

Amoz City

“Don’t say a word,” Caleb GoodArcher hissed, clamping a hand over his sister Zara’s mouth and pushing her ahead of him into the field of naris. He crouched down at the edge of the row, peeking out at the sharer talking to his father. He heard his two best friends, the twins Naldo and Leila, slip into the row behind him.

“What’s he doing here?” Leila whispered.

“I thought they only came at harvest time,” Naldo said.

Caleb ignored them while he crept further out to get a better view. The Amoz sharer was a head taller than Caleb’s Kinz father and dressed in black from head to toe like all members of the Amoz Protectorate. A helmet with black faceplate ended at the high collar of his tight-fitting uniform coat. The cuffs disappeared into thick gloves and his pants were tucked into gleaming black boots.

“Is your father in trouble?” Leila asked.

“If he was in trouble, he’d be on the ground already,” Naldo scoffed.

Zara gasped and grabbed Caleb’s arm. Caleb glared at Naldo, who shrugged, before reaching out to comfort her. “No need to fear, Pest,” Caleb reassured her. “Sharers sometimes talk to Father because he’s the Kinz Regional Inspector. I’m sure they’re talking about the crops or the harvest quota.”

Caleb returned his attention to the sharer and his father. He knew Zara had every reason to be scared, but he didn’t want to worry her. For the four hundred years since the Kinz had settled within Amoz territories, the sharers had controlled distribution of crops with an iron fist. The slightest miscalculation on a quota was met with dire consequences.

Caleb knew the stories, but he wasn't overly concerned. Only people who'd cheated on the quota or broke an Amoz law were punished, and he knew his father hadn't done anything wrong.

"I think they're just talking business," Caleb said as he settled into a sitting position. "Let's wait here until he goes." Zara pressed herself against him and he draped his arm around her. She was shaking all over. "Really, Pest, there's nothing to fear."

It wasn't long before a silver hoverpod rushed over their heads. Caleb stood up and watched until it was out of sight. The sharer was headed back to Amoz City.

"Did you see how fast that was?" Naldo asked. "Working the farm would be so easy if we had those."

"It wouldn't be very practical," Leila said.

He felt a sharp pain in his arm and realized that Leila had punched him. "Are you listening, Caleb GoodArcher?" she asked, planting her hands on her hips and cocking her head.

"Yeah...no...I was just thinking about—"

"Amoz City," the twins said in unison.

"I can't believe you want to go there," Leila added.

"How can you *not* want to go there?"

"Easy. I remember Sal LowGatherer."

"He never came back from the city," Naldo said.

"I know that, Naldo," Caleb snapped.

"They even came and got his family. Took them away and they never came back either," Leila ignored Caleb's irritated look.

"What did they expect? Sal LowGatherer assaulted a member of a Ruling House. Everyone knows the Kinz are perfectly safe as long as we follow the rules," Caleb said.

“What about Malek Calmsower’s father?” she asked. “Do you think his brother Maldin wants to be running the family farm at seventeen?”

“Their father cheated on the quota. That just proves my point.”

Leila humphed, turned on her heel, and walked away. Caleb chuckled to himself. Today, it was Caleb’s turn to take her wrath. He didn’t mind—she’d be over it by the time they reached the barn.

When he entered the yard, his father stepped out of their house. “Zara, go play with Leila and Naldo in the barn. Caleb, come inside.”

Caleb followed his father into the house. His mother stood at the sink, scrubbing a pot so hard he wondered if she would put a hole in it.

“Did you see the sharer?” his father asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you wonder why he was here?”

“I thought he was here about the crops.”

“No, I’ve been petitioning to speak at the House of Amoz.”

“Really?” Caleb asked. Pride rose and swelled in his chest. “What did they say?”

“They granted me permission to come and speak tomorrow.” Caleb thought he might explode. He couldn’t wait to tell his friends and everyone at school his father was going to speak at the House of Amoz.

His mother clanged several dishes together in the sink. It was obvious she didn’t want his father to go. *Why is she angry? Isn’t she proud of Father?*

His father cast a glance toward her. “Nadira,” he said.

She swung around and looked him in the eye. “Yes, Talman?”

“Can you do that more quietly?”

“Of course,” she said in a calm voice that usually meant she was anything but calm.

Returning his attention to Caleb, he said, “I’ve decided you can go with me.” His mother stepped away from the sink and stormed across the kitchen into his parents’ bedroom. She slammed the door making the house shake.

Caleb couldn’t believe he’d heard his father correctly. “Did you say I can go with you?”

“Not to the House, of course, but to the city, yes.”

That’s what she’s mad about. She doesn’t want me to go to the city. She still thinks I’m a little boy.

“Well, do you want to go?” his father pressed.

“Yes, sir. I definitely want to go.”

“Your mother thinks at fourteen you’re too young. The truth is most people never go to the city and certainly not at your age. I know you can handle it. I know you’ll be careful.”

Caleb thought of what the Amoz had done to Malek’s father. “I’ll be careful Father, I promise.”