

THE AETHON CHRONICLES ~ BOOK THREE



THE
HORSE
QUEEN

LAVAY BYRD

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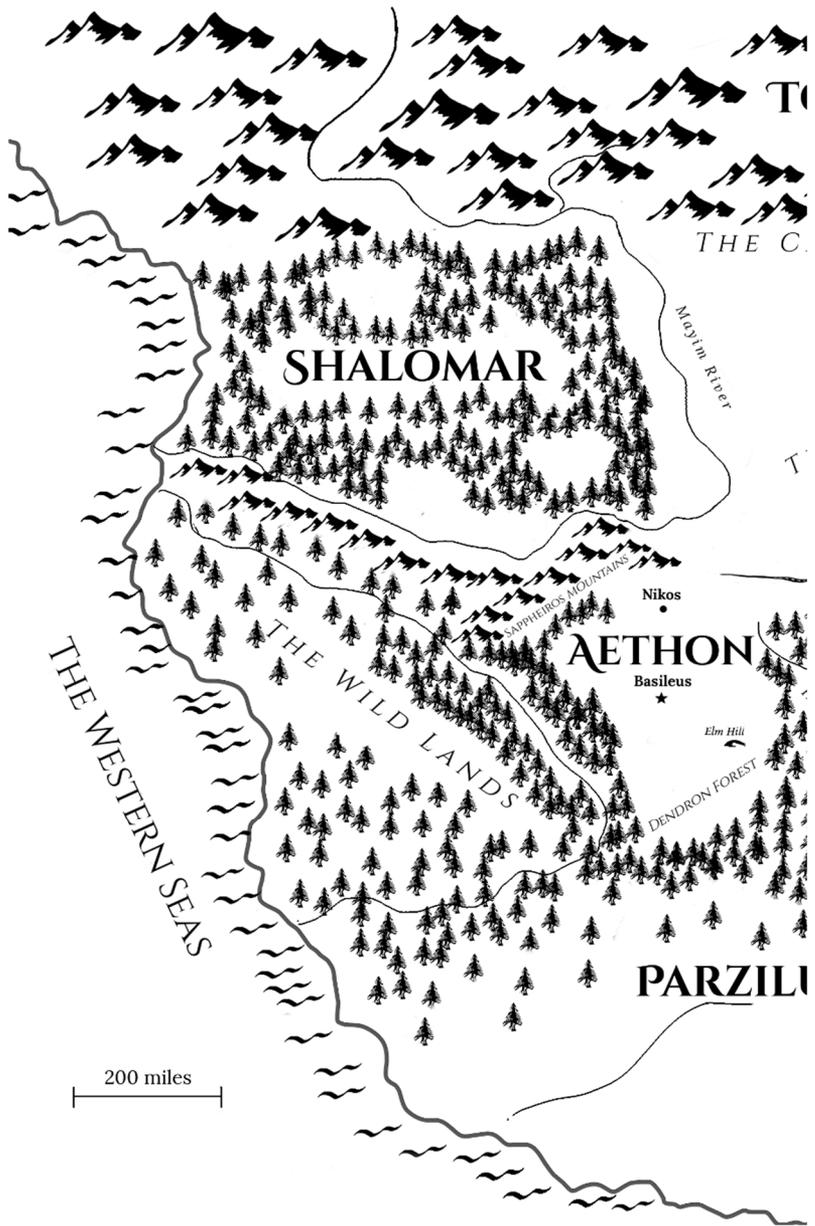
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*To Pop and Mom (especially Mom)
who encouraged me to write and trust in God,
and who became the inspiration behind my characters Andreas and Lyra*



T

THE C.

T

SHALOMAR

Majim River

Nikos

AETHON

Basileus

Elm Hill

DENDRON FOREST

PARZILU

THE WESTERN SEAS

THE WILD LANDS

SAPPHIROS MOUNTAINS

200 miles





PROLOGUE

The gray pegasus stallion circled a high distance above the city below. His wings extended, he kept slightly below the overcast clouds, appearing no more than a lone hawk. Any lower, his purple mane, tail, and wings tips would compromise his position.

A moment later, with a heavy flap of his wings, the pegasus scout banked sharply to the left and galloped mid-air away from the city, the expanse of plains grass blending into a thick canopy of trees below him in a matter of minutes. Certain he was at a safe distance, he lowered closer to the trees. A vast valley came into view, filled with thousands of legionnaire pegasi milling among various purple pavilions, armored at the necks and chests in silver. The scout glided lower and lower towards the largest of the pavilions at the center of the encampment until hooves touched the ground. He slowed to a trot as he approached a pair of fighters standing guard at the entrance of the towering pavilion.

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The scout halted with a stamp of his hoof and a toss of his head. "Scout Decius Vellus reporting to Tribune Romulus Tertius Arius."

One of the guards returned the salute and stepped inside the pavilion. Ten stallions gathered around a table at its center, armored around the chest and shoulders in silver, and their manes cropped in neat ridges above their necks.

At the head of the table, a black stallion with deep blue mane and gold-edged armor turned his head in the guard's direction. "Yes?"

His ten companions, centurions, fell silent as they craned their necks to the guard, who stamped his hoof.

"Scout Decius Vellus has returned from Aethon, Tribune."

Tribune Romulus Tertius Arius, the black pegasus, gave a nod. "Send him in."

With another stomp, the guard turned and left.

"Two days since our arrival, Tribune," one light gray stallion with black mane said. "You suppose the scout will have enough findings?"

Tribune Romulus gave a slight grin. "Decius is the best of among our scouts, Centurion. This you know. Given the scope of the land, I have no doubt he has been thorough in his search and will give us what we need."

A moment later, the gray scout, Decius Vellus, entered.

"Report," Tribune Romulus said.

Decius stepped to the large parchment etched with a map hanging on the left side of the tent. "Aethon is mostly of plains grass, but bordered by mountains in the north, then the rest by forest."

The second of the centurions, golden with grass-green mane, flicked his ears back. "This we already know, scout."

"Continue, Decius."

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“Yes, Tribune. The land consists of mainly ten villages and two cities. The largest of the cities lies *here...*” Lifting his head, he pointed his nose towards a dot in the center of the etching of Aethon. “... the capital.”

“What were your findings there?” Tribune Romulus asked.

“The city is surrounded by a massive wall, about three stallions’ high and entirely of stone. Only about ten stallions patrol the wall.”

The golden centurion snorted. “Not quite as vigilante as we surmised.”

Decius glanced at the centurion and continued. “There is a palace at the very center of the city on top of a hill, next to another building. A... *temple* of some sort.”

Several of the centurions snorted derisively; Tribune Romulus remained expressionless.

“There is also a garrison in the city...” Decius added. “I believe the *only* garrison.”

“How many fighters?” Tribune Romulus asked.

“I... wouldn’t say...”

“You are permitted to guess, Decius.”

“Yes, sir. I would say about... no more than a thousand stallions.”

Tribune Romulus gave a thoughtful nod. “What of their weaknesses?”

Decius gave a soft laugh. “Well, aside from the obvious...”

Soft chuckles drifted. Tribune Romulus’s ears flicked backward as his frown deepened.

Decius ducked his head and cleared his throat. “I mean... all of the buildings in the city are made of granite with red tile roofs, while the villages out of mud and brick with thatched roofs. Also... most of the horses live in the plains, which leaves them completely exposed.”

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Tribune Romulus paused for a moment, then nodded. “Thank you, Decius. I believe we have more than we needed. You are dismissed... and get plenty of rest.”

Decius smiled. “Thank you, Tribune.” With a stamp of a hoof, he made his exit.

Tribune Romulus turned to the centurions. “Well, gentle-stallions? What do you gather from the report?”

The golden stallion with grass-green mane snorted. “The horses are evidently primitive... despite being prosperous over the years.”

“I hear they are a hardy lot,” said a chestnut centurion with golden mane and wingtips closest to Tribune Romulus’ left. “Word has it that they were responsible for ultimately defeating the lupines.”

“That is in the past,” the gray centurion interjected. “And from what we’ve just learned, the horses have undoubtedly grown lax.”

“Perhaps,” Tribune Romulus said, drawing all attention. “Yet we’ve underestimated other equines recently.”

“Yet conquered, regardless.”

“At great cost.”

A brief silence fell.

The gray centurion extended his neck. “Tribune, we’ve lost many stallions, yes... but our orders from the emperor are clear. The conquering of this land is of most importance. For the preservation and the strength of the empire. Many pegasi died for that cause in service to our emperor. Your stallions will do the same.”

Tribune Romulus flicked his ears back. Inwardly, he suspected Emperor Augustus had an entirely different reason for conquering Aethon. But it wasn’t his place to question his ruler’s

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motives. “Nevertheless, if we are to succeed, we need to consider every option. Even a possible avoidance of bloodshed.”

The centurions nodded.

“For now...” Tribune Romulus craned his neck to study the map for a moment. “We will wait.”

“Tribune, sir,” said the golden centurion, “Any further delay, the horses will be aware of our presence.”

Tribune Romulus glanced sidelong. “If so, we will have the opportunity to make our strength known...and give the horses a chance to surrender peacefully.”

“And if they resist?”

Tribune Romulus sighed. “Then we’ll be ready.”



PART ONE

DOWNFALL



Sophia stepped into the guest bedchamber, startled to find her bay roan mistress pacing back and forth. Completely bare---tan from the neck down to her lower black legs; her rich brown face flushed, her black mane frazzled.

The white young mare blinked. *Goodness!* Hermione is in a state! Even the bedchamber, with cloaks and shawls scattered all over the chamber floor

“My lady?” Sophia’s voice came soft enough as a whisper.

Hermione halted and whipped her head in her direction. “Oh, Sophia! Thank Theos! Do come in.”

Sophia obeyed, lowering her head to pick up on of the shawls in her teeth.

Her mistress continued pacing, shaking her head, the white leaf-shaped marking flashing from under her forelock. “Oh, Sophie, I am ever so frightened! I fear my heart would burst from my side!”

Sophia laid the cloak in the chest. Considering what will happen tonight, she couldn’t blame Hermione for her nerves. What would Mother say in comfort? “I’m... sure there’s nothing to be afraid of...”

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“I’m going to meet my betrothed! *Tonight!*” Hermione stopped to take a breath. “He’s more than a stallion, Sophia. He’s the *Prince of Aethon!*”

Sophia grimaced. Really, she should be happy for her mistress. After all, marriage to royalty was considered an honor. Even if it was arranged.

“What if I don’t like the prince?” Hermione said, eyes wide. “What if he doesn’t like *me*? What if he’s cruel or strict like the king?!”

Goodness, she’d worry herself to a frenzy. “I’m... sure it’s nothing like that. Father says the prince is very kind and charming.”

Hermione regarded her in surprise. “Your father met the prince?”

Sophia hesitated. “W-well, not *exactly*. He saw him when the archon was making the arrangements with the king.”

Hermione paused, then sniffled. “I’d rather trust your father than anyone else.”

Sophia allowed a smile on her muzzle. Father is wise enough to be a philosopher.

Hermione sighed as she turned to the wide silver mirror-plate. “When I was a little filly, I’d always dream of marrying the prince. But... I never imagined it would *happen*.” She flicked an ear back. “I’m now eighteen years of age. Practically a mare! But I certainly don’t feel like a mare.”

Memories of Hermione’s coming of age celebration surfaced. It certainly was a lavish affair, especially for the daughter of the Archon of Nikos. Almost every highborn horse in Aethon was invited to celebrate.

Sophia remembered her mother saying that becoming a mare is a blessing of life. A gift from Theos. Sophia hoped that her coming of age, no more than two years away, would be a simple small celebration. Just her, Father, and Mother.

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“Well,” Hermione’s voice drew Sophia from her thoughts. “We mustn’t dawdle, as Mother would say.” She turned towards the pile of shawls and mantles on the chest. “Hmm... if you were the prince, which would you think is more impressive, Sophie?”

Sophia blinked. *If I was the prince?* She’d never knew how princes think, much less stallions. She bit her lower lip as she glanced at the shawls. One snagged her attention. A thick, light blue cloak accented in gold.

“What about this one?” She lifted the shawl in her teeth.

Hermione’s dark muzzle lit up in her smile. “Perfect! You’re a love!”

Blushing, Sophia draped the cloak over Hermione’s back with her teeth, then straightened it at the corners. Afterward, she proceeded to smooth Hermione’s raven mane and tail with her teeth. A routine she’d performed every day.

Moments later, she stepped back as Hermione turned to the mirror-plate.

“Oh, Sophie, you work wonders!”

Sophia smiled. “You look lovely, my lady.” Her gaze drifted to her reflection. A snow-white young mare stared back with gold-hazel eyes. She tore her gaze away. “Would there be anything else?”

“Yes.” Hermione faced her. “I want you to attend me at the feast.”

Ice froze Sophia’s breath. “M-me...?”

“Of course, you! Mother and Father have already met the prince, but I need someone with me when *I* meet him.”

Sophia’s stomach flopped. “But... my mother...”

“Oh, Lyra won’t mind this once! Please, Sophie. You’re my only true friend in the world, and I’ll have no one else but you.”

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Sophia paused. Hermione had a lot of friends in the highborn class— or *acquaintances*, as Hermione called them. Everyone— even Sophia— admired her. Yet, Sophia had forgotten that Hermione never had a true friend to confide in.

Really, Sophia always did her best to listen as a dutiful servant. Yet Hermione had become as close to a friend *she'd* ever had. Almost like a sister.

She couldn't say no to her. "All right..." she mumbled.

Hermione squealed. "Oh, you're a love! I know you don't like meeting horses or being in large gatherings, but we'll make the most of it! You'll see."

Sophia's smile wobbled. *Oh, why did I say yes?*



Butterflies dancing within her, Sophia followed close to Hermione's flank as they entered the parlor of the guest apartment. Where Hermione's parents stood waiting. Archon Ilias, a heavyset chestnut stallion with a white patch above his eyes, and his elegant black wife, Lady Korinna

"Ah, daughter," Archon Ilias gave a brief nod, as if in approval. "You look well-suited."

Sophia turned her gaze to a solid steel-gray stallion standing at the entryway. *Father*. Tall, muscular, well in the early 40s, he wore a guard's faded blue square-shaped fabric across his back. He turned his head in Sophia's direction, and a smile appeared on his dark muzzle, his dark hazel eyes twinkling.

The butterflies in Sophia's stomach eased, and she returned the smile.

"Come, then." Archon Ilias cocked his head in gesture. "We mustn't keep the king or his son waiting." He led the way to the entry, where Father stepped to the side.

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“Good evening, Andreas,” Hermione said with a smile.

Father inclined his head. “My lady.”

Hermione cast a gleeful grin in Sophia’s direction. “Sophia will be joining us for the gathering. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Father raised an eye-ridge. Sophia ducked her head.

As Hermione stepped past to join her parents, Father fell instep beside Sophia.

“She asked you, didn’t she?”

Sophia bit her lower lip. “I don’t know I can do this..”

Father chuckled. “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine. Just be yourself.”

Sophia smiled, eased in her father’s presence as always.

Leaving the apartment, they strode along the wide corridor, one of many in the palace. Sophia took in steady breaths to relax. Within moments, voices hummed in the distance. The butterflies in her stomach grew into buzzing bees, and her legs stiffened.

The archon led them to a wide entryway towards a long line of fluted columns. A massive courtyard spread before them.

A courtyard full of horses. *Hundreds* of them!

Sophia’s heart jumped in her throat, and her hooves froze in place.

“Breathe...” her father’s whisper came to her ear.

She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath. *One. Two. Three. Four.* She exhaled, and her body relaxed.

“Ah, there’s the royal family,” Archon Ilias said with a nod of his head.

Sophia opened her eyes as they moved forward. Stallions in rich silk-cloaks and mares with shawls, fabrics, and jewels milled about. Sophia lowered her gaze and focused on her father beside her. Her withers pricked. Eyes watching her. Out the corner of her eye, a young stallion grinned in her direction.

Her face heated. Oh, why couldn’t I have a different color?

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“My king,” Archon Ilias’ voice drew her focus.

Three horses stood before them— a middle-aged stallion and a mare, and a young stallion—, all wearing deep blue cloaks and silver neckbands. The older stallion’s coat shone brilliant gold against his snowy mane and tail, and he wore a silver crown the shape of a laurel leaf branch and his large cloak hemmed in white. The mare on his left looked very regal, her deep blue shawl shimmering brightly against her deep brown coat, and her dark mane woven in a single braid on the top of her neck.

Neither of them looked friendly, their ears flicked back, and their muzzles pinched.

Sophia ducked her gaze as they drew closer.

“King Lysander,” Archon Ilias said. “Queen Damaris.”

“Archon Ilias,” the king replied, his voice as cool as his gaze. “We are pleased you and your family have arrived. I trust your stay has been comfortable.”

“Indeed, my king. We are most grateful for your hospitality. May I present my wife, the Lady Korinna.”

The king inclined his head. “My lady.”

“Great king,” Lady Korinna said with a bow.

“And *this*,” Archon Ilias turned to Hermione, “is my daughter Hermione.”

Hermione dipped her head. “Pleased to meet you, my king.”

A slight smile appeared on the king’s muzzle. “Your daughter is most lovely, Archon. Do you agree, Timotheus?”

Sophia stole a glance at the younger, dark bay stallion on the king’s left, who wore a smile on his dark muzzle. He was handsome— deep dark brown, his black mane in a neat trim, and his white lower legs gleaming with his coat and neckband. He held his head high, not arrogantly, but with firm confidence. His eyes, honey-brown like the king’s, shone with warmth.

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“A pleasure to finally meet you, Lady Hermione,” he said with a dip of his muzzle.

Hermione blushed but quickly lowered her head. “Likewise, my prince...”

“Well, now that we are acquainted,” the king said with a lift of his muzzle, “My son, you should escort your betrothed. Introduce her to your friends. Enjoy each other until the wedding.”

With a sidelong glance to the king, the prince moved aside. “Shall we, my lady?”

Hermione darted a glance towards the archon, who flicked his ears back at her. “I’d... be honored, my prince.”

Sophia and her father followed them along the courtyard, keeping a respectful distance. Why would Hermione be nervous about the prince? He seemed very kind.

The prince, Prince Timotheus, turned his head to Hermione. “I hope we didn’t make you uncomfortable, my lady. My father has a way of intimidating horses.”

Hermione offered a smile. “Well, he *is* the King of Aethon.”

Prince Timotheus laughed. “Very true.”

Sophia felt herself smile.

“I’d like to introduce you to some friends of mine,” Prince Timotheus said, “I had also wondered if you would like to visit the—”

“KING LYSANDER!” a voice boomed from across the courtyard.

Sophia jumped, bumping into Father. Startled voices rose as many of the horses began to part in different directions like birds.

“Sophia, stay with me,” Father said.

Sophia inched closer.

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Heads began to turn to a solitary figure emerging from the far side of the courtyard. A black stallion with slightly graying mane. His brown tattered coat made him very out of place among the richly-clad highborn horses. But a deathly silence fell the room as he strode past, his hooves echoing off the columns.

“Prophet Demas,” Father whispered.

Prophet? Sophia’s breath snagged. A prophet of Theos!

On the other side of the courtyard, the king glared at the approaching prophet with ears pinned back. The prophet stopped less than a length away, completely still. Like a living statue. Even his tail didn’t move.

Neither king or prophet said a word or even looked away. The air thickened with tension, so silent that Sophia could hear her heartbeat.

“So, you come yet again, *Prophet*,” the king’s voice broke the silence. “This time to disrupt the celebration of the tenth year of my reign.”

The prophet’s ears twitched back. “I see you’ve refused Theos’ correction.” His low voice sent a shiver in Sophia’s withers.

The king stamped a hoof. “And you *continue* to badger us with your complaints!”

“What I speak only comes from Theos,” the prophet said. “He is displeased with your actions. Yours and *many* of Aethon’s horses. You’ve become arrogant in your power and led many of your subjects astray. You’ve even forsaken the poor and desolate while you seek to increase *your own* wealth!”

“You *dare* admonish me?! I’ve given my subjects wealth and power! Our lands have thrived with even greater prosperity since the reign of King Leonidas! We’ve become the wealthiest kingdom in *all* the realms!”

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“You claim these blessings were by *your* doing?” The prophet swept a steely gaze around the chamber. “It is *Theos*, in His infinite mercy and goodness, Who brought prosperity to Aethon’s lands and has protected you from your enemies.” He cast a narrowed look to the king. “Yet, you’ve continued to test His patience with your greed and pride.”

“ENOUGH!” the king roared.

Sophia’s breath froze. Is he going to kill him?

“I’ve heard enough of your contempt! I hereby *banish* you out of this city and *out* of Aethon! The day you step hoof in this kingdom is the day you die!”

A gasp flew from Sophia’s lungs.

Silence thickened.

The prophet stepped back, expression cool. He closed his eyes, and his body made a slight tremble. His eyes flew open—blazing blue lights.

The king recoiled; gasps erupting at the same time Sophia’s heart slammed against her ribs. She had heard stories of prophets’ eyes glowing blue... but never thought she would *see* it.

“Hear the words of Theos the Sovereign Creator!” the prophet’s voice boomed like thunder.

Heat bloomed from Sophia’s sides, hooves and body frozen in place.

“Behold, I have seen the wickedness of My chosen!” the prophet’s continued. “You who have chosen to forsake My righteousness to seek your own glory. In the days of your ancestors, the horses of Aethon gave glory to Me and devoted themselves to Me as My sons and daughters. In your pride, you’ve claimed “Look what we have done! We’ve made our homeland greater than all the realms! We do not need Theos!” Time and time again, I beseeched through My prophets to turn

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from your ways, to seek Me as your provider, shelter, and protector! Yet your hearts remain hardened against My pleas, chasing after the enticements of riches and prosperity. Those who do evil, I chasten! Those who lift themselves in pride, I shall humble! As I have established Aethon's beginning, so shall I declare its end!

“A great power rises from the north. A nation mightier than the enemies Aethon has ever faced! They are the Pegasus Kingdom of Tonarius! Their armies now sweep the realms within its domain. Its ruler now rises to lay siege on this land! Theos commands you: ‘do not resist! Surrender to the pegasi, and you and your families shall live! And the city of Basileus shall be saved.’” The prophet narrowed his glowing eyes, seeming to stare at the king. “If you resist— if you refuse to heed the command of the Sovereign Creator— you, your families, and your armies, will die, and Basileus, the glory of Aethon, shall be destroyed. Yet, from Aethon, Theos will raise a remnant. For this is what Theos declares: ‘When enemies seek your death, my remnant shall be saved. Your lands shall be restored, and all will bring glory to My Name!’”

His voice faded to silence.

No one seemed to move. The king stood rigid like a statue, body tensed, and ears pinned back. As if he might erupt in rage.

The prophet whirled around and strode back down the path, hooves thudding in the silence. Sophia inched back as the prophet passed. His eyes turned in her direction. She froze, unable to look away.

A small smile appeared on the prophet's muzzle, then faded as he stepped further away, disappearing through the entrance.



Sophia slowly exhaled, her heart thumping against her ribs, and the heat simmering from her sides to her head. She could still hear the prophet's voice echoing in her ears; his gaze still fused in her mind.

Why did he smile at her?

"My fellow horses," the king's voice startled her from her reverie, shattering the stillness. The fierce glare on the king's face was gone, replaced by a smooth grin on his muzzle. "What you've heard are nothing but the ramblings of a fool. I command that we put his words out of our minds. Our kingdom has long prospered since the reign of King Leonidas and shall continue to thrive as the envy of all equines! So, let us raise our hooves in pledge of our great realm! To Aethon!"

Voices cheered and hooves stamped like thunder.

"And let us honor the betrothal of my son and heir, Prince Timotheus, and Lady Hermione, daughter of Archon Ilias of Nikos! To Timotheus and his bride!"

The horses cheered again, a decibel louder.

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Sophia turned to the prince inclining his head, with Hermione smiling beside him.

“Now, everyone,” the king said with a tap of his hoof, “enjoy yourselves! Eat, drink, and celebrate!”

Sounds of harps rose in the air, followed by chattering voices.

Sophia could only stare. How could they still celebrate after what the prophet said?

She glanced at Father, who seemed to stare at something in the distance. She followed his gaze to the very spot where the prophet stood before the king.

“Theos, forgive us,” Father whispered.

Unease pricked in Sophia’s withers.

“I apologize for that debacle,” Prince Timotheus’ voice pulled her focus to him and Hermione. “The prophet’s been hounding Father for months. They never got along since yesteryear.”

Hermione glanced downward, as if hesitant. Could she be as affected by the prophet’s words as Sophia felt?

Prince Timotheus seemed to study her expression as well. “Are you all right, my lady?”

Hermione blinked as if snapped out of a stupor. She cast a smile in the prince’s direction. “Yes, I’m fine. I was just... slightly shaken. You were going to... introduce me to your friends?”

Sophia frowned, unable to tell if her mistress was nudging the scene to the side like everyone else.

Prince Timotheus raised his eye-ridges in surprise, then nodded. “Of course.”

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Hermione glanced in Sophia's direction. "Oh, by the way, I'd like for you to meet my attendant, Sophia."

Ice zinged Sophia's stomach.

Prince Timotheus turned to her, and she ducked her head, sensing the passing glance almost ever highborn horse would give her....

"A pleasure to meet you, Sophia."

She darted her gaze up at him, meeting a smile. *He's... talking to me?* Her mouth hung open, but no words came.

The prince chuckled. "I think I may have frightened your attendant..."

"Oh, she's just timid," Hermione said with a shake of her head. "She's not very accustomed to speaking to highborn or royals."

Heat crept in Sophia's face. Why should she feel embarrassed? It was the truth. Still, it stung to hear Hermione say that to a stranger.

"And this is her father, Andreas. My guard."

"My prince," Father said with a bow of his head.

Prince Timotheus returned the gesture, grinning. "I have a feeling we'll be seeing more of each other, then, Andreas."

"Indeed, my prince."

Prince Timotheus turned to Hermione. "Shall we, then?"



The archon's family finally retired for the night, Sophia and her father made their way down the

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corridor to the servant's quarters on the other side of the palace. Sophia glanced at her father, who still wore a silent grave expression on his face. Thinking of the prophet.

Sophia swallowed. Really, she couldn't stop thinking about the prophet, either. Or his chilling words. Or his frightening glowing blue eyes. Or the heat flaring through her body when he spoke

But then, when he looked at her... and smiled ... he no longer looked frightening. He reminded her of Father almost.

He didn't smile at anyone else. Just *her*. *Why?*

"Sophia." Her father's voice jolted her out of her thoughts. He stood a little ahead of her at the doorway, his neck craned to her. "We're here."

Had she stopped? Her cheeks warmed. "I'm sorry..."

Father smiled slightly, then lifted his muzzle to allow her entrance. Their quarters were nowhere near as large as Hermione's apartment... or her room back in the archon's villa in Nikos, but it was warm. Cozy. Enough space for the three of them.

She peered at the walls. This is where they would be staying from now on... when Hermione marries.

"Back so soon?" A creamy mare rose to her hooves on the far side of the room, her lovely white mane shimmering in the dim room.

"Mother."

Closing the distance, Mother kissed her on both cheeks, then smiled with twinkling brown eyes. "I

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heard you attended the banquet. That's quite an accomplishment."

Sophia's cheeks flushed.

Father drew near to kiss Mother on the lips. "Thanks to our mistress Hermione. She did well."

Sophia glanced downward. "I felt foolish in front of the prince..."

Mother's ears perked. "Oh, so you met the prince as well?" She cocked her head to the mat on the side of the room. "I want to hear all about it."

They both settled on the mat, their legs folded beneath him.

"What did you think of the prince?" Mother asked.

Sophia remembered Prince Timotheus' warm smile. "He seems very kind. Not very much like the king or queen."

Mother nodded knowingly. "So I gather." She perked an ear. "Handsome?"

Sophia's face bloomed.

"Dear, there's nothing wrong with complimenting a stallion. Just as a stallion can say how beautiful you are."

Sophia ducked her head, glancing sidelong at her snow-white coat that always seemed to glow.

All-white and palomino colors were uncommon among the horses. Why did she have to be one of the rare ones?

"Sophia," Mother's light scolding tone drew her attention. "You *are* beautiful. Theos created you just as you are. Just as He created Lady Hermione just as she

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is. You are unique. Don't ever think of yourself otherwise."

Sophia allowed a small smile.

"Speaking of which, How did Hermione respond to the prince?"

"She was nervous at first... but then she warmed up to him. I think she likes him..."

The prophet's words drifted in her thoughts, sending chills down her withers.

Mother frowned. "Sophia? Is something the matter?"

Sophia glanced towards Father, who met her gaze, seeming to understand.

Mother turned to Father "Did something happen?"

Father sighed. "The prophet Demas arrived during the feast."

Mother stilled. "What... did he say?"

Father relayed everything that happened between the prophet and the king. Sophia nearly shivered at the memory of it all.

But the prophet's warm smile seemed to chase all the cold away.

"Theos above!" Mother gasped. "A siege?!"

"I'm afraid so," Father said, "Whomever these... *pegasus equines* are, they must be as powerful to be feared."

Mother remained quiet for a moment. "What... will we do?"

With a sigh, Father stepped to Sophia's side and laid beside her on bent legs.

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Sophia glanced between her parents, catching the fear emanating from Mother's eyes. "Father, Theos wouldn't truly let Aethon fall... would He?"

Father briefly closed his eyes. "Dearest... understand that for everything Theos does, there is a reason and a purpose for it. Theos is merciful, but even He requires us to have standards. As you've heard what the prophet said, our homeland's become so prosperous that we've become far too comfortable in our own wealth. When we become too wealthy or, in a way, powerful, it is easy to become consumed with pride that we lose sight of our true Provider. And always, great pride leads to disaster."

Cold rushed in Sophia's stomach. "Has Theos... abandoned us?"

Father shook his head. "Theos would never turn back on His word to His chosen ones. After all our kind has been through since their beginning, He will never abandon us. There's still hope. There's *always* hope."

Familiar words echoed in Sophia's mind. "*When enemies seek your death, my remnant shall be saved. Your lands shall be restored, and all will bring glory to My Name!*"

"In the meantime," Father said, "we'll continue as we have. Serve our masters and prepare for the wedding." He paused. "We'll pray that the wedding is successful. And we'll pray for our kind, that they'll turn to Theos and heed His words. If possible, Theos will protect us. Until then, we'll trust Him... and wait."

Sophia laid her head on her mother's neck. Father and Mother had always been strong in their faith. She

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wasn't so sure of her own. Her own prayers always seemed so... feeble. And yet, Theos could always hear everyone's prayer. She'd have to try... for Hermione's sake.

*Theos... please protect my family... and Hermione, Prince
Timotheus, and their families. Protect us all*

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