

CENTAUR HOMECOMING

ome on mom, we're going to be late!" Annabelle wiggled with her four-year old excitement. Already a handful, her blond hair swayed back and forth impatiently as her mother tried futilely to grab it and comb it straight.

"We would get there much faster if you would just settle down." She laughed exasperatedly. Her daughter kept her more than busy in their home. If it wasn't one thing, it was another, whether it was footraces through the small home or her garden, to trying to climb like a human! With the lower half-of a horse, you'd think she'd stay on the ground like a normal centaur, but no! She actually caught the foal trying to reach the top of the bookcase, front hooves scratching the finish on the shelves! Her story about how she thought a fairy had landed up there and she wanted to see it first hands was absurd, and she had been scolded so fiercely that she hadn't dared climb the bookcase again, but there was always something!

"Rain, are you almost ready?!" came the cracked voice of Margaret, her mother. The elderly dam pulled aside the curtain that separated the living room from the sleeping quarters.

"Almost, mom" Rain said apologetically. "Anna is taking a bit longer to do today, that's all."

"Well, mercy sakes child! Get a hoof on! Or we'll be late to see the menfolk return." Margaret chided softly.

"Yes, mom." Seemed to be the only response.

In a surprisingly short time, they were out in the village proper. Centaurs of every shape and description were out on that sunny day. Dams laughed quietly as they conversed gaily back and forth, while young fillies and foals gamboled around them, and older colts marched determinedly beside their mothers, trying to look older than they were. All looked excitedly up the road that led from their village to the West, where already a thin plume of dust could be seen.

"We made it in time." Rain spoke happily in relief as her eyes caught sight of the dust.

"Yes, we did." Margaret agreed as she ponderously moved to the front of the crowd. The others in front gave way before her. As the oldest centaur in the village, she deserved a certain respect that came naturally to those around her.

"Look! There's the Chief!" someone shouted. All eyes turned up the road as the first figure crested the small hill that had hidden him from view. He looked resplendent in his plumed helmet with the long nose and cheek guards, and the heavy round shield on his arm. In his left he cradled a long bronze lance and across his back were slung two slightly shorter spears and the hilts of two great swords swinging idly

on either side of his human waist. His hair was grey, and he moved slightly stiffly due to his age, but there was no finer swordsman in all the land.

"Matthew!" Margaret spoke fondly when he drew near. Behind him were a hundred of the village's men, dressed in similar armor and weapons to their chief.

"Margaret, my queen!" Matthew laughed as he hugged her firmly around the middle and pulled her close for a kiss. The drone of the village rose sharply as wives hugged or kissed their husbands. Matthew and Margaret broke apart from their kiss.

"Now dear, stop that! The children are watching." Margaret scolded gently as she slapped his questing hands away. Matthew just grinned and turned back to the assembled.

"The Daniards have been pushed back! The threat to our village is over!" he announced in his deep, most commanding voice. This time, the cheers shook the buildings and made starlings in the nearby brush take startled flight.

"Where is Daniel?" Rain asked as she looked for her husband, with his distinctive golden horse coat and broad smile. While she scanned the warriors, she failed to notice Matthew's pained grimace, and the dawning understanding on Margaret's face.

"We...suffered some losses on the battlefield." Matthew began gently.

Rain snapped to him in horror, feeling the ground falling away beneath her hooves. How was it even possible? Daniel...dead?

"Mom, what's wrong?" Annabelle's voice asked her worriedly, a small pressure coming from Rain's hands as she grabbed her limp fingers.

I can't let her see me like this, I have to be strong, for her! Rain realized frantically, but her thoughts seemed frozen like the pond in winter, she couldn't move or think.

"Matthew, you big lump, take Annabelle into the house." Margaret's voice came on her right. "Rain, dear. Let's go to my house, we can talk about it. There, there, shhh. Shhh. It's all right." She whispered soothingly as she took Rain's hand. Rain let her head fall on Margaret's shoulder and let herself be led as tears slid down her face, blinding her. What on earth, she wondered, was she going to do without Daniel to help her raise Annabelle? How would she get along without her father? What was she...The thoughts stopped as the enormity of her grief came crashing down on her head, and she collapsed on the floor of her mother's hut and let her howls of anguish shake the rafters and echo into the uncaring world around her.