The Horse of Bronze

The First Heroes
New Tales of the Bronze Age

by Harry Turtledove, 1949–

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Whether for tin or wine or gold or amber, commerce brought the Bronze Age cultures of northern and western Europe into contact with peoples of the south and east. With luxuries and staples, merchants wove vast webs of resources, creating an interdependence among powers great and small, far and near. How alien such travelers must have found the lands they visited and their inhabitants, and how strange these travelers and their goods must have

seemed to their hosts. At such convergences foreign notions hybridized with one another and norms mutated as people were forced to adapt, embracing or rejecting influences far more profound than the material goods brought by merchant ship or caravan.Harry Turtledove, master of the myriad ifs of history, explores how how much stranger still it might be if these Bronze Age peoples had not been—quite—human.

I knew, the last time we fought the sphinxes, this dearth of tin would trouble us. I knew, and I was right, and I had the privilege—if that is what you want to call it—of saying as much beforehand, so that a good many of the hes in the warband heard me being clever. And much grief and labor and danger and fear my cleverness won for me, too, though I could not know that ahead of time.

„Oh, copper will serve well enough," said Oreus, who is a he who needs no wine to run wild. He brandished an axe. It gleamed red as blood in the firelight of our encampment, for he had polished it with loving care.

„Too soft," Hylaeus said. He carried a fine old sword, leaf-shaped, as green with patina as growing wheat save for the cutting edge, which gleamed a little darker than Oreus's axe blade. „Bronze is better, and the sphinxes, gods curse them, are bound to have a great plenty of it."

Oreus brandished the axe once more. „Just have to hit harder, then," he said cheerfully. „Hit hard enough, and anything will fall over."

With a snort, Hylaeus turned to me. „Will you listen to him, Cheiron? Will you just listen? All balls and no sense."

If this does not describe half our folk—oh, far more than half, by the Cloud-Mother from whom we are sprung—then never have I heard a phrase that does. „Hylaeus is right," I told Oreus. „With tin to harden their weapons properly, the sphinxes will cause us more trouble than they usually do."

And Oreus turned his back on me and made as if to lash out with his hinder hooves. All balls and no brains, sure enough, as Hylaeus had said. I snatched up my own spear—a new one, worse luck, with a head of copper unalloyed—and would have skewered him as he deserved had he provoked me even a little more. He must have realized as much, for he flinched away and said, „We'll give the sphinxes some of this, too." Then he did kick, but not right in my direction.

In worried tones, Hylaeus said, „I wonder if what they say about the Tin Isle is true."

„Well, to the crows with me if I believe it's been overrun by monsters," I replied. „Some things are natural, and some just aren't. But something's gone wrong, or we wouldn't have had to do without tin shipments for so long."

Looking back on it, thinking about the Tin Isle while we were camped out not far from the sphinxes' stronghold, in the debatable land north and east of their river-valley homeland, seems strange. This is a country of broiling sun, and one that will never match or even approach the river valley in wealth, for it is as dry as baked straw. Only a few paltry folk dwell therein, and they pay tribute to the sphinxes who hold the land as a shield for their better country. Those folk would pay tribute to us, too, if only we could drive away the sphinxes.

They found us the next morning. Keeping our camp secret from them for as long as we had struck me as something of a miracle. With their eagle-feathered wings, they can soar high over a battlefield, looking for a fight. And so this one did. Hideous, screeching laughter came from it as it spied us. They have faces that put me in mind of our own shes, but lengthened and twisted into a foxlike muzzle, and full of hatred—to say nothing of fangs.

„Now we‘re for it,“ I said, watching the accursed thing wing off southward, listening to its wails fade in the distance. „They‘ll come by land and air, bedeviling us till we‘re like to go mad.“

Nessus strung his great bow. When he thrummed the bowstring, he got a note like the ones a he draws from a harp with a sound box made from the shell of a tortoise. „Some of them will be sorry they tried,“ he said. Nessus can send an arrow farther than any male I know.

„Some of us will be sorry they tried, too,“ I answered. I had not liked this expedition from the beginning and never would have consented to it had I not hoped we might get on the scent of a new source of tin. That seemed more unlikely with each league farther south we traveled. Wherever the sphinxes got the metal to harden their bronze, it was not there.

But we were there, and we were about to pay the price for it. I had put out sentries, though our folk are far from fond of being so forethoughtful. One of them cried, „The sphinxes! The sphinxes come!“

We had enough time to snatch up our weapons and form the roughest sort of line before they swarmed upon us like so many lions. They are smaller and swifter than we. We are stronger. Who is fiercer… Well, that is why they have battles: to find out who is fiercer.

Sometimes the sphinxes will not close with us at all, but content themselves with shooting arrows and dropping stones and screeching curses from afar. That day, though, they proved eager enough to fight. Our warbands seldom penetrate so far into their land. I suppose they thought to punish us for our arrogance—as if they have none of their own.

The riddle of the sphinxes is why, with their wings and fangs and talons, they do not rule far more of the land around the Inner Sea than in fact they hold. The answer to the riddle is simplicity itself: they are sphinxes, and so savage and vile and hateful they can seldom decide what to do next or make any other folk obey them save through force and fear. On the one hand, they hold the richest river valley the gods ever made. On the other, they could be so much more than they are. As well they do not see it themselves, I suppose.

But whether they see it or not, they had enough and to spare that day to send us home with our plumed tails hanging down in dismay. Along with their ferocity and their wings, their bronze weapons won the fight for them. Oreus practiced his philosophy, if you care to dignify it with such a word, when he hit one of the sphinxes‘ shields as hard as he could with his copper-headed axe. The metal that faced the shield was well laced with tin, and so much harder than the blade that smote it that the axe head bent to uselessness from the blow. Hit something hard enough and… This possibility had not entered into Oreus‘s calculations. Of course, Oreus is not one who can count above fourteen without polluting himself.

Which is not to say I was sorry he was part of our warband. On the contrary. The axe failing of the purpose for which it was intended, he hurled it in the startled sphinx‘s face. The sphinx yowled in pain and rage. Before it could do more than yowl, Oreus stood high on his hinder pair of legs and lashed out with his forehooves. Blood flew. The sphinx, screaming now rather than yammering, tried to take wing. He snatched it out of the air with his hands, threw it down, and trampled it in the dirt with all four feet.

„Who‘s next?“ he cried, and none of the sphinxes had the nerve to challenge him.

Elsewhere in the field, though, we did not do so well. I would it were otherwise, but no. Before the day was even half done, we streamed north in full retreat, our hopes as dead as that lake of wildly salty water lying not far inland from where we were. The sphinxes pursued, jeering us on. I posted three hes beneath an overhanging rock, so they might not be easily seen from the air. They ambushed the sphinxes leading the chase as prettily as you might want. That, unfortunately, was a trick we could play only once, and one that salved the sore of our defeat without curing it.

When evening came, I took Oreus aside and said, „Now do you see why we need tin for our weapons?“

He nodded, his great chest heaving with the exertion of the fight and the long gallop afterward and the shame he knew that that gallop had been away from the foe. „Aye, by the gods who made us, I do,“ he replied. „It is because I am too strong for copper alone.“

I laughed. Despite the sting of a battle lost, I could not help laughing. „So you are, my dear,“ I said. „And what do you propose to do about that?“

He frowned. Thought never came easy for him. At length, he said, „We need tin, Cheiron, as you say. If I‘m going to smash the sphinxes, we need tin.“ His thought might not have come easy, but it came straight.

I nodded. „You‘re right. We do. And where do you propose to get it?“

Again, he had to think. Again, he made heavy going of it. Again, he managed. „Well, we will not get it from the sphinxes. That‘s all too plain. They‘ve got their supply, whatever it is, and they aren‘t about to give it up. Only one other place I can think of that has it.”

„The Tin Isle?“ I said.

Now he nodded. „The Tin Isle. I wonder what‘s become of it. We paid the folk there a pretty price for their miserable metal. Why don‘t their traders come down to us any more?“

„I don’t know the answer to that, either,“ I said. „If we go there—and if the gods are kind—we‘ll find out, and bring home word along with the tin.“

Oreus frowned at that. „And if the gods are unkind?“

With a shrug, I answered, „If the gods are unkind, we won‘t come back ourselves. It‘s a long way to the Tin Isle, with many strange folk between hither and yon.“ That only made Oreus snort and throw up his tail like a banner. He has his faults, does Oreus, and no one knows them better than I—certainly not he, for lack of self-knowledge is conspicuous among them—but only a fool would call him craven. I went on, „And whatever has befallen the folk who grub the tin from the ground may meet us, too.“

His hands folded into fists. He made as if to rear, to stamp something into submission with his forehooves. But there was nothing he could smite. He scowled. He wanted to smash frustration, as he wants to smash everything. Another fault, without a doubt, but a brave fault, let it be said. „Anything that tries to befall me will rue the day," he declared. Idiocy and arrogance, you are thinking. No doubt. Yet somehow idiocy and arrogance of a sort that cheered me.

And so we built a ship, something centaurs seldom undertake. The CHALCIPPUS, we named her—the *Horse of Bronze*. She was a big, sturdy craft, for centaurs are a big, sturdy folk. We need more space to hold enough rowers to drive a ship at a respectable turn of speed. Sphinxes, now, can pack themselves more tightly than we would dream of doing.

But the valley in which the sphinxes dwell has no timber worth the name. They build their ships from bundled sheaves of papyrus plants. These strange vessels serve them well enough on their tame river, less so when they venture out onto the open waters of the Inner Sea.

We have fine timber in our country. The hills are green with pine and oak. We would have to cut and burn for years on end to despoil them of their trees. I do not like to think the dryads would ever thus be robbed of their homes. Not while the world remains as it is, I daresay, shall they be.

Once the wood was cut into boards and seasoned, we built the hull, joining planks edge to edge with mortise and tenon work and adding a skeleton of ribs at the end of the job for the sake of stiffening against the insults of wave and wind. We painted bright eyes, laughing eyes, at the bow that the ship might see her way through any danger, and the shes wove her a sail of linen they dyed a saffron the color of the sun.

Finding a crew was not the difficult matter I had feared it might be. Rather, my trouble was picking and choosing from among the swarm of hes who sought to sail in search of the Tin Isle. Had I not named Oreus among their number, I am sure he would have come after me with all the wild strength in him. Thus are feuds born. But choose him I did, and Hylaeus, and Nessus, and enough others to row the CHALCIPPUS and to fight her: for I felt we would need to fight her before all was said and done.

Sail west to the mouth of the Inner Sea, then north along the coast of the strange lands fronting Ocean the Great—thus in reverse, it was said, the tin came down from the far northwest. What folk dwelt along much of the way, what dangers we would meet—well, why did we make the voyage, if not to learn such things?

Not long before we set out, Oreus sidled up to me. In a low voice, he said, „What do you think, Cheiron? On our travels, do you suppose we'll find—wine?" He whispered the last word.

Even if he had spoken more softly still, it would have been too loud. Wine is… Wine is the most wonderful poison in all the world, as any of us who have tasted it will attest. It is a madness, a fire, a delight beyond compare. I know nothing hes or shes would not do to possess it, and I know nothing they might not do after possessing it. As well we have never learned the secret of making the marvelous, deadly stuff for ourselves. Gods only know what might become of us if we could poison ourselves whenever and however we chose.

I said, „I know not. I do not want to find out. And I tell you this, Oreus: if you seek to sail on the *Horse of Bronze* for the sake of wine and not for the sake of tin, sail you shall not.“

A flush climbed from where his torso rose above his forelegs all the way to the top of his head. „Not I, Cheiron. I swear it. Not I,“ he said. „But a he cannot keep from wondering…“

„Well, may we all keep wondering through the whole of the voyage,“ I said. „I have known the madness of wine, known it and wish I had not. What we do when we have tasted of it—some I do not remember, and some I wish I did not remember. Past that, I will say no more.“

„Neither will I, then,“ Oreus promised. But he did not promise to forget. I wish I could have forced such a vow from him, but the only thing worse than a promise broken is a promise made or forced that is certain to be broken.

We set out on a fine spring day, the sun shining down brightly from the sky. A wind off the hills filled my nostrils with the spicy fragrance of pines. It also filled the saffron sail that pulled the *Horse of Bronze* across the wine-dark sea (an omen I should have taken, but I did not, I did not) fast enough to cut a creamy wake in the water.

The Inner Sea was calm. In spring and summer, the Inner Sea usually is. The CHALCIPPUS‘s motion was as smooth and gentle as an easy trot across a meadow. This notwithstanding, several strong hes leaned over the rail and puked up their guts all the way to the horse in them. Some simply cannot take the sea, do what they will.

I am not one who suffers so. I stood at the stern, one hand on each steering oar. Another he called the stroke. He set the speed at my direction, but I did not have to do it myself. I was captain aboard the CHALCIPPUS, yes, but among us he who leads must have a light hand, or those he presumes to lead will follow no more. Not all hes see this clearly, which is one reason we have been known—oh, yes, we have been known—to fight among ourselves.

But all was well when we first set out. The wind blew strongly, and from a favorable direction. We did not have to row long or row hard. But I wanted the hes to get some notion of what they would need to do later, if the wind faltered or if we fell in with enemies. They still reckoned rowing a sport and not a drudgery, and so they worked with a will. I knew that was liable to change as readily as the wind, but I made the most of it while it lasted.

Some of the hes muttered when we passed out of sight of land. „Are you foals again?“ I called to them. „Do you think you will fall off the edge of the earth here in the middle of the Inner Sea? Wait till we are come to Ocean the Great. Then you will find something worth worrying about.“

They went on muttering, but now they muttered at me. That I did not mind. I feared no mutiny, not yet. When I set my will against theirs in any serious way, then I would see. A captain who does not know when to let the crew grumble deserves all the trouble he finds, and he will find plenty.

Oreus came up to me when new land heaved itself up over the western horizon. „Is it true what they say about the folk of these foreign parts?“ he asked. He was young, as I have said; the failed attack against the sphinxes had been his first time away from the homeland.

„They say all manner of things about the folk of foreign parts," I answered. „Some of them are true, some nothing but lies. The same happens when other folk speak of us."

He gestured impatiently. „You know what I mean. Is it true the folk hereabouts"—he pointed to the land ahead—„are cripples? Missing half their hindquarters?"

„The fauns? Cripples?" I laughed. „By the gods who made them, no! They are as they are supposed to be, and they'll run the legs off you if you give them half a chance. They're made like satyrs. They're half brute, even more so than satyrs, but that's how they work: torso and thinking head above, horse below."

„But only the back part of a horse?" he persisted. When I nodded, he gave back a shudder. „That's disgusting. I can stand it on goaty satyrs, because they're sort of like us only not really. But these faun things—it's like whoever made them couldn't wait to finish the job properly."

„Fauns are not mockeries of us. They are themselves. If you expect them to behave the way we do, you'll get a nasty surprise. If you expect them to act the way they really do, everything will be fine—as long as you keep an eye on them."

He did not like that. I had not expected that he would. But then, after what passed for reflection with him, he brightened. „If they give me a hard time, I'll bash them."

„Good," I said. It might not be good at all—it probably would not be good at all, but telling Oreus not to hit something was like telling the sun not to cross the sky. You could do it, but would he heed you?

I did not want to come ashore among the fauns at all. But rowing is thirsty work, and our water jars were low. And so, warily, with archers and spearers posted at the bow, I brought the CHALCIPPUS toward the mouth of a little stream that ran down into the sea.

As I say, fauns are brutes. They scarcely know how to grow crops or work copper, let alone bronze. But a stone arrowhead will let the life out of a he as well as any other. If they gave us trouble, I wanted to be ready to fight or to trade or to run, whichever seemed the best idea at the time.

It turned out to be trade. Half a dozen fauns came upon us as we were filling the water jars—and, being hes on a lark, splashing one another in the stream like a herd of foals. The natives carried spears and arrows, which, sure enough, were tipped with chipped stone. Two of them also carried, on poles slung over their shoulders, the gutted carcass of a boar.

„Bread?" I called to them, and their faces brightened. They are so miserable and poor, they sometimes grind a mess of acorns up into flour. Real wheaten bread is something they seldom see. For less than it was worth, I soon got that lovely carcass aboard the *Horse of Bronze*. My crew would eat well tonight. Before we sailed, before the fauns slipped back into the woods, I found another question to ask them: „Are the sirens any worse than usual?"

They could understand my language, it being not too far removed from their own barbarous jargon. Their chief—I think that is what he was, at any rate; he was certainly the biggest and strongest of them—shook his head. „No worser," he said. „No better, neither. Sirens is sirens."

„True," I said, and wished it were a lie.

An island lies west of the land west of ours. Monsters haunt the strait between mainland and island: one that grabs with tentacles for ships sailing past, another that sucks in water and spits it out to make whirlpools that can pull you down to the bottom of the sea.

We slipped past them and down the east coast of the island. The gods‘ forge smoked, somewhere deep below the crust of the world. What a slag heap they have built up over the eons, too, so tall that snow still clings to it despite the smoke issuing from the vent.

The weather turned warm and then warmer and then hot. We stopped for water every day or two, and to hunt every now and again. There are fauns also on the island, which I had not known and would not have if we had not rushed by them while coursing after deer. Next to them, the fauns of the mainland are paragons of sophistication. I see no way to embarrass them more than to say that, yet they would not be embarrassed if they knew I said it. They would only take its truth for granted. They have not even the sophistication to regret that which is.

Maybe they were as they were because they knew no better. And maybe they were as they were because the sirens hunt them as we hunted that stag through the woods. We would not be as we are, either, not with sirens for near neighbors.

I wish we would have had nothing to do with them. What a he wishes and what the gods give him are all too often two different things. What the gods gave us was trouble. Hylaeus, Nessus, and I had just killed a deer and were butchering it when a siren came out of the woods and into the clearing where we worked. She stood there, watching us.

I have never seen a siren who was not a she. I have never heard of a siren who was a he. How there come to be more sirens is a mystery of the gods. The one we saw was quite enough.

In their features, sirens might be beautiful shes. Past that, though, there is nothing to them that would tempt the eye of even the most desperately urgent he. They are, not to put too fine a point on it, all over feathers, with arms that are half wings and with tail feathers in place of a proper horse‘s plume. Their legs are the scaly, skinny legs of a bird, with the grasping claws of a bird of prey.

But the eye is not the only gateway to the senses. The siren asked, „What are you doing here?“ A simple question, and I had all I could do not to rear up on my hind legs and bellow out a challenge to the world.

Her voice was all honey and poppy juice, sweet and tempting at the same time. I looked at the other two hes. Hylaeus and Nessus were both staring back at me, as if certain I would try to cheat them out of what was rightfully theirs. They knew what they wanted, all right, and they did not care what they had to do to get it.

I glanced over at the siren. Her eyes had slit pupils, like a lion‘s. They got big and black as a lion‘s when it sights prey as she watched us. That put me on my guard, where maybe nothing else would have. „Careful, friends,“ I said. „She does not ask because she wishes us well.“ Roughly, I answered the siren: „Taking food for ourselves and our comrades.“

By the way she eyed me, we had no need of food; we *were* food. She said, „But would you not rather share it with me instead?“

That voice! When she said something might be so, a he‘s first impulse was to do all he could to make it so. I had to work hard to ask the siren, „Why should we? What payment would you give us?“

I have lived a long time. One of the things this has let me do is make a great many mistakes. Try as I will, I have a hard time remembering a worse one. The siren smiled. She had a great many teeth. They all looked very long and very sharp. „What will I do?“ she crooned. „Why, I will sing for you.“

And she did. And why I am here to tell you how she sang… That is not so easy to explain. Some small beasts, you will know, lure their prey to them by seeming to be something the prey wants very much. There are spiders colored like flowers, but woe betide the bee or butterfly who takes one for a flower, for it will soon find itself seized and poisoned and devoured.

Thus it was with the siren‘s song. No she of the centaur folk could have sung so beautifully. I am convinced of it. A she of our own kind would have had many things on her mind as she sang: how much she cared about the hes who heard her, what she would do if she did lure one of them—perhaps one of them in particular—forward, and so on and so on.

The siren had no such … extraneous concerns. She wanted us for one thing and one thing only: flesh. And her song was designed on the pattern of a hunting snare, to bring food to her table. Any doubts, any second thoughts, that a she of our kind might have had were missing here. She drew us, and drew us, and drew us, and…

And, if one of us had been alone, she would have stocked centaur in her larder not long thereafter. But, in drawing Nessus and Hylaeus and me all with the same song, she spread her magic too thin to let it stick everywhere it needed to. Nessus it ensnared completely, Hylaeus perhaps a little less so, and me least of all. Why this should be, I cannot say with certainty. Perhaps it is simply because I have lived a very long time, and my blood does not burn so hotly as it did in years gone by.

Or perhaps it is that when Nessus made to strike at Hylaeus, reckoning him a rival for the charms of the sweetly singing feathered thing, the siren was for a moment distracted. And its distraction let me move further away from the snare it was setting. I came to myself, thinking, *Why do I so want to mate with a thing like this? I would crush it and split it asunder.*

That made me—or rather, let me—hear the siren‘s song with new ears, see the creature itself with new eyes. How eager it looked, how hungry! How those teeth glistened!

Before Nessus and Hylaeus could commence one of those fights that can leave a pair of hes both badly damaged, I kicked out at the siren. It was not my strongest blow. How could it be, when part of my blood still sang back to the creature? But it dislodged a few of those pearly feathers and brought the siren‘s song to a sudden, screeching stop.

Both my comrades jerked as if waking from a dream they did not wish to quit. They stared at the siren as if not believing their eyes. Perhaps, indeed, they did not believe their eyes, their ears having so befooled them. I kicked the siren again. This time, the blow landed more solidly. The siren‘s screech held more pain than startlement. More feathers flew.

Hylaeus and Nessus set on the siren then, too. They attacked with the fury of lovers betrayed. So, I daresay, they imagined themselves to be. The siren died shrieking under their hooves. Only feathers and blood seemed to be left when they were done. The thing was lighter and more delicately made than I would have thought; perhaps it truly was some sort of kin to the birds whose form and feathers it wore.

„Back to the ship, and quick!“ I told the other two hes. „The whole island will be roused against us when they find out what happened here.“

„What do you suppose it would have done if you hadn‘t given it a kick?“ Hylaeus asked in an unwontedly small voice.

„Fed,“ I answered.

After that one-word reply, neither Hylaeus nor Nessus seemed much inclined to argue with me any more. They carried away the gutted stag at a thunderous gallop I had not thought they had in them. And they did not even ask me to help bear the carcass. As he ran, Nessus said, “What do we do if they start—singing at us again, Cheiron?“

„Only one thing I can think of,“ I told him.

We did that one thing, too: we took the *Horse of Bronze* well out to sea. Soon enough, the sirens gathered on the shore and began singing at us, began trying to lure us back to them so they could serve us as we had served one of them. And after they had served us thus, they would have served us on platters, if sirens are in the habit of using platters. On that last I know not, nor do I care whether I ever learn.

We could hear them, if only barely, so I ordered the hes to row us farther yet from the land. Some did not seem to want to obey. Most, though, would sooner listen to me than to those creatures. When we could hear nothing but the waves and the wind and our own panting, I had the whole crew in my hands once more.

But we had not altogether escaped our troubles. We could not leave the island behind without watering the ship once more. Doing it by day would have caused us more of the trouble we had escaped thus far by staying out of earshot of the sirens, for the creatures followed us along the coast. Had some foes come to our shores, slain one of our number, and then put to sea once more, I have no doubt we should have relentlessly hounded them. The sirens did the same for this fallen comrade of theirs. That she had tried to murder us mattered to them not at all. If they could avenge her, they would.

As the sun god drove his chariot into the sea ahead of us, I hoisted sail to make sure the sirens on the shore could see us. Then I swung the CHALCIPPUS‘ bow away from the island and made as if to sail for the mainland lying southwest.

„You are mad,“ Oreus said. „We‘ll bake before we get there.“

„I know that,“ I said, and held my course.

Oreus kept on complaining. Oreus always complains, especially when he cannot find something to trample, and not least because he never looks ahead. *It could be that he will learn one day, I thought. It could also be that he will never learn, in which case his days will be short.* To my sorrow, I have seen such things before, more often than I would wish.

A few of the other hes likewise grumbled. More, though, paid me no small compliment: they gave me credit for knowing what I was about. Now I had to prove I had earned their trust.

The sun set. Blue drowned pink and gold in the west. Black rose out of the east, drowning blue. Stars began to shine. There was no moon. Her boat would not sail across the sky until later. „Raise the sail to the yard, then lower the yard," I said, and pulled the steering oars so that the CHALCIPPUS swung back to starboard.

„Very nice," said Nessus, who seemed to understand what I was doing.

„Is it? I wonder," I replied. „But we have need, and necessity is the master of us all." I raised my voice, but not too loud: „Feather your oars, you rowers. We want to go up to the shore as quietly as we can. Think of a wild cat in the forest stalking a squirrel."

At that, even Oreus understood my plan. He was loud in his praise of it. He was, as is his way, too cursed loud in his praise of it. Someone must have kicked him in the hock, for he fell silent very abruptly.

In the starlight, the sea was dark and glimmering. An owl hooted somewhere on the land ahead. I took the call as a good omen. Perhaps the sirens did as well, the owl being like them a feathered hunting creature. I have never understood omens, not in fullness. I wonder if ever I shall, or if that lies in the hands of the gods alone.

From the bow came a hiss: „Cheiron! Here's a stream running out into the sea. This is what you want, eh?"

„Yes," I said. „This is just what I want." Few folk are active by night. Fewer still are active both day and night. I hoped we could nip in, fill our empty jars, and escape the sirens without their ever realizing we were about.

What I hoped for and what I got were two different things. Such is the way of life for those who are not gods. I have said as much before, I believe. Repeating oneself is a thing that happens to those who have lived as long and have as seen as much as I have. And if you believe I have troubles in this regard, you should hear some of the gods I have known. Or, better, you should not. A god will tell the same story a hundred times, and who that is not a god will presume to let him know what a bore he is making of himself? Only one of great courage or one of even greater foolishness, for gods are also quick to anger. However boring they may be, they are also powerful. Power, after all, is what makes them gods.

My hes scrambled out of the *Horse of Bronze*. They set to work in as sprightly a way as any captain could have wanted. But they had not yet finished when another owl hooted. As I have remarked, owls crying in the night are said to be birds of good omen, but not this one, for his cries alerted the sirens. I do not understand omens. I have said that before, too, have I not?

The sirens rushed toward us, fluttering their winglike arms and then—far more dangerous—commencing to sing. For a bad moment, I thought they would instantly ensorcel all of us, dragging us down to doleful destruction. But then, as if a god—not, for once, a boring god—had whispered in my ear, I called out to my fellow hes: „Shout! Shout for your lives! If you hear yourselves, you will not hear the sirens! Shout! With all the strength that is in you, shout!"

And they did—only a few of them at first, but then more and more as their deep bellow drowned out the sirens' honeyed voices and released other hes from their

enchantment. Shouting like mad things, we rushed at the sirens, and they broke and fled before us. Now they did not sing seductively, but squalled out their dismay. And well they might have, for we trod more than one under our hooves and suffered but a few bites and scratches in the unequal battle.

„Back to the ship," I said then. „We have done what we came to do, and more besides. The faster we get away now, the better."

Those sirens had nerve. They could not close with us, but they tried to sing us back to them as we rowed away. But we kept on shouting, and so their songs went for naught. We pulled out to sea, until we were far enough from land to hear them no more.

„That was neatly done, Cheiron," Oreus said, as if praise from him were what I most sought in life.

Well, this once maybe he was not so far wrong. „I thank you," I said, and let out the long, weary sigh I had held in for too long. „I wonder what other things we shall have to do neatly between here and the Tin Isle—and when we have got there, and on the way home."

We were not tested again until we left the Inner Sea and came out upon the heaving bosom of Ocean the Great. Heave that bosom did. Anyone who has sailed on the Inner Sea will have known storms. He will have known them, yes, but as interludes between longer stretches of calm weather and good sailing. On the Ocean, this business is reversed. Calms there are, but the waters more often toss and turn like a restless sleeper. Sail too close to land and you will be cast up onto it, as would never happen in the calmer seas our ships usually frequent.

The day after we began our sail upon Ocean the Great, we beached ourselves at sunset, as we almost always did at nightfall on the Inner Sea. When the sun god drove his chariot into the water, I wondered how he hoped to return come morning, for Ocean seemed to stretch on to westward forever, with no land to be seen out to the edge of the world. I hoped we would not sail out far enough to fall off that edge, which had to be there somewhere.

But for our sentries, we slept after supping, for the work had been hard—harder than usual, on those rough waters. And the sentries, of course, faced inland, guarding us against whatever strange folk dwelt in that unknown land. They did not think to look in the other direction, but when we awoke *someone had stolen the sea*.

I stared in consternation at the waters of Ocean the Great, which lay some cubits below the level at which we had beached the CHALCIPPUS. I wondered if a mad god had tried to drink the seabed dry through a great rhyton and had come closer than he knew to success.

We tried pushing the ship back into the sea but to no avail: she was stuck fast. I stood there, wondering what to do. What could we do? Nothing. I knew it all too well.

As the sun rose higher in the east, though, the sea gradually returned, until we were able to float the *Horse of Bronze* and sail away as if nothing had happened. It seemed nothing had—except to my bowels, when I imagined us trapped forever on that unknown shore. Little by little, we learned Ocean the Great had a habit of advancing and withdrawing along the edge of the land, a habit the Inner Sea fortunately fails to share. Ocean is Ocean. He does as he pleases.

Here we did not go out of sight of land, not at all. Who could guess what might happen to us if we did? Better not to find out. We crawled along the coast, which ran, generally speaking, north and east. Were we the first centaurs to see those lands, to sail those waters? I cannot prove it, but I believe we were.

We did not see other ships. Even on the Inner Sea, ships are scarce. Here on the unstable waters of Ocean the Great, they are scarcer still. And Ocean's waters proved unstable in another way as well. The farther north we sailed, the cooler and grayer they grew—and also the wilder. Had we not built well, the *Horse of Bronze* would have broken her back, leaving us nothing but strange bones to be cast up on an alien shore. But the ship endured, and so did we.

We had thought to travel from island to island on our way to the Tin Isle. But islands proved few and far between on the Ocean. We did sail past one, not long before coming to the Tin Isle, from which small cattle whose roan coats were half hidden by strange tunics—I know no better word—stared out at us with large, brown, incurious eyes.

Some of the sailors, hungry for meat, wanted to put ashore there and slaughter them. I told them no. „We go on," I said. „They may be sacred to a god—those garments they wear argue for it. Remember the Cattle of the Sun? Look what disaster would befall anyone who dared raise a hand against them. And these may not be cattle at all; they may be folk in the shape of cattle. Who can say for certain, in these strange lands? But that is another reason they might be clothed. Better we leave them alone."

And so we sailed on, and entered the sleeve of water separating the Tin Isle from the mainland. That was the roughest travel we had had yet. More than a few of us clung to the rail, puking till we wished we were dead. Had the day not been bright and clear, showing us the shape of the Tin Isle blue in the distance, we might have had to turn back, despairing of making headway against such seas. But we persevered and eventually made landfall.

Oreus said, „Like as not, Ocean will steal the ship when our backs are turned. What would we do then, Cheiron?"

„Build another," I answered. „Or would you rather live in this gods-forsaken place the rest of your days?"

Oreus shivered and shook his head. I did not know, not then, how close I came to being right.

Something was badly amiss on the Tin Isle. That I realized not long after we landed there and made our way inland. The Isle proved a bigger place than I had thought when setting out. Simply landing on the coast did not necessarily put us close to the mines from which the vital tin came.

The countryside was lovely, though very different from that around the Inner Sea. Even the sky was strange, ever full of fogs and mists and drizzles. When the sun did appear, it could not bring out more than a watery blue in the dome of heaven. The sun I am used to will strike a centaur dead if he stays out in it too long. It will burn his hide, or the parts of it that are not hairy. Not so on those distant shores. I do not know why the power of the sun god is so attenuated thereabouts, but I know that it is.

Because of the fogs and mists and the endless drizzle, the landscape seemed unnaturally—indeed, almost supernaturally—green. Grass and ferns and shrubs

and trees grew in such profusion as I have never seen in all my days. Not even after the wettest winter will our homeland look so marvelously lush. High summer being so cool in those parts, however, I did wonder what winter might be like.

Hard winters or no, though, it was splendid country. A he could break the ground with his hoof and something would grow there. But no one and nothing appeared to have broken the ground any time lately. That was the puzzlement: the land might as well have been empty, and it should not have been.

I knew the names of the folk said to dwell in those parts: piskies and spriggans and especially nuggies, who were said to dig metal from the ground. Those names had come to the Inner Sea along with the hidewrapped pigs of tin that gave this land its fame there. What manner of folk these might be, though, I could not have said—nor, I believe, could anyone from my part of the world. I had looked forward to finding out. That would have been a tale to tell for many long years to come.

It would have been—but the folk did not come forth. I began to wonder if they *could* come forth, or if some dreadful fate had overwhelmed them. But even if they had been conquered and destroyed, whatever folk had defeated them should have been in evidence. No one was.

„We should have brought shes with us and settled here," Nessus said one day. „We'd have the land to ourselves."

„Would we?" I looked about. „It does seem so, I grant you, but something tells me we would get little joy from it."

Oreus looked about, too, more in bewilderment than anything else. Then he said one of the few things I have ever heard him say with which I could not disagree, either then or later: „If the folk are gone out of the land, no wonder the tin's stopped coming down to the Inner Sea."

„No wonder at all," I said. „Now, though, we have another question." Confusion flowed across his face until I posed it: „Why have the folk gone from this land?"

„Sickness?" Nessus suggested. I let the word lie there, not caring to pick it up. It struck me as unlikely, in any case. Most folk are of sturdy constitution. We die, but we do not die easily. I had trouble imagining a sickness that could empty a whole countryside.

Then Oreus said his second sensible thing in a row. Truly this was a remarkable day. „Maybe," he said, „maybe their gods grew angry at them, or tired of them."

A cool breeze blew down from the north. I remember that very well. And I remember wondering whether it was but a breeze, or whether it was the breath of some god either angry or tired. „If that be so," I said, „if that be so, then we will not take tin back to the Inner Sea, and so I shall hope it is not so."

„What if it is?" Nessus asked nervously, and I realized I was not the only one wondering if I felt a god's breath.

I thought for a moment. With that breeze blowing, thought did not come easily, and the moment stretched longer than I wished it would have. At last, I said, „In that case, my friend, we will do well enough to go home ourselves, don't you think?"

„Do our gods see us when we are in this far country?" Oreus asked.

I did not know the answer to that, not with certainty. But I pointed up to the sun, which, fortunately, the clouds and mist did not altogether obscure at that

moment. „He shines here, too," I replied. „Do you not think he will watch over us as he does there?"

That should have steadied him. But such was the empty silence of that countryside that he answered only, „I hope so," in tones suggesting that, while he might hope, he did not believe.

Two days—or rather, two nights—later, a nuggy came into our camp. I would not have known him from a piskie or a spriggan, but a nuggy he declared himself to be. I had sentries out around our fires, but he appeared in our midst without their being any the wiser. I believe he tunneled up from under the ground.

He looked like one who had seen much hardship in his time. I later learned from him that was the true aspect of nuggies, but he owned he had it more than most. He was ill-favored, a withered, dried-up creature with a face as hard and sharp as an outcropping of flint. In other circumstances, his tiny size might have made it hard for me to take him seriously; he was no larger in the head and torso than one of us would have been at two years, and had only little bandy legs below, though his arms were, in proportion to the rest of him, large and considerably muscled.

His name, he said, was Bucca. I understood him with difficulty. We did not speak the same language, he and I, but our two tongues held enough words in common to let us pass meaning back and forth. His rocky face worked with some mixture of strong emotion when he came before me. „Gods be praised!" he said, or something much like that. „Old Bucca's not left all alone in the dark!" And he began to weep, a terrible thing to see.

„Here, now. Here, now," I said. I gave him meat and bread. Had we had wine, I would have given him that as well. But for us to carry wine would have been like stags carrying fire with which to roast them once they were slain.

He ate greedily, and without much regard for manners. Though he was so small, he put away a startling amount. Grease shone on his thin lips and his chin when he tossed aside a last bone and said, „I hoped some folk would come when the tin stopped. I prayed some folk would come. But for long and long, no folk came. I drew near to losing hope." More tears slid down the cliffsides of his cheeks.

„Here now," I said again, wanting to embrace him yet fearing I would offend if I did. Only when he came over and clung to my foreleg did I take him up in my arms and hold his small chest against my broad one. He was warm and surprisingly hard; his arms, as they embraced me, held even more strength than I would have guessed. At last, when he seemed somewhat eased, I thought I could ask him, „Why did the tin stop?"

He stared at me, our two faces not far apart. Moonlight and astonishment filled his pale eyes. „You know not?" he whispered.

„That is the truth: I know not," I replied. „That is why I came so far, that is why we all came so far, in the *Horse of Bronze*—to learn why precious tin comes no more to the Inner Sea."

„Why?" Bucca said. „I will tell you why. Because most of us are dead, that is why. Because where *they* are, we cannot live."

I did not believe all Bucca told me. If I am to speak the whole truth here, I did not want to believe what the nuggy told me. And so, not believing, I told a party of hes to come with me so that we might see for ourselves what truth lay in his words—or rather, as I thought of it, so that we might see he was lying.

„You big things are bold and brave," Bucca said as we made ready to trot away. „You will have grief of it. I am no bolder or braver than I have to be, and already I have known griefs uncounted."

„I grieve for your grief," I told him. „I grieve for your grief, but I think things will go better for us."

„It could be," Bucca replied. „Yes, it could be. You big things still believe in yourselves, or so it seems. We nuggies did not, not after a while. And when we did not believe, and when *they* did not believe … we died."

„How is it that you are left alive, then?" I asked him. This question had burned in my mind since the night when he first appeared amongst us, though I had not had the heart to ask him then. Now, though, it seemed I might need the answer, if answer there was.

But Bucca only shrugged those surprisingly broad shoulders of his. „I think I am too stubborn to know I should be dead."

That, then, meant nothing to me. I have learned more since than I once knew, however. Even then, I wanted nothing more than to get away from the nuggy. And away we went, rambling east into one of the more glorious mornings the gods ever made.

It was cool. It was always cool on the Tin Isle, except when it was downright cold. A little mist clung to the hillsides. The sun had trouble burning it off. This too is a commonplace of that country. But oh! the greens in that northern clime! Yes, I say it again. Nothing round the Inner Sea can match them, especially not in summertime. And those hills were not stark and jagged, as are the hills we know, but smooth and round, some of them, as a she's breast. The plains are broad, and roll gently. Their soil puts to shame what goes by that name in our land. Yet it grew no wheat or barley, only grass. Indeed, this might have been a countryside forever without folk.

As we trotted east, we left the hills behind us. The plain stretched out ahead, far broader than any in our own homeland. But only a cold, lonely wind sighed across it. „Plague take me if I like this place," Oreus said.

„We need not like it," I answered. „We need but cross it."

Though I might say such things to Oreus, before long the stillness came to oppress me, too. I began to have the feeling about this plain that one might have about a centaurs' paddock where no one happens to be at a particular time: that the folk are but gone for a moment and will soon return. About the paddock, one having such a feeling is generally right. About this plain, I thought otherwise.

There I proved mistaken.

I found—the entire band of hes found—I was mistaken some little while before actually realizing as much. We hurried through the tall grass of the plain, making better time than we had before, and did not think to wonder why until Hylaeus looked down and exclaimed in sudden, foolish-sounding surprise: „We are following a trail."

All of us stopped then, staring in surprise at the ground under our hooves. Hylaeus was quite correct, even if we had not noticed up until that time. The earth was well trodden down, the grass quite sparse, especially compared to its rich lushness elsewhere.

Nessus asked the question uppermost in all our minds: „Who made it?"

What he meant was, had the trail survived from the days when folk filled this land—days Bucca recalled with fond nostalgia—or was it new, the product of whatever had driven the nuggies and so many other folk to ruin? One obvious way to find the answer crossed my mind. I asked, „How long has it been since any but ourselves walked this way?“

We studied the ground again. A trail, once formed, may last a very long time; the ground, pounded hard under feet or hooves, will keep that hardness year after year. Grass will not thrive there, not when it can find so many easier places close by to grow. And yet…

„I do not think this trail is ancient,“ Hylaeus said. „It shows too much wear to make that likely.“

„So it also seems to me,“ I said, and waiting, hoping someone—anyone—would contradict me. No one did. I had to go on, then: „This means we may soon learn how much of the truth Bucca was telling.“

„It means we had better watch out,“ Nessus said, and who could tell him he was wrong, either?

But for the trail, though, the land continued to seem empty of anything larger than jackdaws and rooks. It stretched on for what might have been forever, wide and green and rolling. Strange how the Tin Isle should show a broader horizon than my own home country, which, although part of the mainland, is much divided by bays and mountains and steep valleys.

There were valleys in this country, too, but they were not like the ones I knew at home, some of which are sharp enough at the bottom to cut yourself on if you are not careful. The valleys that shaped this plain were low and gently sloping. The rivers in them ran in the summertime, when many of the streams in my part of the world go dry.

And I will tell you something else, something even odder. While we were traveling across that plain, black clouds rolled across the sun. A cold wind from the north began to blow. Rain poured down from the sky, as if from a bucket. Yes, I tell you the truth, no matter how strange it might seem. I saw hard rain—not the drizzle and fogs we had known before—in summertime, when all around the Inner Sea a lizard will cook if it ventures out in the noonday sun. By the gods, it is so.

Truly I was a long way from home.

„Is it natural?“ Hylaeus asked, rain dripping from his nose and the tip of his beard and the tip of his tail till he flicked it about, at which point raindrops flew from it in all directions. „Can such a thing be natural?“

„Never!“ Oreus said. His tail did not flick. It lashed, back and forth, back and forth, as if it had a life of his own. „This surely must be some evil sorcery raised against us. Perhaps it is akin to whatever caused the nuggies to fail.“

„I think you may be mistaken,“ I told him. He glared at me—until a raindrop hit him in the eye, at which point he blinked, tossed his head, and spluttered. I went on, „Look how green the land is all around us,“ emphasizing my words with a broad wave of my arm. „Could it be what it is unless rain came down now and again—or more than now and again—in the summertime to keep it so?“

Oreus only grunted. Nessus considered the greenery and said, „I think Cheiron may be right.“

„Whether he is or not, we'll be squelching through mud if this goes on much longer." As if to prove Oreus's point, his hoof splashed in a puddle—a puddle that surely had not been there before the rain began.

The hard-packed trail helped more than somewhat, for it did not go to muck nearly so fast as the looser-soiled land to either side. We could go on, if not at our best clip, while the rain continued.

Little by little, the steady downpour eased off to scattered showers. The wind shifted from north to east and began to blow away some of the clouds. When we forded a stream, we paused to wash ourselves. I was by then muddy almost all the way up to my belly, and my comrades no cleaner. Washing, though, proved a business that tested my hardiness, for the stream, like every stream I encountered in the Tin Isle, ran bitterly cold.

In a halfhearted way, the sun tried to come out once more. I was glad of that. Standing under it, even if it seemed but a pale imitation of the blazing disk of light I had known around the Inner Sea, helped dry the water clinging to my coat of hair and also helped give me back at least a little warmth.

I was, then, reluctant to leave the valley in which that stream lay, and all the more so since it was rather deeper and steeper than most of the rest in the plain. „No help for it, Cheiron," said Hylaeus, who of the other hes had the most sympathy for my weariness.

„No, I suppose not," I said sadly, and set my old bones to moving once more. Some of the other centaurs went up the eastern slope of the valley at a pace no better than mine. Oreus, on the other hand, was filled with the fiery impetuosity of youth and climbed it at the next thing to a gallop. I expected him to charge across the flat land ahead and then come trotting back to mock the rest of us for a pack of lazy good-for-nothings.

I expected that, but I was wrong. Instead, he stopped in his tracks at the very lip of the valley, which stood somewhat higher than the western slope. He stopped, he began to rear in surprise or some other strong emotion, and then he stood stock-still, as if turned to stone by a Gorgon's appalling countenance, his right arm outstretched and pointing ahead.

„What is it?" I called grumpily. I had no great enthusiasm for rushing up there to gape at whatever had seized foolish Oreus's fancy.

But he did not answer me. He simply stood where he was and kept on pointing. I slogged up the slope, resolved to kick him in the rump for making such a nuisance of himself.

When at last I reached him, my resolve died. Before I could turn and lash out with my hind feet, my eyes followed his index finger. And then, like him, I could do nothing for long, long moments but stare and stare and stare.

How long I stood there, I am not prepared to say. As long as the wonder ahead deserved? I doubt it, else I might be standing there yet.

The great stone circle loomed up out of nothing, there on the windswept plain. Even in summertime, that wind was far from warm, but it was not the only thing that chilled me. I am not ashamed to say I was awed. I was, in fact, amazed, wondering how and why such a huge thing came to be, and what folk could have raised it.

The sphinxes brag of the monuments they have built, there beside their great river. I have never seen them, not with my own eyes. Centaurs who have visited their country say the image of one of their own kind and the enormous stone piles nearby are astonishing. But the sphinxes, as I have said, dwell in what must be the richest country any gods ever made. This… This stood in the middle of what I can best describe as nothing. And the sphinxes had the advantage of their river to haul stone from quarries to where they wanted it. No rivers suitable for the job here. And these blocks of stone, especially the largest in the center of the circle, the ones arranged in a pattern not much different from the outline of my hoof, were, I daresay, larger than any the sphinxes used.

Some of this—much of this, in fact—I learned later. For the time being, I was simply stunned. So were we all, as we came up the side of the valley one after another to stare at the amazing circle. We might have been under a spell, a spell that kept us from going on and bid fair to turn us to stone ourselves.

Brash Oreus, who had first seen the circle of standing stones, was also the one who broke that spell, if spell it was. Sounding at that moment not at all brash, he said, „I must see more." He cantered forward: an oddly stylized gait, and one that showed, I think, how truly impressed he was.

Seeing him move helped free me from the paralysis that had seized me. I too went toward the stone circle, though not at Oreus's ceremonial prance.

As I drew closer, the wind grew colder. Birds flew up from the circle, surprised and frightened that anyone should dare approach. *Chaka-chaka-chak!* they called, and by their cries I knew them for jackdaws.

I do not believe I have ever seen stonework so fresh before. The uprights and the stones that topped them might have been carved only moments before. No lichen clung to them, and I had seen it mottling boulders in the plain. Hylaeus noted the same thing at almost the same time. Pointing ahead as Oreus had done before, he said, „Those stones could have gone up yesterday."

„Yesterday," I agreed, „or surely within the past few years." And all at once, a chill colder even than the breeze pierced me to the root. That was the time in which the tin failed.

Again, Hylaeus was not far behind me. „This is a new thing," he said slowly. „The passing of the folk of the Tin Isle is a new thing, too."

Chaka-chaka-chak! the jackdaws screeched. Suddenly, they might have been to my mind carrion crows, of which I had also seen more than a few. And on what carrion had those crows, and the jackdaws, and the bare-faced rooks, and the ravens, on what carrion had they feasted? The wind seemed colder yet, wailing out of the north as if the ice our bones remembered lay just over the horizon. But the ice I felt came as much from within me as from without.

Oreus said, „Who made this circle, then, and why? Is it a place of magic?"

Nessus laughed at that, even if the wind blew his mirth away. „Could it be anything but a place of magic? Would any folk labor so long and so hard if they expected nothing in return?"

Not even quarrelsome Oreus could contest against such reasoning. I shivered yet again. Magic is a curious business. Some folk choose to believe they can compel their gods to do their bidding by one means or another rather than petition them in humble piety. What is stranger still is that some gods choose to believe

they can be so compelled—at least for a while. Sometimes, later, they remember they are gods, and then no magic in the world can check them. Sometimes… but perhaps not always.

I looked at the stone circle again, this time through new eyes. Centaurs have little to do with magic, nor have we ever; it appears to be a thing contrary to our nature. But I believed Nessus had the right of it. Endless labor had gone into this thing. No one would be so daft as to expend such labor without the hope of some reward springing from it.

What sort of reward? Slowly, I said, „If the other folk of the Tin Isles fail, who will take the land? Who will take the mines?“

Once more, I eyed the stone circle, the uprights capped with a continuous ring of lintel stones, the five bigger trilithons set in the hoof-shaped pattern within. Of itself, my hand tightened on the copper-headed spear I bore. I thought I could see an answer to that. Had much power sprung from all this labor?

Chip, chip, chip. I turned at the sound of stone striking stone. Oreus had found a hard shard and was smacking away at one of the uprights. Before I could ask him what he was about, Nessus beat me to it.

„What am I doing? Showing we were here,“ Oreus answered, and went on chipping.

After watching him for a while, I saw the shape he was making, and I could not help but smile. He was pounding into that great standing stone the image of one of our daggers, broad at the base of the blade and with hardly any quillons at all. When he had finished that, he began another bit of carving beside it: an axe head.

„Not only have you shown we were here, but also for what reason we came to the Tin Isle,“ I said. Oreus nodded and continued with his work.

He had just finished when one of our hes let out a wordless cry of warning. The centaur pointed north, straight into the teeth of that wind. As I had with Oreus‘s before, I followed that outflung, pointing arm. There coming toward us were the ones who, surely, had shaped the circle of standing stones.

If dogs had gods, those they worshiped would wag their tails and bark. If sheep had gods, they would follow woolly deities who grazed. As the world is, almost all folk have many things in common, as if the gods who shaped them were using certain parts of a pattern over and over again.

Think on it. You will find it holds much truth. Centaurs and sirens and sphinxes and fauns and satyrs all have faces of an essential similarity. Nor were our features so much different from those of Bucca the nuggy on this distant shore. The differences, such as they are, are those of degree, not of kind.

Again, hands are much alike from one folk to another. How could it be otherwise, when we all must grasp tools and manipulate them? Arms are also broadly similar, one to another, save when a folk needs must use them for flying. Even torsos have broad likenesses amongst us, satyrs and fauns, nuggies, and, to a lesser extent, sirens as well.

The folk striding toward us through the green, green grass might have been the pattern itself, the pattern from whose rearranged pieces the rest of us had been clumsily reassembled. As bronze, which had brought us here, is an alloy of copper and tin, so I saw that sirens were an alloy of these folk and birds, sphinxes of them and birds and lions, satyrs of them and goats, fauns of them and horses.

And I saw that we centaurs blended these folk and horses as well, though in different proportions, as one bronze will differ from another depending on how much is copper and how much tin.

Is it any wonder, then, that, on seeing this folk, I at once began to wonder if I had any true right to exist?

And I began to understand what Bucca meant. As a nuggy, he was no doubt perfectly respectable. Next to these new ones, he was a small, wrinkled, ugly *thing*. Any of us, comparing ourselves to them, would have felt the same. How could we help it? We were a mixture. They were the essence with which our other parts were mixed. They might have been so many gods approaching us.

Nessus shivered. It might have been that cutting wind. It might have been, but it was not. „When I look at them, I see my own end," he murmured.

Because I felt the same way, I also felt an obligation to deny it. „They are bound to be as surprised by us as we are by them," I said. „If we have never seen their kind, likewise they have never seen ours. So long as we keep up a bold front, they will know nothing of… whatever else we may feel."

"Well said, Cheiron," Hylaeus told me. Whether it would likewise be well done remained to be seen.

„I will go forward with two others, so they may see we come in peace," I said. „Who will come with me?" Hylaeus and Oreus both strode forward, and I was glad to have them (gladder, perhaps, of the one than the other). The reason I offered was plausible, but it was not the only one I had. If I went forward with only two bold companions, the new folk would have more trouble noticing how so many of my hes wavered at the mere sight of them.

We three slowly went out ahead of the rest of the band. When we did, the strangers stopped for a moment. Then they also sent three of their number forward. They walked so straight, so free, so erect. Their gait was so natural. It made that of fauns or satyrs seem but a clumsy makeshift.

Two of them carried spears, one a fine leaf-shaped sword of bronze. The one with the sword, the tallest of them, sheathed his weapon. The other two trailed their spears on the ground. They did not want a fight, not then. We also showed we were not there to offer battle.

„Can you understand me?" I called.

Their leader frowned. „Can you understand *me?*" he called back in a tongue not far removed from the one Bucca used. I could, though it was not easy. I gather my language was as strange in his ears.

„Who are you? What is your folk?" I asked him, and, pointing back toward the stone circle, „What is this place?"

„I am Geraint," he answered. „I am a man"—a word I had not heard before. He looked at my companions and me. „I will ask you the same questions, and where you are from, and why you have come here."

I told him who I was, and named my kind as well. He listened attentively, his eyes—eyes gray as the seas thereabouts—alert. And I told him of our desire for tin, and of how we had come from the lands around the Inner Sea to seek it.

He heard me out. He had a cold courtesy much in keeping with that windswept plain. When I had finished, he threw back his head and laughed.

If I needed it, I could have brought up my axe very quickly. „Do you think I jest?“ I asked. „Or do you aim to insult me? If you want a quarrel, I am sure we can oblige you.“

Geraint shook his head. „Neither, although we will give you all the fight you care for if that is what you want. No, I am laughing because it turns out those funny little digging things were right after all.“

„You mean the nuggies?“ I asked.

Now he nodded. „Yes, them,“ he said indifferently. „I thought they dug because they were things that had to dig. But there really is a market for tin in this far corner of the world that has none of its own?“

„There is,“ I said. „We have trade goods back at the *Horse of Bronze*, our ship. We will pay well.“

„Will you?“ He eyed me in a way I had never seen before: as if I had no right to exist, as if my standing there on four hooves speaking of trade were an affront of the deadliest sort. Worse was that, when I looked into those oceanic eyes, I more than half believed it myself.

Oreus, always quick to catch a slight, saw this perhaps even before I did. „I wonder if this man-thing has any blood inside it, or only juice like a gourd,“ he said.

Geraint should not have been able to follow that. He should not have, but he did. His eyes widened, this time in genuine surprise. „You are stronger than the nuggies,“ he said. „Do any of them yet live?“

„Yes,“ I said, not mentioning that we had seen only Bucca. „Will you trade tin with us? If not, we will try to mine it ourselves.“ I did not look forward to that. We had not the skills, and the nuggies‘ shafts would not be easy for folk with our bulk to negotiate.

But Geraint said, „We will trade. What do you offer?“

„We will trade what we have always sent north in exchange for tin,“ I answered. „We will give you jewelry of gold and precious stones. We will give olive oil, which cannot be made here. We will give wheat flour, for fine white bread. Wheat gives far better bread than barley, but, like the olive, it does not thrive in this northern clime.“ I was sure the olive would not grow here. I was less sure about wheat, but Geraint did not need to know that.

„Have you wine?“ Geraint asked. „If you have wine, you may be sure we will make a bargain. Truly wine is the blood of the gods.“ The mans with him nodded.

„We have no wine,“ I said. „We did not bring any, for it is not to the nuggies‘ taste.“ That was true, but it was far from the only reason we had no wine. I said not a word of any other reasons. If Geraint wanted to ferret out our weaknesses, he was welcome to do so on his own. I would not hand them to him on a platter.

I wondered what weaknesses the mans had. Seeing him there, straight and erect and godlike in his all-of-one-pieceness, I wondered if mans had any weaknesses. Surely they did. What those weaknesses might be, though, I had no idea. Even now, I am less certain of them than I wish I were.

I said, „You must leave off killing the nuggies who grub the tin from the ground. They have done you no harm. That will be part of the bargain.“

One of the mans with Geraint did not understand that. He repeated it in their language, which I could follow only in part. I did not think he turned it into a joke

or a bit of mockery, but the mans laughed and laughed as if it were the funniest thing in the world.

To me, he said, „You misunderstand. We did not kill the nuggies and the other folk hereabouts. They see us, and then they commonly die.“

„Of what?“ I asked.

He told me. I was not sure I followed him, and so I asked him to say it again. He did: „Of embarrassment.“

I refused to show him how much that chilled me. These mans embarrassed me, too, merely by their existence. I thought of Bucca, who was somehow tougher than his fellows. I wondered who among us might have such toughness. I was not sorry these mans dwelt so far from our homeland.

Another question occurred to me: „Did you make this great stone circle?“

„We did,“ Geraint answered.

„Why?“ I asked.

I thought he would speak to me of the gods these mans worshiped, and of how those gods had commanded his folk to make the circle for some purpose of their own. I would not have been surprised that he and the other mans had no idea what the purpose was. That is often the way of gods: to keep those who revere them guessing, that they themselves might seem the stronger. And I would not have been surprised to hear him say right out that the purpose of the circle was to bring a bane down upon the other folk dwelling in those parts.

But he answered in neither of those ways. And yet his words *did* surprise me, for he said, „We raised this circle to study the motions of the sun and moon and stars.“

„To study their motions?“ I frowned, wondering if I had heard rightly and if I had understood what I heard.

Geraint nodded. „That is what I said, yes.“

I scratched my head. „But… why?“ I asked. „Can you hope to change them?“

He laughed at that. „No, of course not. Their motions are as the gods made them.“

„True,“ I said, relieved he saw that much. These mans were so strange, and so full of themselves, he might easily have believed otherwise. „This being so, then, what is the point of, ah, studying these motions?“

„To know them better,“ Geraint replied, as if talking to a fool or a foal.

For all his scorn, I remained bewildered. „But what good will knowing them better do you?“ I asked.

„I cannot tell you. But knowledge is always worth the having.“ Geraint spoke with great conviction. I wondered why. No sooner had I wondered than he tried to explain, saying, „How do you know you need tin to help harden copper into bronze? There must have been a time when folk did not know it. Someone must have learned it and taught it to others. There must have been a time when folk did not know of wonderful wine, either, or of this fine wheat flour you brag you have brought to trade. Someone must have learned of them.“

His words frightened me more even than his appearance. He carved a hole in the center of the world. Worse yet, he knew not what he did. I said, „Assuredly the gods taught us these things.“

His laugh might have been the embodiment of the cold wind blowing across that cold plain. „No doubt the gods set the world in motion," he said, „but is it not for us to find out what rules they used when they did it?"

„Gods need no rules. That is why they are gods," I said.

„There are always rules." Geraint sounded as certain as I was. „At the winter solstice, the sun always rises in the same place." He pointed to show where. „At the summer solstice, in another place, once more the same from year to year." He pointed again. „The moon likewise has its laws, though they are subtler. Why, even eclipses have laws."

He was mad, of course, but he sounded very sure of himself. Everyone knows eclipses show the gods are angry with those whose lands they darken. What else could an eclipse be but the anger of the gods? Nothing, plainly. Quarreling with a lunatic is always a risky business, and all the more so in his own country. I did not try it. Instead, I answered, „Let it be as you say, friend. Will you come back to the *Horse of Bronze* and trade tin for our goods?"

„I will," he answered, and then smiled a very unpleasant smile. „We are many in this land—more all the time. You are few, and no more of your kind will come any time soon. Why should we not simply take what we want from you?"

„For one thing, we would fight you, and many of your hes would die," I said. „I do not deny you would win in the end, but it would cost you dear. And if you rob us and kill us, no more of our folk will come to this shore. You will have one triumph, not steady trade. Which do you want more?"

The man thought it over. By his expression, he had never before had to weigh such considerations. I wondered whether one orgy of slaughter *would* count for more with him than years of steady dealing. Some folk care nothing for the future. It might as well not be real to them. Were Geraint and his kind of that sort? If so, all we could do was sell ourselves as dear as possible.

In due course, he decided. „You have given me a thought of weight, Cheiron," he said. He pronounced my name oddly. No doubt his in my mouth was not fully to his liking, either. Our languages were close cousins, but not quite brothers. He went on, „Trade is better. Robbery is easier and more fun, but trade is better. Our grandsons and their grandsons can go on trading if we do well here."

„Just so," I said, pleased he could look past himself. Maybe all his talk of rules, rules even in the heavens, had something to do with it. „Aye, just so. Come back to the ship, then, and we shall see what sort of bargains we may shape."

We clasped hands, he and I. Though his body could not match mine for speed, his grip was strong. He and his followers turned and went off toward the rest of the mans, who were waiting for them. Oreus and Hylaeus and I trotted back to our fellow centaurs. „It is agreed," I called. „We will trade. All is well."

A jackdaw flew up from the stone circle. „*Chaka-chaka-chak!*" it cried. It seemed as if it was laughing at me. What a fool I was, to let a little gray-eyed bird prove wiser than I.

As I have said, we centaurs were quicker than mans. But Geraint's folk showed surprising endurance. We could do more in an hour. Over a day's journey, the difference between us was smaller, for the mans would go on where we had to pause and rest.

We did all we could to take their measure, watching how they hunted, how they used their bows and spears. They, no doubt, were doing the same with us. How folk hunt tells much about how they will behave in a fight. I learned nothing spectacular from the mans, save that they were nimbler than I would have guessed. With our four feet and larger weight, we cannot change directions so readily as they do. Past that, there was little to choose between them and us.

No, I take that back. There was one thing more. I had seen it even before I saw the mans themselves. The other folk of the Tin Isle could not abide their presence. I wondered if Bucca would call on us while we were in Geraint's company. He did not, which left me saddened but unsurprised. And of the other nuggies, or of the spriggans and piskies, we found not a trace.

Hylaeus noted the same thing. „Maybe the man spoke true when he said they died of embarrassment," he said worriedly. „Will the same begin to happen to us?"

„If it will, it has not yet," I answered. „We are stronger-willed than those other folk; no one would doubt that."

„True." But Hylaeus did not sound much relieved. „But I cannot help thinking they are all of what we are only in part. Does that not give them more of a certain kind of strength than we have?"

I wished that thought had not also occurred to me. Still, I answered, „What difference does it make? What difference can it make? We will trade with them, we will load the CHALCIPPUS with tin till she wallows like a pregnant sow, and then we will sail home. After that, how can the mans' strength matter?"

Now he did seem happier, saying, „True, Cheiron, and well thought out. The sooner we are away from the Tin Isle, the gladder I shall be."

„And I," I said. „Oh, yes. And I."

Geraint sent some of his mans off to gather the tin: whether to dig it from the ground themselves or to take it from stocks the nuggies had mined before failing, I could not have said. They brought the metal in the usual leather sacks, each man carrying one on his back. They had no shame in using themselves as beasts of burden. And the sacks of tin did not much slow them. They still kept up with us.

As with our home country, no part of the Tin Isle is very far from any other part. We soon returned to the *Horse of Bronze*. The hes we had left behind to guard the ship were overjoyed to see us and bemused to see the mans. Anyone of any folk seeing mans for the first time is bound to be bemused, I do believe.

The trading went well: better than I had expected, in fact. Geraint was clever, no doubt about that. But he had little practice at dickering. I gather, though I am not certain, that he was much more used to taking than to haggling. To him, the tin he gave us was almost an afterthought, nothing to worry about. He wanted what we had.

When the dealing was done, when we had loaded the sacks of tin aboard the CHALCIPPUS and his mans had carried off the trade goods, he said, „Let us have a feast, to celebrate the hour of our meeting."

„You are kind and generous," I said, meaning it at least in part. The countryside belonged to the mans. If there was to be a feast, the burden of fixing it would fall on them. I did add, „But let it not be long delayed. The season advances. Ocean the Great was harsh enough on the northward voyage. I would not care to sail in a time when storms grow more likely."

„As you say, so shall it be," Geraint replied, and so, indeed, it was. Mans brought cows and sheep and pigs to the seashore for slaughtering as the sun went down. Others had slain deer and ducks and geese. Shes of the man kind—womans, Geraint called them—came to tend to the cooking. Many of them were as pleasing in face and upper body as any of the shes we had left behind so long ago. Below… Below is always a mystery. The mystery here was to discover whether one part would fit with another. Some of us, I am told, made the experiment, and found it not altogether unsatisfactory. I doubt we would have, were our own shes close by. But they were not, and so…

I do wonder if any issue resulted, and of what sort. But that is something I shall never know.

Along with roasting meat, the womans baked barley cakes and others from different grains they grow in that northern clime. Those were edible, but oats and rye are not foods on which I should care to have to depend. And the womans baked bread from the good wheat flour we had brought from our own home. The soft chewiness and fine flavor of the loaves occasioned much favorable comment from the mans.

In that part of the world, they use less pottery than we. Being rich in forests, they make wooden barrels in place of our amphorae. The mans brought several of them to the feast. I asked Geraint, „What do these hold?"

„Why, cerevisia, of course," he answered in surprise. „We brew it from barley. Do you not know it?"

„No, though we sometimes use barley-water as a medicine," I said.

He laughed. „Even as we do with cerevisia. Drink of it, then, and be … cured." He laughed again.

Some of the womans broached a barrel of cerevisia and used a wooden dipper to pour the stuff into mugs, most of them of wood; some of pottery; and a few, for the leaders, of gold. The stuff in the barrel was thin and yellow. It looked, to be honest, more like what we expend after drinking than anything we would have wanted to drink. But the mans showed no hesitation. In fact, they were eager. I also saw that the womans sneaked mugs of cerevisia for themselves when they thought no one was looking.

Geraint, then, had not brought this stuff forth with the intention of poisoning us. He could not possibly have given so many mans an antidote ahead of time, and he could not have known in advance which womans would drink and which would not. He had a mug of cerevisia himself, a golden mug. He lifted it to me in salute. „Your good health!" he said, and drank it down.

A woman brought me a mug of my own, a golden mug similar to Geraint's. Cerevisa sloshed in it. I sniffed the brew. We centaurs have keener noses than many other folk. It had a slightly sour, slightly bitter odor. I did not see how anyone could care to drink it for pleasure, but I did not see how it could hurt me, either.

As Geraint had done, I raised my mug. „And yours!" I said. I too drank down the cerevisia.

It was not quite so nasty as I had thought it would be from the smell, but it was definitely an acquired taste—and one I had not acquired. Still, for courtesy's sake I made shift to empty the mug. I even managed to smile at the woman who poured

it full again. She was, I own, worth smiling at. I had made no surreptitious experiments with these womans. With this one… Well, I might even get used to the idea that she had no tail.

Looking around, I saw I was not the only centaur drinking cerevisia. Some of the hes who had sailed up to the Tin Isle took to it with more enthusiasm than I could muster myself.

A woman also refilled Geraint‘s mug. He drank deep once more. When he nodded to me, his face seemed redder than it had. „What do you think?“ he asked.

„Of cerevisia?“ I tried to be as polite as I could, for it was clear the mans were giving us the best they had. „It is not bad at all.“

„Not bad at all?“ As I might have known, that was not praise enough to suit him. „It is some of the finest brew we have ever made. I have drunk enough to know.“ But then he caught himself and began to laugh. „I forget. You who live by the Inner Sea are used to wine, and to those who have drunk only wine, cerevisia, even the finest, must seem nothing special.“

I drained the golden mug once more. The cerevisia truly was not bad at all as the second serving slid down my throat. The woman smiled at me when she filled the mug again. My brain seemed to buzz. My whole body seemed to buzz, if the truth be known. I told myself it was the woman‘s smile that excited me so. On the Tin Isle, I told myself any number of things that were not true.

One of the centaurs let out a great, wild whoop. Another he howled out a similar cry a moment later. The buzzing that coursed through me grew stronger. I tossed back the mug of cerevisia. No, it was not bad. In fact, it was quite good. Without my asking, the woman gave me more. And the more I drank, the better it seemed.

Geraint had said something. I needed to remember what it was. It had mattered, or so I thought. But thought was… not so much difficult, I would say, as unimportant. I managed, however, and laughed in triumph. „Cerevisia and wine!“ I said, though my tongue seemed hardly my own or under my will. „Why do you speak of cerevisia and wine together?“

I was not the only one who laughed. Geraint all but whinnied, he found that so funny. „You should know,“ he told me when he could speak again.

„What mean you?“ I was having trouble speaking, or at least speaking clearly, myself. Drinking cerevisia was easier and more enjoyable. Yet another mug‘s worth glided down my gullet.

Geraint laughed once more. „Why, they are the only brews I know that will make a man drunk,“ he replied. „And I see they will make your folk drunk as well. In truth, they must mount straight to your head, for the cerevisia makes you drunk far faster than it does with us.“

„Cerevisia … makes for drunkenness?“ I spoke with a certain helpless horror. I knew then what was toward, and knew myself powerless to stop it.

„Why, of course.“ Geraint seemed tempted to laugh yet again, this time at my foolishness. And I had been a fool, all right. The man asked, „Did you not know this?“

Sick with dread, I shook my head. The buzzing in my veins grew ever higher, ever shriller. Many folk around the Inner Sea make wine, drink wine, enjoy wine. We centaurs fight shy of it. We have good reason, too. Wine does not make us

drunk, or not as it makes them drunk. Wine makes us mad. And cerevisia seemed all too likely to do the same.

I tried to say as much, but now my tongue and lips would not obey the orders I gave them. Not far away, a woman squealed. Oreus—I might have known it would be Oreus—had slung her over his shoulder and was galloping off into the darkness with her.

„What is he doing?“ Geraint exclaimed. I knew perfectly well what he was doing (as did Geraint, no doubt), but I could not have told him. The man drew his sword, as if to stop Oreus, even though Oreus was now gone. I could not speak, but my hands and hooves still obeyed my will. I dealt Geraint a buffet that stretched him on the ground. When he started to get to his feet, I trampled him. He did not rise after that. No one, not from any folk, could have after that.

The woman who had served me screamed. I trotted toward her. Would I have served her as Oreus was surely serving the other woman? I suppose I would have, but I found myself distracted. There stood the barrel of cerevisia, with the dipper waiting for my hand. I drank and drank. The woman could wait. By the time I thought of her again, she had—quite sensibly—fled.

All over the feasting ground, madness reigned. Centaurs fought mans. Centaurs fought other centaurs. I do not know if mans fought other mans, but I would not be surprised.

A man speared a centaur in the barrel. The centaur, roaring, lifted the man and flung him into a pit of coals where a pig was cooking. The savor of roasting meat got stronger, but did not change its essential nature. Man‘s flesh on the fire smells much like pork.

Some centaurs did not bother taking womans into the darkness before taking them. The mans attacked these very fiercely. With madness coursing through them, the centaurs fought back with an animal ferocity I had rarely known in us before.

Shrieks and screams and howls of rage from both sides profaned the pleasant seaside feasting ground. There were more mans than centaurs, but the centaurs were bigger and stronger—and, as I say, madder. We cared nothing for wounds, so long as we could wound the enemy in return. We drove the mans wailing into the night, the few we did not slay.

Then we were alone on the beach, along with those wonderful barrels of cerevisia. To the victors, the spoils of battle. For us, these were enough, and more than enough.

I came back to myself thinking I had died—and that the gods of the afterlife were crueler than I had imagined. The pale sun of the Tin Isle beat down as if on the valley of the sphinxes. By the way my head pounded, some demented smith was beating a hammerhead into shape just above my eyes. The taste in my mouth I will not dignify with a name. Like as not, it has none.

The sun was just rising. It showed me that not all the horror, not all the nightmare, dwelt within me. Mans and womans and centaurs lay sprawled and twisted in death. The blood that had poured from them was already turning black. Flies buzzed about the bodies. Rooks and carrion crows and ravens hopped here and there, pecking at eyes and tongues and other exposed dainties.

Not many centaurs had died. This, I think, was not only on account of our advantage in size but also because we had been full of the strength and vitality of madness. Looking around, I saw ovens overturned, barrels smashed, and much other destruction for the sake of destruction. This is not our usual way. It is not the usual way of any decent folk. But when the madness of wine—and, evidently, also the madness of cerevisia—struck us, what was usual was forgotten.

Other centaurs were stirring, rousing, from what had passed the night before, even as was I. By their groans, by the anguish in their voices and on their faces, they knew the same pain I did. Awakening from madness can never be easy, or sweet. You always know what you are and, worse, what you were.

My fellows gazed on the devastation all around as if they could not believe their eyes. Well, how could I blame them, when I had as much trouble believing as the rest of them? Nessus said, „Surely we did no such thing. Surely.“ His voice was as hoarse a croak as any that might burst from a raven's throat. Its very timbre gave his hopeful words the lie.

„Surely we did not,“ I said, „except that we did.“ I wish I could claim I sounded better than Nessus. In fact, I can. But claiming a thing does not make it true. How I wish it did!

He turned his tail on the chaos, the carnage, the carrion. It was as if he could not bear to see himself mistaken. Again, blaming him is not easy. Who would wish to be reminded of … that?

„Did we slay all the mans?“ Hylaeus asked.

„I think not.“ I shook my head, which sent fresh pangs shooting through it. „No, I know not. Some of them fled off into the night.“

„That is not good,“ Nessus said. „They will bring more of their kind here. They will seek vengeance.“

There, he was bound to be right. And the mans would have good reason to hunger for revenge. Not only had we slain their warriors, we had also outraged and slain their shes. Had some other folk assailed us so, we too would have been wild to avenge.

I looked inland. I saw nothing there, but I knew the mans did not yet thickly settle this part of the Tin Isle, the other folk who had lived hereabouts having only recently died out. I also knew this did not mean vengeance would not fall upon us, only that it might be somewhat delayed.

„We would do well not to be here when more mans come,“ I said. „We would do well to be on our way back toward the Inner Sea.“

„There is a coward's counsel!“ Oreus exclaimed. „Better we should fight these miserable mans than run from them.“

„Can you fight five mans by yourself? Can you fight twenty mans by yourself?“ I asked him, trying to plumb the depths of his stupidity.

It ran deeper than I had dreamt, for he said, „We would not be alone. The other folk of this land would fight with us, would fight for us.“

„What other folk?“ I inquired of him. „When the other folk of this land meet mans, they perish.“ Perhaps the madness of the cerevisia had not worked altogether for ill for us. Mad with drink, we had not fretted over our place in the scheme of things and that of the strange folk who sought to find rules (rules!—it chills me yet) in the gods' heavens.

Oreus would have argued further, but Nessus kicked him, not too hard, in the flank. „Cheiron is right," he said. „Maybe one day we can sail back here in greater numbers and try conclusions with these mans. For now, though, we would be better gone."

The thought that we might return one day mollified the young, fiery he. Nessus knew better than I how to salve Oreus's pride. „Very well, let us go, then," Oreus said. „The mans will not soon forget us."

Nor we them, I thought. But I did not say that aloud. Instead, I helped the rest of us push the *Horse of Bronze* into the sea, which luckily lay almost under her keel. With all those sacks of tin in her, the work still was not easy, but we managed it. The gods sent us a fair wind out of the east. I ordered the yard raised on the mast and the sail lowered from it. We left the Tin Isle behind.

Our homeward journey was neither easy nor swift. If I speak of it less than I did of the voyage outward, it is because so many of the hazards were the same. For the first two days after we left the Tin Isle, I do admit to anxiously looking back over my tail every now and again. I did not know for a fact whether the mans had mastered the art of shipbuilding. If they had, they might have pursued. But evidently not. We remained alone on the bosom of Ocean the Great, as far as my eyes could tell.

Sailing proved no worse—and possibly better—than it had on our northward leg. We stayed in sight of land when we could, but did not stay so close that we risked being forced onto a lee shore by wind and wave rolling out of the west. And *rolling* is truly the word, for we saw waves on Ocean the Great that no one who has sailed only the Inner Sea can imagine.

With the CHALCIPPUS more heavily laden than she had been while we were outward bound, I did not like to bring her up on the beach every night. I had learned to respect and to fear the rise and fall of the waters against the land, which seems to happen twice a day in the regions washed by the Ocean. If the waters withdrew too far, we might not be able to get the galley back into the sea. To hold that worry at arm's length, we dropped anchor offshore most nights.

That too, of course, came with a price. Because we could not let the ship's timbers dry out at night, they grew heavy and waterlogged, making the *Horse of Bronze* a slower and less responsive steed than she would otherwise have been. Had a bad storm blown up, that might have cost us dear. As things were, the gods smiled, or at least did not frown with all the grimness they might have shown, and we came safe to the Inner Sea once more.

As we sailed east past the pillars said to hold up the heavens, I wondered once more about the mans, and how *they* escaped the gods' wrath. Most folk—no, all folk I had known up until then—are content to live in the world the gods made and to thank them for their generous bounty. What the gods will, lesser folk accept, as they must—for, as I have remarked, the essence of godhood is power. Were I as powerful as a god, what would I be? A god myself, nothing else. But I am not so powerful and so am no god.

Nor are these mans gods. That was plain. In our cerevisia-spawned madness, we slew them easily enough. Yet they have the arrogance, the presumption, to seek out the gods' secrets. And they have the further arrogance and presumption to believe that, if they find them, they can use them.

Can a folk not given godlike powers arrogate those powers to itself? The mans seem to think so. How would the gods view such an opinion? If they did take it amiss, as I judged likely, how long would they wait to punish it?

Confident in their own strength, might they wait too long? If a folk did somehow steal godlike power, what need would it have of veritable gods? Such gloomy reflections filled my mind as we made our way across the Inner Sea. I confess to avoiding the sirens' island on the homeward journey. Their temper was unpleasant, their memories doubtless long. We sailed south of them instead, skirting the coast where the lotus-eaters dwell. I remember little of that part of the voyage; the lotus-eaters, I daresay, remember less.

I do remember the long sail we had up from the land of the lotus-eaters to that of the fauns. The sail seemed the longer because, as I say, we had to keep clear of the island of the sirens. We filled all the water jars as full as we could. This let us anchor well off the coast of their island as we traveled north. We also had the good fortune of a strong southerly breeze. We lowered the sail from the yard, then, and ran before the wind. Our hes were able to rest at the oars, which meant they did not grow thirsty as fast as they would have otherwise. We came to the land of the fauns with water still in the jars—not much, but enough.

That breeze had held for us all the way from the land of the lotus-eaters to that which the fauns call home. From this, I believe—and I certainly hope—the gods favored our cause and not the sirens'. This I believe and hope, yes. But I have not the gall to claim it *proves* the gods favored us, or to use it to predict that the gods would favor us again in the same way. I am not a man. I do not make stone circles. I do not believe a stone circle can measure the deeds and will of the gods.

By what has befallen the other folk on the Tin Isle besides the mans, I may be mistaken.

From the easternmost spit of the fauns' homeland to ours is but a short sail. Yet the *Horse of Bronze* came closer to foundering there than anywhere on turbulent Ocean the Great. A storm blew up from nowhere, as it were. The CHALCIPPUS pitched and rolled and yawed. A wave crashed over the bow and threatened to swamp us. We all bailed for our lives, but another wave or two would have stolen them from us.

And then, as abruptly as it had sprung to life, the storm died. What conclusion was I to draw from this? That the gods were trying to frighten me to death but would spare me if they failed? That drawing conclusions about what the gods intend was a risky business, a fool's game? I had already known as much. I was not a man, to require lessons on the subject.

We came home not only to rejoicing but to astonishment. Most of the hes we left behind on setting sail in the CHALCIPPUS had expected to see us no more. Many of the shes we left behind also expected to see us no more. That led to several surprises and considerable unpleasantness, none of which deserves recounting here.

It often seemed as if the tin we brought home was more welcome than we were. Few cared to listen to our tales of the great stone circle or of the strange mans who had built it. The fauns, the sirens, the lotus-eaters we centaurs already knew. The stay-at-homes were glad enough to hear stories about them.

Certainly the smiths welcomed the tin with glad cries and with caracoles of delight. They fell to work as if made of bronze themselves. We have a sufficiency of copper—more than a sufficiency—for we trade it with folk whose land gives them none. But tin is far less common and far more dear; were it otherwise, we would not have needed to fare so far to lay hold of it.

Spearheads and shields and swords and helms began to pile up, ready for use against the sphinxes or whoever else should presume to trouble us. Now we could match bronze against bronze, rather than being compelled to use the softer copper unalloyed. Some of the younger hes quite looked forward to combat. That far I would not go. I have seen enough to know that combat too often comes whether we look for it or not; what point, then, in seeking it?

The smiths also made no small stock of less warlike gear. I speak of that less not because I esteem it less, but only because, when bronze is not measured against bronze, its hardness as compared to copper's is of less moment.

Not too long after our return, I learned that we in the CHALCIPPUS were not the only band of centaurs to have set out in search of tin. A he named Pholus had led a band north by land. There are mountains in those parts that yield gold and silver, and Pholus hoped he might happen upon tin as well.

Although those mountains are not far as the raven flies, our folk seldom go there. The folk who live in those parts are strange, and strangely fierce and formidable. They come out only at night, and are often in the habit of drinking the blood of those they kill. And they are persistent of life, though sunlight, curiously enough, is alleged to slay them.

This Pholus affirmed for me, saying, „After we caught a couple of them and staked them out for the sunrise, the others proved less eager to see if they could sneak up and murder us by the light of the moon."

„Yes, I can see how that might be so," I told him. „Good for you. But I gather you found no tin?"

„I fear me we did not," he agreed. „It is a rich country. Were it not for these night skulkers, we could do a great deal of trade with it. They care nothing for bargaining, though. All they want is the taste of blood in their mouths." His own mouth twisted in disgust.

„Many good-byes to them, then," I said. „Maybe we ought to send a host up that way, to see how many we could drag out for the sun to destroy."

„Maybe." But Pholus did not sound as if he thought that a good idea. „If we did not get rid of them all, they would make us pay. And besides—" He did not go on.

„Besides, what?" I asked when I saw he would not continue on his own.

He did not answer for a long time. I wondered if he would. At long last, he said, „I swore my hes to secrecy, Cheiron. I did not take the oath myself, for I thought there was no need. I knew I could keep a secret. Perhaps the gods foresaw that I would need to speak one day, and did not want me forsworn. I know you can also hold a secret close at need. The need, I think, is here. I have heard somewhat of your voyage, and of the peculiar folk you met on the Tin Isle."

„The mans?" I said, and he nodded. „Well, what of them?"

„That is the secret we are keeping," Pholus replied. „Up in the mountains, we met some of what I think must be the same folk ourselves. They were coming

down from the north, as much strangers in those parts as we were. They did not call themselves mans, though; they had another name.“

„Why did you keep them a secret?“ I asked.

He shivered. Pholus is bold and swift and strong. I had never thought to see him afraid, and needed a moment to realize that I had. „Because they are … what we ought to be,“ he answered after another long hesitation. „What we and the satyrs and the sphinxes and those troublesome blood-drinkers ought to be. They are … all of a kind, with more of the stuff of the gods and less of the beast in them than we hold.“

I knew what he meant. I knew so well, I had to pretend I knew not. „More of the gall of the gods, if they truly are like the mans I met,“ I said.

„And that,“ he agreed. The hard, bright look of fear still made his eyes opaque. „But if they are coming down from the north—everywhere from the north—how shall any of the folk around the Inner Sea withstand them?“

I had wondered that about the mans, even on the distant Tin Isle. If they had also reached the mountains north of our own land, though, there were more of them than I had dreamt, and the danger to us all was worse. I tried to make light of it, saying, „Well, the blood-drinkers may bar the way.“

Pholus nodded, but dubiously. „That is the other reason I would not go after the blood-drinkers: because they might shield us. But I do not think they will, or not for long. The new folk have met them, and have plans of their own for revenge. Do you think the night-skulking blood-drinkers can oppose them?“

„Not if they are mans of the same sort I knew,“ I said. „Are you sure they are the same? What *did* they call themselves?“

„Lapiths,“ he answered. The name meant nothing to me then. But these days the echoes of the battle of Lapiths and centaurs resound round the Inner Sea. We are scattered to the winds, those few left to us, and the Lapiths dwell in the land ours since the gods made it. And Pholus knew whereof he spoke. The Lapiths *are* mans. They remain sure to this day that they won simply because they had the right to win, with no other reason needed.

They would.