for the common room, Martin tagging at my heels. A wench had a tankard of ale for me and a bowl of water for Martin as soon as I was seated, both cold enough to drip water. After a cautious sip, I drank deep, as Martin lapped happily, his tail wagging.

"Gods, that's good," I said. "How do you keep it so cold in this weather?"

"You have the Beast Lady to thank for that," the wench replied.

"The Beast Lady?"

"Sorceress, lives over on Aiaia, a few miles south of here. Called Kirke, to her face. Helarmak lets her work out of here in exchange for the spells to keep our food and drink good. Magic isn't all she deals in, if you know what I mean, but no one really complains about the competition. Besides that she helps everyone by helping the inn, I can't say I've met anyone who'd knowingly choose her. Not that she's repulsive to look at, by the gods, I wish I could look like that. It's that any man she takes to bed will leave it an animal, of some kind, or so it's said. There are rumors that she works the change first, then lets him mount her as a beast. Ain't my taste, that's for sure.

"She don't allow men on her island, it's said. Even those seeking her help will be a beast once they set foot on Aiaia, until they leave, and they don't talk much about what she demands of them in return. Some of those who try to reach her home uninvited have been found swimming away from the island in animal form. Others may be there yet. I've also heard that her fur robes might bear scars, tattoos, or other marks that had been borne by men who haven't been seen since before she got the robes.

"If others won't respect her privacy, let her do as she will. No one whose pelt she's worn was missed all that much, I hear. She's a good neighbor, and has a right to her oddities. If you'd like to meet her, I thought she came in earlier. Oh, there she is, in leopard today."

The wench pointed Kirke out to me, across the room. What I saw made me a bit homesick. In leopard skin robes, and not much if anything else, she showed as frank a sexuality as any mare, without anything mercenary about the proposition. She'd show you a good time, and had the equipment and experience to do so, but only if you showed her an equally good one. She noticed me in return, and gave me the same sort of inspection. I raised my tankard to her, in salute, and she got up to come towards me.

"A meal for two, your wisdom?" the wench asked. "For five," I replied, "And some raw meat for Martin, here."

The wench nodded, and headed for the kitchen. Half the men were trying to see just how much Kirke was wearing under her leopard-skin robes, as she crossed the crowded common room towards me. A large, young sailor, with one gold earring in his right ear, shook off his companions' warnings, and met her. I was too far away to hear much, but she didn't like his tone, that was clear. Still, with malicious mischief in her eye, that he never noticed, she led him off to one of the rooms. Val joined me, our guards at a nearby table, and I filled Val in on what the wench had told me and what Kirke was doing. We heard a deer bugle, and, a time later, Kirke returned, leading, by a rope around the neck, a confused-looking buck with a gold earring in his right ear. They both bore the contented afterglow of just having had sex. Kirke led him to the young sailor's companions, and picked out who seemed the captain. I cast a spell to let me listen in.

"Are you sailing today yet?" she asked. "If you are, would you take this buck to Aiaia for me?"

"We're planning to lay over for a couple of days yet," the captain replied.

"I'm headed back myself later today," she said. "I'll leave him in the stables until then."

The buck looked more and more frightened, as Kirke called for a stable boy.

"Excuse me, your wisdom," the captain said, "But I'm interested in that buck, myself. What will you take for him?"

"A couple of silver pieces," Kirke answered.

"You have that much?" the captain asked, and the buck nodded. "Done."

"When you sail, have him drink water from a cable-length off the tower on the west side of Aiaia," she said, as the captain paid her the money. "You'll get your money's worth from him if you do. Good-bye, buck, and, by the way, thanks."

She patted the buck's neck, and turned towards us, as one of the other sailors led the buck out of the room.

"Good day, colleagues," she greeted me and Val.

"Good day, colleague," I replied. "Would you care to join us? Cheiron Kronosson, at your service, and this is Valkar, my chief of bodyguard."

"Honored, I'm sure," she answered, seating herself. "I've heard much about you. They call me Kirke, the Beast Lady, if you hadn't guessed."

"And I've heard of you," I answered. "Please, share our meal. I expect you're hungry after your exercise."

"Are you going to be in this part of the Archipelago for long?" she asked.

"Not too long, but probably some days," I answered.

"I'd like to get to know you," she said. "This place is going to be an oven before nightfall. I can't keep it cool, but I have my home, on the next island south of here. Why don't you come with me? You can stay there while you're in the area, and I can loan you transportation to any island you might want to visit."

"Thank you, colleague," I answered. "For me only, or can I bring Val and the rest of our guards along?"

"Just those other two in sable and ermine?" she asked, and I nodded. "No problem, I think."

"And a wolf," I added. Martin stretched lazily, and stood up at my feet. He padded over to Kirke, sniffed her inquisitively and allowed her to pat his head, then put his forepaws on her knee to raise up and lick her face, his tail wagging happily.

"Oh, hello, boy," she replied, stroking his head and neck in a most suggestive manner. "What's his name?"

"Call him Martin," Val answered. "We'd also rather keep our horse's with us, if that's not too inconvenient."

"One for each of you, or do you have a baggage train?" Kirke asked.

"Just the four," he answered.

"Shouldn't be too much of a problem," she answered. "Let's leave after we're done eating."

After our meal, Val and one of the guards fetched our horse's, as the other guard retrieved the rest of our gear from the rooms we'd taken.

"You've taken care of that buck I made, haven't you, Wolf?" Kirke asked Val, when they joined us at



the dock with our horse's. She'd been calling him that half the meal, and me "stallion," and it was clear what attribute of a stallion she had in mind.

"Yes, colleague," he answered. "I ended the spell, and he'll rejoin his crew."

"Don't worry, I won't fight about it, nor will I turn him again unless he comes to Aiaia," she commented. "By the way, stallion, when we get to Aiaia, keep your mare's away from my stallion's."

"We'll try," Nauva, one of the guards, answered. "They're healthy, though. Besides, they're not likely to come into heat all that soon. If they do, Ronchon or Kolfas can take care of them."

The grey stallion nickered flirtingly, and the mare's' tails flicked over. I noticed Kirke giving the stallion's the same sort of looks Nauva did.

"They seem awful close for you to be so confident," Kirke commented. "Let's get aboard and under way."

She led us onto a large barge, with no crew apparent. As our guards got our horse's aboard, she went to the bow, casting off the lines. Four large fish-like creatures burst out of the water, to leap high in the air. Two turned somersaults in the air, and one leaped clear over the bow. Then, all four of them swam up to the bow, resting their heads on the rail, as she bent down to pat their heads and kiss their blunt snouts, stroking them beneath their chins affectionately. On closer look, they weren't fish, with their smooth, scaleless grey skin and transverse tails, and the clearly audible breath flowing into and out of the holes on the backs of their heads. With their mistress's reputation, their apparent intelligence was no surprise, nor were the shape-shifting spells each of them wore. Kirke tossed three lines ending in harnesses into the water, to join one already hanging over the rail, and each of the porpoises, as we later learned the name, swam into one. Once we were all aboard, a coordinated effort from the four porpoises started the barge moving away from the dock and into the harbor.

"May I see you privately, colleague?" Kirke asked me, once we were well under way. "They'll get us home safely enough."

"As you wish, colleague," I replied. Though she'd not used her pet name for me, what she had in mind was so clear that Val and the guards gave me knowing winks, and even one of the mare's nickered flirtingly, as I accompanied her to the aft cabin. Once the door was closed behind us, she kissed me, and I couldn't help myself. I all but ripped her robes off her, and it dimly registered that she was wearing nothing else, and my own clothes off me to hump her. When the fit passed, I knew I'd shot my bolt, and I felt quite different. I was lying flat on my back, and propped myself up on my elbows to see my equine chest and forelegs, sticking up in the air. My masquerade spell had gone, and I was in my normal centaur form. Kirke was sitting by my flank, caressing my genitals lovingly, as my member retreated into it's sheath. It was clear from her attitude and the scent on her where my bolt had gone.

"Thank you, stallion," she said, dreamily. "I've never had better."

"What did you do to me?" I asked, trying to feign shock and surprise.

"Don't worry, I only took down your disguise spell," she answered. "There was nothing else on you, anyway."

"But why?"

"For one thing, it was in the way when I tried to make a stallion out of you, and I couldn't warp it enough to leave it in place."

"Why did you want to make a horse of me? If I've offended you, please forgive me. I don't know what came over me once we were alone here."

"That was my doing, stud. I wanted you to be so busy you'd not notice what I was doing to you. No, nothing you did ever offended me, not even then. Your insistence was so gentle that I had all the time I needed to figure out what to do with you before you were fully engaged. I usually have to act fast to forestall rape.

"The only thing that I might have taken offense at was your not keeping your natural equipment when you were passing as human otherwise. Still, if you were really hung like a horse in your human form, you might be as readily attacked as a monster as if you were in your natural form. No man has ever been able to satisfy me. It takes a stallion, bull, or stag to fill me up. So, whatever you might have done before, if I was going to take you to bed, you were going to be a stallion to make me happy."

"It half worked, didn't it?"

"The best half, stud. Don't worry, I won't turn on you. What you did with your human half more than made up for your rather small stallion half, and I want more.

"Besides, I've heard of you, and nothing I've heard would lead me to make trouble for you, without reason. With your magic-hating reputation, I couldn't quite accept that it was you under the spells most of your party was wearing. If you weren't who you claimed to be, I might listen to what you were planning, anyway. Your talk almost persuaded me, and that you show your true face, even when you hide your race, convinced me.

"Word of your true race won't go beyond Aiaia, you have my word on that, so long as you wish it hidden. Things make sense now, and I won't help those who might want to kill you as a monster."

"But you would not, colleague?"

"You're not that monstrous to look at, stallion. Especially with your small lower body, everything seems to go together well. Besides, no one who acts as you do deserves to be treated as a monster. As for me, again, I guess you're the stud I've always wanted. Male enough to satisfy me and man enough to make it even more fun. I'd thought about what it might be like to have a centaur, but never followed through. You know, stallion, you didn't live up to your kind's reputation as rapacious lovers, even under my spell. Willing and eager, but more than ready to let me lead and show you what I wanted."

"If we do go public, we might well change that reputation. Our mare's are quite ready to start kicking at the slightest provocation. The stallion's learn quickly to honor their wishes. My lady, did you drop my spell before we started anything, so we did it as my stallion and your woman? No wonder it felt so tight."

"The tighter the fit, the more I like it. You were just engaged when I dropped your spell, though I didn't really feel anything until I did.

"You're not the only stallion of your herd, then? Hmmmm, except for one of your guards, your whole party, man, horse, and wolf, showed as magical. Did you bring any others of your herd along, then?"

“Actually, except for Lantos and Martin, all our party, rider and steed, are centaur’s.”

“Three more stallion’s? Oh, wow! Don’t worry, stud, I’ll get back to you. Still, while you’re reloading, I’d like to see how they compare to you. Or are you so much the lead stallion that you keep other stallion’s away from your mare’s?”

“They wouldn’t stand for it, or for me, if I tried any such thing. Let me make you a proper mare, and show you what all we can do together. Oh, hell, I’d brain myself on the ceiling if we tried it here. Once we reach shore, where we can have both headroom and privacy, I’ll show you what our mare’s seem to find enjoyable. The others would prefer it, as well, and we’ll be tripping over our hooves to get you to allow us onto your back.”

“Thank you for the offer, and I’m sure it was well meant. Yet, when I have been a mare for my stallion’s, I’ve found it little better than when I’ve had a man. If you want, stud, we’ll try it once we get to shore. Until then, let’s see what the other stallion’s are like.”

I rolled and scrambled to my hooves, and offered her my elbow. Everyone looked around at the “clap” of my hooves on the deck when Kirke and I left the cabin.

“The masquerade’s down, until we leave Aiaia,” I announced, and the rest of the party regained their normal forms.

“I guess your wolfishness only showed in contrast to your master,” she mused, looking Val over. She clearly wanted him, and the other stallion’s, but walked up to the only other human remaining.

“Hello, my brawny young bull,” she hailed him. “Lantos, is it? May I see you privately?”

“As my lady wishes,” he replied, and they retired to the cabin, through a respectful, well-wishing lickerish chorus.

“I hope he has the manners to relax and enjoy it,” I mused, “And not offend our hostess by tearing her cabin apart when he winds up wearing horns. Gods, that woman has strange tastes.”

“Her tastes seem pretty good to me,” Nauva commented, with a flick of her tail in my direction.

“But you’re built for it,” I returned, “Or have you and Ronchon been fooling around while under the masquerade? She intended to make me a stallion, as she did that buck at the inn, and then screw me in her own body. She cleared my masquerade out of the way, and found I had what she wanted naturally, so had at me. She’d hit me with something that kept my mind off anything but getting into her while she had her way with me.”

“She needed a spell to do that?” Parani commented, playfully. “Sounds like any red-blooded stallion’s normal state of mind.”

“Actually, she was surprised that I managed to mind my manners even under that,” I returned. “In any case, she was ecstatic when we finished, though it was a tight fit, for me. So, Lantos is going to be a bull to hump her. The rest of you, mind your manners, hear? I’ve half a promise from her to let me properly mount her when we can have both privacy and headroom. She doesn’t expect to like it, but let’s see if we can change her mind.

“Let’s get off this matter, for now. Val, have you learned anything?”

“I’ve mind-linked to one of the animals pulling the boat,” he replied, pointing at the rightmost one as

he broke water, "That one. Yes, he's human, under his mistress's spell, as are the others. I haven't gotten too much from him yet, so link in. His name's Wastak."

I made the passes to link with Val, and felt the stranger's presence.

"Hello, Master Wastak," I greeted him. "I am Cheiron. Sorry that we're such a load for you."

"In Her service, no load is too great," the porpoise replied, his exertion clear in his mental "voice." "Besides, had She not wished to bring all your party and horse's along, it would have been a lonely trip, with none of my pod-mates for company as I tow Her and Her latest stud home again. What can I do for my lord?"

"I'd like to know more about your Lady," I returned. "If you would tell it, how did you come to be turned into an animal, to haul her around?"

"I volunteered, more or less," he answered, with a noticeable sigh. "It's been years, but I was once a fisherman, from an island not too far from here. I'd seen Her on some of Her off-island visits, without quite realizing who She was, and was fairly smitten, though not quite so far as to do anything about it. Then, I passed by Aiaia looking for fish, and saw Her on the shore. I found myself returning to the area frequently, to the point of trying to work barren sea because She was on the shore.

"That went on for a time, then one day I could not catch sight of Her. After I sailed around the island, I gave up, and headed for the best fishing grounds I'd found in the area. After I had a load, my anchor seemed to be fouled. Diving down to free it, I met Her waiting on the bottom. She kissed me, and I gather you know something of what happened next. What did She make of you, a horse, perhaps?"

"Something like that. I'll show you when we get to her island." I replied.

"Anyway, when She finished with me, I realized my lungs were about to burst. I drove to the surface, just broaching water enough to blow, and take a couple of deep breaths. Then I realized I'd become a porpoise."

"As you've been ever since." Val put in.

"Actually, no," Wastak replied. "Tolpran, off to port, hasn't been human since the first time She had him stallion Her, but She didn't take me into Her service quite yet. To continue, She surfaced beside me, patting my flank affectionately. We swam and played together, then She wrapped Her legs around my tail and had me service Her again. She led me back to my boat, and I was suddenly human again. I grabbed the gunwale to scramble aboard. She beckoned me down for a farewell kiss, then a porpoise swam up to carry Her back to Her island, as I raised anchor and prepared to sail home.

"I told my story, and was believed, and my listeners told me about Her. In spite of that, I spent the rest of that season around Aiaia, and, when She would come to me, I'd dive into the water to be Her bull-porpoise. At the end of the season, I made up my mind, gave away everything but my boat, made my farewells, and sailed to Aiaia. When I went to set foot on the pier reserved for those seeking audience with Her, it gave way under me, and I fell into the harbor, a porpoise again, as I've been ever since. You're sailing in my boat, Hers now as I am Hers, though She's had it thoroughly rebuilt over the years."

"What do you do with yourself between trips with her, or when she comes to swim with you?" I asked.

"What any bull-porpoise does, I expect," he answered. "We don't stray far, but we can forage for fish to eat, and are always on the lookout for cow's. We play together, and can talk, after a fashion, in porpoise voice. We serve as Her sentries, letting Her know what may approach Her island. Aye, we can call on Her at any time, mind-to-mind, as She can contact us. If you will excuse me, my lord, She wants to be home in a hurry, and my mates are impatient with me for holding us back, because you might be distracting me."

"We might talk again later," I returned. Val ended the link to him, and I dropped my own. The boat had been picking up speed, and picked up a bit more. Not long after, the "clop" of hooves on the deck heralded our hostess rejoining us. She had turned Lantos into a bull, but, unexpectedly, mainly from the waist down. She'd also given him horns curving out of his temples. Our mare's looked the bucentaur over curiously, and he gave them a sheepish, "What can I do about it?" shrug.

"As always, if there is a problem with what she's made of you, just ask one of us," I said, and Val nodded assent. The four of them nodded agreement.

"My servants report that another boat is making for Aiaia, from outside the Archipelago," Kirke began. "They've already made landfall, and haven't changed course to round the island to my harbor. I need to be home in time to properly greet them.

"If you feel you need to hide your and your herdsmen's race, stallion, just remember, I don't allow men on my island, as I told this bull. I don't often have female visitors, and few would think I'd welcome any females who'd compete with me for my studs. I've a feeling I can trust you mare's, though. Or is there something more that you want from a stallion than a hump?"

"As a rule, no, though we do have our friends, from whom more will come and to whom we will give more," Parani commented, patting Kolfas's withers.

"Anyway, though you will be the first centaur's I've ever had on Aiaia," our hostess continued, "No one is likely to question anything they see on my island. If you don't want to trust to that, until my visitors are taken care of, I'll make Lantos all bull, and we can make your stallion's all horse and the mare's all woman."

"You really want to keep us all to yourself, don't you?" I asked. "I don't think that'll be necessary. We can keep out of sight of your visitors, though I would like to tag along and observe how you handle the situation, if you'd permit it."

"I can't see why not," she answered. "I'd ask the same were I visiting Stallion Valley. I don't expect to use anything I want to keep secret."

"I'll make myself a horse when necessary," I said. "I'll not interfere unless you do something that really cannot be tolerated."

"I've heard enough of you that I think I can warn you if I'll overstep your bounds," she said. "By the way, before I try your other stallion's, could you give me a child, human or centaur? I don't let my studs impregnate me, and blocked the bull from doing so, but didn't for you. I can still block you if it is needful. It seems an unlikely chance, since you aren't human, but do you know otherwise?"

"As far as we know, you have nothing to worry about," I answered. "We have had more than enough experiments to show that human's don't readily breed with centaur's, either way."

When we docked here, the stag and bear that helped tie the boat up looking us over curiously, Lantos fetched my clothes with his gear from the cabin, and we disembarked. Kirke gave each of her

porpoises an affectionate pat on the head, and the four of them looked us over with the same surprise and curiosity. One porpoise turned into a black stallion as she did, another to a bear, and they waded out of the water. They shook themselves, and a gesture from their mistress made them completely dry.

"Tolpran will show your people to my guest stables," she said, indicating the stallion. "Then, after they drop their gear, they can join us for dinner. What do you eat, by the way? I couldn't think what else to do, so Lantos grazes now, and can't eat meat."

"We can and do," I replied. "You should have asked him about it. He's more than close enough to the herd to know. We also graze, to fill out our need for nourishment."

"By the way, we don't usually dress, except at need. Unless you've got your castle cold enough to freeze the chamber pots, we won't see that need, I expect. But, since you've not dressed since I pulled your clothes off you, that shouldn't offend you, should it?"

"Sounds interesting, though you stallion's hide too much by your stance," she mused. "Men would have a fun time watching your mare's, though. By the way, my servants report the visitors have landed, some twenty strong, and are making camp for the night. I'll deal with them in the morning."

Suddenly, in the middle of our dinner, Kirke froze, listening to a voice only she could hear.

"Damn them," she swore, gesturing and suddenly wearing tawny fur robes, with antlers rising from the shoulders. "Trouble on the other side of the island. If you'll excuse me, it's an emergency."

"If I might come with you, colleague," I said, then worked the masquerade spell to make myself a horse.

She nodded assent, and I joined her teleport spell, letting her direct it. We appeared in the middle of a ring of some score of sailors, next to a panicking stag, who calmed visibly when he winded her. She gave his neck an affectionate pat, then turned to the men around us, who were eying the stag with venison on their minds.

"Welcome to my island," she said, sweetly. "I'm afraid all the animals on it and porpoises near it are mine, and not to be slain. If you will come with me to my home, over on the other side of the island, I can lay you a much better feast than one stag can provide for so many."

"Yes, my lady," one of the men spoke up.

"But the captain said -" another said.

"Captain ain't here, is he?" a third said. "Besides, a wench like that can provide quite a feast, I wager."

"She's a witch, or are you blind? You'd be wagering your life to try that."

They argued for some time, until the third speaker overpowered the rest, and said, "We would be honored to be our lady's guests. Lead on, if you will."

The rest formed up behind him, and followed her, me, and the stag across the island. One of the men, the second speaker, from his scent, dropped back, and did not enter the castle with the rest. I'd mind-spoken Val, so our centaur's were out of sight as she led the men into the dining hall. There was wine poured for them, and they fell onto the couches, drinking and getting more loud,

boisterous, and lewd as they got drunker. Not a few tried to feel Kirke up, which she managed to avoid quite handily. Though I could sense her disgust with them, it was clear they never noticed. After they were quite in their cups, she started a spell, walking around the room behind them. As she touched each man in turn, he began to change. She did pause at one, quieter and less offensive than his companions, but touched him as well. Each man became a pig, tail, snout, hooves, bristles, and all.

"There's your feast, you swine," she said, herding them out the door to a sty, and throwing them some acorns and mash.

"Now, they're taken care of," she said, returning to the room, "And are in the forms to match their spirits."

"How long will they be pigs?" I asked, ending my masquerade.

"I don't care if they die as swine," she replied. "Perhaps, I can deal with their captain for a ransom. Yes, my servants told me one held back, watched what I did to the others, and has run off, in search of their captain. He should be here in the morning. If you will excuse me, stallion, I'll be along to your stables in a little while. Follow Stavtan."

"As my lady wishes," I replied. The stag and a wolf entered, and she approached the stag, as I followed the wolf. He first led me to a long gallery of statues. All sorts of animals, all male, and extremely life-like, some fifteen of them. A couple of porpoises were lying above a pool with a fountain at one end. I half expected them to move, and they were warm to a cautious touch, but unyielding as stone. Every hair was visible, but even they wouldn't bend. The wolf waited for me to finish looking it over, then led me to the stables where the rest of the party was gathered around Tolpran. I sketched briefly what Kirke had done, then asked, "You find anything else?"

"Even if she would allow it, I can't remove and restore the spell he's wearing," Val said, indicating the horse. "Too many cute and complex variations that she'd notice." \ "So mind-speaking it is," I said. "You already linked to him? Good, I'll join. Well, Master Tolpran, Would you care to answer a few questions?"

"Unless it would harm Her," the horse replied. "What do you want to know?"

"How did you come to live with her, if it's not too personal?" I asked.

"I came willingly," he answered, with an unmistakable sigh. "I thought I was in love with Her, and so offered to work for Her. Just being with Her sort of made up for having to be a stallion to please Her, at first. But then I did begin to miss being human. I got the nerve up to ask to be allowed to service Her in human form, and She assented. After two days and three nights of continuous action, I awoke content enough to lie back and contemplate Her. I rolled off her, and tweaked my own tail. Yeah, I still had it, as I had as a horse, my ears were as pointed, and my mane reached down to my shoulders. I was almost afraid to look, but I learned why She seemed so happy with me. I was still literally hung like a horse, the same equipment in size and form I have now. She awoke, and after one more bout, She made me all horse again and dismissed me.

"When She summoned me again, I built up the nerve to insist I be completely a man. She complied, but, when I was inside Her, She made me a stallion again, too wound up to withdraw. Sort of like Her first time with any man, but without the intensity of desire that blocks out all other sensation. I refused Her summons the next time, and met a mare, so in heat to put a gelding into rut. The mare turned into Her around me while I was mounted. The next time, I refused Her, in either form, and the mare chased me into Her gallery. There, I suddenly couldn't move. She returned to human, and a

stallion came to life, and serviced Her before me. In the month I was in there, I learned my lesson, and now do whatever She bids.”

“Then that gallery is her servants being punished?” I asked, giving Val a mental picture of it.

“Or other studs that she wishes to keep with her,” the horse commented. “You’d best take care with Her, or you might end up in there yourself. I’ve never seen Her so enamored of any male as She is with you. How’d you keep Her from making you completely into a horse, if I might ask?”

“Long story,” I replied. “Basically, except for that half-bull, this is our real form. We try to pass as human or horse with spells to keep from being killed as monsters. Your Lady dropped my concealment spell to make a stallion out of me, and found I already had what she wanted.”

“It seems a good form, stallion enough to satisfy Her, and human enough to talk and serve Her properly,” Tolpran mused. “If I get the nerve up, I’ll ask if She’ll make me to match you. She does have Her ideas of what a male’s proper form should be. Oh, She’s coming.”

Kirke walked in, a short time later. She’d bathed, though the stag’s scent was still on her.

“It’s getting late,” she said, “So I’ll bid you good night. Still, I do have a price for my hospitality — a companion for each night you stay here. Work out among yourselves who goes first.” “Among us, it’s the mare’s choice,” Ronchon commented.

“All right, Red,” she said. “Would you share my bed tonight?”

“I would rather you share my stall, my lady,” Val replied. “I am at your service, but may I make of you a proper mare so I can show you all of what little pleasure I know?”

“All right, stallion, go ahead,” she replied. “Still, if it doesn’t work, would you give me what I wish?”

“Yes, my lady,” he answered. Then, he shape-shifted her into the centaress she is now. She looked herself over curiously.

“Interesting,” she mused. “And damned if I couldn’t come to like it. One thing, though, udders as well as breasts? Oh, I see, it’s how your mare’s are built.”

“For when our foals are on their hooves,” Letita put in, “So they can feed without slowing us down. Then, when we must carry them, they can reach our breasts.”

“They have other uses, that a stallion can show you,” Nauva added, with a friendly leer.

“All right, Red, come, show me,” Kirke said, her tail swinging aside. Val took her arm and they left. He passed the mind-link to Tolpran to me. The horse was five-legged listening to the playful banter from the mare’s.

“Sorry, Tolpran,” Parani said, apologetically, “Your Lady has placed you and your stablemates off-limits to us.”

“I understand,” he returned. “We dare not offend Her, do we?”

“What would you do if she gave you your freedom?” I asked.

“I think I’d stay with Her,” the horse replied, after a moment’s thought. “My love for Her hasn’t really died. I’d even accept being a stallion for Her servicing.”



"How about the others? Would they stay, or go? Would they accept having to remain as she made them? Or are you cut off one from the other because you are in animal bodies, without speech?"

The wolf barked suddenly, and he and Tolpran locked eyes briefly. The interplay of expression was too fast and subtle for me to follow.

"Stavtan says that he would stay, and be a wolf to Her personal service, but would leave rather than be a wolf between such times," Tolpran said. "Actually, most of Her most active servants would like to stay with Her. We've talked this out long since. Many of us won't object to whatever form She wishes us to be in, either."

"By the way, how do you and Stavtan get along?" I asked. "Why don't the meat-eaters turn on the grass-eaters?"

"She forbids it, and keeps them well supplied with off-island meat," Tolpran replied. He locked eyes again with the wolf, and said, "There's also a scent about us that the predators shun, lest they wake up as prey without the scent themselves, when we've called on Her while under attack. Others She wishes slain may be so transformed. I gather it can be a long and fearsome time before a well-fed predator makes the kill."

"Thanks, Masters," I said. "Perhaps we'll talk again later. You'd best get to your stall and kennel."

"Good night, my lord," Tolpran sent, and I ended the link, and they left.

"Master," Letita said, walking up, her arm around Lantos's waist.

I quickly shape-changed her equine parts to bovine, and said, "Enjoy yourselves."

"Thank you, Master," they chorused, and retreated to one of the stalls. The rest of our guards had paired off, too, and I was left alone with my thoughts.

[Valkar put in,] Kirke led me to one of the chambers, whose floor was padded enough to be comfortable to roll on, but solid enough for traction under hoof. There, I started courting her, and had just gotten onto her back when she stiffened, listening to a distant voice.

"He's come already," she said. "It speaks well of him. Sorry, Red, but we'll have to finish this later. He's likely to come bursting in here if he has to wait. The only thing that's going to slow him down is if one of my bulls gores him. So down, and I'll be back."

She leaned back to give me a kiss, and I dismounted. She returned to human, summoning a set of tiger-striped robes, as I mind-spoke the Boss to tell him what was happening. I followed his example, and made myself all horse to tag along with her. She hurried into an audience chamber, to sit down on a couch, and calm herself down. I waited off to one side, to watch. Before too long, but long enough for her to be totally composed, the doors to the audience chamber burst open, and a man shouldered his way past one of her bulls and one of her stallion's into the room. A second man followed, almost timidly, as the first strode up to face her.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded, icily.

"Where are my men?" he barked, in response.

"What do you mean, your men?" she returned. "What men are you talking about, what makes them yours, and what makes you think I know anything about them?"

"The crew of my ship," he answered. "We made landfall on the far side of your island, after a long voyage. I left them to make camp while I went off to look the place over. Then I hear that you invited them here for a feast. I wish to make sure they haven't gotten into trouble, and to make amends for what trouble they may have made."

"They're here, but sleeping off the feast," she returned. "You're strangers to this part of the Archipelago, aren't you?"

"Aye, we're from Ithake, and have had a hell of a voyage trying to return there," he answered.

"You are off course," she said. "I have a price for my hospitality. I have men here so rarely. None of your men could pay properly, though. Well, Tiger, would you be willing to pay it for them?"

"Aye, my lady," he answered, clearly reading the payment she had in mind. The other man cowered in fear, and tried to hold the captain back. The leader shrugged him off, and strode confidently up to the couch Kirke was lying on. He bent down to kiss her, and seemed to go berserk to get into her. They tore his clothes off, and, once he was on top of her, he roared, like a lion. As he humped her, he started to grow a tail, like a cat's, with striped fur, that spread over his body. His nails, on toes and fingers, turned into claws, and his feet and hands to paws. He grew fangs, and his mouth lengthened into a muzzle. His hair and beard became striped orange and black, melding into the pelt that covered him. Well before he shot his bolt, he was a tiger, in all outward aspects. She held him close coupled to her until he climaxed, and she sighed with pleasure. Then, she, now well scratched from his claws and fangs, released him, and he leaped to the floor, to look himself over in shock. With a snarl, the tiger turned and sprang at her. She gestured quickly, and he stopped, immobile, in midair.

"You'll stay like this until I decide otherwise, Tiger," she said, coolly, walking up to pat his head. "Behave yourself, and we'll see. Attack me again, and I'll be wearing your pelt. Understand?"

The tiger shook his head, defiance in his eyes.

"I won't need to kill you to skin you, Tiger," she said. "I might need several of your skins to make a full set of robes, at that. Now, will you do my bidding until I let you go?"

He nodded, submissively, and closed his mouth and sheathed his claws. She gestured dismissal, and he dropped to the floor.

"Here's your share of the feast, my lusty tiger," she said, as a lion and wolf carried a side of pork into the hall, and left it.

"Oh, no," the other man cried, as the tiger sniffed it, suspiciously.

"Don't worry, it's nobody you know," she said. "In truth, I don't want men on my island, they're worse than animals."

She threw a spell, and the man bleated in terror, and became a sheep.

"You'd best go find your pasture," she told the sheep, who turned and ran. "As for you, Tiger, eat your fill, then head for the forest. Nothing on the island is to be hunted, understand? If you get hungry, come back here. I'll decide your ultimate fate later. Good eating, and thank you, my lusty tiger."

She patted his head, though he eyed her warily, then she walked over to me.

"That's settled him," she said. "Well, stallion, shall we resume?"

I shrugged, then followed her back into the chamber with the padded floor. I ended my spell, and gave the Boss a mind-spoken summary of how she'd handled the captain. Meanwhile, she made herself a centaur mare, covering over the scratches the big cat had given her. Even so, I went gingerly, and slowly worked my way back on top of her to hump her. She sighed with pleasure when I shot my bolt, and we disengaged and drifted off to sleep, wrapped in one another's arms.

The tiger was gone when we joined the rest of the centaur's for breakfast, after a quick breakfast mounting. She was pleasantly surprised at how well fodder went down a centaur's throat.

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[Cheiron resumed,] When our breakfast was over, Kirke asked, "Now, colleague, what did bring you down here from Stallion Valley?"

"Council business," I replied, "That does concern you, though you aren't a member. May our guards have the run of the island, while we talk? The castle is a bit confining for us."

"Go ahead," she said. "Not that there's that much to see. No animal is to be harmed, remember, and you mare's, again, try to keep away from my stallion's. Beyond that, you have full freedom of my island, as my guests. The predators have been warned about you, too." "What will become of the men from the ship last night?" Val asked. "Will they remain here as beasts all their lives, or have you made up your mind?"

"I would plead for clemency for them, my lady," I put in, "They did no harm, and do not deserve to be animals for ever."

"I will release them, in time," she answered, "All but one."

"Then you'd best give the pigsty a wide berth," Val commented to our guards. "There's a new tiger and a new sheep roaming the island, too. We don't want them to get ideas and spread them around after they leave."

"Yes, Boss," the guards chorused, and they filed out, leaving Val, Kirke, Martin, and me alone.

"You've surely heard how the members of the Council have been setting up permanent bases and staking out territories since I settled in Stallion Valley," I began, and Kirke nodded. "It's the turn of the Inland Sea to be claimed, and both Frenal, towards the northeast, and Zaratas, on the west, have filed a claim to the area."

"I've met them, briefly, a nice bull and bear, respectively," she commented. "I've not had them here, and they've shied away from my invitations."

"I wonder why," I said, rhetorically. "Had I not been intent on seeing you, your reputation would have kept me out of your bed, too. That does describe them, though."

"In any case, a feud seems to be building between them. They are closing their borders, and have each forbidden the other access to the Inland Sea. The Council has been asked to mediate between them, and, as I've been trying to stay out of it, without friends or enemies on either side, I came here to see who has the stronger claim."

"I've been traveling across the Inland Sea, and the undisputed bordering lands in both territories,

for the last month or so. Both covens are lightly represented in the disputed area, but they are clearly newcomers. When the people talk about their local magician, they tend to mention a third coven, or rather, an independent lone sorceress, the Beast Lady, who's been on Aiaia for a century or so. They think you've served them well, and are only disappointed when something happens that you cannot react to fast enough because you are alone here, with no standing presence on other islands. They'll seek your neighboring wizards' men out in emergencies, but will call on you if there is the time.

"Much as I did when I settled in Markan, you have established a claim to the entire Inland Sea for your territory, with the consent of the people of the Archipelago. You have a stronger claim than either of your neighboring wizards, who'd ignored the area until each realized that the other had defined his territory to butt up against his established operating area. Unless the Council recognizes what you've done here, though, they will divide the area between the members who have claimed it. They won't allow you to stay, I'm sure, and you cannot fight them off alone."

"So what is there for me?" she asked. "I'm a full master magician, and will be no other's lackey, even if another will tolerate my methods. Most of the rest of the world is already claimed by one Council Member or another, so there's no place for me to go and stay independent. My master and tutor had had more than enough of the petty political in-fighting on the Council for my taste, thank you."

"In my considered opinion," I said, "It would be best for the people if you remained free, independent, working from here as you deem best. No one from beyond the Archipelago will be able to serve them as well as you do. You need Council approval and support to keep the others from running you over. Even were you interested, you are not ready for Council membership, so would you accept a sponsor, a champion on the Council? You know how respected I am on the Council. I can't promise anything, but neither of your neighbors seems to have the support needed to win outright. A third position, that gives neither what he wants, might well succeed if a strong and clearly neutral member promotes it. If they do come to blows, I'll help keep the fighting out of your territory."

"I thank you for the offer of support," she replied, coolly. "What need I do for it?" "With regards to your service to the people," I answered, "Keep on as you are. So long as they accept you, and your terms, I will not object. Your sex life is your own business, though sometimes how you treat them comes rather close to rape. I'm in no position to object to what you choose to do it with, anyway. It's sometimes hard to ignore a mare in heat or for a mare, a stallion in his rut. The equipment's close enough that it's enjoyable, and they take us as one of their kind."

"I could support you freely, except for the way you treat your servants and other lovers. That gallery is no physical torture chamber, but it is the scene of the most inhuman mental torture I can imagine. It isn't really my place to judge how you discipline your servants, but the others are another matter. They are but prisoners, in a constant nightmare of fully aware immobility, except when you desire them. What did they do to deserve that sort of living death?"

"How human are you to call what I do inhuman, stallion?" she asked, coldly. "Some of them slew my servants, and should they not replace what they took from me? Others tried to abandon their service to me, without my leave, and so, should I not keep them, as long as they please me?"

"Do they still please you?" I asked. "How can they perform adequately if they are certain that you will put them back into the gallery? Are they such studs you cannot find others to give you similar pleasure? You have a reputation among the people, my lady, and there are men who would pay the price you ask to bed you, should you grow tired of all your own studs."

"Surely whatever punishment you are imposing on the others is well served by now. Whatever they did, they have paid the price, in standing immobile but sensing all that goes on around them. Nothing they took from you can compare to the living hell you have put them through."

"Again, colleague, what would you have me do?" she asked, coolly. "I see I might need your assistance on the Council, but must I follow your bidding to have it?"

I wrestled with my conscience, then said, "From what I have seen of your operations to date, I have no choice but to support you, fully, before the Council. You may do as you will with your servants and prisoners. But knowing what I do of your actions, I dare not trust you, so long as you continue to treat them as you have. Such callous treatment of others, especially those who've freely come to do your bidding and rely on you for protection, speaks of a streak of evil in you, buried not deeply enough. How long will it be before you treat the people you are meant to serve as you have those who serve you? I know not, and the Council will wish to know, as well. I will have trouble justifying to them granting you the territory you've claimed so long as you persist in such actions."

"If you wish my full and free support, you should release every male in your gallery from the stasis. Then, they, and every one of your servants, should be given the freedom to stay as long as he chooses or leave your service at any time. Those who remain should be allowed to wear whatever form they wish or will accept, save when their duties to you require otherwise."

"They will not stay, but will run off, if given their choice," she protested.

"You do not know them so well as you think, colleague," Val put in. "We've talked with a number of them, and they are a singularly loyal crew. Most will stay, and service you as you wish. Many will also accept being the animals you've made them, between such times. They love you, rather than fear you."

"Once you give them their freedom, and their choice, they should not be put into the gallery again, nor should it ever be used on anyone. Your servants need not be so disciplined, and no crime merits such a living death," I finished.

"I think I can appreciate the moral dilemma I've put you in, colleague," Kirke answered. "I thank you for the support you've offered so freely. You've not made it dependent on my doing as you would prefer, and will accept it as it is offered. Yet, I see how you will be uncomfortable with supporting me, while I act so much against your conscience. Nor, do I suspect, will you come to me again if you despise my methods so much. As your coven learns of how you feel about my methods, they will likewise avoid me. I know of no others of your kind, and your herd doubtless needs your coven's protection so they are part of it."

"You are the best studs I've ever found, and I will not give that up, for my own pride. I will do as you request. I will free all those from the gallery, and they and my servants will be given their choice to stay or leave. Those who stay may wear whatever form they wish. It may slow things down when I want a stud, but I'll manage. A few of the stallion's and bulls have asked if they might be centaur's, like you or Lantos. After last night, I think I will."

She patted Val's withers, affectionately.

"Let's to it, then, the gallery first," she said.

She led us back to the gallery, and released the first figure, a bull. Before he'd finished shaking himself, she dismissed his shape-shift, and he became a big, rather bull-like man.

"You will all be free to go, once you are released and restored to human," she announced, with a note of regret in her voice. "I've kept what gear you brought with you safe, in that room, and my servants will carry you to Padolan."

"I thank my lady for her mercy," the man said, bowing, and dashed for the door.

"I'll leave your youth spells in effect," she announced. "They should last long enough for you to find someone to handle them."

"If you make for Markan, look up Cheiron's coven," I said. "We'll rejuvenate you properly."

A one-time stallion, fifth in the sequence, said, bowing, "If my Lady will allow, I would resume my place in Her service."

"Thank you, Farksar," Kirke replied. "Would you object if I made you a centaur, as I am now and these my guests are?"

"Whatever my Lady wishes," he answered. "It does make me as my Lady desires, but leaves me what I so missed as a horse. If you wish me to service you as one, I will. Yet, if my Lady would permit, may I remain as I am between times?"

"Yes, you may," she said, reluctantly. "Go to your duties."

The next to agree to stay had been a bear, and, to her request about what form he might accept, replied, "Whatever my Lady wishes. If she wishes me to be a bear again, I will be one, happily."

"So be it," she said, and started the spell.

"Remember Lantos," Val commented, quietly. She paused, then nodded, and finished the spell. The bear-like man turned into a bear from the waist down.

"Will you accept this, Santal?" she asked.

"If it pleases my lady," the bear-centaur said, with an awkward bow.

"Go to your duties," she commanded.

"Have him stay a moment, colleague," I put in.

"Santal, wait!" she called, and he turned back. "What do you have in mind?" "I'd rather not tell those who may not need to know," I said, gesturing to the remaining gallery. "But trust me, I think you'll like him better if I can do what I've got in mind."

She gave me a puzzled look, then continued through the gallery. Three more chose to stay, of the sixteen in all, and she made a stag-centaur and a merman of two of them. Half a dozen porpoises, including Wastak, bobbed out of the pool, next to the merman, and, like him, agreed to stay as mermen. Those of her servants that were out of the castle were called in next, most of whom agreed to stay and a score became various breeds of centaur. Then, she called in the rest of her servants, with the human ones covering for them. They all agreed to stay, seven of the dozen, including Tolpran but not Stavtan, as they'd said, agreeing to be centaur's of a breed to match what she'd made of them. Eventually, there were half a dozen stallion's, four bulls, three stags, five bears, four wolves, three each lions and tigers, and two panthers among her centaur's, plus the seven mermen.

"Now, what do you have in mind?" Kirke asked, when none but her half-human servants were left.

"Might you want them to be permanently as they are now?" I asked. "Beyond magic, so none could easily tell they'd ever been otherwise. Then, they'd not have to be magicked into the form you wish them to be. You clearly don't agree, but I don't like to see magic used so freely."

"Perhaps, and I do see how that could make a difference," she mused. "Your bull was much less confident in handling me than you were. Still, that sounds like a job for a god. I may have been sired by one, but I don't have any contacts in any priesthood good for that many miracles. Do you, or are you one yourself?"

"No, he isn't," Val put in. "Nor do we need one, really. To be honest, neither of us was born a centaur, but a god-powered magic pool half turned us to horse's when we were first exploring Stallion Valley. We've managed to harness the pool to undo what it did, but, by then, we were too settled on all fours, and we had foals who'd had foals that we could neither abandon nor force out of the only life they'd known. We can do nearly any change with it, actually."

"I think I see," Kirke said. "Can you do it here and now?"

"We didn't bring nearly enough of what is needed with us," I returned. "It has other uses, so we don't want to waste it. It's reasonably confidential, so I'd rather they spend a day in Stallion Valley."

"I am tempted," she replied. "But it's what, five weeks each way to your place? I'd run the rest of my staff ragged trying to do without them that long. Could you bring what you need from Stallion Valley?"

"Not really," I answered, "Not and be ready for the Council meeting in three months. Besides, it would take a sizeable party to protect it, and it's too far to march so many under the masquerade. If you would consent, I think we could, with help from there, teleport them to Stallion Valley and back the following day, once the permanent change is set in. We've worn the mana level fairly well down, already, so we should wait a day."

"I don't want teleport coordinates for my home too widely known," she said, "As I'm sure you do for Stallion Valley. Hell, you've been here more than long enough already to get them. You should have them if you're going to protect as well as support me. I'll trust you, if they'll accept it. They've been listening, but I doubt they understand. Tell them what all they'll be in for."

"Men!" I began, "I have offered to your lady to make you in truth as she has made you now. Afterwards, you will need magic to seem human again, as magic has turned you from human now. You will not be able to sire human children again, but will breed after your own kind. In fact, no human woman will bear you offspring again, not even your lady. You will be able to sire offspring of your kind on the animals that are your kindred, and on the mare's of our centaur herd, should your lady allow you access to them. We could undo what we did, should you request it. Will you accept this?"

"My lord," one of the stallion's said, "What will be different for us in what you offer from having Her magic us always into this form She wishes for us? If She will enjoy us more afterwards, then please, do not put it off. Whatever pleases Her, we will seek to fulfill. Perhaps She will consent to be a proper mate for us, as She is now, at least at times, if not always."

A murmur of assent went around the room from her servants.

"I will remain human in truth, and most of the time in fact," Kirke answered, "Though I have known the pleasures this kind knows from it's stallion's. I will ask your service, as I have in the past, your kind and my human. We shall see whether I shall ask other kinds of service from you. Do you accept

that?"

"As our Lady wishes," they all replied.

"We cannot proceed with this until tomorrow morning," she said. "Go to your duties. Wastak, Urovat, hitch yourselves to the boat, take the men waiting on the dock to Padolan, then return."

"As our Lady wishes," two of the mermen said, and dove into the pool. The others followed, as the centaur's scattered.

"All this magic work has made me hungry as a horse," Kirke said, grinning at the all but unavoidable pun. "It's getting towards midday, so call your people in for lunch. It'll be ready shortly."

In our conversation over the meal, we told the rest of our crew what had gone on, to the three mare's' special interest. "Excuse me, your wisdom," Nauva put in, "But you might enjoy what you've made of your stallion's more if you would give us leave to show them how to use their new bodies properly."

"Will your own stallion's not object?" Kirke returned.

"Only if they ask us to dismount to make room," Kolfas commented.

"Otherwise, it isn't their place to," Parani put in, "No more than it is ours to object to what they might do with you. Any stallion who tried to tell us who we could hump would find himself treated as he would we treat others."

"You and I think alike," our hostess mused. "As I said, somehow, I get the feeling you won't try to take my studs away. Go ahead, and they're excused from their duties while they're with you. After what Valkar showed me last night, I'll give them the chance to use what you'll teach them. They're also sure to have enough practice the day they'll spend in Stallion Valley."

After the meal, the mare's trotted off together to round up her stallion's, and we joined Kirke to look the island over and talk with the other centaur's. When we met one of her stallion's, she deflected his pass by telling him of the orgy our mare's were setting up, and he trotted off eagerly. A stag-centaur, grazing with him, followed, as eagerly, to return, disappointed. Six to three was quite out of balance enough for the mare's. Kirke patted his lower shoulders, reassuringly, and started growing antlers of her own. When she was a doe for his stag, she led him off for some private reassurance. After she rejoined us, and he, more relaxed, returned to his companions, we moved on. Suddenly, we all scented a tiger. Not one of her tiger-centaur's but the full thing, the one Val watched her make last night. She dropped her shape-shift, the scratches from the night before still visible, excused herself, and disappeared into the brush. We heard the tiger roar exultantly, and she returned, bearing new scratches and bites. The tiger came back to the castle near nightfall, and Kirke went to meet him again.

"Come on, Spots," Kirke addressed Ronchon, after she'd rejoined us, and continued our conversation a while, "I'm ready for bed. Show me what besides your colors you got from your sire."

"The Master sired my sire's dam, actually," the other sable-and-ermine stallion answered. "At least, so far as my own dam and sire's grand-dam believe. But I'd be happy to do your pleasure, my lady, if you might be a mare for my own."

"All right, stallion, come on," she said, and took his elbow to lead him off. We male centaur's had to find new stables, since the mare's' orgy with her stallion's went on all night. She was a centaress

again when they joined our breakfast manger the next morning, and had been mounted at least once, that was clear.

“Now what, colleague?” she asked. “Your studs are making me more and more eager to get my own studs the reflexes that only come with the real body. I’ve called them together, and let’s get them off as soon as we can.”

“You’d best be free of magic, colleague,” I said. “This is going to be tough enough, what with the range. We cannot be sure those on the other end will make them what you want of them, and had best send most of them magicked.” “Yes, and it is a long lift,” she said, returning to human. “To send my mermen, too, we’d best use the gallery, with its pool.”

I started a long-range mind-speak to Mel as we returned to the gallery.

“What?” he sent, when contact came, then, “Oh, hello, Boss. Gods, you must be far away. I can barely sense the contact. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, really,” I returned. “I’m down on an island in the Inland Sea. I’ve got a world-class favor to do a colleague in return for a similar-sized one on her part, and this is the only way we can see to do it. Where are you, now?”

“Main hall. My workroom is like an oven, and the librarian’s half afraid the books are going to catch fire.”

“I want to send some thirty people to the Valley, have the shape-shifts they’re wearing fixed, and send them back here tomorrow. Our hostess is somewhat stronger than Val, but we’re going to need help at this range, especially with the spells intact.”

“I can see half a dozen magicians around, should be no problem getting help. Do you want them to know about us?”

“We’re out of the masquerade here. You’ll understand when you see and talk to them.”

The mermen bobbed out of the pool, as her centaur’s filed in. The stallion’s were well contented, almost exhausted.

“I’ve made contact with Stallion Valley,” I announced, then, relaying Mel’s mental message, “They’re ready to catch what we can send. Non-equine centaur’s first. Come, colleagues.”

Val, Kirke, and I linked hands into a ring, and she said, “You first, Santal.”

When the bear-centaur was in our circle, we linked minds to work the spell, and he disappeared.

“He’s here,” Mel sent, “And in one piece. We weren’t sure something hadn’t been scrambled until he confirmed that was how you sent him.”

One by one, we sent the rest of her special centaur’s to Stallion Valley.

“A baker’s dozen more, Mel,” I sent. “For the next batch, can you get to the river?”

“Boss, we can’t fix mermen,” Mel returned.

“I think we can these,” I answered. “Give us a few moments and we’ll be wading,” he sent back.

"How deep is the pool, my lady?" I asked, aloud.

"Two and a half feet," Kirke answered. "The bottom's a foot below the floor."

"Come on, Val, let's go wading," I said.

We're small enough as horse's go that our equine bellies were in the water as we ringed the mermen, with Kirke on the shore, and sent them off when Mel signaled he and his helpers were ready.

"I see your point," Mel sent, as we climbed out of the pool. "What are the remaining half-dozen going to be?"

"I'll send them to the valley head," I replied, "Let the field take care of them."

"Of course," he answered. "I was beginning to wonder. We only have the normal complement up there, and it'll be half a day before we can get up there to help them."

"Link us through, and they should suffice," I sent.

"Colleague, is there any reason that you might want any of your stallion's exactly as you've made them, in every detail, color, conformation, anything?" I asked, aloud.

"Not particularly, why do you ask?" Kirke returned. "Why should anything change?"

"I'd like to send them there as human's, and let them become centaur's as we originally did," I answered. "It would make the teleport easier, but there's no good way of predicting what the pool will make of them. They'll be stallion's, that I can assure you, but the pool uses their bodies to direct the change with a subtlety even the strongest of us cannot match. Their color and conformation, particularly, are likely to be different from what they are now, in minor ways."

"Go ahead," she said, ending the spells so the stallion's returned to human. "They were handsome enough, though variation need not destroy their handsomeness. If they're too distorted, I hope you'll be able to make them again as they were now."

"The changes are not likely to be that significant," Val commented. "Drop them into the field? We might as well, we're going to be sending them close enough to trip the change anyway."

"That would save a spell apiece, wouldn't it?" I said. "Men, brace yourselves. When you arrive, you will be a centaur again."

"Then we could bring them right back," Kirke mused. "No, let them have their fun, and stay a day like the others." Tolpran and the others stepped into the ring, and we sent them off.

"They all arrived on all fours," Mel relayed. "We'll send them back tomorrow, with the others. Anything else that can't wait until you get home?"

"There may be as many as a score of men come looking for our coven," I said. "They'll be wearing eternal youth spells, which they got from Kirke, or the Beast Lady, or on Aiaia. I'll still be travelling around, so they're likely to beat me to Markan. Tell our healers, they're to have full rejuvenations, at no charge. Masquerade up, though."

"Right. I hope the favor we're getting out of this is worth it," he sent back. "See you later, if there's nothing else."

"My Lady," Valkar asked, "Would you want to be permanently a centaress for your studs?"

"Of which breed, Red?" she returned. "It's tempting, from what you and Ronchon showed me, but I don't want to be tempted to play favorites. I'll pass. I gather that Lantos would be a stallion already if he wished to be. Could you ask him if he'd like to be always a bull?"

"Not really, begging my lady's pardon," Lantos returned, when Val contacted him mind-to-mind and posed the question. "I'll bull you, when you ask, but I'd rather be as I was born between times. Besides, if I wished to be on all fours, I'd have a much easier time back home as a stallion than as a bull. There aren't any heifers around, and it's uncomfortable cross-breed without magic. Now, there are women in the Valley I can ask so I need not use magic when I need to get my rocks off."

"All right, bull," Kirke said. "Nothing more, colleague."

"That's it, Mel, and thanks," I sent. "I'll be waiting to hear from you when they're ready to come back."

"After lunch, tomorrow. Talk to you then," he returned, and I ended the mind-link.

"I'm hungry as a horse again from all this work," Kirke said. "I hope it'll be worth it. Let's get our lunch."

Her human servants kept the castle running, and, after our meal, she made herself a centaur again to continue our tour of her now nearly deserted island. We met the tiger again, and she went to human again for have him service her, and when he came to the castle to be fed at nightfall. She took Kolfas for that night. We spent half a day more marking time, until Mel contacted me after noon.

"The fixer took," he sent. "All of them, even the mermen. They're ready to come. We dropped their youth spells, and gave them each a full rejuvenation."

"Thanks, Mel," I returned. "I should have thought of that."

"They're ready to send your servants back," I said aloud.

"Back to the gallery, so we can put the mermen back in the water," Kirke said.

We repeated the process of the day before, and each appeared in the ring of our arms. When all the centaur's had arrived, Val and I went wading again to drop the mermen in the pool.

"All here safe and sound," I sent. "I'll tell you the full story when we get home."

"I'll be waiting," he returned. "See you then."

"Hold a moment," I sent. Then, aloud, "Any further changes, colleague?"

"No, colleague," Kirke answered.

"See you then. Out," I sent, and the mind-link ended.

"If anything, the changes make them look even better, more one being," she mused. "They're all younger than when they left, too. I don't like my studs quite so callow."

"They're as experienced as they were," I said, "With the strength of youth, as well. My people

decided to get rid of their youth spells, and give them their real youth back. It's how I've been around so long without having to fear being dispelled and dying of instant old age."

"I see the point," Kirke said. "They're aging again, though, as are you. When they reach their prime, I'll stop their aging, so they continue to amass experience without ever losing their ability. Now, I need something to eat. All of you may relax, and get used to your new bodies, until my guests leave. I'll see what each of you has learned afterwards."

"I'd like to move on again, colleague," I said, over our meal. "There's quite a bit of politicking I need to do before the Council meeting. I've spent about as much time here as I can afford. May we borrow your barge and some of your mermen to take us back where we met?"

"Tell you what, stay another night, and you can take that ship from the back side of my island, with her crew," she said. "You two should be able to put them back into their native forms once you're well clear of the island."

"Are you still meaning to keep one of them?" I asked.

"Yes, I am," she answered, coolly, almost challengingly. "All right, stallion, I'll take him into my stables, or let him leave, eventually. I'll give him the chance to get away from that group of swine he's been working with. "Let's get off the subject. For tonight, Bull, would you share my stall? I'll make myself a heifer for you, if you'll bull me as I enjoy it."

"Aye, my lady," Lantos answered, as she grew horns and turned to a cow from the waist down, "Though if you're going to start through the cycle again, it's the Master's turn, isn't it?"

"Aye, but I know I'll see him again," she replied. "I don't know enough of your routine to know how long you will be in his guard, or when I will see you again."

"Your wisdom," Nauva put in, "This will be the last night the six of us will be able to be of compatible race until we get back into Markan. We have always tried to make the most of such times, and you would be welcome to join us this evening."

"What do you have in mind?" Kirke asked, her eyes lighting. "An orgy?"

"That's what it usually ends up," the bucentaur commented. "Master, Chief, you're welcome, too. My Lady, would you either make me a stallion, or let me go back to human so I can with my own resources, so we don't have to disrupt our fun to make me match with the others?"

"I'd be honored to join you," our hostess said. "I'll let you bull me first off, then make you a stallion for these fillies. I'll give you your horns back for your last hump of the evening."

"It'll be my pleasure to join you this evening," I said.

"And mine," Valkar added.

It was still mid-afternoon, after we'd refreshed ourselves, and she came trotting with us to watch her cavorting centaur's, her tail twitching in her desire for them. There were rarely few enough around for her to accept any of their offers. Our own mare's had had enough for one stretch the day before, and were saving their energy for the evening. That night, Kirke had each male in our party at least twice, the centaur's both as centaress and as woman. Even Martin got into her act, and, when I told her about him, she ended his spell and took him as wolf-man. I thought I noticed Val were at one point, to service her. She had Lantos both ways, as bull and stallion. The mare's didn't try to keep

up, but kept to a relaxed pace to enjoy each of us.

Kirke woke me up the next morning, and I was on her back before I was fully awake. When we were finished, she went back to human and, with a last pat on my flank, left us to our preparations to leave. With her own centaur's on the island now, it was reasonably safe to let our true race show. Still, we put our steeds and Martin under the masquerade first, in private.

Meanwhile, our hostess went to the pigsty, and selected one of them, the one she'd paused over that first night. He was terrified, that was clear, but he followed her to her chambers. Once she had him alone, his eager snorts turned to a lion's roar, and a lion followed her out of the room. She sent him off, as the tiger returned. When she finished with him, she led him to the pigsty. The lion met them there, herding that sheep.

"You can take your crew back to your ship now, captain," she said, opening the gate of the sty. "You help him, lad."

The two cats herded the pigs and sheep across the island, as Kirke and we followed. Her servants had laid a gangplank up the side of the beached ship, so the pigs and the tiger could board. The lion returned to Kirke's side.

"Ahoy, captain!" Val called out, and the tiger looked over the rail, growling a question.

"Would you be able to carry a couple of magicians, their guards, and our horse's to the next island?" Val asked. "We can pay, in gold or in kind."

It didn't take the tiger-captain long to make up his mind and he nodded acceptance.

"If you'd rather stay with your shipmates, lad," I addressed the lion, as the rest of my party boarded, "I'll deal with her for your freedom."

The lion shook his head, and rubbed affectionately against his new mistress's legs.

"Thanks for everything, stud," Kirke said, beckoning me down for an impassioned kiss. "You surely know how to keep your mare's happy. Come back, often, will you? You and all the stallion's of your herd will always be welcome guests."

"I'll see you when the Council calls you to our meeting, colleague," I replied. "Good luck until then."

I boarded, and her centaur's pushed and her mermen pulled the ship off the beach. The tiger paced anxiously and the rest of the crew milled around nervously. Kirke mounted one of her stallion's, and rode him into the water beside the ship. She stood on her mount's lower back to beckon me to bend over the rail for a farewell kiss. Then, she worked a spell, and her mount's lower body turned from horse to porpoise. She rolled into the water with him, and dove, flashing her own mermaid's tail, as he gave chase. Soon, the mermen towing the ship cast off the lines, and bade us farewell as they returned to her island.

We turned the tiger back to human first. We'd left his clothes with Kirke, so he scrambled for fresh ones. Then, he called out his officers, and then the rest of his crew, and Val and I dispelled their changes. As the crew made sail, we restored our own masquerade, Lantos first, then Nauva, and finally Val and myself. Of course, that took care of our passage, anywhere in the Inland Sea we would name.

"Where's Zerlat?" one of the mates cried out, on counting the crew. "Did we leave him behind in the

clutches of that witch?"

"She chose to keep him," I answered, "And he chose to stay. I offered him the chance to come, and he refused."

"Let's go back and get him!" the mate continued. "We'll teach that witch a lesson."

"Did you enjoy being a pig?" the captain challenged him. "The next time you might think that would be a blessing. He's hers now so let him go. You'll find another boy soon enough. Besides, until we can find a mage to undo her spell, I doubt you'll enjoy bedding a lion, if we could get him away from her."

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"The others subsided, and they carried us on to Padolan," Cheiron finished. "I heard they had even more troubles, and only the captain eventually made it back to Ithake. Kirke brought Zerlat when she was called before the Council, and he asked to be made permanently a lion. He insisted, over any argument we could muster, and would not be a leocentaur, so I agreed. I gather they both did the same with whichever of my coven came by after he brought his lady love back here.

"As you've probably guessed, lad, the Council accepted my proposal. Under Council protection, Kirke was given her own territory, without having to be a member herself. That also earned me the lasting enmity of Frenal and Zaratas, and through him, Konvalor. I don't know how much of Council politics you've heard, colleague, but that could have crippled our stand against Narzog. Frenal would have preferred to sit by and watch Konvalor, Narzog, and me destroy one another. His better instincts, together with his stronger hatred for Konvalor, made him lean to our side, especially after they offered him the Inland Sea for support or neutrality. I made no such offer of my own, of course, though he expected it. When he finally came in on our side, he offered to guard the Inland Sea in case Konvalor moved this way. I told him to ask your permission, and advised him against splitting our forces that way. Narzog wouldn't, I was sure."

"Konvalor made little trouble here," Kirke said. "Anti-monster propaganda and centaur terrorism before the war was about it. With my reputation, I went more or less public as soon as you converted my stable, and could weather the propaganda. I was also able to help your people ride it out."

"And since?" Valkar asked.

"Frenal's been cordial, though rather cool," she replied. "I gather he expected you to have Konvalor executed, so Rendalan could take over the territory. I expect he has as many agents in Konvalor's coven as Kolman does. Konvalor has been almost annoying with his attentions. I think he expects to get into your good graces through my bed. He arrived here once as a centaur, though he shouldn't have hooves, as far as I'm concerned. I won't accept him so long as he seems to think that way. Besides, he's so slimy and fawning it's repulsive."

"By the way, where was Rondal during the Council meeting?" Cheiron asked. "You clearly weren't in foal then, and the timing would have been right for you to drop him at the meeting."

"I foaled just before I left for the meeting," Kirke answered, reaching over to tousle her son's mane. "Expecting the kind of gossip we got, and not wanting to give them more ammunition, I left him home, with my healer half a mare to nurse him."

"We've been loose allies ever since," Cheiron continued. "Aiaia was about the only place outside Markan we could stretch our legs properly, and even outside Stallion Valley where we could really

run. It was enough to compensate for what she puts our stallion's through. I've paid a visit every century or so, to keep tabs on her.

"A few times each century, depending on weather, politics, and wars, one of her studs, in horse form, would carry a new member of her stable to Stallion Valley, to be permanently made the stud she wants him to be. The senior stud would be of the same kind. We'd oblige, and give them a few days to relax in the valley, before they'd head back, usually with their roles reversed."

"Some did not return," Kirke complained. "Or if they did, they soon asked their release to join the Stallion Valley herd. I do not appreciate your mare's stealing my stallion's."

"I'm sure they did not do so deliberately," Cheiron replied. "They're happier in the herd, so why keep them from their happiness. Besides, they've been back here so often that it would not have been that far off for Narzog to attack my territory this way."

"I know, but I still miss them between times," Kirke said. "I'll get by, though. I won't return to the possessiveness that led me to what so offended you when we first met."

"You might see them more often in the near future," Valkar put in. "The herd's beginning to outgrow the Valley's capacity, and now that the masquerade is down, we can spread out. Many of your former studs would volunteer to establish a second herd in this area. Once we've settled down from the war, we'll see what sort of deal we can make with the baron at Knossos."

"I might join them," Rondal spoke up. "I'll have to see what they have to offer, and what Stallion Valley is like, before I decide. It'll feel more like home, and I'll be closer to the only family I've known."

"Thank you, son," his mother said. "Still, do what your heart says."

"Well, Ken," Kirke said, as their further conversation, after their meal, wound down, "You've heard about the price I ask for my hospitality. Would you pay it, for tonight?"

"I am sorry, my lady, but no," the young brown stallion replied.

"I'll stay a mare for you," she said. "If you could make your filly happy with the equipment you were born with, I'm sure you could make me happy stallion and mare."

"I thank you for the compliment, but again, my lady, pardon me, but I must decline," he said.

"You're going to trip yourself if you were any more interested," she mused. "Or is it that you still prefer as you first did with your filly? I'll magic you back to human and you can show me."

"No!" Kendor cried out, half in panic. "Do not do that, I beg you. Ask the Master, or Val, or Martin. I must beg your pardon for any offense I might give you, but I do not wish to bed you. You are lovely, and under other circumstances I might happily mount you, but not this visit."

"Stop teasing the boy," Martin growled. "It's been the two-legged fillies that have been the worst of your problems, hasn't it?"

"Go ahead, lad, tell her," Cheiron said. "He has good reason to refuse you, and you do deserve to know, since he'll be at my flank as long as I can keep him alive."

"My lady, had you ever accepted my Master's offer to make you permanently a centaress, I would

be astride you with little hesitation," Kendor began. "However, except for my Maggie, I have always kept to females truly of my own kind. I might not be a stallion now were what Maggie and I shared enough for me, or her.

"It is the magic you wear now, and that any cross-race mating normally requires that makes it impossible for me to accept your or any woman's offer. I can not easily bear magic, or even to be near magic, of any kind. When the mana goes away, I get headaches. I cannot come close enough to touch you now, and even this distance is not comfortable. Even worse, were you to try to make me human, I'd be unconscious, or hurting so bad I could never make you happy."

"This is to be a tactical secret, colleague," Cheiron put in. "My having Ken on my back was one reason we beat Narzog. He's become a very sensitive, continuous, highly discriminating, non-magical magic detector. I'd had six months to train him, and he couldn't join the herd until after the war. The masquerade played merry hob with his allergy, as it was."

"I see where he could be useful," Kirke said. "You were lucky to recruit him. About the only thing he did that surprised me was his vehemence when I suggested making him human again. Intelligence on top of his special gift, quite a combination. If you're uncomfortable, lad, I'll get rid of the spell, until I have one of the other stallion's alone."

She gestured dismissal, and became a woman again, no more modest about her nudity than she'd been before.

"My lady," Kendor spoke up, quietly, "As a favor to you, to pay for our lodgings, I would be willing to give you what you want, as we are, without magic."

"Oh, stallion?" she asked, surprised. "I thought you kept to the mare's."

"Were it for my own pleasure, I would," he answered. "This shall be for yours alone. I do not expect to enjoy it, myself. It will be no more than a release for me, since I haven't had a mare since we left Markan. Your youth spell may make things a bit uncomfortable anyway."

"Else you'd bankrupt yourself buying mare's to hump," Kirke commented. "It sounds like you're getting desperate. Come, my mannerly young stallion, let's see what kind of pleasure we can show you in the process. Rondal, please show our guests back to their stables. I'll see you for breakfast, colleagues."

As Rondal led Cheiron, Valkar, and Martin out of the room, Kirke got to her feet to walk over to Kendor, who started to scramble to his hooves.

"Don't move, stallion," she said, gesturing him back down. "We can do it here, and you're not going to be able to do anything I like standing up."

She took him for an impassioned kiss, flicking her tongue into his mouth to begin to explore his body, and inviting him to do the same, with hands, lips, and tongue. She got him to roll his equine body onto its back, with all four legs in the air, and wound up sitting astride his equine chest, her back to his face, as she played with his penis, with hands and mouth, stroking it up to fully erect. He bent his upper body forward, to reach between his forelegs and caress her behind. He reached up between her legs, sticking his fingers into her vagina, then bent nearly double to follow them with his tongue. When she tried to move, he held playfully tight to her thighs, and continued his exploration of her genitals.

"Come on, stallion," she said. "You're primed and ready. That feels good, but not half as good as



what you've got between your hind legs."

"But I can't find enough room for me in here," he answered, disengaging just long enough to speak.

"Trust me, stallion," she said. "Let me go, and I'll show you how well you fit in."

With one last, lingering stroke of his tongue, he let her go. She reversed herself to stand astraddle his body, gave him another kiss, then slipped back along his body to impale herself on him. He bent almost double again to reach for her. She flexed her knees to pump on him, and his hind knees flexed in reflex. They began to pant in the rhythm of her pumping, and cried out together as he discharged into her. Then she reached up to his forelegs to pull herself off him, and he reached down to help, and they resumed their loveplay. He rolled onto his side, and she eventually curled up to sleep nestled against his equine belly.

Her kissing woke him up the next morning, and they reprised their loveplay of the night before, without having sex, though. She sat resting against his lower belly and playing gently with him while they ate their breakfast, as the rest of her guests arrived. During their meal, a knock came, and a centaress walked in at Kirke's invitation, and stopped short.

"Come on in, Alexandra," Kirke invited her, "Pull up a manger and take a load off your hooves. I'd like you to meet my guests: Cheiron of Stallion Valley and his bodyguard, Valkar, Martin, and Kendor. My resident healer, Alexandra."

"I am honored, my lord," the centaress replied, curtsying centaur-style. "I've heard much about you."

"My pleasure, colleague," Cheiron returned, rising to his hooves to bow, and the three other males echoed him in words and gesture, Kendor bowing as well as he could without displacing Kirke.

"Cheiron, or one of his great-grandsons, is Rondal's sire," Kirke continued, as Alexandra joined the other reclining centaur's. "He's going to take him back to Stallion Valley to let him find a free stallion's life."

"I might say that it's long past time," the healer commented. "Will I have time to say good-bye to him before you leave, my lord?"

"We'll linger a couple more days," the sable-and-ermine answered. "I'd like to get to know you better, when our hostess can spare us."

"If your mother can spare you, would you like to come with us and your brother?" Valkar asked. "Like him, you should learn more of the life you were born for than you can from her studs."

"Yes, I would like to go back to Stallion Valley, if you can spare me, my lady," Alexandra replied. "I'd like to compare notes with your herd's healers, to see if what I've learned on my own really works. By the way, I'm not the Lady's offspring. She hasn't carried a foal to term since she dropped Rondal, even while we were figuring out how he happened. We've figured it was probably because she had you without using magic, unlike most people in that situation, that you hit paydirt on her."

"We figured that out for ourselves, less than a year ago," Kendor commented.

"When were you in the Valley?" Cheiron asked. "I'd expect to have seen you, once you mentioned your Lady, and I'd remember you, and not just because she said she didn't like to have competition for her studs."

"I've learned not to worry about that," Kirke commented.

"I don't recall being there myself," Alexandra answered. "I'd been working for her off and on for years. Rondal was about three months along, when I woke up like this when I was here to check on the two of them, changed quite beyond magic. She offered me sanctuary here with her stallion's, and I didn't know any place else to go, so I accepted. I guessed I'd been sent to Stallion Valley in the night and been changed truly there, from what I learned from the other centaur's. Kedar and other of her stallion's have hinted that they'd been sent there as human's, and were centaur's when they arrived, and I guess that's what happened to me, so no one there need have helped."

"Colleague," Valkar began, turning to Kirke, "I didn't think you were strong enough to teleport a sleeping person to Stallion Valley from here, much less bring a mare back. By the way, twenty meters the wrong way and she'd have been all mare, not just from the waist down."

"Actually, she helped, herself," Kirke commented. "I suppressed the memories after."

"Give them back to her, now," Cheiron said, darkly. "She has most of them back already, it seems. Alexandra, if you wish, we will turn you fully back to human, regardless of whether she consents. Colleague, that was unforgivable. You have done what my enemies have long accused me of doing, making centaur's of human's without their consent. When you said you'd made your healer half mare to nurse Rondal when you couldn't, I thought you meant just for the time. But you said you weren't the motherly type, didn't you? So you made your healer permanently a mare to foster your son, while you went off doing other things. Our mare's would dress you up and down for that, though they don't insist we stallion's take care of our get, except those who are half horse in more than appearance."

"If I might offer a defense against that last charge," Alexandra put in, "The Lady was running with me and Rondal until she fully weaned him. I only nursed him when she was off the island at the Council meeting. Except for then, she never left him so far away that she couldn't go to him herself when he was hungry. She'd even ask a stallion to wait when she heard her son cry. For all she denies a mother's instincts, I've rarely seen a more devoted mother."

"It was for you, stallion," Kirke said. "She was learning too much that you would have me keep secret, so I wanted to make sure she wouldn't talk."

"My lady, I will admit that I had been beginning to wonder about Rondal, and your centaur studs," the healer put in. "But I would never have pushed it. That would violate the confidentiality that should be kept between healer and patient, besides that I'd long since learned when to label things I chance to see as 'do not recall' when they are none of my business and do not affect my professional relationship with my patients. In fact, had you not forced me into your household by making me a centaur, I would probably never had the time, opportunity, or inclination to probe into your secrets. By the way, nothing I've heard in the last year about Cheiron, including just now, was a surprise. I'd figured it out long since, and kept quiet because you clearly wanted it that way."

"And, Colleague," Cheiron continued, still fuming, "I've never resorted to that sort of blackmail, even to protect my own life. If I trusted your honor as little as you did hers, you'd have followed your stallion's to Stallion Valley, whether you wished to or not. I'd deserve the fate those who hate and fear my race would inflict on it if it ever became accepted that I did. I really ought to break off our relationship now because of what you did. Gods, woman, it could be the beginning of the end of the race if my enemies hear that one of my allies has been taking people into my herd without their consent."

"Why need they know?" Alexandra asked. "I won't mention just how I became a centaur, and as far

as I know, I'm the only one she's surprised with a true change. Had I wanted to go back to human, I'd have asked one of your people when they came visiting. Yours was not the closest of alliances, and I figured you'd react as you did when you found out about what she'd done to me today. She'd suggested I avoid her visitors, but hers aren't the only stallion's I've had. One does get used to things with time, anyway, though I thank you for the offer. I'll come back after my visit to Stallion Valley, too. I agree with you, my lord, that it wasn't necessary, but I know you well enough, my lady, to be able to understand and forgive you for it. Beyond that, I thank you for letting me share your studs, especially Kedar and Genkal, and wish to return to them."

"All right," Cheiron said, "And the political situation hasn't changed all that much. There's too much friction between your neighbors for you to be without my patronage. We'll let our arrangement stand, but for me, I'll not share your bed this trip."

"I understand, colleague," Kirke said. "I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me before too long. If the rest of you share his feelings, I will not ask the normal fee for my hospitality, ever again."

"I'm with the Boss, at heart," Valkar said, "But I can put it aside. She has forgiven you, and there is no need to reverse what you did, so I think it can be considered over and done with, since no real harm has been done. I would be willing if you might ask me to share your stall, tonight."

"Thank you, Red," she said, "And the stall it shall be."

"My lady," Kendor began, "Surely you'd have known how my Boss would react when he heard what you did to Alexandra. Why, then, did you call her to join us here this morning? Your relationship with our coven would have remained unchanged so long as we did not know about her." "For one thing, stallion, introducing you to her was the best way I could repay you for last night," Kirke answered, patting his flank. "You'd have run her down soon enough, and then Cheiron would learn about her anyway. It seemed the easier course to let him learn the truth while I was here to defend myself."

"You didn't lie about it, colleague," Cheiron said. "That much I'll grant you, but the truth had to be pulled out of you. Your actions have done nothing to mitigate your original crime against her and humanity, as too many will call it."

"I concede your point, colleague," the sorceress replied. "Yet what's done is done. I will not object if she asks to become human again, but to force her would be as bad as what I did, would it not? She's accepted what I gave her in exchange for what I felt I needed to take from her, and is happy with the trade. I may have acted without due consideration, but it seems to have come out well."

"Aye, we were lucky that way," Cheiron said. "Colleague, you would be welcome in the herd if you chose to stay in Stallion Valley. My lady, please, don't ever do that again, to anybody. We were only fortunate that she settled happily onto all fours before her change became public. Another might not take it so easily. Since we went public, there's no way that sort of blackmail will work, and it was always risky to attempt. If you all will excuse me, I need to do some private thinking."

"I hope to see you for luncheon, colleague," their hostess said, as the sable-and-ermine scrambled to his hooves with a shrug, bowed, wheeled and left.

"If our lady will excuse us, will you come walk with me, Alexandra?" Kendor asked. Kirke nodded indulgently, a bit wistfully, as the brown and the centaress scrambled to their hooves to leave as well.

It took a couple of days to have armor and barding made for Rondal and Alexandra, and for her to make her farewells. Martin shared Valkar's sentiments, and accepted when Kirke asked him for their

last night on Aiaia. He was all wolf again when the others joined him and her for breakfast. Martin ended the shape-shift to don his armor again, then Valkar made him a wolf again. Kirke escorted them to the harbor, where Rondal and Alexandra met them, ready to travel. Wastak, wearing a harness, was hanging on the edge of the quay near the bow of a barge. A stag-centaur walked up and waded into the water. Kirke gestured, and Kendor winced, as the stag's antlers disappeared and his lower body became a porpoise's.

"You and Wastak take my guests, Rondal, and Alexandra to Padolan," she ordered him, as he swam around, getting used to the change, and he nodded assent, and swam to Wastak, who helped him into another harness. "Then bring the barge back. I'll see you both when you return."

Then, she bade her guests farewell, with thanks for the three that had humped her.

"Come back soon, Stud," she said contritely, as she bade Cheiron farewell. "I pray you can forgive me for what I have done, so we can do again as we once did." "We'll see, colleague," he answered. "Farewell."

Once the five centaur's and the wolf were on board the barge, the lion came out of the woods, and roared a farewell. The departing centaur's answered with waves and Martin with a friendly bark. Then the lion walked up to Kirke, and sniffed her, especially her groin and bottom, questioningly, his tail wagging. Kendor winced, involuntarily, as she gestured. She became a leocentaress and bounded into the woods, Zerlat chasing her happily. The mermen leaned into their harnesses, and pulled the barge away from the quay.

*The End*