

THE AETHON CHRONICLES ~ BOOK ONE



THE
GUARDIAN

LAVAY BYRD

SOTER PUBLISHING

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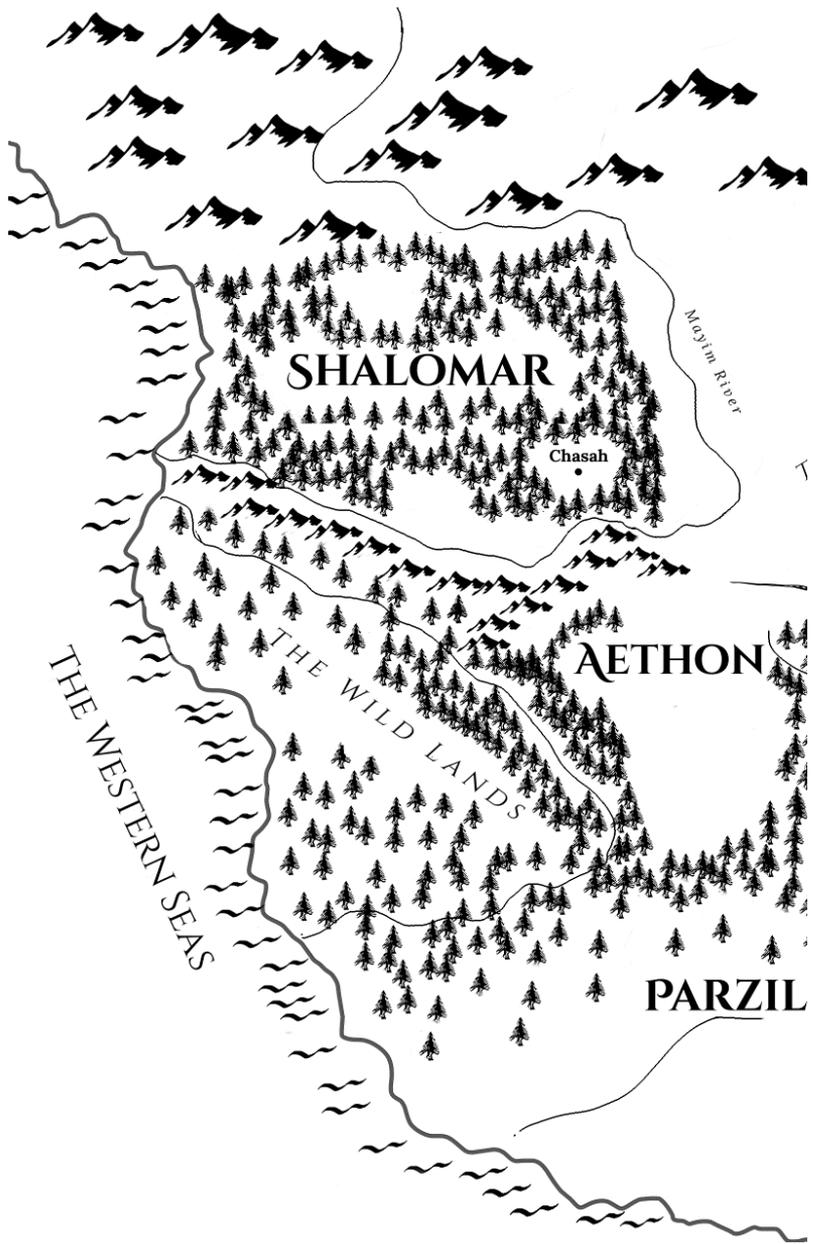
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*To my Heavenly Father God,
Who's always been with me,
Who rescued me from my personal prison
and set me on a journey.*





BARAZAR

THE NAR DESERT

AZAR DUNES

- Pulad
- Tamanna
- Akbar
- Roshani
- Omid
- Setareh
- Darya

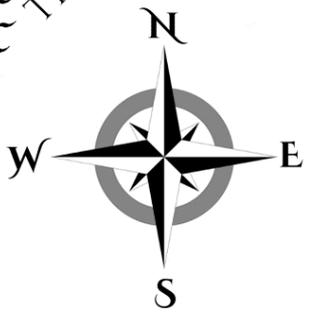
THE CRIMSON GORGE



VARGR

UN

THE EASTERN SEAS





PROLOGUE

Twenty Years ago

The chestnut mare paced the room, flicking her tail. Something creaked from outside. Eudora halted with a gasp. *Sentinels!* She swung her neck and perked her ears towards the draped entry. The curtain shifted in a light breeze.

Heart pounding, Eudora shook her mane. *Creator*, she murmured inwardly for the tenth time. *Keep Rhesus and Costas safe...*

Hoofbeats snapped her attention. A red-brown stallion with dark legs, mane and muzzle stepped through the curtain. A white stripe ran down the middle of his face between dark brown eyes.

Eudora exhaled. “Rhesus!”

Drawing near, her blood-bay husband kissed her on the cheek. “We came back as soon as we could, my love.”

Another stallion entered, dark brown with light tan colorings around his muzzle. Costas.

“Brother...” Eudora glanced between the stallions, heart quickening. “Where—?”

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A distant crash shattered the stillness. A scream pierced the air.

Eudora gasped. *They're here!*

"Be calm, Eudora!" Rhesus whispered.

She nodded, fighting to calm her galloping heart.

Costas stepped towards the single window. His ears flicked back. "They're coming."

Drawing a trembling breath, Eudora turned her attention to Rhesus. "Is... is he...?"

Rhesus met her gaze and nodded. "He's safe."

She sighed. *Thank the Creator!*

Hooves thudded close. Costas shied back from the window as the curtain flew from the entryway. A lithe capricorn stallion stormed inside, neck and shoulders clad in armored plates.

Ice flooded Eudora's veins. *Sentinel!*

Rhesus pressed her against the wall out of the Sentinel's path.

The Sentinel glared at them, ears pinned back and eyes narrowed. A dark, red liquid stained the wicked-looking curved horn on his head.

Bile rose in Eudora's throat. *Creator, let there be no evidence...*

The Sentinel clopped across the room, pawing a forehoof through the blankets on the ground. Pausing, he lifted his muzzle, sniffing, and swung his head around, black eyes fixed on Eudora.

Heart lurching, Eudora looked away. Out the corner of her eye, Rhesus stiffened, as if poised for a fight.

Creator, don't let him! He'll be killed!

The Sentinel smirked, unaffected by Rhesus' stance. With a snort, he stormed across the room and disappeared through the drapes.

More screams pierced the silence... and wails. Innocents being slaughtered.

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Eudora shut her eyes and pinned back her ears against her head to block out the noise.

Rhesus's muzzle touched her cheek. "It's all right, Eudora. We are safe."

Trembling, she managed a nod.

Costas stepped nearby, his head bowed and eyes closed, lips moving in prayer.

The screams and wails continued, ringing in the night.

Eudora drew a shuddering breath. "What happens now?"

Rhesus rested his head on hers. "Now we wait."



PART ONE

SECRETS



“My prince.”

Prince Nadir’s ear flicked at the voice drawing him out of slumber. He cracked an eye open. Tiny white lights peeked through the dark red canopy of their royal tent, almost resembling stars. *Must be morning.*

“My prince?”

The young blood-bay stallion glanced forward to another stallion kneeling before him. A stump sat where his horn was severed, and a gold clasp fastened around the stallion’s extended pastern. One of Akmal’s slaves.

Nadir closed his eyes and shifted upward, folding his legs beneath him. “Is it time?” he questioned, stifling a yawn.

“Yes, my prince. The Crown Prince commanded me to wake you for the journey.”

Nadir sighed. At least his elder brother had the decency to wake him. Who knew traveling from city to city and meeting with satraps would be so taxing? He climbed to his hooves. “Inform my brother I will be joining him.”

“As you command, my prince.” Head still bowed, the slave took three steps backward, turned, and disappeared through the tent flap.

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Several more of Akmal's slaves entered, two holding Nadir's gold-edged burgundy cape and his ruby studded brass neckband in their teeth. Nadir stilled as they dressed him, while the others collected his mat and blanket.

Soon, I will have slaves of my own to wait on me.

The slaves stepped back and bowed their heads. With a nod of satisfaction, Nadir left the massive tent. Akmal stood waiting nearby, his tall, golden form gleaming in the light of the twin suns beneath his own burgundy mantle embroidered in gold.

Akmal turned his head, his gold-plated concave horn gleaming with his shaven neck. A smirk flashed on his dark muzzle. "How good of you to finally join us, brother."

Nadir allowed a wry grin.

Within minutes, their royal pavilion bundled and strapped onto the backs of the royal slaves, Akmal led the orderly procession across the sands, Nadir beside him, surrounded by the ten slaves and thirty Sentinels accompanying them.

Two hours passed. Nadir squinted towards the twin suns hovering high above and turned his attention to the great expanse of dry rock and sand. A distant ridge caught his eye. The Azar Dunes. Beyond that lay the endless Nar Desert.

"...looking forward to the feast?" Akmal's voice snapped Nadir's attention.

"What?"

Akmal tossed his muzzle. "I merely wondered if you are looking forward to the celebratory feast."

The naming day feast. Nadir drew his ears back. He had nearly forgotten.

"You are not planning to avoid the feast, are you?"

Ha. Nadir snorted. "Hardly." To avoid his own twentieth naming day celebration would be unthinkable. Utter disgrace

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would fall upon Father. Not to mention disappointment to Mother.

“Well, that is a relief. Otherwise, my surprise would be for nothing.”

Surprise? “What surprise?”

Akmal grinned slyly, his piercing black eyes glinting. “All in good time, brother. You will have to wait until the feast.”

Unnerving, that grin. Schooling indifference, Nadir looked away.

A familiar ridge loomed ahead. The procession climbed until Akmal stopped then at its crest. Miles from the base of their bluff lay a familiar, expansive city enclosed in an octagonal wall; its sun-dried mud-brick, rectangular structures shining brilliant gold beneath the suns. At its center, a vast palace mounted on a hill, its complex buildings almost a city within itself. The Royal City of Akbar, ruling center of the Capricorn Kingdom of Barazar.

“Home at last,” Akmal said, dark eyes gleaming.

Nadir grinned “Soon, it will all be yours.”

Akmal cocked his gold-plated horn. “I *am* heir to the throne, after all.”

Nadir rolled his eyes. As if he needed a reminder. Their royal father practically announced it on Akmal’s twentieth naming day a year ago.

“Perhaps you would like to rule beside me...” Akmal raised an eye-ridge, “... as regent.”

Nadir twitched his ears back. “I doubt the satraps would approve.” He could almost visualize the ears-drawn-back scowls on their faces.

“And why not?” Akmal’s voice cut through his thoughts. “You *are* the brother of Barazar’s future king, are you not?”

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Nadir snorted. “To some, I am nothing more than a *blemished* prince.”

Despite the whisperings in the palace halls, all of Barazar would’ve known of his unfortunate birth by now. A birth that left him hornless, nearly resembling the horse-slaves. He shook away the thought.

“You know *Mother* would disagree,” Akmal said.

Nadir sighed. *Of course she would.*

“Regardless of your appearance,” she had once admonished when he was just a colt, “you are a son of royal blood—descendant of Caprius the Great! In time, you shall rise to greatness, and all will grant you the same reverence given to your father—may he live forever—and your brother.”

Beloved Mother.

“We should hurry home before she begins to fret.”

Akmal grinned. “Or worse, send the Sentinels after us.”

Nadir chuckled.



Familiar aromas of baked bread, spices, and perfumes filled the air. Voices of merchants rang in Nadir’s ears, mingling with the hoofbeats of Akbar’s inhabitants. Agile, muscle-toned stallions with horns and slender-bodied mares in various cloaks strolled in the plaza, their black manes and tails and their metallic-sheened coats of brown, chestnut, silver-gray, and gold gleaming in the sunlight. With his naming day celebration less than two days from now, the plaza seemed less crowded.

“Make way for the Princes of Barazar,” a Sentinel on Akmal’s left boomed. “Crown Prince Akmal III and Prince Nadir of the Royal House of King Azamat V!”

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Silence fell as every gaze turned in their direction. The masses of bodies parted in a heartbeat, forming a path, and bowed their heads low to the ground.

Nadir allowed a grin. Being a Royal Capricorn certainly had its privileges.

“Ah, my princes have returned!” a regal, feminine voice hailed from nearby.

Nadir turned his head to the left. An elegant, deep brown mare approached, flanked by two Sentinels and trailed by three slave-mares and two more guards. Jewels glittered from the running braid in her dark mane that trailed down her neck, while the ruby-decked neckband and headpiece shone brilliant gold with her maroon gold-tasseled cloak.

“Mother!” Nadir trotted to her, extending his neck, and kissed her on both cheeks. “Forgive us for being late...”

Queen Fatimah shook her head, the ruby pendant on her headband flashing in the sunlight. “Nonsense!” She paused as Akmal came close to kiss her. “You both are hardly late. In fact, you are just in time!” She cocked her head to the side. “Come. I shall have our attendants prepare the finest meal for your return.”

Nadir’s stomach growled, as if on cue.

Akmal chuckled. “I believe Nadir is practically starving.”

Nadir pinned back his ears in mock annoyance. *Anyone* would be starving after a day’s journey with nothing but dates and water.

With Nadir and Akmal flanking their royal mother, their entourage merging with hers, the royal procession continued down the familiar streets through the plaza, the capricorns parting the path as they paid homage. Nadir glanced at the lines of bowing stallions and mares. Several peered in his direction but

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quickly looked down. Some started to whisper. Obviously about his “abnormality.”

Let them whisper.

Out the corner of his eye, a light chestnut filly beside his flank peered in his direction. Unlike the rest of Mother’s slave mares, her mane had the same shade as her coat, which lacked the metallic sheen. A white stripe ran down the middle of her face to her dark muzzle.

A horse.

Mother usually kept one or two horse slaves in her chambers. Nadir frowned. He hadn’t seen this filly before. A gold clasp wrapped around the filly’s pastern and fetlock. She must be from the royal harem.

The filly glanced upward, briefly meeting his gaze.

Nadir cocked an eye-ridge. She looked no older than sixteen but quite tall for a female of her race, her withers inches from his own. Pretty eyes. Light brown instead of black like all capricorns.

Familiar eyes.

A face flickered in his mind. An older chestnut mare with a gentle yet sad smile on her dark muzzle. Almost resembling the young slave-filly.

Strange. Nadir slid another quick glance at the filly. *Where have I seen the old mare? Better yet... who is she?*

“How was the meeting with the Satrap of Pulad?” Mother’s voice jarred his thoughts. “I trust it went well?”

“As well as expected,” Akmal answered from the other side of her. “He sends his most heartfelt greetings.”

A strong odor of sweat wafted into Nadir’s nostrils. His eyes moved to a wide square full of stallions and mares standing on wooden platforms, each of their left flank tinged with a brand bearing Barazar’s emblem of a tongue of flame. All horses.

The slave market.

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Nadir's stomach churned. He rarely visited Akbar's slave market... or *any* slave market for that matter. The sight of slightly thin and bruised bodies always disturbed him.

He tore his gaze away, steeling himself. *Ignore the stench. Focus on something else.* Like his naming day celebration.

"Halt in the name of the king!" someone shouted.

Startled, Nadir swung his head over his shoulder. A single stallion burst through alarmed capricorns some distance away, ropes around his neck flying in his black mane. Sand-colored with dark legs and muzzle. Hornless. A horse slave.

Seven Sentinels pursued him, shouting warnings.

"Gods above!" Mother exclaimed.

"He will not escape," Akmal replied, voice cold. "Not alive."

A gasp twitched Nadir's ear. He looked back toward the horse filly beside him. She stared past him, eyes wide with horror.

Shrieks snapped his attention behind him. The runaway horse slave vaulted over carts and swerved with incredible speed. Capricorns fled out of his path, some screaming, others shouting. One stallion crashed into a stall, shattering it into splinters.

Someone had to stop the slave before further damage could be done.

Nadir glanced back to the others. "Wait here." He bolted forward.

"Nadir!" Mother screamed.

He kept his pace. The distant slave, barreling in his direction, turned his head, distracted.

Nadir skidded to a halt— iron force slammed him sideways, hooves flying from under him. His body crashed to the ground with a grunt.

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His shoulder numbed. Shrieks and shouts pierced his ears, dust clouded his eyes. He spat, shaking his head with a snort. A body pressed atop of him. He opened an eye, staring into widened bright brown eyes.

“Prince Nadir!” someone shouted.

Rope tightening against his neck, the slave jerked off of Nadir with a gargled cry. Air rushed into Nadir’s lungs. He rolled over, folding his legs beneath him, and twitched his muscles. Pain stabbed his shoulder, forcing a wince. He craned his neck to spot a trickle of red his right shoulder. A minor wound.

Thank Caprius.

“My prince, are you well?”

He glanced up at a Sentinel before him and nodded. “Yes, I’m all right. Stand back.” He climbed to his hooves and shook his body.

“Nadir!” Mother cried.

He shut his eyes with a grimace. The last thing he needed was to be fussed about like a colt in public, especially before his naming day. Maintaining calm, he angled his body to the side as she approached.

“Oh, Nadir! My foolish and brave son! Thank Caprius...” She glanced over his body. “Are you injured?”

“Mother, I’m all right. It’s just a small scratch.” He lowered his tone, stern-like. “Now, please, stop your fretting.”

He looked behind him to the Sentinels flanking the slave, holding his ropes in their teeth. The slave stood snorting, more bruises blotching his coat, his left eye swollen. His other eye glared. At him.

“Thank you, my prince!” a voice gasped.

Nadir turned to a heavy-set mahogany-brown stallion donning a dark green cloak and gold chain around his neck—the overseer of the slave-market. The stallion peered past him and

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his eyes flashed wide. Nadir followed his line of sight to Akmal approaching from behind, nostrils flared and ears pinned back against his head. A near image of Father in his rare but feared angered moods.

Nadir moved aside.

“Explain yourself for this disruption!” Akmal commanded.

The overseer recoiled, dropping his head at his front hooves. “G-g-great Prince! T-the fault is not—”

“This market is now in disarray because you have failed to properly secure this slave!” Akmal cocked his head, gold-plated horn flashing. “You are responsible. Therefore, you will pay for the damages.”

Nadir grimaced.

“Y-yes, Great P-prince, as you command.” The stallion glanced up at Akmal. “Great Prince... may I explain?”

Eyes cold, Akmal snorted, turned, and strode away, deliberately ending the discussion. Fatimah followed, casting a dark glare towards the overseer that would send any slave fleeing.

Nadir turned to join them but stopped at a pleading look from the overseer. He dared not interfere with Akmal’s judgment. Yet... *a Royal Capricorn should show some clemency. Father may agree.*

“What is your name?”

The heavy-set stallion swallowed. “Mahmud, my prince.”

“Mahmud. Whatever it is you wish to explain to my royal brother, you may to me.”

Relief fell on the stallion’s face, and he dropped his head in another bow “I thank you, my prince! Thank you!” He straightened with a sniff. “Our orders were to take this slave to the sulfur pits. He was properly secured as I waited for more Sentinels to arrive, but the cur bit through his ropes and escaped.”

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The sulfur pits? A death sentence for criminals.

A snort sounded from the horse-slave, whose eyes flashed.

“What wrong has this slave committed?”

Overseer Mahmud flared thin nostrils, curling his lips. “*The filth* murdered the son of his master!”

Murdered? Nadir turned to the horse. He looked no older than seventeen. And tall! Nearly a head taller than most capricorns. Despite dark bruises—fresh and old—across most of his body, he did not appear thin. He was powerfully built, especially on the shoulders, back, and hindquarters; strong enough to kill with a strike of his hooves.

“By your leave,” Mahmud’s voice drew Nadir’s focus. “We will take him to the pits immediately for his sentence.”

Nadir nodded. “See to it then.”

The slave lurched and kicked at one guard behind him. A crack sounded; the Sentinel screamed and toppled on his knees. Two more Sentinels lunged, lashing their teeth onto the slave’s neck and mane, and shoved him to the ground. Growling, the slave thrashed wildly. More Sentinels converged and pinned their hooves onto the slave. Over ten stood atop of him, and he stopped, teeth clenched, blasting air through his nostrils.

Remarkable.

The slave met Nadir’s gaze, eyes flaring with open defiance. And... something else.

Interesting.

He turned to Mahmud. “I’d like to purchase the slave.”

The stallion’s eyes bugged. “M-my prince?”

“Nadir!” Mother’s unmistakably appalled tone rang in his ears. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s all right, Mother. I’m merely making my first purchase. Name your price, Mahmud.”

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“B-b-but, my prince, I would give you any slave for *half* the price! Any but *this one!* He is a—”

Nadir narrowed his eyes and tilted his ears back.

Mahmud flinched. “T-t-ten pieces of gold!”

Better. “I will give you twenty to help pay for the damages. Nothing more.”

Eyes widening, the overseer bowed his head, horn scraping the dirt. “May the gods reward you for your kindness!”

May they indeed.

The slave wore a look of bewilderment, obviously not expecting to be purchased.

Nadir turned away. “Have the slave properly cleaned... if you can... then deliver him to the palace. Your payment shall be sent to you shortly.”

He trotted back to where Akmal and the others waited. Mother stared as if he’d committed some offense. Behind her, the horse slave-filly met his gaze, an odd smile on her muzzle, as if relieved.

“Well, well, brother,” Akmal said with a smirk. “I’m surprised you would choose a runaway slave—much less a *horse*—as your first purchase.” He flicked an ear. “One would think you were gambling for your life.”

Nadir cocked his head with a flick of his ears. “Perhaps.”

2

At the palace's hindmost pointed-arched entrance, Nadir flicked his tail. *They should have arrived by now.* If the slave escaped again, there will be no mercy left to save him.

His mind wandered to an hour earlier, to a heated conversation with Mother during their return to the palace.

"Of all slaves to be your attendant, you had to purchase that *beast!*" she had complained for the fifth time. "What makes you think he will not try to murder you?"

Nadir had to keep calm. "I do not believe this slave would simply kill out of malice. If so, he had every opportunity to kill other capricorns, including myself."

"He *glared* at you!"

Of course, for a slave to merely glance upon a Royal Capricorn— or *any* capricorn— would render grave consequences. Not that Nadir was offended.

"What slave would not glare if his chance for escape was deprived of him?"

Mother was silent for a heartbeat. "But must your first slave be a *horse?* Not a single king or prince from Caprius the Great to your father— may he live forever— *ever* owned a horse-slave! You know it is beneath your dignity."

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Akmal interrupted. "Let him be, Mother. It is useless to deter him when his mind is set."

Clops of approaching hooves against stone drew his attention. Six Sentinels ascended the ramp, flanking the still-bound horse-slave. All the guards bore bruises and teeth marks on their necks, shoulders, and flanks. The slave walked quietly, body tensed and nostrils flared. As if restraining himself from erupting in a fit of rage.

A wonder the colt had any strength left.

The Sentinels reached the terrace, halted, and bowed their heads. The slave stared, open defiance flashing in his bright brown eyes.

"Bow before your prince, scum!" A Sentinel clamped his teeth onto the slave's rump.

The colt yelped, then jerked against his ropes. Another Sentinel flicked horn on the slave's side. The slave yelled and kicked backward.

Nadir stamped a hoof. "Enough!"

The Sentinels straightened in unison.

Nadir nodded towards the horse. "Release him."

Each of the guards' faces fell in alarm. Nadir narrowed his eyes and pinned back his ears with a silent threat. They cut away the slaves' bonds with their teeth and sharpened horns. The slave flinched but made no further retaliation.

"Leave us," Nadir said.

Casting silent glares toward the slave, the Sentinels turned and descended the steps, leaving Nadir alone with a dangerous slave.

The young stallion slowly pushed himself to his hooves, rising to his impressive height. His nostrils flaring in his breaths, his eyes flicked at Nadir from head to hooves. Sizing him up.

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Unmoved, Nadir stared back. The slave frowned, questioning.

Nadir closed his eyes with a sigh. “You are not the first to be put off by my blemish. An unfortunate occurrence during my birth.”

Hardness returned in the slave’s eyes, and his ears twitched back.

Nadir relaxed his tone and body, avoiding the chance to provoke the slave further. “I am in need of an attendant, and I believe you are just the stallion for me. You have my word that you will be well-treated in the palace.”

The slave remained silent, but his ears rose a fracture.

Nadir angled his body towards the entrance. “If serving me is not to your liking, then you may leave the palace if you wish.”

The slave blinked in surprise and made a backward glance.

“*However*, should you choose to escape, I will be forced to allow the Sentinels to apprehend and take you to the sulfur pits. I will not spare you from that sentence a second time.” Allowing the warning to settle, he stepped through the threshold.

Slowing, he twitched an ear back. Hoofsteps. The slave followed close to his flank.

Nadir nodded. “Wise choice.”

The horse lowered his eyes to the floor.

They walked in silence through the massive colonnade lining the hall. Each towering, fluted-shaft column sported a capital in the form of a double-headed capricorn stallion with wide-open jaws, supposedly to resemble one of Barazar’s gods.

Nadir craned his neck to the slave. “Do you have a name?”

The horse flicked a dark glance in his direction.

Nadir sighed and turned his head forward.

“Apollo,” a voice broke the stillness. “My name’s Apollo.”

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Nadir turned back to him. “Well, Apollo, you should thank me for sparing your life. No stallion can survive in the sulfur pits. Even one as strong such as yourself.” He shook his head. “A waste of valuable property.”

A snort sounded. “Is that all we are to you capricorns? *Property?*?”

Nadir halted and turned to Apollo’s ears-back glare. No doubt resentful against his life in slavery. “I understand if you do not agree with your situation. I even sympathize. Yet laws are laws. Like it or not, you might as well accept it.”

Apollo’s eyes flashed. “No living soul should ever be made a slave! *Our God* made all equal!” He shook his dark mane with a snort. “I wouldn’t expect a *capricorn* to understand.”

Such zeal, from someone so young.

Nadir frowned. “You mentioned *a god*. To which god are you referring? Caprius the Great?”

Another snort flew from Apollo’s flared nostrils. “There’s only *one* God, who made all lands, the seas, the heavens, and all equines and creatures alike. He’s beyond time and eternal.”

Nadir twitched his ears back. Rumor had it that the horses once bowed to a different—*single*—god ages ago. He’d never heard any of the slaves mention this god.

Until now.

Akmal would have laughed at the notion of an eternal god. All things have an end. Even the gods and self-proclaimed divine-kings.

Nadir resumed walking. “So, this God of yours, does He have a name?”

A pause. “We call Him the Creator. We don’t remember His name... only who He truly is: all-powerful, always present, and all-knowing. Far greater than your hollow *idols!*”

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The colt must be mad. “If that is so, then why is your kind in bondage?”

Silence.

Nadir glanced back to Apollo’s lowered gaze. *Thought as much.* The colt is obviously disillusioned.

Nadir eyed the columns, towards the double-capricorn capitals. The priests had claimed that the gods only speak to the descendants of Caprius the Great and the “highly-enlightened” few. As far as Nadir knew, he heard nothing from the gods.

Perhaps he may not be as enlightened as he realized. Not that he wished it.

“A long time ago,” Apollo murmured, “Our Creator promised our kind that we will return to our homeland, where we truly belong.”

Their homeland. Aethon. A wild terrain infested with all manner of beasts. A miracle the capricorns conquered the land with the aid of their allies.

Does this colt believe his god would bring the horses back to that place? “And how is that supposed to be accomplished?”

Apollo gazed ahead, seemingly in deep thought. “We believe He’ll send someone to free us from slavery. We call him *the Guardian.*”

Nadir frowned. “And... when is this Guardian supposed to appear?”

“We don’t know... but we will... when the time comes.”

When the time comes? Nadir shook his head. This is going nowhere. “Why were you sentenced to the sulfur pits?”

Apollo snorted. “The overseer told you.”

Nadir peered back at him. “I want to hear what *you* have to say.”

Ears pinned back, Apollo turned away. “A slave’s word means nothing to you.”

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“Try me.”

Apollo stared. Nadir waited.

Apollo sighed. “He... assaulted my younger sister... and she died from her wounds.”

Nadir halted.

“I wanted to kill that cur... but by the time I realized what I was doing... it was too late.”

The sincerity in the slave’s voice was unmistakable.

At first glance, this strong, towering young stallion would be capable of cold-blooded murder. But would any criminal confess their crime knowing the consequences? Of course, he had good reason to murder.

Nadir nodded. “I believe you, Apollo... and I truly am sorry for your loss.”

Apollo stared in astonishment.

Nadir allowed an amused grin. “I can see you are a stallion of integrity, despite the circumstances.” He paused. “What was your sister’s name?”

Still shocked, Apollo glanced downward. “Her... name was Iona. She was all I had left of my family.”

Nadir released a breath. “Again... you have my deepest sympathies...”

“Good day, my prince,” a voice spoke from the distance.

A horse approached from down the hall. Middle-aged, tall, lean, and, except for his light-tan muzzle, entirely dark brown, almost as dark as his mane. Gold metal clasped around his neck, fetlock, and pastern, marking him a palace slave.

Costas, one of the few horse slaves residing in the palace other than the mares serving the royal harem. He was often present during Father’s meetings, assisting the chief scribe in documenting the records.

“Costas! You are just the stallion I wished to see.”

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Costas slowed to a halt, a look of bewilderment on his face. “Yes, my prince?”

“This is Apollo, my new attendant.”

Costas’ eye-ridges rose and his ears twitched. Out the corner of Nadir’s eye, Apollo also looked in surprise.

Interesting. “I take it that you know each other.”

Costas made a sidelong glance. “He is a close friend of my family, my prince. It has been a long time since we’ve seen each other.”

“I see. Then I suppose you will not mind giving your companion the guidance he needs to begin his work. As a most trusted slave to my father’s chief scribe, I know you will not disappoint.”

A grin forming in his muzzle, Costas dipped his head. “I shall inform him of his duties as well as guide him, my prince.”

Nadir turned to Apollo. “You will accompany Costas for the remainder of the day. Both of you will report in my quarters tonight.”

With a wary glance, Apollo followed Costas down the corridor.

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