

Chapter 6

Stormy's Watch

As she continued to stare out in the darkness, a soft moan from the blanket-covered mound that was Alan caused her to look over with some concern. Fortunately, he was simply shifting to a more comfortable position before drifting back to sleep. She smiled in fondness at him. Alan and his family had been so kind to her for most of her life. She remembered how afraid she had been when she found herself captured and forced into slavery. She had only been, what, 5 years at the time? It had been on a very dark night much like tonight.

She had wandered only a short distance from the safety of her herd. Centaurs had only the most temporary of structures as they were continuously on the move, looking for good food and occasionally hunting the great wooly beast of the plain. Different from most of the other creatures in the land, it was very massive, with thick shoulders that dropped very quickly to the haunch. A massive head covered in thick curly fur and horns that spread out of either side completed the beast. It was very aggressive, and as it was easily twice the size and thrice the weight of a centaur, taking one down was counted as a great accomplishment for the tribe. They used the skin as a cloth to wrap their buildings, and the bones of the creature as decoration. They traded or consumed its meat as needed for the health of the tribe. That day had been one of great celebration. A group of centaurs on the hunt had come across three of the great creatures, called Argos, by her people, and had killed them with spear and arrow. After a night of feasting and celebration, most of the centaurs had dropped into a heavy slumber, except her. She didn't really want to be beside her mother that night, she had wanted a chance to look at the stars and picture what life would be like if she became a huntress. She had foolishly moved outside the range of huts to the top of the hill that had sheltered them. From that high vantage point, she could see the high mountains in the distance and the thick forest to the west. She stood there as the wind gathered her hair and tail in its embrace, dreaming about what could be.

The only warning she got was the soft sound of a rock being kicked by a careless boot. She had tried to turn to confront what was in the darkness, thinking it was her mother coming to scold her for leaving the safety of the herd. Instead, she had found a weighted net tossed over her. She bolted in panic, but the net tangled around her legs, causing her to slip and fall, entrapping her further. Now helpless, she could only look up at the shadows that moved closer to her, fear causing her heart to race. Strong unseen arms grabbed her from behind. She attempted to kick, but the net baffled her efforts. She ended up falling painfully to the ground. Trying to regain her footing useless, the net was so tight about her now, she couldn't move her legs. Angry voices spoke in a language she didn't know, and she felt the cold tip of a knife moving up her back from her tail to her head, cutting the ropes. When the knife reached her neck, she felt a cold metal band slide quickly around her throat and close with a metallic click. She gasped in fear. The knife had finished its work; she was now free of the net. Feeling a huge surge of energy, she quickly regained her feet and turned to run. Instead she found a fist flying at her face. Her head was ringing from the blow when she felt the gag go between her teeth, and shackles click onto her hands. Her shoulders slumped as she realized that she was well and truly captured. She also realized something else important. In the entire struggle, she had failed to scream. She had been so surprised she had fought back and had ended up failing to alert the herd or escape.

One of the figures lit a small torch, and she gave a muffled cry of surprise. It was another centaur. This one was a young stallion with a pale white hide and hair. She recognized him as one of the younger stallions of her herd. Why was he here, had he been captured too? But no, he had no shackles, or collar on him. And his face was twisted into a slight sneer of greed. She saw a smaller figure that held her chain. He was similar to her, except he had only two legs. This was the first time she had ever seen a human. Again, he spoke in that strange language that she didn't know and the centaur responded in the same tongue! She gurgled a question through her gag, which caused them to look at her. The centaur gave a twisted grin at her predicament. "What, can't talk? That's because there's something in your mouth Storm Walker." And he chuckled quietly as she stared at him in shock. She was too young to understand why he was being so mean to her. "You're a slave now," he explained to her casually as the human counted coins out and passed them to him. "Your life here is over. You are

going with this human to be sold in one of their race's markets. Your mother will need a strong stallion around her in her time of grief. Who knows, perhaps I'll even mate with her." He laughed at her horrified denials.

The human suddenly tugged hard on the chain to her collar, causing her to choke slightly. She dug her hooves in. She didn't want to go with this man, she wanted her mother! The human pulled out a long rod and smacked her butt with it. The sudden pain caused her to take a step. The man gestured with the rod more forcefully, and she went fearfully. She was occasionally hit with the rod if she wasn't going fast enough, or she was making too much noise. Tears leaked from her eyes and fell to the ground below as her whole world came crashing down around her.

The human had made her walk to the stand of trees where he had tied his horse. It was similar to the centaurs except it didn't have their upper body. The animal nickered to her and she drew back in fear until the man threatened her with that horrible rod again. They trotted through the night, the path lit only by the thin sliver of moonlight and stars. The morning light revealed her bloodshot eyes and puffy face. She had cried until there were no more tears to shed, and had whimpered each time the human had used his pain stick on her rump to quiet her. Already red welts were starting to show on her hide. The human refused to stop and let her rest. They walked and trotted throughout the day. If she dared slow, she was choked by the collar and whipped with the rod. She did her best to ignore the gnawing hunger of her belly and the sting of the cuts, but it was so hard. Finally, when the sun stood directly overhead, did the human finally stop. She was in such a haze from hunger and thirst she had actually continued plodding until the man had grabbed her collar and gave it a yank, causing her to stumble to a halt. Her tongue felt thick and heavy from the lack of moisture. When the man offered her his canteen, she had greedily drunk it down. The man had let her finish it off, and then gave her a small hunk of bread from his pack. A bigger piece he had broken off for himself. She finished hers in three bites, and felt the pain of hunger actually increase rather than slake. The human did not appear willing to share, so she began ripping handfuls of grass and shoving them in her mouth right next to the horse. Centaurs rarely ate grass, considering it a plant for lower species to eat, but they could ingest grass if needed. The human had laughed at the sight of her next to his horse, eating like him. The sun had

barely moved before he was back up on the saddle of his horse. Realizing the human was about to depart, she grabbed a last handful of grass before he goaded her into moving again.

After six long days of continuous travel, they had made it to the Rogue River Trading station, near the Great Wall. She was very thin by the time they had made it there; his incessant travel had worn her down. She had only been able to eat what she could get on the move, which was very little. In a cloud of pain, she barely even twitched when he laid another stripe across her back now, which was thick with such marks. He had paused there only long enough to sell her to a slave convoy that was heading south. The slaver had looked her over and gave the man less than ten pieces of silver and thirteen copper pieces because of her poor condition. There were several dozen other centaurs there, ranging from speedy runners of the plains, to the heavy draft-style body like her. Many of the centaurs were shocked at her poor condition when she was brought to the picket lines. When the human had finished securing her, she had simply collapsed as the last of her energy left her.

She had drifted in and out of a state of unconsciousness. She could barely hear the murmur of conversations and discussions going on around her, but she could barely understand them. She awoke to the sound of grinding wood and loud curses. She was in a dark place, lit only by a solitary lantern that was swinging dangerously around. The sound of other centaurs crying and groaning and pain terrified her more than anything else. What new hell had she found herself in?!

"What in the name of the Dark Stallion did we hit?" came the groggy voice of the centaur next to her. "Where are we," Stormy demanded in a high pitched wail. "Easy there child!" came the gentle voice behind her. Its owner was a motherly looking draft like her. "It's good to see you finally awake. We've been so worried about you, looking so thin and you asleep for three days!" "Three days?" Said Stormy faintly. Her stomach started growling in response. "Yep. We've done what we can to make you better. Didn't want the master to simply abandon you to the river. Tried to get some food in you, but you refused to wake up. Such a stubborn child you are." She continued. "Mariah's my name. I see you have already met Wild Weed," she gestured to the centaur now standing shakily next to her. She gave a wane smile to Stormy as she finished regaining her feet. "And of course there's Dolly, Maude, Cloverhill, and Wild River over there. He's a

wilder too. And on the other line there is Joanna, Milly, Abigail,..." the Centaur continued for a full minute, listing about three dozen names of centaurs that were with them. "But where are we, and what do they want with us." Stormy begged, "I just want to go home." The other's faces took on a look of sorrow as they turned away. "Oh, sweetie. I'm afraid your home is lost to you." Said Mariah gently. She moved as close as the collar line would allow and clumsily tried to hold Stormy. Stormy felt the tears start sliding down her cheeks again as she accepted Mariah's embrace.

Daylight streamed into the hold as the doors were suddenly wrenched open. Humans began moving the centaurs out quickly in twos and threes. Stormy tried to hold on to Mariah, but was pulled away by an unsympathetic human. Led onto the deck of the barge, she saw wagons, centaurs, and livestock milling around piles of boxes and barrels. Each were being lowered over the side of the barge. From her vantage point, she could only see the tops of trees a fair distance away. She had no idea the barge had run up against a rock in the center of the river. The damage was not severe, but the barge was stuck fast. The captain had made the decision to have the cargo unloaded onto the shore in the hopes that the added buoyancy would float the craft. The trader had decided to spend the night at the local village, Sandytown. He was simply waiting for his centaurs to be unloaded so he could take them with him.

When it came time for Stormy to be unloaded, she was taken to the edge of the barge. A sling was set around her middle. To keep her from thrashing, her hands were bound behind her back and tied to the lifting rope. The rope was taught enough that she could barely twist her upper body around at all. When the sailor signaled the rope was pulled tight and she was lifted screaming into the air. The world tilted crazily around her, and familiar sights became blurs as the rope sling spun slowly in a circle. She kicked her hooves an effort to escape, still screaming her head off. On deck, the cargomaster in charge of unloading winced as the high pitched squeals above reached painful proportions. He expertly corrected for swing and spin, setting Stormy down on the smaller raft that had been hastily assembled from the nearby wood. She was joined by six others, and the raft was poled ashore. There, Stormy fell to her knees and hurled what little was in her stomach on the grass. Taking deep breaths, she whimpered as the world continued to heave and spin around her.

When the dizziness had passed, she pulled herself back onto her feet and took a look around. They were in a thick forest that seemed to block the light from shining beneath it. A dense gloom held the understory in perpetual darkness. To her, the thick forest seemed a dense and forbidding place, and she quickly grabbed the hand of the centaur closest to her. It turned out to be Wild Weed, the roan centaur that had been next to her on the barge. Wild Weed smiled down at her and squeezed her hand. "Don't be afraid little one," she whispered to Stormy. "Nothing is going to happen to you in there." The assurance did little to calm Stormy's nerves, however. When the last centaur was over and the Slaver had hopped on Mariah, Stormy clung to Wild Weed as the entire herd was led deep into forest.

It took little more than an hour to reach the village of Sandytown. They had come out from under the trees and topped a small rise to find the village just ahead. Tall buildings that she had learned were called houses filled the entire building. Stormy had been shocked to see them made completely out of wood and were made to be permanent structures. What kind of species didn't move around at all if they had working legs? She supposed that having only two made the humans tire faster and it made sense to be close to a permanent territory. Still, she was very frightened as all the humans looked up at the sight of the herd walking in. A few actually turned around in disgust. The trader began arguing with a tall balding man with a large round belly and thick arms.

Stormy was distracted by the sound of sawing and hammers. Turning around, she noticed a big house on the edge of the village with a large fenced in section. The sound was coming from there. Curious enough, she strained at her bonds to get a peek. The sound continued with a steady rhythm that she found oddly relaxing. Enough so that she let go of Wild Weed's hands and was curious as to what the trader was arguing about. "What's going on?" she whispered to Wild Weed. "What's happening?" Wild Weed leaned over towards her and whispered, "The master and the innkeeper are haggling over the price of shelter for the night." Then she stood up and looked closely at the innkeeper for a moment before swiveling back to look at her. "Hasn't anyone ever taught you a human tongue?" Stormy shook her head. "Well, when we shelter for the night, I had better teach you some words and phrases, so you won't be completely helpless when it comes time." "Time for what?" Stormy asked nervously, but Wild Weed refused to say anything else. Apparently, the price was

soon agreed upon, because the fat man began calling people to help guide the centaurs into the stable. The sound of work stopped, and, turning, she saw a very large human stride out from the fenced house with a young boy tagging along at his heels. The man stopped in front of the innkeeper. The balding man asked a question, and the large human shook his head and rumbled something back to him. The man gestured more forcefully, and the large human held his hands up in a placating gesture. He walked along the lines of centaurs, idly looking them over until he came to Stormy. When he saw her, his brow darkened in anger and she drew back against Wild Weed in fear. The large human immediately pointed at her and bellowed something. The adult centaurs stopped to listen as the Slaver turned around in surprise. The large human pointed again and repeated his question. The slaver glanced at her and shrugged before replying in a more controlled tone. Whatever he had said caused the innkeeper to glance askance at him and the other man to swell up in anger like a bullfrog. He pointed to her again and spoke sharply, causing Wild Weed to gasp in surprise. The slaver took a disinterested glance over and then nodded. "What's going on." Stormy asked plaintively. Wild Weed shushed her and told her that she had been sold to the large man. Sold! She grabbed Wild Weed tightly and tried to hide, but the rope refused to let her move. The big man strode over and to her surprise, knelt on the ground. Putting out his hand, he gently stroked her horse backside while a soft smile creased his formerly angry face. Wild Weed gently coaxed Stormy in letting go of her hand while the other centaurs were led into the inn's stable. When it came time for Wild Weed, the large man held up his hand and shook his head in a negative. He pointed towards his place and said something. "He's asking if I can stay with you for the night, Stormy." Wild Weed told her. Stormy perked up hopefully. The stablehand simply nodded and passed the rope to the big man.

That night, Wild Weed taught Stormy several phrases of human tongue, as well as several words that she should know. When dawn came, the man came out the house holding his son. As he strode over to them, Stormy stood up and said in human, "Good morning, Master." Wild Weed nodded in approval while the humans stopped in surprise. The large one smiled and replied, "Good morning to you as well, youngster." He then said something following that which Stormy had no clue as to what it meant. She desperately turned to Wild Weed who gabbled back to the human in

his own tongue. The man then said, "We welcome you to our home, Stormy."

It was only a short time later that the barge had been refloated and the centaurs left the village, all except one who now had a home again. The Eaglehearts had healed her wounds and kept her well-fed. Soon afterwards, she had been introduced to Alan as his playmate. When he had grown to the point that he had chosen a career, she had followed him. They had learned all they could from a blacksmith in Rivertown, which was a short distance away. When they returned, they had created their own forge building on the family's property. It hadn't taken long for them to become well established in the town. Alan and the others had treated her more like a family member than a slave, to which she was profoundly touched. As time had passed, she had become as attached to them as, well as if they truly were her family now.

The crack of a branch snapped her back into the present, and she cursed herself for letting her guard down. She could have easily allowed disaster to befall them from her negligence. She moved the spear into the guard position and stepped forward cautiously, her ears pointed towards the noise. Bushes rustled softly as she walked towards them, and her spear point snapped down. The bushes parted and a startled rabbit shot past her legs and bounded away into the darkness. Whickering laughter bubbled as her nervousness dissipated. Trotting back to the fire, she resumed walking and watching the moon. She did not fall back down memory lane. She kept her mind firmly in the present for the remainder of her watch.

When the moon was high, she awoke Alan for his watch and went next to his bedroll. Laying down comfortably was not easy here, so she simply kept some tension in her upper body and slept upright. Before the last vestiges of conscious thought were swept from her mind, she gave a silent prayer of thanks for the Dark Stallion for sending her to the Eagleheart farm. She knew she could have had a far worse fate than this.