

THE ÆTHON CHRONICLES
~PREQUEL NOVELLA~

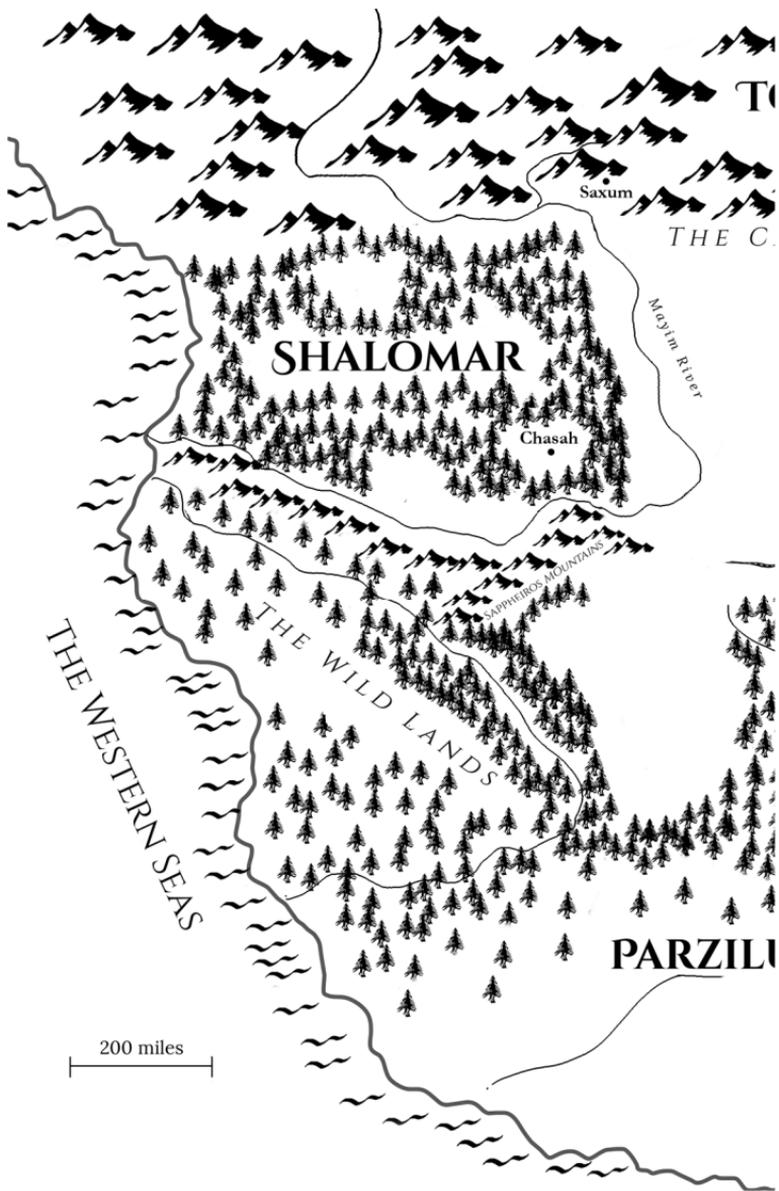


LAVAY BYRD

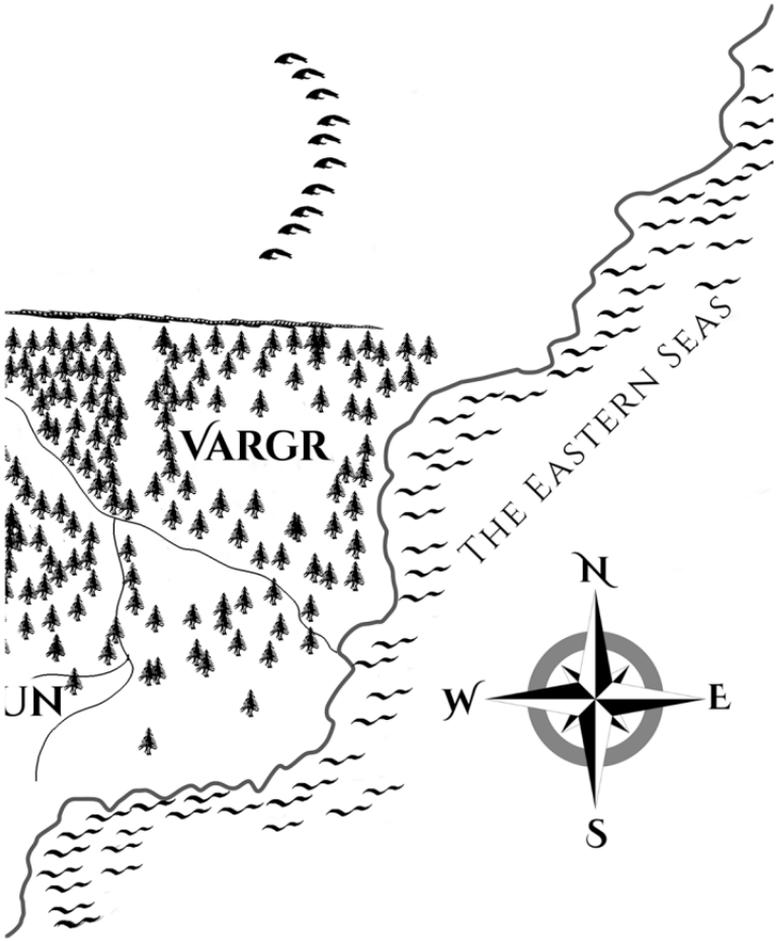
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ONARIUS
AELUM MOUNTAINS





The bay stallion shifted awake, lying on his side on cold, gravelly ground, slightly cushioned by the thin mat. His back, neck, and legs ached, as if he could still feel the weight of the grinding stone against his harness. Cold air drifted through his blanket onto his thickened pelt. He blinked opened his eyes to the empty spot beside him.

His ears perked at a shuffling of hooves, and he raised his head over his shoulder, fighting the slight pain in his neck. The light-buckskin mare with a white blaze on her face stood in the middle of their small, round hut, nosing two pairs of bowls side by side. Her dark mane fell inches from her neck, the rest of her seemingly frail form wrapped in a cloak less tattered than his own.

She seemed healthier... yet still beautiful.

Julia paused, her ears twitched backward, then turned her head to Anthony. "Oh, good! You're awake!" She smiled, her golden eyes shimmering in the daylight. Her radiance always had a way of brightening the gloom.

ETERNAL VOW

Anthony returned the smile as he pulled himself upward, folding his forelegs beneath him. “I hardly slept... surprisingly.” Every day at the mine left him feeling as if he carried all of Tonarius’s mountains. Pulling his forelegs out from beneath him, he slowly rose, legs trembling like a newborn foal’s.

“Perhaps some food will make you feel better.” Julia nodded to the two bowls at her hooves.

Anthony sighed as he turned to stand across from her, eyeing the grain in one bowl and the water in the other. Something else was in the grain bowl. Small red berries.

“Where did...?”

Julia blushed. “I found them outside our hut.”

Anthony grunted. He wouldn’t be surprised if a pegasus would carelessly drop a berry or two in their flight home. And always, these “lost treasures” would end up in a drifter’s belly. With a slight shake of his mane, he knelt on his knees, then lowered the rest of his body to the ground. He frowned. There seemed to be *less* grain than yesterday had been...

He flicked his gaze to catch a brief shift in Julia’s expression— ears lowered, chewing on lower lip, lowered gaze. “Everything all right?”

She started, then smiled. “O-of course. I *am* feeling better. The herbs truly helped...”

It costed him nearly half his saved wages to acquire the herbs for Julia’s fever. They were the only medicine

LAVAY BYRD

the apothecary would give him for at least one silver. At least to a *wingless laborer*.

Anthony raised an eye ridge. “Is that the truth, dearest?”

Julia hesitated.

Of course. “We are low on food.” Again.

Food had always been scarcer every early winter for every lowborn and wingless pegasi, while the highborns clutched on their own resources. In the past, Anthony and Julia would ask their wingless neighbors to spare a few grains. A week ago, however, the shared grains became less and less. Every stallion for himself.

“Do you have enough coin for the market?” Julia asked.

Anthony flicked his ears back. He *barely* had enough. Not with his meager wage of *five* copper pieces of working ten days in Saxum’s copper mine.

“I... I’m sure it’ll be all right, my love,” Julia’s soft voice barely reached his ears.

A sigh escaped his muzzle. “Five years. Five years of living *beneath* this town, living off scraps... for what? A life when you toil day after day as hard as any other laborer... earning *far less*? All because you are deemed *beneath* your own kind?”

It had always been this way in Saxum. In the *entire* realm of Tonarius. Every 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.

ETERNAL VOW

“At least...” Julia said. “... it’s a life...”

He snorted. “This isn’t a *life*, Julia. It’s barely an *existence*.”

Silence thickened the air.

“What about... *us*?”

He turned his head at the tremor in her voice. To her misting golden eyes.

“Are you unhappy about *us*?”

His heart constricted. “No. Never.” Extending his neck, he placed a lingering kiss on her white muzzle. “I could never be unhappy about *us*, Julia. I love you. You are the most precious thing in the world to me. My greatest joy.”

She moved her lips to his, deepening her kiss. He pulled away to brush his muzzle on her face, laying his gaze on her sides, bare of wings like his.

Bare of the foal they could never have...

His throat tightened at the thought. “I only wish to give you more than... *this*.”

She sighed into his dark mane. “We are wingless, Anthony. There’s nothing more for us.”

The words sent a flicker of heat through his veins.

“But what truly matters is that we have each other.” She shifted back to meet his gaze. “That is be something to be thankful for...”

He allowed a smile. “Of course. And I am grateful to have you in my life.”

“And I you.”



LAVAY BYRD

Cold air sliced through Anthony's cloak, nearly scraping his coat. Not that the tattered thing offered any additional warmth. He huffed white vapors through his nostrils as he trudged further up Walker's Path. Winter was always treacherous in the mountainous realm. Even in the town of Saxum. With the rapid decline of the climate in the past autumn weeks, the coldest season is about to worsen.

He lifted his gaze, the incline continuing straight for another half a mile before cutting to the left side along the mountain. A beat of wings drew his attention higher. Several pegasi flying from the massive rocky crag. Where the town of Saxum lay above.

Most of Tonarius' cities, he'd heard, were divided into three layers or "tiers", each belonging to the pegasus classes according to social rank. Being only one of the fewest towns in the great mountainous realm, Saxum was a "tier" all on its own.

Anthony snorted. Finding work in the copper mines did nothing to better his and Julia's situation.

"We are wingless, Anthony. There's nothing more for us."

Heat flickered in his veins at the familiar words, briefly chasing away the cold wind. There must be more. More to this... *existence*. If only—

Anthony.

What the...?! He whipped his head about, ears perked and heart thudding against his ribs. The mountain path lay empty.

"Who's there?"

ETERNAL VOW

Wind vibrated along the rocky walls.

He exhaled and shook his head. *Must be my—*

Iron-force slammed into him, knocking him flat on his side on the ground. A grunt flew out of his lungs, sounds of wings and hooves ringing in his ears. He opened his eyes... to a cloaked stallion standing above him, gold eyes wild and tattered wings spread. He thrust his head towards Anthony's neck. Open jaws aimed for the coin pouch.

No! Anthony jerked and snapped his teeth at the assailant's face. The winged stallion leaped back. Anthony scrambled to his hooves and glared at the assailant, blasting air from his nostrils. The assailant grew still with a snort, his cloak hanging limp from the stallion's body. Gaunt head, wild gold eyes, and thin mane.

A drifter.

"I don't want any trouble..." Anthony said. "I can only—"

The drifter lunged, head ramming onto Anthony's side. Anthony gasped as the ground vanished from under his hooves. Air spiraled around him, his heart lurching to his throat...

He slammed on hard surface, blackness exploding in his vision.

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Anthony's mind swam into consciousness. His head and body throbbed as if been trampled. He groaned, gravel pressing onto his entire side. His eyes fluttered open. Dark shapes against white light swirled in his vision. A rocky crag hovered a long distance above him. Saxum.

What the blight happened?

Ice-cold wind flooded his body. He flinched, curling his neck over his shoulder.

The coin pouch was missing.

Heart lurching, he rolled upward, spasms shooting through his muscles. Images flashed. A drifter attacked him... both falling off the path...

"No..." He turned his head to his left, searching the rocks and the ground. "No, no, no, *no!*"

All his coin ... *gone. Stolen.*

"Blight!" Anthony climbed to his hooves. Fire shot through his shoulder; a cry burst from his mouth. With a hissing breath, he rose on all four hooves.

That *scum* fled with his coin! Everything they needed to survive!

ETERNAL VOW

He groaned, head lowering to the ground. “Julia, forgive me...”

Anthony...

Anthony jerked his head up. “Who’s there?!”

A cold breeze drifted. Wetness trickled from his left ear down his face. He shook his head. Splotches of red scattered at his hooves.

Anthony, the strange whisper came again.

That voice... He heard it just moments before he was attacked. Could it be the drifter?

Tensing, he turned in a slow circle, shaking his mane. “Show yourself, thief!” His voice echoed off the walls of the mountains.

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

Do not be afraid.

Anthony 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.

I have chosen you, for you are highly favored in My sight. Leave the realm of your birth, and I will lead you to a land where you will prosper. From you and your descendants, I shall make a new nation.

The warmth vanished, cold nearly raking its teeth onto his body. Anthony let out a shuddering gasp. *What in Tonarius’ name...?!* He shook his mane, head throbbing. He winced, then heaved a snort.

That drifter had stolen everything he had. Everything he and Julia needed to survive. What will they do now...?

“Leave the realm of your birth...” The words rose unbidden in his thoughts.

Leave Tonarius?

I must be going mad. He stepped forward, pain nipping at his shoulder. He will have to get home... but how will he explain this Julia?



“Anthony!” Julia rushed to him, golden eyes wide in fright. “What happened?! You’re bleeding!”

Anthony kissed her on the cheek. “I’m all right, Julia. It was...” He winced. “Just a scratch...”

Julia stared, her ears flicked back. “What happened? Please, tell me.”

He sighed as he stepped further into the hut. “I was attacked by a drifter. We... fell over the ledge...”

“You *fell*?!”

“It was not that far of a fall...” He’d rather not dwell on that. “The drifter took my coin pouch.” Even if he managed to scour a little more work at the mines before winter comes, it would not be enough.

“Leave the realm of your birth, and I will lead you to a land where you will prosper...”

A land where we would prosper?

“Have you reported it?” Julia’s voice snapped him out of his reverie.

ETERNAL VOW

“What?”

“Have you reported the theft to a town guard?”

He shook his head. “It wouldn’t matter, Julia.”

“But you’re a *laborer*! Surely—”

“You know they would care *less* for a wingless than the slave who aided in the murder of Jupiter the Merciless. There’s nothing to be done.” He lowered himself to the floor. “What truly matters is that I’m alive and safe...” Even though they had lost everything he had saved over the years.

Julia lowered her head, her dark mane drifting over her face. “I am glad you are safe, my love.... But what are we to do? How will we last the winter?”

“Leave the realm of your birth....”

Leave Tonarius? How could they just leave? This is their home...

“I will lead you to a land where you will prosper...”

Anthony mentally nudged it aside and nuzzled Julia’s face. Best not to mention the strange voice. No doubt from landing on his head... “We’ll find a way, Julia. Somehow...”



A seed bounced from a towering mountainside and dropped onto a hill. An ornate tree sprang from atop the hill, branches full of bright green leaves shimmering in the sunlight.

Two foals raced around the tree, their laughter echoing in the air. One a gleaming brown colt and a chestnut filly. Both wingless.

“This is my eternal vow to you...” *A voice spoke through the images.*

Roots spiraled downward from the tree, expanding, transforming into... a vast grassy plain as far as the eye could see. Mountains capped in snow towered high on the left, while tall, triangular pine trees encircled the plains.

“I will give you a land where you will prosper.”

Buildings emerged from the ground. Some with ivory walls and topped with red-clay roofs. Others simple mud-brick with thatched roofs in small communities. Figures poured from each of the buildings. Stallions, mares, and foals... multiplying by the thousands.

All wingless.

“From you and your descendants, I shall make a nation like no other. From you, my glory shall be revealed to all equines of the realms. For I, Your Sovereign Creator, have chosen you, Anthony, son of Gaius, for you are highly favored in My sight. You and your wife shall be blessed.”

Anthony’s eyes flew open, heat simmering within his sides.

Julia shifted beside him. “Mmm... Anthony...?”

He nuzzled her. “It’s all right, my love. Go back to sleep.”

She stilled, breaths evening out.

Anthony inhaled, calming his thudding heart. That voice... the same he heard when he returned to consciousness. No... *before* the drifter had attacked him.

ETERNAL VOW

The images flashed.

“This is My eternal vow to you. I will give you a land where you will prosper.”

The voice said the same thing earlier. Promising him to lead him to a new land...

“I, Your Sovereign Creator, have chosen you, Anthony, son of Gaius, for you are highly favored in My sight...”

The voice... *knew* his father's name. *He* barely knew it. His mother uttered it once, as the stallion who left her...

Not even Julia knew.

“... Your Sovereign Creator...”

Sovereign Creator.

Creator.

His breath stilled.

A god had spoken to him.

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