

PREFACE: CENTAUR

The Centaur in the Land of Azron

Azron is a land divided by the conquests of Men and Elves. On one side a conquering empire spreads relentlessly across the continent; On the other a sprawling forest held fast by the ancient Elves. Deep within the forests, conflicts between distant empires seemed like far off concerns.

The peace and tranquillity of the woodland was an effective barrier against any of those worries, the unique challenges and trials of living in such a mystical and wild place taking priority.

Deep in the forests dwell all manner of creatures both monstrous and beautiful, all revered and protected by the elves. Beasts whose names are whispered only in myth and legend roam freely in the land, an unspoken respect between man and beast maintaining the peace.

Among those creatures are the Centaur, a wise race of mixed blood; the legs of a horse and the body of a human. The lineage of these so-called 'monstrous humanoids' is ancient, dating back almost as far as the Elves' first appearance.

The unity of species is known to most only by rumour and speculation. The Centaur are capable of mating with each other or any other humanoid race be it Human or Elf, in any combination of gender, and with a fifty-fifty chance of the offspring being born a Centaur. Even two Centaur have a chance to produce a human child.

*"Then, Centaur, ride to the village. I can make a few pennies with my verses while you perform circus tricks for passers-by."
- Common Exploitation*

A fifty-fifty chance of the child being accepted into normal society.

The Centaur are not a wide-spread race, holding but a handful of villages and towns within the Elven forest. This suits them well enough, however, as they prefer the tighter community this affords them.

Outside the villages and forests of the Elves, life as a Centaur is not easy. Subject to the mockery and distrust of the common person, integrating into the populace of a new town is hard.

Those that count a Centaur as their friend find themselves with a powerful ally. Fast under foot, strong in arm, and wise in mind. The Centaur are deemed as masters of the bow and spear, their affinity for nature and danger as sharp as an Elf's.

The most accepted of the wandering Centaur are those pursuing military and scholarly tasks. Excelling as instructors, scouts, warriors, and small-team support, all but the most bigoted of leaders have taken a Centaur within the ranks as an asset.

Most Centaur who take the path of mysticism become Druid, embracing their natural meld between man and beast. Some use the chance to play with their form, to temporarily become fully human or fully horse. Arcane and Divine Centaur are rare indeed, but not unheard of, especially among those Centaur that choose to leave their home villages and travel to the towns of Humans and Elves.

One such Centaur left his village, not of choice but of need...

ANALOUS VAL'TYR

The Search for Vengeance

The Village of Amphion lies near the border between empires, named so for its wise and ancient founder. As with most villages of Centaurs, Amphion is small but well built.

Finely constructed buildings meld with the surrounding woodland, catering for both man and horse in size and design. A mix of races live in the village, with at least one Centaur to every non. Companions, children, and non-Centaur mothers alike dwell in peace, others coming and going in trade and pleasure.

Born of the union between the Centaur Chiron and his Elven mother Adelphe, Analous Val'tyr lived for most of his life in Amphion.

When he was born there was a great commotion. Birth is always difficult for non-Centaur mothers, often claiming the mother's life or causing great injury. This birth was no different, and during the event it seemed that Adelphe would lose her life bringing a child into the world.

But she was spared. In the moment when all seems lost and the darkness fades in, when time slows and the life-force within clings desperately to this plane, a soft light came over her vision. Weakened but alive, she came back from the edge of death and held her child for the first time.

As they all saw it everyone was shocked, but Adelphe knew immediately what she had felt in that moment of light. The child's palm bore a birth-mark, a clearly defined and radiant symbol. The mark of Gozreh, deity of Nature and the Storm.

The mark was immediately taken for what it was, a brand placed by the deity Gozreh upon the child; a price paid for the life of Adelphe.

Raised within Amphion, Val'tyr received the benefit of a Centaur education. Lessons in martial prowess, the knowledge and wisdom of life, the truth of his birth, and his brand of a deity.

When he was deemed ready, Val'tyr began to study the teachings and ways of Gozreh. A mixed deity, both represented as a woman of the sea and as a man of nature, Gozreh's neutral position among the deities spoke to Val'tyr.

Druids, Clerics, and Scholars of Gozreh all agreed that the child had been chosen to serve under the guidance of nature, the storm, and the sea, but the direction of that service was yet unclear.

The paths before him were laid out, in their wisdom making clear the dangers ahead. Something within Val'tyr spoke out, declaring his intention to join with the small number of Clerics under Gozreh. A small and uncommon order, but one that was well respected and recognised by the druids.

Coming of age, Val'tyr left to pursue his studies and training under the tutelage of Gozreh's clergy. He spent many years debating the philosophy, practising the divine arts, and ultimately becoming a full Cleric of the order of Gozreh.

Travelling under their banner, Val'tyr moved from village to town, assisting druids, helping the people, and serving nature.

It wasn't until his mid-twenties that Val'tyr finally returned home. Whilst he had visited at least twice a year when possible, this time he intended to stay and live once more among his people, to share his tales and wisdom with the elders, and to seek a companion.

A great feast was thrown at his return, both Chiron and Adelphe proudly taking their place of honour next to their son. Much merriment was had and the whole village celebrated until the dawn.

The sun broke above the trees, casting the first rays of light upon the village. All was still, most asleep where they had fallen, some asleep in their homes, even fewer watching the sunrise.

Val'tyr was among those watching the sun. The silence around the village was pure, and the memories of the night still danced playfully in his mind. Life would be good here.

The trees whispered quietly among themselves, animals scuttling noisily through the undergrowth, shadows dancing in the light of the morning. Too at peace and too tired to immediately recognise the strangers, several figures broke free from the brush and swept quickly into the village.

Finally realising the danger, Val'tyr gingerly tried to rise to his hooves. Why hadn't the guards sounded an alarm? Where were the Elvish ranger patrols?

Clumsily he stood, wavering on his feet. He groped vacantly for his Morningstar, realising too late that something was dangerously wrong with him.

The band of humans charged into the village, seemingly expecting to meet no resistance from the Centaurs, their blades drawn with wicked smiles and they began their butchering.

"No!" Val'tyr screamed, his shout coming out as barely a croak. He desperately looked around between the unconscious figures of his friends and family. None of them moved save for the deep breath of sleep. Managing to nudge the nearest person to him, the figure simply slumped over and continued to sleep.

Panic brimming just beneath the surface, he searched through his sluggish mind for the spell that would set all of this right, every moment he spent struggling in thought costing the lives of more of his kin.

The words slurred out of his mouth as he desperately called upon the divine wisdom of Gozreh, but it was hopeless. As soon as

he remembered a word another would slip away; the incantation was lost.

There were no screams, there was no clashing of steel or final agonising cries. There was simply murder as one-by-one the figures worked their way through the unconscious figures, slipping into houses to ensure no person is left.

Noticing the barely standing Centaur, two of the figures separated from the pack and closed in on Val'tyr. The knives and clothes were thick with blood, their smiles even wickeder than before.

Unable to run and barely able to keep a grip on his Morningstar, Val'tyr braced himself for the inevitable. He glared down at the two figures with all the dignity he could muster.

It was then that he noticed the symbol these Humans bore, one that even with an addled mind spoke volumes about these people and their purpose.

Proudly embossed onto dark medallions, the evil symbol of Rovagug bore into Val'tyr's mind. At one time in the distant past, all of the deities put aside their differences to fight Rovagug. Wanting nothing more than the wanton destruction of anything and everything, the chaos his followers wreaked was endless.

With every fibre of his being, Val'tyr called upon Gozreh, if nothing more than to send warning that Rovagug's followers had resurfaced in the world once more.

The splintering of wood filled the air as something destroyed the door of a nearby shack. Turning his head, Val'tyr almost shed a tear of relief as Llyr, an elder among the druids, stormed forth.

Loudly he shouted angry words in an unintelligible voice, the attacker he drove before him sent flying. In that moment it seemed that the entire forest were coming alive. The trees groaned and cracked, animals and monsters calling and howling in anger.

The dark figures, their task mostly complete, retreated swiftly away from the village as vines, stones, and beasts alike began to swarm. Llyr steadily walked forward, a great energy cursing and lancing at any figure too slow to flee.

Deciding it was time to leave, the two closest to Val'tyr flashed a wicked smile before turning and feeling into the darkness.

"Quickly now, Val'tyr! We must hurry if we are to save those who yet live!"

Surprised at the touch, he turned to see Llyr next to him, one hand placed against Val'tyr's side. A warmth spread through his body as the poison was evicted by the druidic magic. Final able to think clearly and needing no more encouragement, Val'tyr pulled away from Llyr and tore through the village with haste.

There was little that either of them could do. Llyr woke those who had been missed, Val'tyr tended to those who yet lived, all but a handful too far gone to be saved. He scanned the faces at the table, hoping against hope that his parents had retired for the night, that they had gone for a walk. Anything but this.

He found them, lying together against a tree near the edge of the village. They had both been stabbed straight through the heart, his mother's necklace ripped cruelly off as petty loot.

Llyr found him hours later, still slumped over in sheer despair and failure. Elven rangers swept through the trees, tracking down and hunting the perpetrators of this crime. Dazedly, Llyr guided Val'tyr away from Amphion.

Staying at the nearby Elven village of Etirra, events unfolded over two weeks. Only a handful of the attackers had been caught, most making their escape under the cover of divine protection. The Elves accused the Empire of a blatant attack, the Empire dismissing the attack as the work of a renegade group. Either way, the damage had been done.

At the end of the first week Val'tyr buried his village. Only ten others had survived, six of which were Centaurs. They all soon left for other villages soon after with a sorrowful goodbye. Llyr stayed around, as much to heal the land as to help Val'tyr.

One evening in the tavern, Val'tyr idly spun one of the medallions around, his drink ignored and warm. The mocking symbol of Rovagug flashing into view then out again as the metal turned on the table. Sitting down, Llyr allowed him a moment before speaking.

"Monster hunters. An invention of the Empire."

A moment of silence as Val'tyr pretended to ignore the druid.

"You were raised with the wisdom of the Centaur, Val'tyr. You know what dwelling on such negative things will result in. The inevitable end that always comes..."

The medallion clanks noisily down into the table as Val'tyr lets it fall, his attention turning to the druid.

"You have been kind to me, Llyr, but this is none of your concern. Justice must be met for this. Gozreh demands it. I demand it!"

"Do you think you are the only one to lose someone back there, Val'tyr? I have lost more friends than I care to count over the years, and I fear I am about to lose another."

Val'tyr sits up, looking at Llyr seriously across the table.

"What would you have me do, Llyr? Pretend to forget? Move on with my life knowing that this atrocity was allowed to happen, and will happen again?"

"No, my friend. What I am trying to say is that you have a destiny, Val'tyr."

Llyr reaches across the table, turning Val'tyr's hand over to reveal the birthmark on his palm.

"Whatever you do, you must remember that you have been chosen. This mark bears a heavy burden and a greater responsibility than either you or I can fathom."

"Your mother nearly died bringing you into this world, saved but by the grace of Gozreh. Remember this as you travel through the Empire."

A certain knowing look came over Llyr's face as he spoke, already aware of what Val'tyr intended to do.

Silently, Val'tyr nodded his farewell to Llyr. Travelling with haste, he headed for the border of the Empire. Once there he had only one plan.

He would join the Monster Hunter's Guild. He would make friends and contacts. He would learn of the hunters that attacked his village. He would find them, and he would kill them.