

THE AETHON CHRONICLES ~ PREQUEL

THE ANCESTORS



LAVAY BYRD

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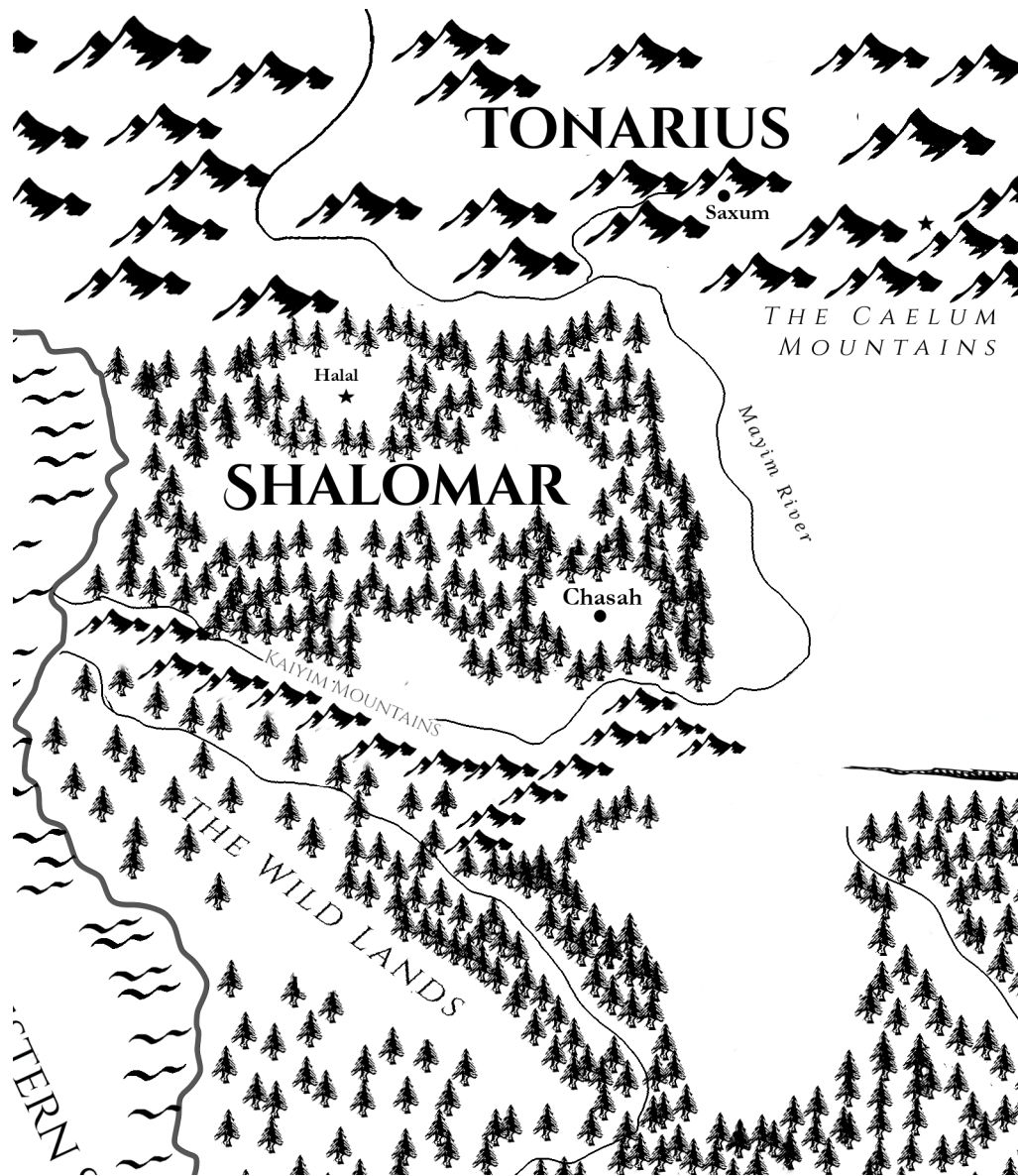
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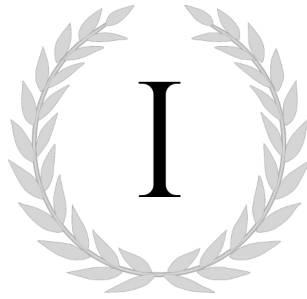
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Cold air sliced through the young brown stallion's cloak, causing him to shiver. Not that the tattered thing offered any added warmth. Shaking his mane, Antony huffed white vapors through flared nostrils as he trudged along the rocky path, a near-empty satchel thumping against his shoulder.

A rush of wind drew his gaze upward. A winged pegasus soared high above the mountains, silver armor glinting from his neck. A pegasus fighter. No doubt patrolling the invisible border that divided the town of Saxum from below.

Most cities of the great mountainous realm Tonarius, he'd learned, were divided into three layers or "tiers", each belonging to the pegasus classes according to social rank. Being only one of the few towns, Saxum, which lay on a rocky crag some miles above, was a "tier" all on its own, belonging to the working class.

Pegasi without wings— like Antony—, *always* live in the valley...as the lowest.

Antony snorted, then glanced skyward again. Nearly sunset. He quickened his pace, dodging the hazardous rocks that littered the valley floor. Within moments, he came upon figures lining from one side of a mountain outward. Six winglessness, older stallions and several mares, all with satchels strapped from their necks.

He snorted again. Doubtful that any of them found anything of value. Especially below a pegasus *town* of all places. He'd known that all eighteen years of his life.

He swept his gaze to the front of the line, where a group of *winged* Pegasi flanked a collection of baskets. Several of the winged donned brass neck armor. Legionnaires. The only *non-armored* pegasus stood at the front of the wagon, with a rather disdainful look on his face. The Collector, most of called him, a highborn merchant.

Antony flicked back his ears as the line brought him closer to the winged. He watched an older wingless stallion trot pass, clutching a white clothed sack in his teeth. Antony craned his neck for a closer look, but the stallion trotted away. The smell of bread drifted in his nostrils, sending a rumble in his stomach.

"Next!" a voice bellowed.

Antony snapped his gaze and stepped forward, now facing the Collector. The Winged stallion looked heavysset, his wings and cloak barely hiding the fat of his belly.

"What have you brought?" the Collector said in a bored tone.

Antony craned his neck, grabbing the satchel in his teeth, then gently tipped the satchel over to pour out his scavenged items onto the basket: a single, rusted medallion. The *only* thing he scavenged for the past three days.

Sniffing, the Collector lifted a hoof and tapped at the item, upper lip curling slightly. Antony stifled the urge to pin back his ears in annoyance. One of the legionnaires just might trample him.

“One half-loaf.”

What?! Antony’s mouth sagged open.

A legionnaire pegasus tossed a satchel with his teeth. It plopped at Antony’s hooves as the Collector turned to leave.

“But that medallion’s worth *two whole loaves!*” Antony protested.

The Collector craned his neck at him. “That was *yesteryear’s* price, colt. Be grateful we are even feeding the likes of you.” With a flick of his tail, the Collector trotted off.

Anger burst in Antony’s veins that he started forward. Two of the legionnaires flared open their wings and stomped in his direction. He backed away, gritting his teeth and lowering his head. With snorts, the legionnaires trotted off— one grabbing the baskets—, following the Collector down the valley path until, one by one, took to the air with flaps of their wings.

Antony glared after them, then snatched his bread and trotted in the opposite direction. *Blight!* A half a loaf of bread is hardly enough for two mouths. Let alone one for seven days.

Food had always been scarcer in the winter for every lowborn and wingless pegasi. These past weeks, however, it was becoming harder and harder to find even a kernel of *grain*, much less an old lost coin.

His stomach growled, prompting him to shift to a lope, the bundle thumping against his muzzle. It did not even feel warm... and the aroma... faint. *Stale*. A gusty breath flooded out his nostrils, but he kept his pace further and further down the path.



At last, a cave emerged in his line of sight. He slowed his pace, flicking his tail, and approached the mouth. A cough sounded from within.

“Ennia?” he called through a full mouth as he extended his neck, peering inside. “I’m back.”

A young buckskin mare, at least a year younger than him, lay just within the mouth of the cave, her pale form wrapped in a thin blanket, save for her dark mane. She lifted her gaze, blinking golden eyes. “Oh...!” She smiled sleepily. “Hello, Antony.”

His heart gave a sudden *tha-thump*, and a smile grew on his muzzle as he laid the bundle on the ground. “Sorry it took me so long. Couldn’t find anything else.”

“What... did they give you?”

He hesitated. “They gave me half a loaf...”

Her eyes widened. “Only *half?*”

He shook his head with a snort. “Three days of searching before I stumbled on that medallion. You know those things are *impossible* to find out here.” He snorted. “Now hardly anything will get us two loaves...”

Silence stretched between them.

“At least...” Ennia said softly. “It’s better than nothing...”

Antony sighed. *At least. Still...* He glanced at Ennia across from him, eyeing her thinning sides. “Here.” Lowering his head, he nosed the bread close to her. “You can have it.”

She stared. “Antony...!”

“Please, Ennia. You need it more than I do.”

Her ears twitched back, then she lowered her head and nosed it back to him. “We’ll share it. Please.”

Antony sighed. “All right.”

Smiling, Ennia took the first few bites of the bread.

As he waited, Antony lowered himself to the ground, folding his legs beneath his belly. He stared off towards the familiar rocky wall that made up the seemingly endless base of the mountains. The same rock he’d stared and wake up to... for as long as he could remember.

“I’m finished.”

He turned his head at Ennia’s voice, finding the remaining portion of the bread. He took a bite. *Stale*. He glumly ate the rest, settling his growling stomach.

A portion of *half* of a loaf. Gone in minutes.

Just briefly, the exchange with the Collector flickered.

“*Be grateful we are even feeding the likes of you.*”

“Thank you, Antony,” Ennia said softly with a smile.

Antony’s heart briefly skittered. “You’re welcome.”

He would do anything for her. If only... he could give her more... if they would marry... He shook his head at the thought.

Ennia coughed, a little harder. He grimaced at the sound.

She smiled. “I’m all right, Antony. Really.”

His ears drew back. “I just hate to see you suffer like this.”

“It’s just a cough. It will be all right.”

“No, it’s not all right.” He huffed a breath. “It’s *never* all right. Every day we *scavenge* for scraps.”

“At least... it’s a life...” Ennia said softly.

A life?! He snorted. “This isn’t life, Ennia. We’re barely surviving.” He lifted his gaze to the towering mountains. “Haven’t you ever wanted something... *different?* Something... *more* than... *this?*”

He eyed her sidelong. Her gaze remained lowered... but her eyes flickered. He had to wonder if she must have felt the same longing as he felt as an orphan foal. A longing for... a different life.

Her voice came softly. “We’re wingless, Antony. There’s nothing more for us.”

The words, though soft, felt as if they bit his sides.

She lowered her head to the ground, closing her eyes. “Good night, Antony.”

“Good night,” he mumbled, the words still ringing within him.

In *all* of Tonarius, any pegasus born without wings was deemed an *abnormality*. Unworthy to even be *named* a pegasus. So much so that many wingless foals were abandoned at birth.

Antony and Ennia were only two of the fortunate few that survived.

Memories swirled in Antony’s thoughts. Some faint... of himself a small foal walking alone. He shook them away, a dull ache in his chest.

“*We’re wingless, Antony. There’s nothing more for us.*”

“*Be grateful we are even feeding the likes of you.*”

He lifted his gaze again. This time, to the faint stars beyond the mountains. Distant. Like the cities in the mountains. Like the life they could never have...

There must be more. There must be... more than just... existing.

Antony...

He started at the voice. "Who's there?"

Silence, save for a brief wind on the rocks.

His stomach growled, nearly grating his ribs. If he doesn't find food soon..., how will they survive come winter?

Ennia coughed, sounding a little worse than before.

He gritted his teeth. He could not even get any medicine for Ennia. Unless...

His gaze trailed up the mountain side. Towards the crag that would hold the town of Saxum. A path lined the side towards it.

He didn't want to steal. Not after what had happened to one wingless drifter less than a week past. Killed by a dozen legionnaires before stepping hoof below. *But what choice do I—?*

Antony.

Heat snaked up his withers, and he leaped to his hooves. "Who's there?! Show yourself!"

Warmth, like the twin suns, flowed down his neck, to his shoulders down his legs, then to his ears. Into his soul.

Do not be afraid, Antony, son of Gaius.

He gasped. The voice... clear as the wind. Spoken as if near him... yet all around him... and within. The warmth surged like fire, freezing him in place, sending a tremor through his body.

Leave the realm of your birth, and I will lead you to a new land where you will prosper. From you and your descendants, I, your Sovereign Creator, shall make a new nation.

The warmth vanished, cold nearly raking its teeth onto Antony's body. He let out a shuddering gasp. *What... in Tonarius's name...was that?!*

His head throbbed; he closed his eyes with a deep breath.

I must've been dreaming... but... it felt... so real...

The warmth... and the Voice...

"Leave the realm of your birth..."

He blinked at the words. Leave... Tonarius?

"...I will lead you to a new land..."

A new land...

He turned his gaze southward. Towards the distant ridge of mountains that made up the Caleumns. That bordered the land of Tonarius from the outside world.

No pegasus has ever stepped hoof outside of Tonarius. At least none that Antony has heard of. And he'd only heard *hints* of stories from the outside world from winged passersby. But even *those* were few.

But he'd always wondered what life was like beyond those mountains.

Could there truly be...?

He blinked at the thought. *What am I even thinking?! I must be going mad!* He shook his mane. Until the earlier words drifted.

"Do not be afraid, Antony... son of Gaius..."

The Voice... called him "son of Gaius".

He never knew anyone in his family. Much less his... own father. For all he knew, he could've been... abandoned...

“From you and your descendants, I, your Sovereign Creator, shall make a new nation.”

He frowned, two words echoing in his thoughts. *Sovereign Creator.*

Sovereign... Creator...

His breath stilled, eyes widening.

The voice he heard... was a *god*.



Coughs startled Antony out of his stupor. He shook his head and blinked. Above the mountains, a brightening sky. Dawn.

“Oh... good morning...”

He turned his head to Ennia rolling upward. “Um... morning...”

She frowned. “Are you alright? You look as if you hadn’t slept...”

He’d been awake all night. Because he heard... a voice of a god.

His breath hitched. Such a thought *had* to be insane. Impossible, even. And yet... and yet...

“Antony?”

He drew in another breath. “Ennia... do you believe... in such things as gods?”

She blinked. Stared. “What?”

He closed his eyes, then turned his gaze fully on her. “Have you ever wondered... if gods exist?”

Her ears drew back in her frown. “But... there... *aren’t* such things as gods... or goddesses...”

And yet... Antony closed his eyes with a deep breath. “Something... happened last night, Ennia. I can’t explain it. I... heard a voice... call my name.”

Her frown deepened.

He swallowed. “I thought I was just hearing things. But when it spoke again, it was... as clear as I am speaking to you... but *different*. I felt as if I could hear It all around me... and *within* me.” He shook his head. “I thought I was going mad, but then it said... *do not be afraid*, and... I no longer felt... *afraid*.” He briefly closed his eyes, remembering the sensation of... peace. He opened his eyes. “I think... *I believe... a god* spoke to me.”

Silence lengthened between them. Ennia’s eyes slowly widen, mirroring the shock he felt just hours ago. That everything they knew their whole lives... was shattered by a Voice.

Antony sighed. “I know it sounds like madness, but... I can’t...explain it. I... *know* what I felt. He even mentioned my father’s name...whom *I never knew!*” A laugh escaped.

Ennia kept staring. “Antony... you... must be exhausted. And... and starving...”

Blight. He sighed. “I know what I felt, Ennia. It felt *real*. It *was* real.” He paused. “He... said that he... *chose me*. And told me to leave Tonarius...”

“What?! Leave Tonarius?!”

He paused, the words swirling. “He said that... he’ll take me to a new land... so we could... *thrive*.”

Ennia shook her head. “Antony, you’re scaring me. You’re hearing voices and now you’re thinking about... *leaving* Tonarius...!”

Antony turned his gaze back to the distant mountains. “What if he’s right?” He turned back to Ennia. “What if there *is* a new land out there? Just waiting for us!”

She blinked. Stared. “But... why? Tonarius is our home...”

He shook his head with a snort and climbed to his hooves. “This isn’t home, Ennia! I’ve *never* felt at home pawing the ground for *scraps*!” He stared back out at the mountains, his heart thudding even further. “If... if there’s even a chance for a better future... why not go after it?”

A brief silence followed.

“You’ll... truly leave?” Ennia whispered.

Antony drew in a breath, the answer clear as the dawn. Then he turned to Ennia, and his heart warmed. “We can *both* leave.”

Her eyes widened.

Smiling, he turned his body to face her. “There are more realms beyond those mountains. What if there is a place we could call our own? A place where we *don’t* have to live *beneath* our own kind because we’re wingless?”

She looked away, but he caught the glimmer in her eyes. A sense of... longing.

He lowered his head to catch her focus. “Don’t you see? This could be our chance, Ennia. A chance to have a new life. We could be *free*.”

She met his gaze, briefly.

He bit his lip. He knew it was risky to ask her to join him. With her condition, she hardly moved more than a few hoofsteps outside the cave. But he didn’t want to leave her. Nor did he want her to live the rest of her life suffering...

“Where... where would we go...?” she asked softly.

He hesitated, glancing back. And remembered the voice. “I... I think He will lead us. He... said He would.”

She looked away again.

He held his breath, waiting.

She slowly climbed to her hooves, legs trembling, and she coughed. But she lifted her head, gaze wavering. “I’ll... I’ll come with you...”



Antony could hardly remember what had happened the moment heard Ennia agree to come. It all seemed like a blur. Except for the voice.

That night, he could have sworn he heard the words: “*Tomorrow. Go south,*” ringing in his ears and soul. He could barely contain his excitement when he told Ennia, who, he confessed, seemed hesitant... but she merely nodded.

Now, he led the way down the rocky path through the mountains, trying his best to keep a slow pace for Ennia when his heart kept galloping. He had to wonder if he had been dreaming. Or merely going mad. But after hearing the Voice last night... he could no longer deny it.

A cough snapped his attention, and he turned to Ennia slowing. He stopped. “Are you alright?”

The buckskin mare looked up at him with a weary smile. “I’m... all right...” She gazed ahead... and her eyes widened with a soft gasp.

He followed her gaze... and his breath stilled.

Laid out before them was... rocky ground... and a bright sky.

He craned his neck around. The Caelum Mountains stretched out nearly a mile behind them, towering to the sky in the distance.

They've crossed over the border. Far from their home in Tonarius. From a life of scavenging and misery. From... all that they knew...

With a steady exhale through his nostrils, Antony turned his head forward. To the unknown. To... a *new life*. A *new land*. A smile tugged on his dark muzzle, sending his muscles quivering. He gazed sidelong at Ennia, who still looked back. Hesitant.

But then she turned her gaze back to his... and smiled.

He allowed his grin to widen. "Let's go."

And they both strode ahead. Tonarius behind them. A new world ahead.