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The Pillars of Amur

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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PROLOGUE

The Year 3,241 — 9th Day of Spring

Thousands of people filled a forest clearing on the southern side of Mount Azorreth. They all stood in silence, mourning the death of High-Chieftain Rasheid Zanisba the Eighth. Marc Zanisba, the renowned leader's third grandson, leaned on his mother, Catherine, and used her gown to keep himself warm against the cool spring morning. He was sad that his grandfather would not be coming back home with them. Home, the city of Amur, was a distant place then. It would take several days' journey back through the forest, over a bridge, and through countless fields until they reached its gates. Marc knew his grandfather could no longer walk with him through the city telling him stories of ages past, nor could his grandfather listen to the stories Marc imagined on his own. The noble boy wanted to cry, but none of the men around him were and he wanted to be strong like them. He also wanted to play with their swords that were so unlike the small wooden one he held in his left hand.

At six years old Marc struggled to pay attention as his father began to read from a dusty tome before the gathered members of Clan Zanisba. He thought about how his father's deep voice sounded close to his grandfather's. He stared at the body wrapped in white cloth that lay on the pyre—a new word for Marc—behind his father although he had been told it would be easier not to. Marc's legs were tired of standing and he wanted to sit in the grass like his younger brother, Alon, was allowed to. Marc dug his right hand into his pocket where he had placed stones he gathered during the four-day trip to the forest. Playful fingers stirred the stones, but René, his sister, pulled his hand out of his

pocket so she could hold it. He didn't fight her when she brought her woven bracelet to his face and tickled his cheek. Her eyes were red around the edges and she gave his hand a squeeze.

Marc leaned forward and looked down the row of people, but couldn't see his older brother, Rasheid. Their grandfather once said he did not like Marc's older brother because he was mean and Marc hated when Rasheid practiced fighting moves he learned at the military academy on him. Then there was the fact that Rasheid wanted to be called "Ten" all the time. Marc thought the name "Ten" was improper as it was just a number. He, and many others, called his older brother "Sheid" instead.

An armor-clad warrior from Marc's row stepped forward with a lit torch and handed it to his father. Marc was in awe of the man's gleaming weapons that passed close enough to touch. It was a disappointment that his hands were already occupied. He had to watch as the newly named Rasheid the Ninth laid the torch on the pyre and the flames soon spread on the wrapped form of Marc's grandfather. Marc wanted to stop it, to stop his grandfather from burning, but his mother and René held him tight. He squinted against the bright light and the heat of the flames that felt so close. Tears welled up in his eyes as the people around him began to chant words that he did not understand. Most of the ancient words held little meaning for him and he did not say them along with the others. He was mad at himself for needing to cry and hoped that few in the crowd would notice the sudden weakness.

His mother crouched beside him, close enough for him to smell flower oils on her skin. "Look at me, son," she said. Marc did so and could see the tears that smeared

painted blue symbols on her cheeks. They too were outside of Marc's understanding.

"Your grandfather was a great man and the funeral rites will make sure he reaches his ancestors safely."

Marc nodded, still crying. He was taught that the body must be burned for the spirit to be released. He did not want his grandfather to go, but saying so was selfish. He didn't want to believe his grandfather was gone. Marc released René and wrapped his arms over his mother's shoulders. "I miss him," he said with a sob. She embraced him but did not pick him up like his grandfather would have. He covered his face in the folds of her gown.

"I do too. All of these people will miss him. And there are thousands of others not here that will miss him just as well," she said, letting go of him. She wiped Marc's face free of tears with her hands. "His ashes will be buried here at the base of that tree," she said and pointed to the tree behind the pyre. "If you ever want to speak to him, then I will take you here. You know he was an excellent listener."

Marc's father went to the rest of their family then, with Rasheid the Tenth in tow, and hoisted Alon from the ground to sit astride his broad shoulders. Marc could barely recognize his father without the beard he usually kept. The hard lines of his jaw made him look strong and his eyes looked to Marc like he was sleepy and sad. His family together, side by side, stood by and watched as the fire released the spirit of his grandfather into the air. The chants of a thousand people subdued his sad thoughts so he joined in, chanting the words he knew by their sounds and mouthing the ones he did not.

The rituals ended around midday, seeming like ages to Marc, and most of the people were preparing to leave the forest. He stared at the pyre, now mostly blackened logs, where his grandfather had laid. According to his people's custom, the ashes were buried and mixed with the roots and the soil so that in death people are still connected to some form of life. Then the spirits of the dead still had a means to communicate with their descendants. Marc stared at the massive tree, he thought large enough to carve a house into, which would be forever his grandfather's. He wondered about all the stories that were left untold and if his grandfather's spirit would pass them on when he returned.

Men and women took to conversing amongst themselves and Marc's elder siblings were following their parents. There were guards that kept watch over Marc and Alon, Marc knew, but they did not interfere when he led Alon by the hand to the base of the funerary tree. They were far enough apart from the others that Marc was not worried about trying to speak with his grandfather's spirit.

"I'll come back, *Abovio*," Marc said when he remembered the word grandfather in the ancient tongue. Few outside of the noble class had any knowledge of the ancient language of his people's ancestors. Marc's mother had studied the language extensively though. "I'll come back and tell you stories, and how things are back home. I'll miss you." If he hadn't run out of tears already, then Marc would have started crying again.

"I'll miss you too, *Abov...*" Alon stammered on the word.

"*Abovio*," Marc said to help his brother who had turned five at winter's end.

"*Abovio*," Alon said correctly. "I'll come back with Marc and read to you like you used read to us at night."

Their father, and new High-Chieftain, approached with Sheid still following behind him. “I’m sure you boys are hungry, but we must leave this sacred forest before we can eat.” He put a hand on Alon’s head and messed up his black hair. “How does that sound?” their father asked with a short laugh at Alon’s frown. It was the first laugh Marc heard from his father since his grandfather died.

Alon readjusted his hair and said, “Sounds good, father.” Rasheid the Ninth returned Alon to his shoulders and started walking back towards the crowd with Sheid following behind. Marc watched them head off, fighting the urge to follow and to stay behind near his grandfather’s resting place. Two men went past his father with shovels, chisels and other tools. He did not recognize them, but knew they were too skinny to be warriors. The likely scribes continued past Marc and began clearing away the burnt logs that had comprised of the pyre.

A third man passed, and Marc immediately recognized his father’s youngest brother. Marc’s Uncle Alix was by far his favorite uncle, although he rarely saw his mother’s brothers. He received a pat on the shoulder as the Alix went to join the workers. Marc wondered what else needed to be done, but could not dwell on it long as there came a shout of his name.

“Marc!” Alon said from their father’s shoulders. “Hurry up!”

Their father turned back to Marc, “Come on, Marc. Your uncle will catch up with us before nightfall.” He hurried at his father’s words and strained to keep up with his father’s long strides. “You, my sons, will all be princes when we return to Amur. And your sister a princess.”

Marc thought that people calling him “Prince Marc” was funny. They had called his father a prince and he was old. They called his Uncle Alix a prince and Alix was old to Marc. He did not want to become old; he wanted to stay new. “Will cousin Bevrán be a prince?” Marc asked. His cousin was the same age as Sheid, so he guessed that Bevrán will become a prince too.

“No,” Rasheid the Ninth said in a harsh tone. “He will not.”

“Oh,” Marc said, but he didn’t have the courage to ask his father why.

PART I – Amur

The Year 3,251 — 93rd Day of Autumn

The Bull and the Boy

Scouts were disappearing. Bodies of commoners were showing up on trails near their dwellings. The southern hills were rampant with rumors that the tribes were attacking villages and outposts. Such rumors had reached the city of Amur, far to the northwest of the occurrences, and its leaders would not take the suffering of their people lightly. The High-Chieftain had said so anyway, but Clan Zanisba's armies had stayed within the walls of Amur. Some of the city's cavalry were abroad, but they were patrolling the northern forests to enjoy the trails before winter and not seeking out the enemies of the Allied Clans.

Marc Zanisba, on the other hand, was restless from being confined in the city. He was astride a horse and leading several of his peers outside Amur's walls. However, he was not a warrior. Still a child by his society's standards, he was reduced to the title of a cadet with only a wooden sword on his hip and a cloth tunic thin enough that even a needle could pierce him. People among the Southern Clans were dying and Marc thought it laughable that Amur still had enough horses to allow cadets from the military academy to ride through fields as farmers prepared the winter crops or tended their herds.

He led the other cadets north and then west so they could trace their path along Amur's northern wall. The massive tan stones of the wall loomed high above him had stood for over two thousand years. The wall's bottom layer dwarfed him despite his

raised height on the horse. How the Kings of Dundas, Amur's builders, moved the gigantic stones and shaped them to be smooth as glass was beyond Marc's comprehension. He saw a straight enough path along the wall and fell into a steady rhythm in the saddle.

Soon enough two of his friends were riding next to him. To Marc's immediate right rode Isaac Bohun, direct heir to Clan Bohun's chieftain. On Isaac's right was Cecil Duarte, the son of Captain Duarte—the head of Amur's city guard. “If there is a smell as foul as a herd of rune-oxen, then I don't know it,” said Cecil. Marc saw that Cecil was bobbing up and down in the saddle like a novice. Neither him nor the horse he was on could be comfortable at that rate, Marc knew. Joining the cavalry would not Cecil's future.

“City-boy,” said Isaac. “Have you checked your own scent, Cecil?” Marc and Isaac shared a laugh then, but they stopped when they heard yells from a nearby field.

Marc held up a closed fist and used his other hand to slow his horse. Other cadets slowed their horses behind him, creating a spray of mud. Cecil was not able to stop his until he was several paces in front of the group. Marc rolled his eyes at his friend's inability to handle the horse when he heard the yelling again.

“There!” said Isaac.

A bull rune-ox was charging at a young boy through a field and the boy was tiring. At over three times the mass of a horse, a rune-ox was a relatively slow creature that was known to outlast a pursuing predator. “Say here!” Marc shouted as he turned his horse so he could catch the boy before the bull could.

“But Marc—” said Cecil behind him.

“That’s an order!” Marc shouted as he put his heels to the horse’s sides, picking up speed. As a cadet he held no rank over Cecil, but he did as one of Clan Zanisba’s princes. Isaac, however, did not have to follow such an order and was right beside Marc in the span of a few breaths. He was not sure how Isaac intended to help, but Marc was going to make sure the boy left the field in one piece.

The bull and the boy were not alone in the field, there were hundreds of rune-oxen and more yells coming far behind the charging bull. Other farm hands were chasing after the bull, but they had no chance of catching the beast on foot. Marc wondered what had made the bull so angry or the boy, not older than ten, so unlucky. He and Isaac neared the running pair as the bull was thrashing its head at the boy. Its horns, curved down from either side of the head then pointed forward at the center of the bull’s long skull, almost caught the boy’s leg and Marc urged his horse faster still.

He leaned towards the boy in his saddle and reached for him, but pulled back nothing. “Give me your arm!” Marc shouted and he was able to pull the boy off the ground that time. The boy bounced across the horse like a rolled blanket and that was no way to keep him safe with the bull still in pursuit. “Know how to ride?”

The boy, eyes wide, answered with a shake of his head. Well he is of no use, Marc thought. “Isaac, take the boy,” he said before tossing the boy by his coarse tunic onto the back of Isaac’s horse. Marc watched to make sure Isaac righted the boy in the saddle behind him. Turning his thoughts back to the bull, Marc was almost relieved to see

that the bull was now charging at him. Able to outpace the bull, he maneuvered his horse around so that it faced the bull.

Isaac called out to Marc, “What are you doing?”

Smiling at the rampaging bull, Marc reared his horse on two legs then let his horse land its front two legs on the bull’s head. The rune-ox collapsed and was dazed, not dead. The tarpan horse Marc sat on was bred to carry warriors into battle on its rock-hard hooves and would not be satisfied until the threat was eliminated. She brought her hooves down on the bull again and again until both she and Marc were covered with fragments of bone and ruined flesh. The beast’s head was no longer recognizable to the point where Marc became queasy. He couldn’t hide his repulsion so he turned his head away from the gory scene.

“That went well,” said Marc, petting the horse’s neck to calm her down. The horse handled herself well for one of the academy’s horses, yet it was expected. He looked down at what was left of the bull’s skull and read the name carved on one of the horns. Isaac came over and had the boy get off next to the carcass. “Boy, what is your name?”

“Tobias Groot,” he said. The last name was the same as the one on the horn. Marc saw that the other field hands, probably some of his relatives, were still hundreds of paces away. “Thank you, sir, for saving me.” Tobias, who Marc guessed was twelve, looked at the mangled skull with not even the faintest wince. “My father will want to reward you for saving me.”

Marc coughed and tasted the bile in the back of his throat. He needed to leave the field or risk vomiting from his horse. A city boy himself, the same as Cecil, would not last a day of slaughtering oxen for the markets. “Tell your father that he can owe us a favor.” A favor for a favor—a life for life. An old custom that still held strong even after the Allied Clans’ economy changed their currency to silver coins.

“To which cadet should my father owe the favor?” Tobias asked. Marc knew that the boy had seen their wooden swords by then. The threat of splinters and bruises could not match that from a forged blade, nor could a wooden sword garner immediate respect.

Isaac looked at Marc and shook his head. His friend did not say it, but Marc could guess at what Isaac was thinking: what could a farmer do for a noble of the ruling clan? The loss of a rune-ox was a minor cost when there was a herd of thousands. However, if a tarpan was injured saving the boy that cost would be great for a farmer.

“Tell your father that Prince Marc Zanisba may have need for him in the future.” He did not wait to see Tobias’ reaction and rode off with Isaac back to where the other cadets were waiting on their horses.

“That was not the smartest thing to do, Marc,” said Isaac.

“It was successful though—nobody got hurt,” said Marc. Besides the bull, he thought, but the Groot farmstead would have an abundance of fresh meat tonight.

“You were fortunate. That’s all.”

Marc laughed, “Better to be fortunate and alive than skilled and dead.” It was not a saying that his trainers at the academy agreed with, yet traders in the city were fond of it.

“On occasion. You should wipe yourself off,” Isaac said when the two of them took the lead of the cadets again. “Here,” he said and tossed Marc a pale cloth and called back to the group of riders, “We’re heading back inside the walls.” There were moans of contention, but a loud grunt from Cecil shut them up. Marc’s friends made his role as cadet leader easier, but he did not want to return to the city so soon either.

Cecil rode up and reformed their previous formation. “What are you two doing? We’re going to get in trouble,” he said.

“You’re not going to get into trouble, Cecil,” said Marc. The bull’s blood had found several places from his boots up to his face. He began to clean his skin with the cloth and said, “Only Isaac and I were involved.” There was always a chance for someone in the castle to be peeved that he saved someone’s life. Like Luca, Marc thought, who would have to clean his clothes later.

“And Marc was performing a civil service,” said Isaac. “The two of us might get a morning free of training exercises.” To Marc he said, “Imagine that.”

“Imagine it all you want. You think General Tamarris would allow that?” Marc shoved the cloth away inside his tunic. His main instructor and mentor at the academy, General Rowan Tamarris, was not known for his leniency.

“Your uncle would,” said Cecil.

“Maybe, but he is still out on patrol,” said Marc. He and the other cadets turned south in front of Amur’s eastern wall. They neared the city’s main entrance that stood open for its citizens. Although the construction of Amur’s high walls, and most of the city, were not feats of his ancestors, the wooden gate was. At half the walls’ staggering

height, the gate's two doors were as thick as a man's arm was long. When Marc passed through the shadows of the guard towers overlooking the gate he saw some riders come over a hill from the southeast. More and more riders appeared until they numbered in the hundreds. It was an impressive force for being just a fraction of the Zaniban cavalry.

A sharp pat on the rear urged his horse to into a faster trot. Marc and his fellow cadets would need to make it back to the academy's stables before the cavalry did to avoid punishment. The almost six-mile trip from the eastern wall to the academy, which was set against the western wall, was a relatively quick one thanks again to Amur's builders.

Hooves stamped down on flattened stones of Amur's main avenue that Marc guessed took years to construct. Each stone, after being brought from a quarry, shaped and brought to Amur, had to be placed in the precise spot for miles. His early years of education had informed him that a mile was a thousand paces, with each pace measuring the distance between the heel in stride and when it next touched the ground. While measurements were standard in Amur, Marc found that other clans' miles paces were longer as the paces were from taller men.

Standardization would allow the Allied Clans to be more efficient, he thought. His time at the academy was getting the better of his thoughts again. Mocking himself, he figured he would be reciting military procedures in his head next. Dodging citizens on the avenue served as a new distraction.

"Clear the avenue. The High-Commander is coming," said Cecil to citizens who didn't think cadets were of enough importance to move for. Marc looked behind him and

could see that the riders had merged onto the main avenue that led outside the city too. If people could not hear them coming, then they would be able to feel the vibration of the cavalry in their feet.

The common paths through the city used to allow twenty horses abreast when Marc was a boy. Newer wooden houses were built on both sides of the avenue and cut many of the path's widths in half. Since his father had become king, the population of the city increased along with a decrease in violent disputes. But peace among the Allied Clans did not last long.

Drums sounded from behind Marc. The rhythm of their sound signaled friendly cavalry through the gate. More drums answered across the avenue and were far more effective than Cecil in clearing out the people. Marc had waited for the drums and set his horse off in a run again, leading the way to the academy.

When he cleared the ramp up to the academy, passing through another large gate, Marc slid off his horse at the stables to await his uncle with his peers. Warriors and other cadets, the youngest ones were eight years old, scrambled to form two rows on each side of the gate. Marc, with Isaac and Cecil, took their places on the north side of the entrance. The three of them loomed tall over first and second year cadets. He always ensured that he would be at this place when his uncle rode by.

"You still have some blood on you," said Isaac. Marc rolled his eyes at missing some droplets. There was little he could do or say back to Isaac because the riders poured through the gate into the academy's courtyard.

The transition from a sprint to a canter to a walk was seamless. His Uncle Alix had trained his cavalry to such a precise level that even Amur's builders would have blushed. The riders were all clad in steel-plate lamellar armor and smooth-topped helms. They wore blue tabards over their armor with silver embroidery of the three spears of Clan Zanisba's emblem. One spear was vertical while the other two were crossed diagonally behind the first one. The spears signified the three plateaus of Amur and the three founding families that comprised Clan Zanisba when they were a tribe of nomadic horsemen from lands far to the northwest.

Marc's uncle Alix was riding at the front. His helmet had five half-inch crests that ran from his forehead to his neck. Such a helmet was unique, everyone in the Allied Clans knew it belonged to the High-Commander, and Alix offered his hand to Marc as he rode by.

Taking his uncle's hand, Marc was pulled onto Alix's horse as he led his sizable force deeper into the stables that filled the northeastern side of the military academy's complex. The horse below them hardly recognized the added weight, but was slick with sweat. He must have made them ride all night, Marc thought, as it was not warm enough to warrant such sweat otherwise. Cavalry horses started to fill in the empty stalls and all the commotion made it near impossible to speak. Marc had learned to be patient in such scenarios.

Alix brought his horse to a stop at a stall that was larger than the rest and where servants waited to groom the High-Commander's horse. The stall itself was made of dark wood and ornately carved with images depicting famous battles. Alix let Marc hop down

from the horse before he dismounted and handed his helmet to Marc. Without his helmet Marc saw a face that did not resemble Alix's usual visage, gone were his uncle's mischievous eyes and boyish smirk.

On a usual day Marc could see a resemblance between himself and his uncle. Despite some wrinkles around the eyes and over two decades of time between the princes, the two bore the same green eyes, jaw, and shorter nose when compared to Marc's father. He gave Marc a hearty squeeze, ignoring the interesting scents that were coming off their clothes for a moment. "That is not your blood, is it?" asked Alix.

"Not this time, Uncle."

"Then what trouble did you get into this time?"

Marc released the hug and replied, "I missed you too, Uncle Alix. I'm sure it will be brought up later." Despite a population of about a hundred thousand including the city and farmlands, news travelled fast in Amur. "I thought you were not returning until tonight."

Alix walked towards the academy and Marc followed. "And miss giving you an afternoon lecture?" They turned when an officer ran up to Alix. "Excuse me, Marc," he said. Then to the officer Alix said, "Get the cadets inside." The officer walked off starting to bark orders at the cadets.

There were more officers than Marc could remember names for. Then again, he did not know the names for most the cadets outside of his year. "Any news on the missing scouts?" Marc asked. He had to know which rumors were true.

Alix paused and looked up at the sun, as there was no sundial in sight. Squinting up at the sun, Marc had tried to guess at the time too, but could only tell there was enough time left in the day for a long lecture on tactics. He often relied on the hourly drums in the city, a different beat for each of the fifteen hours of sunlight. “There should be enough time to tell you before my lecture,” said Alix.

Following his uncle into the academy through a rounded archway, Marc passed open doors on both sides of him that held armor, weapons and other equipment. The hall opened into a circular great room with a staircase that spiraled around the edges of the room leading to the academy’s fourth floor. Off the circular room were three other halls that contained many rooms to house cadets not from Amur.

The floor told a story of battle—one that happened two-hundred and fifty one years before. The intricate tile mosaic full of bright colors and unknown runes on the floor held no meaning in Marc’s mind, but the bloodstains on many of the tiles did. There was not a high-chieftain or high-commander that had bothered having the tiles replaced or covered. The stains were the last visual evidence of the battle from when Rasheid the First and his allies took Amur. Blood had become part of the mosaic and Marc avoided stepping on many of the tiles as if they were sacred ground. He followed Alix directly through the room towards the first curve of the stairs.

They went up, passing the second and third floors before reaching the fourth, and Marc kept looking up at the domed ceiling of the room. It resembled the one in the castle’s dining hall, yet it was smaller and was not held up by columns. He had to watch his footing too as there were no rails to save him from falling if he tripped. The stairs

ended on the fourth floor above where they had started their climb. Smaller than the previous floors, the fourth contained the academy's library and offices for the high-ranking members of the military. The number of books in the library was astonishing to Marc because even noble families found it difficult to fill up a meager shelf on their own. Having a book copied by hand was an expensive process to say the least and it was cheaper for clans to send their noble youth for training at the academy than to do so themselves.

The maps and histories in the library were Marc's favorite, but he could not stand having to read for ages inside of the academy when he could be doing something outside in the courtyard. His brother Alon was in the library whenever he could, even begging their uncle to be allowed books to be taken back to the castle for him to read. At the moment the library was empty, except for the thoughts and observations of countless scribes that stayed inked on the pages, waiting to be read.

The High-Commander's room was on the western side of the building and Alix opened the door so Marc could enter. Closing the door behind them, Alix went to the window that looked over the western city walls and the miles of forest far beyond. "What we say stays in this room until all of the information can be brought to your father. You understand?"

"Yes I do."

"Then take a seat."

Uncle Alix

The room was edged by narrow tables full of books and parchment. They seemed scattered about to Marc, but Alix had once called the room to be in a perpetual state of “organized chaos” that he could navigate with ease. Dividing the room in half was a long table, with wooden chairs on both sides, and Marc took the chair closest to the door, putting his uncle’s helmet on the table between them. The padded leather on the chair felt soothing after his stint in the saddle. His uncle, however, did not sit down.

Alix turned and looked out the window. “My sources have found little on the missing scouts. Seven of the twelve scouts from the Southern Clans have not been heard from in a quarter-season,” said Alix. Marc knew that twenty-five days was a long time for a scout not to report in, and scouts were never known to just disappear. The south was home to six of the twenty-one Allied Clans and was believed to be the strongest, most battle-tested of the five regions. Clan Zanisba’s Amur was large enough to be considered its own region; the others were the north, east, south, west, and central. Marc could name all the clans and their current chieftains since he was ten but he was still learning the politics and histories of the individual clans.

Alix continued, “I waited at Clan Belo three days for any word from the south.”

Marc looked to the wall across from him and on it were five hooks. On each of the hooks was a circular metal buckler with the symbol of the current regional commander. Clan Belo had that role in the eastern region as its symbol, the three peaks of the Tribulon Mountains, hung on the wall. “More villagers have been found dead near their homes,” said Alix, referring to the leading eastern clan.

“It is not time for beasts to be roaming yet,” said Marc. Winter migrations were not for another eight days, on the first day of winter, the same went for his birthday.

“Have any traders been found dead?”

The question caused Alix to turn around. “Strangely, no.”

Marc could see from Alix’s face that he was thinking, strategizing, and planning his next words like he would actions in battle. It was the nature of commanders to behave as such. “The attacks on villagers appear to have been random. Violence of that kind is not tolerated in our realm. I believe more is at work than recent events have allowed for speculation.”

“Then what will you do?” asked Marc. Alix did not appear worried, nor anything else for that matter. Having no expression on his face made Marc feel smaller in the chair for reasons he could not explain.

“What can I do? Your father, so obsessed with the nomads—our distant relatives in fact—hundreds of miles to the north, did not grant for me to personally investigate the south with the cavalry. Nor would he let me send our own scouts, or ask the Muthar for their aid.”

The Muthar were seldom mentioned, but well-known nonetheless. It was the name for the other military force inside Amur’s walls. Legends older than the city of Amur had cast the Muthar in an enigmatic light. Their main legend told of how they brought the northwestern tribes, the Zanisba among them, to Amur so a new order to be brought to the land. Marc had enjoyed a similar story when his grandfather told it because

there were many brave men, and some women, defeating a tyrant. The story held no mention of the Muthar though.

Determined to find out the truth, Marc had searched the library for anything relating to them, but had found only one history text with their name mentioned. It said that Rasheid the First had given the remaining Muthar leaders one of the three plateaus of Amur to build a fortress. The force itself sustained its numbers by recruiting the best cadets from all of the clans, yet not those with direct ties to any chieftainship. Members of the Muthar claimed three allegiances: one to their native clan, one to Clan Zanisba, and one to the Muthar. They belonged to all clans and none. That was all Marc knew of them, which was far more than most outsiders.

The High-Commander having to ask the Muthar for aid puzzled Marc as much as his father refusing to let his Uncle Alix see further into the situation. He saw little point in his father employing the most brilliant military mind in a generation as the leader of the Allied Clans' armies and not listening to him. Almost nine full years at the academy had taught Marc not to underestimate his uncle. "What have you done then?"

"Ah, nephew, you have learned something about me," said Alix with a flash of a smirk. He leaned back on the table that sat near the window. "I have requested that another cavalry unit be sent south to see what they make of things."

"How long ago?" asked Marc. If living with his family had taught him anything, then it was that the lot of them were as stubborn as stone.

“As soon as I heard the first scout was missing,” said Alix. His eyes looked toward the ceiling at nothing in particular. The familiar gesture showed to Marc that his uncle was counting. “Seventeen days ago,” he finished.

Marc went through the four Northern Clans in head: Palmiro, Maviel, Uhlan, and Driscol. All had extensive cavalries, but the closest to Amur was Clan Driscol. “So you sent Colonel Driscol to see what he could find?”

“Very good, Marc,” said Alix.

“And they should be back soon, then?” Colonel Driscol had a reputation for being precise and loyal to Alix since he had been one of Alix’s cavalry trainers.

“Before nightfall—if I know the Colonel.”

They didn’t need to discuss how many riders the Colonel had with him or any other logistics, but Marc knew it would be a smaller force so it would not draw too much attention. Having such an accurate timeline for Colonel Driscol’s return brought another string of questions to Marc’s thoughts. He only let one pass his lips, “You have an idea what is happening, right Uncle?”

“I have my theories, yes, but they do not answer all of the questions. Before your time there were raids on many of our clans in the south.” Alix was referring to one of the many conflicts that faced the Allied Clans since its establishment. Marc knew the raids were from twenty years prior and nodded.

“The tribes have been growing more restless for years, but your father has allowed us to barter minor goods with those closest to our borders. Peace is as temporary as a fruit. It will stay sweet for a while, but it will rot away to nothing so another fruit

must be found. Our clan and our allies can sustain peace in our borders if only we can swat the insects away.” Alix had his hands on the back of the unused chair, causing the wood to creak. He let out a long breath and relaxed.

“But uncle, wouldn’t that mean...” said Marc before trailing off. He was sixteen for a few more days and not eligible to fight. At eighteen he would be forced to fight, even die, for the sake of the people, the families, the clans.

“War?” said Alix for him. The word caused Marc’s heart to beat faster. “Yes, I believe another war could come to the clans. The tribes in the south are foolish enough to start a war in winter. And we would be foolish to ignore the threat they pose. Don’t you agree?” Alix stared down at his helmet on the table and Marc could only imagine the responsibility that went with it.

“I do, Uncle.” His father, as High-Chieftain, showed the people how they should live. His uncle, as High-Commander, showed warriors how they would die.

“You are dismissed. I will be in lecture shortly.”

A Troublesome Report

Thoughts of war stirred in Marc's head—none of them uplifting as he made his way down the spiral stairs to the third floor. A few younger cadets, Marc guessed them to be about ten, were hurrying up the stairs for their lectures. They breathlessly muttered greetings to Marc as they passed him. He would not be considered late if he beat the instructor to the room. Being late was not acceptable but the punishment for cadets who were tardy to lectures was kinder than mistakes made on the battlefield. Marc had more than a few white lines on his legs that served as reminders of his own punishments. Recent punishments had left red lines on his skin, which showed his peers that he was a slow learner. He considered himself to be stubborn instead.

The younger cadets turned left, to the northern side of the academy, and Marc went right for a few paces until he reached an open door to one of the many lecture rooms. Five tables were arranged in a crescent and sat five cadets each. Inside the crescent was a circular table that held small wooden figurines used to display battle formations. His fellow cadets looked to him expectantly when he entered the room, then turned away again to their conversations when they realized he wasn't the High-Commander. Almost nine years with the same noble youth had meant the effect of him being a prince had worn off. They were much too concerned with discussing their chances for the upcoming tournament. It was the only thing most people looked forward to in the season after his birthday.

Isaac waved Marc over so that he could take his usual seat at the table closest to the window which overlooked the academy's courtyard. Marc sat down on a plain

wooden chair to Isaac's left, just off-center of the crescent's zenith so he could see what was going on outside if a lecture became boring. A quick glance showed Marc that the cavalry men still stirred below as the sun shone from behind the academy. The pale orange glow that the sun cast on the city would deepen as the afternoon wore on.

"So, Marc, do you think you will qualify for the tournament this year?" asked Isaac.

"Well those who beat him out last year have graduated from the academy," said Cecil.

The nerve of Cecil, Marc thought. "I think my father would crack my skull if I didn't." Even Alon would be allowed to enter the lower division of the tournament this year, and the last pair of qualifying matches for that division would take place during Alix's lecture. Marc had wanted to cheer his brother on, so he gave him some advice the night before. "It will be the last chance for the lot of us."

"I think this year will allow for someone who is not the spoiled son of a chieftain to make it to Chilant Alon," said Cecil. The bustling trade city where the annual tournament was held sat nestled in the Tribulon Mountains just east of the Allied Clans' borders. Of the twenty four people competing in the tournament, only six would be from the clans. Other competitors came from the Nagano Empire on the eastern side of the Tribulons and from Chilant Alon.

"What do you mean?" asked Isaac. "You live at the castle too."

"You eat the same meals that are served at my father's table," said Marc.

"All the same, I think I can make it this year," said Cecil.

“But can you win once you get there?” asked Marc.

“A good question, cadet,” said Alix, walking into the room.

All the cadets rose from their chairs, arms going stiff at their sides and said in unison, “Hail the High-Commander!”

Alix had arm-length rolls of parchment under his arm, never a good sign in Marc’s experience, that he set down on the circular table. His eyes went from one end of the crescent to the other. “You may be seated.”

He pointed to a cadet off to Marc’s left and said, “What is the main purpose of cavalry?” The question was said quickly and in a voice that commanded respect. The cadet swallowed loud enough for Marc to hear but before the cadet could answer, Alix said, “To catch infantry off-guard like I have caught you off guard, boy. That is just one of many purposes, as you all should know.” He went to a corner of the room to retrieve an easel and placed it near the round table, then unrolled one of the parchment sheets. Fastening it to the easel, Alix said, “You all should recognize this formation.”

Marc recognized the formation on the colored diagram as the wedge, one of the basic cavalry formations, yet there were some differences. “Is that an advanced wedge?” he asked when Alix pointed to his raised hand.

“Yes it is, cadet,” said Alix. “This one here is called Gata’s Wedge. Named for Commander Andreas Gata, this wedge combines infantry with cavalry where the foot soldiers act as the barbs on a spear to prevent the charging cavalry to be flanked on the wings.”

Marc remembered that Commander Gata was the High-Commander under his grandfather and thus replaced by Alix once Marc's father became High-Chieftain. On the table in front of him was a sheet of parchment with a reed and ink set for taking notes. Pouring some ink into his pointed reed, Marc carefully applied pressure near the reed's point to allow some ink to show on the tip. Writing notes was a less tedious process than it had been when he had started at the academy, but his handwriting showed he was not meant to be a scholar. He was far more precise with a sword.

Alix's lecture went on to cover other versions of the wedge along with the appropriate situations where they should be used. He also went over the signals to use for formation changes when warriors would not be able to hear individual orders being shouted. Then there was discussion about how many men should be used for each of the wedge's different parts. All the information had its value, but Marc could not help his mind from wondering.

On the edge of his parchment he wrote the name "Sophia" with more care than he would his own. He wrote it down a few more times, hearing her name in his head and enjoying how it felt. Marc felt the eyes of Isaac glancing over to his parchment, so he covered the name with his right hand and looked back to his uncle. It was difficult to get back into the flow of lecture and note taking with his mind enamored with the idea of courting the young woman.

The next formation that Alix showed with a diagram was the bull's head and Marc's mind flashed to his horse stomping on the bull's head. To eliminate that image he thought of Sophia again. They had met while Marc was on one of his city guard training

days. Cadets begin spending half their day, once every ten days with a different part of the city guard at early as age fifteen, as a way to understand how a practical guard routine was established. On the rare occasion when Marc traversed the market on the main avenue with his trainer, he had come across the cart of a renowned herbalist and his daughter.

The first thing that caught his attention was Sophia's eyes. Their hazel color tinged with gold lured him to her. At the annoyance of his trainer, Marc stayed near the cart buying poultices for his injuries and camphor tinctures that he used to flavor his drinks. Sophia was a beauty beyond most of the nobles and commoners he had seen, yet he was most enamored by her ability to make him laugh. And he could do the same for her. Clandestine meetings on his rare times away from the castle and the academy had allowed for them to grow fonder of each other during the past year. The fact that she, a child of summer, was younger than him by less than a year would not be a deterrent to a legal union once Marc reached adulthood but their stations were what forbade them from being allowed to marry in the future.

Such was not an uncommon story in the Allied Clans as princes like himself were often forced to marry daughters of other chieftains or high ranking officers to solidify the alliances that held the clans together. On rare occasions nobles would marry from a merchant family if it would benefit the clan in a significant way. Joep Cureto, Sophia's father, was a retired sergeant of the city guard and not quite at the level of producing offspring worthy of marrying a prince. Marc questioned that line of thought when he

realized that he was thinking of marriage to Sophia already. His emotions for her could not be that strong—or could they be?

There was not too long to dwell on such a question as he heard the sound of tarpan hooves racing through the courtyard. Turning away from Alix's lecture on his curious instinct, Marc caught an armored rider in full view. He could tell by the rider's double-crested helmet that it was a colonel. The purple on the rider's tabard meant that he was from one of the Northern Clans, and left little doubt in Marc's mind that Colonel Driscoll had arrived to speak to his uncle.

He continued to watch the colonel as he halted in front of the dueling circles where cadets of Alon's age group were gathering for the tournament qualifiers. Dismounting at a hurried pace, Driscoll soon disappeared from view in the direction of the academy's entrance. Marc's eyes shifted when he saw a familiar reflection in the window pane. A sigh was all he heard before he felt a hard *thwack* on the back of his head. The blow from Alix's open hand felt harder than the books that other instructors had used on him for the same reason.

"How many times do I have to remind you to pay attention to my lectures?" Alix said in his authoritative voice loud enough to reverberate off the stone walls. The other cadets were wise not to laugh in response. The silent approach had caught him off-guard.

"I was, High-Commander," Marc said as he turned to face his uncle, "until I saw a rider approach." He knew better than to give away how much he knew to the rest of the room.

“We all could hear it, but only you were distracted,” said Alix. Marc could see in his uncle’s expression that there was more to say, but Alix let himself get cut off by the sound of heavy footsteps echoing from the hall. The high-commander raised an eyebrow and faced the door. Marc guessed that Driscol had taken the steps three or four at a time to already be on the third floor. Not bad for being forty-seven, he thought.

“Don’t think you will be excused from punishment, Cadet Marc,” said Alix. Marc shook his head and sat back in his chair, rubbing where his uncle had hit him. A knock issued from the door. Alix pointed at another cadet to open the door for the visitor. Colonel Driscol stepped into the room and removed his helmet so he could hold it under his arm. The hair underneath was a field of brown and grey long enough to be matted down by the helmet. A matching beard showed how many days Driscol had been away from his clan; a tradition in the north. It showed that he must have left Clan Driscol just after he received Alix’s summons.

Driscol dropped to one knee and bowed his head; twin scimitars in their sheaths hit the floor. He rose to his feet and said, “Pardon me, High-Commander, for I have urgent information for you.” The colonel scanned the room and the cadets with eye movements that were barely recognizable because of their speed. Alix had taught Marc to always pay attention to a person’s eyes as they could convey more accurate details about what a person was feeling than their words might. Driscol’s eyes told Marc that he lacked sleep and the slight wince from when he rose gave evidence that he was nursing some unseen injury. He wore a stern expression, yet the young prince could sense that there was some amount of issues troubling the man.

Alix nodded to Driscoll and the cadets rose to salute him in their region's native fashion. Marc's uncle used the moment to look at Marc—eyes promising a private lecture later. “You are all dismissed.” The young cadets gathered their notes and filed out of the room. It was just Marc that lingered in the doorway and looked over his shoulder at the two officers.

He was unsure why Alix bothered to dismiss him with the rest. He was as he was likely to be told or, more likely, to find out soon enough. Before Alix would have the chance to strike him again, Marc went into the hall with the others. Isaac and Cecil were waiting for him near the stairs.

Cecil asked, “You are going to spar with us after the tournament qualifiers, right Marc?”

Marc heard Alix say behind him that he and Driscoll should speak in his office. “That might be a while from now, Cecil,” he replied. “I have other duties to attend to first.” Alix and Driscoll went up the stairs and the three cadets waited in silence for them to pass out of earshot.

“What about watching your brother compete?” asked Isaac.

He was torn for a few moments, but decided that finding out what Driscoll had to say outweighed cheering on his brother. A possible war took importance over the tournament. “I will be there if I can. Tell him that, alright?” he asked looking to both his friends. With that, Marc bid them to leave.

Cecil opened his mouth to protest, but Isaac pulled him along. “I will spar with you if Marc can't. We all need the practice.” Isaac winked at Marc as the pair of them

went down the stairs with the others. The hall would be filling up with other cadets ending their lectures and time was short for Marc to carry on with his new objective. Below he could hear some roving guards in their armor crossing the first floor. Trying to match his uncle's quiet footwork, he went back up the stairs to the fourth floor.

He crept up to his uncle's closed office door and leaned his ear against it in effort to make out the conversation. Mumbled words were all he was able to hear through the thick wood. The stonework on the floor muddled what he would otherwise be able to hear from underneath the door. Daring to tap on the door to see if Alix would let him in, he hesitated with his fist out in front of him when the conversation stopped.

Alix opened the door. Marc put his hand down and smiled. Driscoll was sitting in the same chair that Marc frequented. His uncle held his arm out for Marc to pass into the room so he could seal the office once more. "Excuse my nephew, Jerrún," said Alix who went to sit behind his table.

"I'm sure he's a good lad when he needs to be," said Jerrún. "Am I right, Prince Marc?"

"Yes, sir," said Marc. Without another chair he leaned on a table that was positioned alongside the wall so he could face both officers.

Alix had his arms crossed in front of him. "Hold your tongue unless you are spoken to, Marc. Go on, Jerrún."

The colonel cleared his throat, "We could not find the bodies of any of the scouts, nor could any of Gata's troops. He doubled the men at the watch-posts across the length of the border and forbade any of the scouts to go out alone."

“Commander Belo has done the same with his scouts and increased the number of men protecting the miners at their camps in the mountains. There were no reports of beast attacks or sightings from any of the Eastern Clans,” said Alix.

“I feared you might say that,” said Jerrún right before he coughed. He pulled a leather satchel from his belt and took a drink when he loosened the knot at its opening. “I have seen several bodies of the attacked citizens and their wounds seem to have been from claws, not man-made weapons. There were not teeth marks on the bodies from what me or my men could tell though.”

“Then you believe my suspicion?” asked Alix.

“That the attacks on citizens and scouts alike are the work of the tribes—yes I do. And...,” said Driscol reaching for something else on his belt, “here is something to prove that fact to your brother.” He laid an unusual weapon down on table and looked to Alix for a reaction. A rough wooden handle split off into what was left of four boney prongs. The one unbroken prong had a beast’s claw attached to it. He could see how it could be used to blame the deaths on the beasts.

All attention was on the weapon as Alix examined it more closely. “A clever ruse,” he said. “Those savages appear to be learning after all. There is dried blood on this claw, Jerrún.”

“It is mine. I found it stuck to my leg after I killed its wielder,” said Driscol without any wavering emotion in his tone.

“So you did find a battle on your trip,” said Alix.

“The battles found us, Alix.”

“Battles?” Alix asked.

The colonel nodded, “We followed one strong trail past our borders, trying to stay away from delving too deep into any one tribe’s lands when my cavalry first found signs of conflict. Gata had told us where we could find some of the tribes that still traded with us, but we couldn’t find them. Their settlements were either burnt to ash or laid vacant.”

Another cough came from Driscol’s mouth and Alix waited for the colonel to take another sip. It would be an insult to inquire if he was alright. Marc wanted to ask questions regarding the battle as freely as he could when it was just his uncle in the room but he would remain respectful of Driscol, and patient.

There were smaller rolls of parchment on the table Marc noticed, next to the claw weapon that were not there earlier. His guess was that they were letters or reports to Alix, likely from Commander Gata himself. Their identity would have to wait, he thought, as Driscol let out another cough.

“I decided to investigate one of the vacant camps more closely to find blood smeared tents and cooking pots with their contents spilled but not yet cool. My two-hundred men were set upon by a thousand and more. To avoid being overrun, I ordered a retreat. I was not about to start a war by spilling tribal blood outside of our borders. Not without permission at least. We made it to the southern border when another group of savages attacked us. Similar in number to the previous group, they swarmed into a narrow valley with their frenzied yells and crude weapons.”

“I formed a wall of cavalry twenty men abreast and we rode through their center before they could form any real line. And we kept going, with only minor injuries

suffered, so I could send a pair of riders to Gata before heading to Amur myself.” Driscol let out a series of coughs and Marc felt sympathy for the colonel.

It was Marc’s turn to clear his throat. “Yes, Marc?” asked Alix, looking annoyed that the story was interrupted.

“Do you have a cup to spare Colonel Driscol?” Marc asked as he searched one of his tunic pockets for a thin pouch made from folded parchment—a purchase from Sophia. Alix eyed Marc, apprehensive for a moment, and then pulled a metal goblet out from under the table. “If you would, sir,” he said to Driscol, “pour some of that liquid into the goblet.”

“It is just water, my boy,” said Driscol.

“All the same,” Marc said, tapping the side of the pouch over the water to let tiny flakes of orange and brown out of it. “That should ease your coughing, Colonel.”

Taking a hearty gulp of water, Driscol cracked a smile from beneath his tanned, weather-beaten face. “I feel a bit better already. Thank you, Prince Marc.” Placing the goblet back on the table he said to Alix, “See? I told you he means well.”

“Please continue,” said Alix.

“Ah, yes,” said a voice far less harsh than it had been before. “Crossing south near Clans Gata and Bohun, which we had passed just days before, there was smoke rising from the direction of Clan Bohun the same evening we were attacked. Fearing the worst, I dispatched half my riders—Major Driscol included,” he paused to look at Marc. “My son, Agorix,” he said then refocused on Alix, “To offer whatever aid they could. After retrieving requests from Gata, I turned my remaining cavalry west to see that Clan Cathra

had been set ablaze as well. The enemy was gone by the time we arrived and an intelligent officer would not spare any more of his riders to help the people there. So I sent half of my remaining force to Cathra. That left me with my injured and the younger members of my original unit.” Alix and Driscol, the aging heroes, shared a laugh over that. Marc had no idea what it would be like to have his home attacked, but those from Bohun and Cathra were not the first victims of the tribes in Allied Clans’ history.

“Those who made it here will be taken care of as long as they need the rest. And the same goes for any of your riders who stop here before returning to Clan Driscol,” said Alix. The High-Commander reached for one of Gata’s letters when Driscol cut him off.

“Let your brother read those. I will tell you what Gata has said to me.”

“As you wish, Jerrún.”

“Commander Gata believes that this has gone beyond the mere border skirmishes of the past. Those tribes to the south,” said Driscol with disgust, “have not shown this fervor since the days when Shao Decando rallied his vermin against us. They are killing their own, Alix. Who knows what Shao’s heir is capable of?”

Marc was taught about that war—some of his instructors had fought in it—and he was almost angry that another war with the tribes would come so soon. A reflex at hearing the Decando name forced his jaw to clench tighter for the longer he dwelled on the cruelty that the Decando tribe had shown the clans before.

“An heir to the Decando tribe?” asked Alix. “I figured that Shao was smart enough to father at least one capable bastard before he was executed. I doubt my brother or General Tamarris will appreciate this information.”

“Clan Tamarris is trying to heal from the last war—that poor Rowan,” said Driscol. “His home may be at risk again. Gata is asking for a lot of warriors to be sent from Amur, or any clan, to bolster the defenses until the other southern clans can recover from the recent attacks.”

“My brother and General Tamarris are on good terms. I’m not sure which one will need convincing to do what, however, I know the general would be on the frontlines for the entire war if I or his commander let him.”

Marc suddenly realized that he could lose his mentor at the academy if his father ordered an all out war on the tribes. The full story of what happened to Clan Tamarris during the previous war was still unknown to him. Alix continued, “The losses the clans have suffered already should be enough to spur my brother into action. It may just take a couple days to reach a formal decision, but we have proof of tribal involvement now. Clan Zanisba is in your debt.”

“True, but I may forever be in yours, Alix. That is a matter we will have to discuss—in private—another time. No offense, Prince Marc.” Old war friends, shield-brothers, a bond often thicker than the blood spilt on the battlefield. Marc would come to understand such bonds if kept to his current career path. “I will need something warm to eat and a flat place to sleep if I am to be of any use to anyone.”

“An easy request to fill,” said Alix standing up from his chair. Driscol also went to his feet so the pair of officers could grasp each other’s forearm, a sign of greeting and farewell. “I would invite you to the castle for meals tomorrow, but I can understand if you want to return home in the meantime.”

“Thank you, Prince Alix,” said Driscol once he let go of Alix. He finished the contents of the goblet and held out his hand to Marc, “Thank you too, Prince Marc.”

It was an honor to interact with officers on a personal level, outside of a cadet’s trainers, and Marc grasped Driscol’s forearm in response. His hand barely reached halfway around the officer’s forearm and Marc thought to say a warrior’s common phrase, “The enemy won’t soon forget your face.”

Out of the many different responses warriors used, Driscol said, “And the headless cannot remember.”

Colonel Driscol was nearly through the door when Alix asked one last question, “Is there a name for Shao’s bastard?”

“Shane,” said Driscol. “It will not be the last time you hear it either.”

Marc and his uncle were alone again in his office when Alix said, “Hold out your arm, Marc.”

Not arguing with a punishment tended to act in Marc’s favor so he held out his shield-bearing arm, his right arm. Alix pulled a dagger from one of his tables and slapped Marc with the flat of it when he was expecting another scar. He looked at his arm to see a narrow welt that would turn into a bruise in a couple of days. “Not a cut today, Uncle?”

“The day is not over so pace yourself,” said Alix, tossing the dagger back to the table. “You showed a kindness to my friend and it is for that reason I have been lenient.”

“Shall I go tell Isaac about the attack on his family?” Marc asked. To his surprise, Alix’s uncommon speed allowed him to seize Marc by front of his tunic. He was lifted off of the floor and pinned against the door. Alix Zanisba, a living legend, had not slowed

a beat at thirty-nine years old. Marc was forced to stare at the similar green eyes that had lost their pleasantness.

“If you weren’t my nephew or your father’s son you would have been strung up for your disobedience by now!” Alix’s arms did not tremble as he held Marc aloft. “Who knows what your father will have planned for me when I tell them I went against his orders—despite my motives. You will speak to no one about what was said in this room. Understand?”

The grip on Marc’s tunic did not waver, but he could hear the threads beginning to stress under his weight. “I do, High-Commander,” said Marc unable to hide the trepidation in his voice.

There was a visible change in Alix’s expression and he let Marc return to his feet. “I’m sorry, Marc,” he said then pulled Marc into a hug. “How’s your head?”

Marc winced as a finger found the spot where he was hit earlier. “Nothing I cannot recover from, Uncle,” he said as they separated. He was thankful that his uncle’s anger seldom lasted long.

“Good. You should head back to the castle and clean yourself up before the evening meal. Luca may want to have you strung up to for the state your tunic is in,” said Alix, opening his office door.

“Does that mean I’m excused for the rest of today?” Alix nodded. Marc then had to ask, “What about watching if Alon will qualify for the tournament?”

“I’m afraid you likely kept yourself from that. With any luck you will both be attending the tournament together this year.” Alix sat back down at his table to read the reports from Gata.

“If Alon has qualified successfully, then can I tell him he is excused for the rest of the day as well?”

“Only if you two are willing to walk back to the castle as I think the academy’s horses need their rest.”

“As you wish, Uncle,” said Marc, rushing to get out of the academy while he could.

Some Small Relief

By the time Marc made his way back outside the academy building, the crowds from the tournament qualifiers had dispersed and cadets were either sparring among themselves in dueling circles or practicing with their trainers. General Tamarris was not in sight, but Isaac and Cecil were. A pang of guilt struck Marc when Isaac waved at him to come over, but he couldn't risk talking to him and letting something slip. He searched the courtyard for his brother instead and found him leaning on one of the circle's wooden railing with several others of his year, grinning from ear to ear.

A head taller than the younger cadets, Marc did not have to separate the throng to get Alon's attention. "Hey Marc," his younger brother said. "Guess what?"

"You qualified for the tournament," said Marc causing Alon's grin to subside a little. The younger cadets turned to look at the older of the two princes, but he ignored them.

"I was supposed to say that," said Alon. He was covered in sweat and was still breathing faster than normal.

"Well I'm not in the mood to play your games," said Marc. There were many things on his mind and with the rest of the afternoon off he decided start planning a meeting with Sophia. Her herbs had inadvertently prevented another scar on his arm, and if he planned correctly he wouldn't face many more.

"Don't you want to hear how I won my bout?"

"I'm sure I'll hear it when you are telling father over dinner. Now come; the High-Commander has excused the two of us from the academy," said Marc.

Alon nodded, never one to disobey their uncle, and went past the other cadets. After receiving pats on his back and a few more words of congratulations, he fell in stride beside Marc. Beside their minor age different, they were considered equals in their society and could walk shoulder to shoulder. “You don’t want me to take off my padding?” Alon asked when they were clear of the dueling circles and headed toward the academy’s gates.

That had escaped Marc’s thoughts and he stopped, “Might as well—we are walking back to the castle.” He went behind Alon and started unfastening the straps to the padding cadets wore in place of armor when dueling or sparring. The tan fabric straps came off easily from Alon’s chest piece. Whistling for a stable hand, Marc almost didn’t hear Alon’s protest.

“Why can’t we take some horses?” he asked as he unstrapped the padding at his waist. Then he handed the padding over to the waiting servant. “Thank you,” he said and the servant left to head back in the direction of the academy building.

“I’m not one to question Uncle Alix,” said Marc walking off again.

“But I borrowed a horse from the castle this morning.” A sideways glance at Alon must have shown Marc’s next question. “Don’t worry; I cleared it with father beforehand. I would have been late for morning exercises if I didn’t.”

Satisfied, Marc gave in, “Fine, then I’ll walk home alone then. It takes longer for you to get your face presentable for mealtime anyway,” he said.

Alon laughed, “I don’t take nearly as long as Sheid.”

“True enough. Go on then; just try not to run me over when you pass me,” said Marc. Alon ran off to the southern part of the courtyard where the non-military horses were kept.

Marc picked up his pace, jogging out of the academy so he could reach a messenger’s post before Alon could get a horse saddled and on the road. He needed to get a message to Sophia and arrange a meeting. The ramp out from the academy’s plateau gave Marc additional speed as he approached the lower elevation of the city.

The messenger post used by those at the castle, and for those from nearby estates of Amur’s noble and wealthy, sat at the junction between the main avenue and the paths that split to the castle and the academy. The post was made out of the same stones as Amur’s walls and the other ancient buildings within the city. It also served as an additional watch-post for the city guard. Marc had the unfortunate timing to arrive at its base when the hourly drums sounded. The beats were loud enough to where he was forced to cover his ears. Their tune signaled that he still had two more hours, or a hundred minutes, until the evening meal.

Amur’s economy could not run efficiently without the work of the messengers. One on a horse emerged from the side of the building and took off on the main avenue. There were another four horses in the small stable attached to the building. Sitting on a bench to the side of the post’s east-facing doors was an old, sour-faced man. Under the employ of Amur’s merchants and not the High-Chieftain, the old man could be trusted to ensure deliver messages safely and secretly. “Otto,” Marc said to the post’s master who appeared to be sleeping.

The man's eyes opened slowly, blinking to adjust to the afternoon light. "Ah, if it isn't Prince Marc Zanisba again," said Otto who seemed to need the same amount of effort to bow his head as a man half his age would take to kneel. Although he did not look wealthy in his unadorned blue vest and white undershirt, Otto was from a prominent family and had been a guest at the castle on multiple occasions. "Another message for the Lady Cureto, is it?"

Otto's memory had survived into his old age and he was a storyteller that rivaled Marc's grandfather. It was likely the reason Marc's father invited Otto to the castle often. One of the many rumors about the man was that he remembered every message ever sent through his post. That skill would work against Marc if his father ever pushed to find out what messages were sent and to whom.

"I do have a message for her," said Marc. He thought on his plan a bit more as Otto reached for some parchment and searched for writing utensil with his other hand. Because he would only be able to meet with Sophia in the middle of the night, they would need some sort of refreshment. It was then that Marc remembered that he was owed a favor by a farmer—one that would be willing to help without asking questions. "And another message for a farmer on the northern side of the wall."

"What should the first one say?" said Otto when he was ready.

"Dearest Sophia, please be so kind to grant a request for your loyal patron. I wish you to be ready to meet me an hour before midnight on the ninety-fifth day of winter. Be sure not to indulge too much during your evening meal as I will present you with delicacies for us to share," said Marc not expecting to come up with the wording as fast.

“Write the message as being from ‘M. Z.’ and she should know who that means.” The initials would not be enough to condemn him if the message was intercepted.

Marc waited for Otto to finish the first message before he started saying what he wanted on the second. “Master Groot, I am in need of you to fulfill your favor to me for rescuing Tobias from the bull. By the twenty-ninth hour, on the ninety-fifth day of winter, I request that you prepare desserts, water, blankets, and a table to be set out for my use. I ask that you set these items outside the tunnel that is on your lands.” Marc waited again for Otto to write down the message.

He had planned on using the area outside the tunnel as a meeting point since the summer. The water drainage tunnel built into the wall would not be the most romantic place for him to lead Sophia through, but it was proven for getting Marc out of the city on more than one occasion. Farmers with such tunnels on their lands knew of them and used them to help irrigate their crops. Until that day he did not know which farmer’s land had use of that particular tunnel. Otto looked back up at Marc, “Write the message as being from my full name, please, Otto.”

“Very well, my prince.” The messenger service came at a price, of course, that paid for the messengers and their horses. Being a prince did have the advantage of wealth, so Marc fished two silver coins from his trouser pocket and placed it in Otto’s hand. “They will be delivered before nightfall.”

“Thank you, Otto. Perhaps I will see you at the castle soon.”

“Perhaps,” the post’s master replied. As Marc walked in the direction of the castle he thought he heard Otto say, “To be young again.”

When Marc looked back towards the academy he saw a lone rider heading down the earthen ramp. He guessed it was Alon—a novice at saddling horses—and hurried to get on the castle's path before he was seen. There was still a mile to walk from the messenger post up to the castle's stables. The distance was a bit shorter if he went through the castle's main entrance, but he chose to avoid that path whenever he could.

The hooves of his brother's horse caught up before long and then passed Marc by a narrower space than was safe. He will pay for that later, Marc thought smiling. He did not know who to thank more for the opportunity at earning a favor with farmer Groot: Tobias or the dead bull whose dried blood was on his tunic. Half his plan was set with the messages written and it meant the other half would come asking for a favor from Luca. Maybe it would be a couple of favors if she considered cleaning him off after his most recent encounter with trouble.

His sole focus became getting to his room, which meant blocking out his mind's distractions all the way through the worn footpaths and avoiding conversations with friends and family within castle. Marc ran the rest of the way to the castle's stables reasoning that a bit more sweat on his clothes would not make a difference to Luca.

His room was set within a courtyard that was shared by other members of his family. The courtyard's center held a garden and a mulberry tree. Light came through the rectangular opening in the ceiling to where the braziers that lined the garden were left unlit.

Compared to the scale of the courtyard at the academy Marc felt his family's restrictive. Marc found his door open and could hear his personal servant humming some

tune. He sat down on a short, wooden bench just to the left of the door that had blue fabric covering the seat's padding. Removing his boots he then emptied his pockets' contents onto a table that sat across from his four-post bed.

Luca came into the Marc's bedroom through the archway that led to a private washroom—a rarity outside of the wealthiest families. Her height brought the top of her head to Marc's shoulders and her light brown hair showed she was from the northern region of the Allied Clans. Marc knew her family came from a line of miners, which accounted for her paler skin tone. Her name, typically that of a male, came from a father who wanted another son. Luca had to keep her hair trimmed off her neck as part of her position caused her to be mistaken from a boy from behind. Still, she maintained a feminine style by using bangs to frame her face in a way that highlighted her blue-green eyes. If not so confined to the short hair and servant's wardrobe, then Marc knew her beauty would rival the merchant's daughters that frequented his father's dining hall. To Marc, Luca's appearance was only surpassed by Sophia's.

"I thought I heard you come in," she said not wasting time with titles or pleasantries and he had never asked her too. Her eyes went to the state of his tunic, "Is that your blood?"

Rolling his eyes, "People keep asking me that question, but the answer is no." Luca closed the door for him and reached for the buckle on his belt. "It is from a bull," he said when he read on her face that she wanted to know what from. She placed the belt on the table that Marc saw was relatively clean, aside from his maps that practically lived on the table, until he came back in.

“The blood should wash off with some warm water. The two tunics you tore last ten-day are still at the tailor, so you will be needing this one sooner in the rotation.”

Stifling a laugh of what happened during the last ten-day week. Sparring with General Tamarris led to the ripping of many clothes; not all could be saved. “Better to have the tunics torn than me, Luca.”

“True enough.” She helped him remove his tunic and undershirt to reveal skin that was still producing sweat. “How can you be so warm in this weather?” she asked, shaking her head.

“I ran most of the way here,” said Marc feeling that he was getting defensive in tone.

“Good thing I’ve drawn you a bath. Off with your trousers and get in there,” she said pointing to the washroom. Luca did not bat an eyelash at Marc’s tanned, muscled flesh when he untied the laces at his waist and handed her the article of clothing. He had learned at an early age there was no such thing as modesty between personal servants and their masters. And no personal servant lasted long in the role if they were prone to blushing.

Personal servants were almost always women in the same way that stable-hands were always men. Servants of any type were given lodging, food, clothing and a fair amount of wealth when or if they intended on retiring. Securing a personal servant’s position in the castle was a rare gift for those of common heritage. Being a servant to the reigning high-chieftain or his descendants was considered prestigious. It also meant

having to be skilled in numerous areas ranging from medicine to cooking, and even weaponry as servants were the last line of defense if an enemy entered a home.

Those who became servants at the clan-family level usually stayed with their noble counterpart until death. Luca, as part of her duty, even slept in the same room so she could always be at hand. Over the years, her loyalty grew and she once confessed to Marc that she would never seek retirement. She had become his closest friend and confidant since entering his service at the age of eight when he also started at the academy. Luca was fourteen then—the age when many children began working.

Naked, he went to the wash basin that faced the archway and stood between the bath and the pair of toilets that filled the rest of the washroom. There were two necessary openings, one for each of them, carved into a flat piece of wood. They led into a sanitary system that was, by far, the most advanced in the Allied Clans. Marc bent to wash his hands and face, letting out a relieved sigh that he was closer to being clean again. Looking up at his face in a polished silver mirror Marc saw that he needed another shave before the evening meal.

Stepping one foot into the bath and then the other, Marc guided the rest of his body into the soothing water and stretched out. His head leaned over the edge of the bath and closed his eyes. He heard Luca's bare feet come towards him. She preferred to let her feet be cold over spending the time it took to dry her shoes if water splashed. Without any word of warning, a bucket stole some of the warm water from his bath and dropped the water level to the bottom of his ribs. Marc's eyes reopened and he said, "I'm in need of a shave."

“I can see that you do,” she said already holding a long-handled, short-bladed dagger used for shaving. They were both quiet while she shaved his face and neck. When she was done she had Marc sit up so she could begin washing him with a square cut of cloth and a cube of soap that she dropped into the bucket. The smell of plant oil from the soap filtered through the warm water in the bucket. She leaned forward on the stool she used to pull his head back to wash his hair.

“I plan on meeting Sophia again,” said Marc with his back to Luca.

“Not tonight, right? You were caught the last time you said you would go out.”

“That is why I commissioned a message saying she should meet me two nights from now—after I qualify for the tournament.”

“I hope you do qualify, but how will you avoid getting caught this time?” she asked.

“I was hoping to ask you for a favor.”

She sighed, “And what would that favor be?”

“Borrowing a servant’s tunic from your brother.” Luca’s brother, Rien, was close enough to Marc’s size in the shoulders and was just one of the many servants that worked in the castle’s kitchen. Servant’s tunics were less intricate than what nobles wore and would make for a passable disguise.

“I can ask him, but he is bound to your father and your father’s household,” she said, moving the stool so she could wash his legs and feet.

“Which I’m a part of,” he put in. “Nobody will know the tunic came from him. You can get it in the morning from him and deliver it to me when you bring my meal in the morning.”

“Well if I can’t talk you out of it, then I guess I will help you.”

“Thank you, Luca. I’ll count it as a birthday gift to me.”

“I can’t afford a gift for you anyway.”

“Nonsense,” said Marc as he stood in the bath. “I’ve told you over and over that if you want anything you only have to ask.”

Luca got up and brought a woolen towel for him to wrap himself with. She helped him step down from the bath and sped up his own drying process. “Anything I need is in the castle. And I won’t have you buying your own presents.”

Leaning forward to see into his bedroom, Marc focused on the day-glass atop the closest of his bedside tables. “Less than a half an hour until meal time, Luca.”

“Then you can finish drying off while I get your clothes ready,” she said going to his wardrobe in the bedroom. Finishing in the washroom, Marc and Luca went through the normal routine of getting him into his more elegant outfit. The tunic was made from a high-quality fabric and dyed in his clan color. Silver-threaded embroidery was on every seam and went into creating designs throughout the garment. His clan’s emblem was stitched over where a matching tattoo would be placed upon reaching adulthood. A studded, black leather belt went over the tunic with a polished silver clasp. He also wore a flawless set of trousers and a shined pair of boots that went half-way to his knees. Such

respectable clothing was expensive and expected to be worn by those attending meals in the castle's dining hall.

Luca had Marc face the mirror that hung above the table that faced his bed. He passed his own final inspection. "Thank you, Luca," he said. Unlike the other nobles he had seen with their servants, Marc did not take his for granted. She would help him with his plan to meet with Sophia, so all he had to do was wait. Two more days, he thought.

Qualifying Cadets

Anxiety had plagued his sleep and he had sat up in his bed more than once thinking it was morning. When he gave up on trying to salvage his sleep, Marc sat up to see Luca already had a plate of food waiting for him on the table. The ninety-fifth day of autumn would be an arduous one at best, but the night held a promise of some enjoyment. Blue rumott fruit and a narrow strip of salted meat was enough to draw him out of his sheets.

“Good morning,” said Luca. She was on her way out the door. “I have some errands to run. Make sure you eat all the food on the plate before you head to the academy. You won’t be able to compete on an empty stomach.”

Never much of a morning person, he managed to reply, “Shouldn’t be a problem, Luca.” She left him alone in the room as he got dressed in his typical training garb of a simple blue tunic and trousers that he pulled from his wardrobe. He ate his small meal, the first of two he would eat in the morning, before pulling on a pair of boots. Then he had to decide what else to wear on his person.

The war with the tribes had yet to reach an official proclamation from his father, but Marc already felt the need to have a bit of extra protection. He grabbed a dagger from a shelf built onto his wardrobe’s door and placed it into the sheath he had made into his left boot. Similar sheaths were made into all of the left boots in his possession once he bought a dagger small enough to fit comfortably. If his training taught him anything, it was to never be without a weapon during wartime.

He exited his room and was greeted by the muted early morning light that cast the garden in a mystical, bluish glow. Ancient stones near the still lit braziers around the courtyard radiated a fair amount of heat. Servants hurried past Marc in the halls on his way to the stables. The large, dark grey stones transitioned to smaller stones that were lighter in hue and had bits of red crystal shards formed into them. Whenever light hit the rebuilt sections of the castle they shone. The use of the new stones started when he was a boy, and the transition from old to new meant he was getting closer to the stables.

Amur was awakening with many of its citizens starting their routines at the same time as the cadets. Marc caught up to Cecil on the ramp up to the academy's plateau just as the sun showed itself on the Muthar's tower north of the academy. The tower sat almost directly north of the academy's entrance, in the center of the Muthar's earthen compound.

Cecil's head was freshly shaved catching the rays from the sun. Marc's should have been, too, in lieu of the qualifiers, but he was waiting to have that done on the eve of his birthday. Besides, he would be wearing a helmet for the qualifiers anyway and his shaggy black hair would provide for some additional padding. Cecil looked at Marc and said, "Isaac found out that his clan was raided last night."

Feigning surprise, Marc said, "That is awful to hear. So the rumors were true?"

"Yes, it appears so. One of Colonel Driscoll's men let it spill in a tavern. It was confirmed by a messenger sent to the academy last night."

"How did Isaac handle the news?" asked Marc.

“He hasn’t spoke to anyone since he found out.” The two of them passed through the academy’s entrance. Marc was surprised by the fact that there were an increased number of guards patrolling the academy. His father must have put the military on notice.

Cadets of all ages filled the courtyard preparing for the horned-head run to start. They cadets ran the intricate course every five days in the spring and autumn as part of their physical conditioning. The shape of the eight-mile course around both the academy and Amur’s western walls provided the run with its name.

Marc and Cecil joined the cadets from their year. The mass of tunics came in a variety of colors; each representing a different region within the Allied Clans. Those from the north wore purple, southerners wore shades of yellow, easterners wore black, westerners wore earthen tones, and those from the central clans wore dark-red hues. Marc went through the stretching routine with the rest of the cadets. In front of Marc’s ninth-year cadets were the tenth years who always got a head start on the course.

Isaac found his way to Marc and Cecil, his expression distant. Marc gave him a nudge with an elbow and asked, “Think we can beat the tenth years this time?” Rivalries between the cadets of differing years were common to say the least. It made sparring sessions between the years more interesting, Marc thought.

“Like we always do,” said Isaac.

One of the tenth years heard Isaac and said, “You boys may be faster, but two of us will be going to the tournament thanks to superior strength.”

“Oh, is that Cadet Felix?” said Cecil. Marc knew of the large cadet from the western region’s Clan Enchel. But he did not know many cadets that were fond of him.

Felix qualified during the previous year over his elders; making him a favorite despite his eventual loss at Cilant Anon.

“It takes more than fat being called muscle to show others you are strong,” said Cecil. Marc, Cecil and even Isaac, shared a laugh over that.

It was Isaac’s turn to nudge Marc, “Is that your brother,” he said pointing at the base of a set of stairs where the run would start. Marc looked in the direction and saw his brother, Sheid, with their Uncle Alix.

“Ah,” said Marc, not pleased. “What is he doing here?” Because Sheid was the direct heir to the High-Chieftain he was elevated to the rank of Colonel upon graduating from the academy. Only a sergeant or captain rank awaited Marc, depending on how well he performed in his last year as a cadet. Alix headed towards the academy building after handing Sheid a roll of parchment. Other officers followed in Alix’s wake, Rowan, Marc’s mentor, among them.

An order to be quiet was issued by the trainers who remained to oversee the cadets. Colonel Sheid Zanisba gave the signal for the run to start, “Begin!” The tenth years made their way up two flights of stairs that brought them above the academy’s entrance. Marc waited for the right moment—when the slowest of them turned north to follow the academy’s eastern wall—to run after them.

The younger years would follow after Marc in the same fashion, but he was more concerned with others from his own year passing him. First Isaac and Cecil passed him, and then several cadets dressed in dark-red. By the time the course turned at a guard tower positioned at the northeast corner of the academy, he had fallen into the middle of

his class. Felix disappeared behind the northwest tower of the academy with Isaac and Cecil on his heels.

The saw-tooth pattern of squared merlons and embrasures passed Marc in a blur as he started to pick up his pace. Running around his peers was a narrow endeavor on the academy walls, but became easier when he turned north again to merge onto Amur's outer walls. Marc touched the tower, or the first tip of the horned-head, and had over three miles to go before he could reach the next.

On his run south he saw the line of younger cadets going on their way to the first horn. To his left he could see into the silent Muthar fortress. Marc maintained his breathing and steady strides atop the wall. The raised perspective gave him a grand view of the lands to the west of the city. He could see the Rizor River far below the wall and the sacred forest that lay beyond it. The dormant volcano, Mount Azores, watched over the forest like the mightiest of guard towers to protect the burial ground of his ancestors.

Marc relied on small goals to keep him going strong through the run. At each mile of the course was a white painted merlon, and he looked forward to running past them. The gap between most of the tenth years, Isaac and Cecil among them, and the other cadets soon spread to a half-mile. Marc's training and inherent endurance allowed him to close the distance by the time he passed under the shadow of the castle. The sheer size of his home was daunting and was the largest structure he had ever seen.

His two friends shared the lead when they passed him again on their way back to the academy. Felix, who was red in the face and panting, gave Marc a sneer. That made Marc smile as he rounded the second tip of the horn-head. He was a conditioned runner if

not the best at his officer studies. With the qualifiers set to start after the run, he needed to make an impression on his competition. By the final turn of the course there was just Isaac and Cecil in front of him.

They had made it back to the eastern wall of the academy and Marc was not going to start his day off with a loss. Legs burning, he sprinted up to his friends. Marc, in a show of athleticism, angled his body to leap between Isaac and Cecil. He gave them a wink over his shoulder, encouraging them to sprint after him. Not content with losing, Cecil and Isaac got ahead of Marc again.

There was still the obstacle of running down the stairs ahead of them, and Marc had something in mind that he always wanted to try. Close to the stairs was a spear rack and he snatched one before anyone could protest. He jumped from the wall to the wooden landing that separated the sets of stairs. The spear-head planted itself in the platform and allowed Marc to vault over his friends. He landed in a roll on the grass of the courtyard, finishing first.

In between deep breaths and laughter, Marc said, "I think I won today!" From his back he could see some more cadets running down the stairs. Of course they had to avoid the upright spear. Some of the guards and trainers were laughing at the ridiculous nature of what they had just seen. Their laughter, Marc hoped, could mean that he would escape punishment for damaging part of the stairs.

"You're lucky I did not try to trip you when you dove between us," Isaac said half-serious.

Cecil held out a hand to help Marc to his feet. “That was definitely a new way to win.”

“Marc!” Sheid shouted from near the dueling circles.

Great, Marc thought. “I’ll be back,” he said to his friends. He went to stand in front of his brother, unaffected by the younger Rasheid’s impersonation of their father’s face. Since graduating from the academy, Sheid had grown his hair to match their father’s shoulder-length style. Marc had to look up, only slightly, to stare into his brother’s dark brown eyes. “Yes, dear brother?”

Sheid stepped back from Marc as if he did not want to smell the sweat pouring off his body. Marc knew that Sheid also hated having his increasingly expensive attire soiled in any way. That day he wore a tunic that was far more silver thread than Zanisban blue. “Are you done destroying the academy?”

There was a number of ways Marc wanted to respond to the question. He chose a serious, “For now.”

“Then I have some good news for you: I will be overseeing the qualifying matches.”

“Why isn’t Uncle Alix?”

“Because he is meeting with several of the officers.”

Marc wanted to say, “And you were not important enough for that meeting?” but thought it better to keep the words to himself. Instead he said, “Just make sure we start once the last of the cadets have finished their run.” Marc turned from his brother to rejoin his friends.

“You will show me some respect!” Sheid shouted less loudly than he had before.

Marc yelled over his shoulder, “Once you show me the same!” The joy he had from finishing the run was short-lived. He needed to rest and eat another small meal if he was going to recover enough strength to have a chance at qualifying.

Midday drums sounded in the city and four cadets were left. Marc was breathing heavily as he sat on a stool; guessing how many bruises were forming under his padding. His opponents used their wooden training swords like hammers. He had blocked more than a few blows reflexively with his forearm like he had a shield on it. The crowd of cadets and warriors was too thick for Marc to tell who was left with him. He had heard Sheid giving orders for two larger circles to be made for the finals.

Marc looked up and saw that the skies to the northeast promised one last autumn rainfall, he prayed the clouds hold their bounty until the next day. He did not care what physical state he would be in when he reached Sophia, yet rain would put a damper on his plans. From the look of clouds though, it did not seem like he was going to have such luck. An officer pulled Marc off the stool and he realized his rest between rounds was over.

The officer led Marc to one of the larger dueling circles and he saw his final opponent for today, Felix Enchel. There was no sign of Alix or General Rowan Tamarris in the crowd around Marc’s circle. Not having their support with him was almost equaled by Marc’s relief at not having to face either of his friends. Sheid began shouting again

and Marc would have liked to tune the words out. He took off his helmet so he could hear Sheid better.

“We have reached the finals of the academy’s qualifying matches!” The crowd cheered loud enough for Marc to wince. He almost put his helmet back on. “These will feature blunted swords and the first two cadets to reach a score of twenty-five will travel—in addition to the junior cadet victors—to Chilant Anon.” Another cheer went up from the crowd.

“To my right, Isaac Bohun will face Cecil Duarte. To my left will be Felix Enchel versus Prince Marc Zanisba,” said Sheid. There was yet another cheer and Marc wished the crowd would be silent.

From behind Marc, an individual from the crowd said, “We’ll see if Bevrán taught Felix enough to compete in Chilant Anon again.” Bevrán was a name that sparked Marc’s memory. A cadet in Sheid’s year, he was the adopted son of Clan Enchel’s chieftain, Cicero. Warfare often left orphans, but rarely were orphans adopted into a chieftain’s family. Although he could not name it, there was something else about Bevrán’s name that was familiar.

“Judges, to your places!” said Sheid. The last judge had almost cost Marc the bout and his brother had the decency to replace him. Marc would not admit that he started to feel nervous. Going against the proven Felix would not be an easy task. Felix had the ability to prevent Marc from what could be his last chance to compete in the tournament as a cadet. His own trainer, General Tamarris, was no pushover and had over a decade more experience than Major Bevrán Enchel.

“Hello again, Prince Marc.” He looked up and saw Colonel Driscoll with a pair of sheathed swords in addition to the scimitars on his hips. “Here you go,” he said, handing Marc one of the swords. He went to Marc’s opponent with the other, “And here’s yours, Cadet Felix.”

“Are you going to be our judge?” asked Marc.

“Indeed I am. Best put your helmet on,” he said and stepped out of the circle. Marc placed his helmet on his head and pulled the sword from its sheath. Tossing the sheath aside, he got a feel for its handle. If he had one regret about reaching the finals, then it was not being able to see Isaac and Cecil fight without restraint. Damn efficiency, Marc thought.

“I will declare the winner after the twenty-fifth point has been reached or surpassed.” Marc could hear Driscoll’s voice over the other judge, who was saying the same things to Isaac and Cecil. “The point values are: one point for striking your opponent’s an arm, two for his leg, three for the back, five for the chest, and ten if you hit his helmet.”

The same rules as before then, Marc thought. He kept a tally in his head during the rounds. Rain started with a thunderclap in the distance. Perfect, Marc thought. The longer that bout went, the heavier his already sweat-soaked armor would become. Relying on finesse would not be possible if he could not move fast without extra effort. If the fight came down to brute strength, he stood less of a chance.

Across from him, Felix was bobbing off and on his heels, and swinging the sword in mock thrusts at Marc. He stopped when a member of the crowd called to him. A set of whispered words passed between Felix and who Marc guessed was Major Bevan.

Marc assumed they were discussing strategy, and he missed having Alix or Rowan with him. He wondered why discussing the war was taking them so long. Then again, Marc thought, his little duel was not important as the fate of the clans' warriors.

The moments before any fight seemed like an eternity to Marc. He envisioned the numerous moves, their counters, his footwork, and he could not shake all of the previous hits he had taken. Driscoll saved him by asking him and Felix if they were ready. The cadets met in the circle's center and were supposed to tap the flat of their swords against their opponent's to show the start of the fight. The performance on the run and Cecil's jeering had not put Felix in a pleasant mood. His tap became more of a swing at Marc's sword and Marc had to twist his sword back to a defensive position as a thrust went towards his chest.

Blocking three strikes, the sound of clashing metal filled his ears. Closer to man than boy, Felix's own heavy padding did not seem to slow his attacks. Western Clans were known for their heavy infantry, so Marc should have figured that Felix trained in armor far heavier than wet cloth. It was not in Marc's bloodline to be intimidated as Felix grunted, swinging again.

Marc blocked the latest blow above his left shoulder. He was forced to look Felix directly in the eyes. Marc smiled. He rolled his shoulder backward and let Felix's

momentum and weight carry him forward. Quick to take advantage, Marc swung at Felix's open back. Three points, Marc thought.

He could sense Felix's frustration as a blind swing came towards Marc's head. Avoiding the sword by just leaning back, Marc aimed a swing at Felix's torso. Felix doubled over in pain; bringing him to his knees. Marc let Felix get up only to be rewarded by Felix charging at him like a bull run-ox. Marc tried to dodge, eyes wide, at the wrong moment and was tackled to the rain-soaked ground.

Landing on his right side, Marc he was hit on his left arm and leg. The dulled edge of the sword hurt far more than the wooden swords had. To block the next strike, Marc rolled onto his back. Another strike came for him and Marc grabbed Felix's sword and was inadvertently lifted back to his feet. The move was likely frowned upon by the crowd because in a real fight Marc would have lost his hand.

Felix's sword blade in his right hand, Marc drove his shoulder into Felix's chest and let go of Felix's weapon. The retaliating blow caught Marc square on the side of his helmet. He staggered backward and was late to set up another block. He only deflected the diagonal swing from Felix. It caused the sword to graze across Marc's helmet, and then landed squarely on Marc's right shoulder.

"One more point!" people were saying around Marc. It was looking like he was not going to make it to the tournament again this year as he was just a single point away from losing. Marc tried to shake out the pain that had spread throughout his right arm. It would take some cunning to come back from the point deficit. Marc used his sword to wave Felix over as if saying, "Come finish this." He left himself open for the attack.

The Zanisban prince seemed to be finished as a thrust came straight for Marc's heart. Even the crowd around their circle went quiet. A deft turn of his body enabled him to pin Felix's sword arm to between Marc's right arm and chest. His own sword free, Marc brought the blade down as hard as he could on Felix's trapped arm. Felix's sword dropped and Marc slammed his helmeted head into Felix face.

Blood spewed from Felix's face and he reeled. Marc bent to pick up the second sword. He gave them a whirl which sent the crowd into a rush of shouts and some disappointed groans. Felix had backed up all the way to the circle's railing. Marc took his time in walking to the center of the circle. When he reached that point, he forced the second sword into the ground—daring Felix to retrieve it.

There was nothing in the rules that implied Marc had to fight fair, or even with respect towards his opponent. Felix went to the sword, even reaching for it. The decision was rewarded by Marc hitting the outstretched arm twice in rapid succession. Marc reached for the implanted sword himself and saw Felix rearing for a punch.

A quick left elbow caught Felix under the jaw. The close-quarters move he had learned from Rowan. The impact left Felix dazed and his body open. Channeling his aggression, Marc punched at Felix's midsection with the hilt of his sword for no points. Then he put the tip of the blade to Felix's foot. Somehow, Felix remained standing after the attacks. Marc stepped around him to prod Felix in the back three times with his sword. They were tied.

Felix made a dive for his sword and pulled it free from the ground. Marc could respect the formidable nature of his opponent in his last ditch effort. Felix recovered

faster than Marc believed was possible. They met again in the middle of the dueling circle. Their swords clashed, silencing the crowds once more.

The impact sent a jolt of adrenaline through Marc's body. He gritted his teeth and pushed. They both fought to gain the advantage in the weapon deadlock. Marc had to only watch Felix's eyes to guess his opponent's next move.

Felix Enchel slid his sword down to Marc's hilt. Instead of challenging the maneuver, Marc let Felix's sword hit his own hilt strongly. It gave Marc enough of an angle for the flat of his sword to strike Felix's bloodied nose. Marc had won.

"Victory to Prince Marc Zanisba!" Driscol called out.

Right after there was a call of, "Victory to Cecil Duarte!" The people around both circles erupted into a deafening roar. Marc did not have long to fully realize his success as an actual straight-sword was thrown into the dueling circle. He and the crowd watched as Felix exchanged the dulled sword for the sharpened one.

"I, Felix Enchel," said the boy, who then kissed the flat of the blade. "Challenge Prince Marc Zanisba," he said and pointed the sword at Marc, "to battle for his life. Victory can only be found by ending mine." He finished what was known at the seventh salute by tapping the blade on his chest. The seventh salute—also called the dueler's salute—was numbered as such because previous six were numbered for the Allied Clan's five regions and Clan Zanisba's unique salute.

A flash of lightning issued to the north of the academy. Marc felt even heavier as the rain pound on his helm and padding. "No, you cannot challenge him!" said Colonel Driscol over the voices of the crowd.

Major Bevrán said, “Clan Enchel’s laws may be different from yours, Colonel. A boy from our clan who is old enough to compete in tournaments is old enough for the dueling rites.” More swords were thrown into the dueling circle. They landed at Marc’s feet as opposed to Felix’s. The warriors around the two cadets were from Amur, not Clan Enchel.

Unsure if he wanted to duel Felix to the death or just defend himself properly. He thought of the dagger in his boot, but it would not suffice alone against an individual with Felix’s skill. At a crouch over the closest sword he knew the act of drawing the sword meant accepting the challenge. His hand lingered over the hilt and kept his eyes on Felix. Marc did not want to earn his first kill against a member of the Allied Clans.

The sword remained on the ground at Marc’s feet. Felix ran at Marc with a yell anyway. Marc heard shouts and scuffling boots from behind him. Colonel Driscoll was half-way over the railing. Even Sheid, an accomplished combatant himself, was trying to push through the crowd. Neither would reach Felix in time. Everything was happening too fast for Marc to comprehend.

“Move!” a man yelled. Marc rolled away from Felix’s attack and almost tripped on the sheath of a different sword. Someone hit the top of the railing with a thud and brought Felix down like a predator who felled its prey.

Faster than anyone could say his name, Alix tackled Felix through a section of the circle’s railing and had the boy pinned on the ground. The sword in Felix’s hand had bounced harmlessly away from them. “You want to challenge a Zanisban prince, Felix

Enchel? Then challenge me!” Marc’s wide-open eyes took in the sight of his uncle causing Felix to cower before him.

In a defiant, yet wavering voice, Felix said, “I will regain my honor by defeating Prince Marc.” Marc saw that Major Bevrán had entered the circle along with Colonel Driscoll and Sheid, who had his own sword out.

“You have no honor,” said Alix. A backhanded blow rendered Felix unconscious. Bevrán went to grab for Alix, but Driscoll caught Bevrán with an arm around his neck. Alix turned his attention to the pair of officers in the circle; particularly Bevrán. “While in Amur all need to obey the common-laws of the Zanisba! As Cadet Felix’s trainer, I’m holding you responsible for his actions.”

“It was Bevrán’s sword that Felix held, High-Commander,” said Driscoll.

“I will make sure Chieftain Cicero Enchel hears of your subversion,” said Alix.

“Indeed he shall,” Bevrán said. Driscoll released his grip, so Bevrán could retrieve Felix. It took some effort for him to heave Felix onto his shoulder.

Sheid helped Marc to his feet; a rare sign of compassion from his brother. Shocked, Marc could not ignore the resemblance he saw between Bevrán and Sheid. No, Marc thought. It couldn’t be.

Bevrán Enchel had been Bevrán Zanisba—the only son of Marc’s other uncle, Baodín. In the decade since their grandfather’s death, Marc had been forced to forget that Bevrán was ever his cousin. That his Uncle Baodín, who was between his father and Alix in age, had tried in vain to become High-Chieftain and was put to death for it. Marc remembered liking Bevrán more than he ever like Sheid. He wondered if Bevrán even

remembered belonging to Clan Zanisba in his youth. More memories filtered into Marc's mind, but he could not dwell on them then.

Bevran opened his mouth to speak, "You can banish myself and Felix from the academy if you must, but please allow the other cadets from Clan Enchel to stay. They have done no harm here."

Rain continued to pelt those in the courtyard, all but making the area silent as Alix considered his words. "I will not banish you today because I cannot. However, the High-Chieftain will be informed and see if you two are fit for banishment."

Cadets and warriors made a path for Bevran to walk uninhibited out of the academy. Alix ordered an officer to ensure the two Enchels left that night. Marc couldn't help but feel partly at fault for Felix's actions because they were the result of how Marc had fought. He could not help feeling a bit ashamed.

"That will be all for today, cadets," said Alix. Those around him were not moving fast enough and he shouted, "Disperse!" Colonel Driscoll and the other officers in the courtyard repeated the order for those who couldn't hear Alix over the storm.

Alix put an arm around Marc's shoulders to lead Marc to the stables. "Best come with me to the castle. It is time for your father to make a decision about the tribes."

Clan Zanisba's Three Houses

Alix kept quiet as they saddled their horses. Marc was at a loss of words himself. Their usual banter would not suffice when faced with a possible war and Marc's own revelation about Bevrán. Despite all of the people that could claim to be of Marc's family, he only had a few first cousins. Bevrán was the sole one who could have been named successor to the high-chieftain if not for the actions of Bevrán's father. Marc had the desire to forget about his cousin all over again, but he knew that would not be possible.

Sheid and several other officers joined the procession to the castle with no one attempting to start a conversation over the thunder and rhythm of hooves. Marc wanted to thank his uncle for stopping Felix, but didn't know what to say. A chilly gust of wind brought small bumps on his exposed forearms. Free of the heavy padding, his drenched clothes bore little resistance to the wind and rain once they were out of the academy's protective walls. Marc kept his shuddering to a minimum as they rode.

All four Zanisban princes converged on the path from their stables to their family courtyard. Alix and Sheid led the way and Marc walked near Alon. They passed all types of officials, guards, and even some extended family along the way. Marc guessed that the numerous people were stirring the castle, in some part, to hear what actions his father would decide. He let the princes in front of him to act as his formality shield so he did not have to salute or bow his head to those they passed.

Alix was handed a folded parchment by a guard when they reached their collection of rooms. He read it and said, “We have less than an hour to be in the throne room. Rasheid, your father wants you to meet him before that time.”

“Yes, Uncle,” said Sheid, who turned and went straight to his room.

Alix eyed his remaining nephews and nodded at them before heading to his own room. They were left alone, minus the occasional passing servant, in the courtyard.

“You’ve looked better,” said Alon.

“And you can be made to look worse,” said Marc. He started to walk past his brother, regretting the callous reply already. The afternoon’s storm surrendered most of its water and left a mist to fill the open air.

A mutter of, “I’m sorry,” paused Marc. “You performed well today,” said Alon.

“It is expected of cadets like us.”

There was no question on Alon’s face at that comment. Instead, one formed on his tongue, “Did Uncle Alix tell you the news?”

“Yes,” said Marc without much thought. “Wait, what news?”

“About Sheid’s planned announcement for tomorrow night’s meal.”

“I haven’t heard that,” said Marc. There was more he wanted to put into his reply, but he would not do so with a guard looking on. Plus he did not need to waste any venom on Alon.

“I don’t want to spoil the surprise. See you in father’s room,” said Alon before entering his own bedroom.

Their father's room—the high-chieftain's throne room—was a place Marc could ensure himself that he would rarely visit once Sheid inherited the role of their father. There was always a chance that another man could become High-Chieftain, but Clan Zanisba have held a line of similar power long before the sons of Rasheid the First took residence in Amur. A residency always threatened by outside forces, clan politics, and wars. Speculation about Sheid's announcement would have to wait another day.

Luca was absent from his room when he cleaned himself off and began to change into another one of his expensive, tailored tunics. Marc noticed a few bruises and welts that would cause his beloved servant to cringe, but he did his best to ignore them. He was fastening his belt when Alix entered the room unannounced.

“I just received word that members from houses Zacúto and Sulla will be in the throne room as well,” said Alix. He adjusted Marc's clothes by pulling some wrinkles out of Marc's tunic in effort to make him more presentable. Marc had stopped becoming embarrassed when Alix fussed over him. There was the possibility that he could get punished for not looking his best for important occasions. Then there was the fact that Alix never had any children of his own. “I would tell you to carry a sword in with you...”

“Why?”

“To show that this family has more men of fighting age. Having just three warriors in our immediate household will be a point that either Sulla or Zacúto makes clear.”

Marc nodded at Alix's certainty in that matter. “I will be in the tournament so that should count for something, right?”

“Not to them—unless you win. Even if you do, the decisions will already be made.”

The younger prince realized their relative privacy provided a moment to thank his uncle for coming to his aid. However, there was little worth in a favor between family members as clan custom meant they were always indebted to their elders. “I want to show you my gratitude for coming to my defense today,” said Marc, but he could not get any more words in as Alix brought him into a tight squeeze.

“Speak no more of it,” said Alix letting go. “Perform well in the tournament and I won’t believe my efforts were wasted.” They shared a smile then, but it did not last long as Alix continued, “And be sure not to mention Bevrán. I will have to discuss that matter with your father and mother privately.”

“Of course, Uncle Alix,” said Marc.

“Now come, we must enter the throne room before your parents.” Alix put an arm around Marc’s shoulders and led them out of his room.

They traversed the castle through dry hallways with arched ceilings, passing the dining hall on the western edge of the complex, before entering into a massive courtyard. Guards in banded scale armor, a heavier version of the lamellar armor worn by Alix’s cavalry, were placed around the outer wall every five paces. The guard was doubled around the three entrances to the courtyard and four were even posted around the ancient maple tree at the center. The treetop marked the highest point in the whole city. They turned left, towards the throne room’s grey double doors. Marc seldom visited the place on his own accord as it represented where his father and grandfather, and high-chieftains

before them, ruled over the Allied Clans. The pressures of nobility were not something he didn't need reminding of on a regular basis.

The guards at the open doors saluted the princes in perfect unison, "High-Commander Alix and Prince Marc, welcome," said the higher ranking of the two guards.

Alix returned the salute and entered into the room ahead of Marc. He saluted the guards as well and followed his uncle, a step behind. Opposite the entry was a circular window of faded stained glass. The meager light that filtered through the window, with assistances from lit braziers, brought a shine to the polished stones throughout the room. Marc could imagine the glow being far more prominent if the afternoon light not being subdued by the passing storm. Thick rugs muffled footsteps on the path that led to the physical thrones on a dais beneath the window and served to prevent slipping on the stones. Although Marc could remember a few times where pompous nobles had made the mistake of hurrying past a procession on the rugs and suffered unforgiving falls. Lack of patience to be heard or to seek power often failed.

Columns, ten on each side of the path, supported the room's high vaulted ceiling and alcoves between the columns. His eyes went to the alcoves as he walked at a slower pace. Eight of the eighteen alcoves had stands that displayed the armors and shields of the past high-chieftains. Behind the stands were the weapons of the respective chieftains. Marc could smell the age of the leather and metal. Mounted around head-height on the columns were the shields and swords of fallen Zanisban princes. The integrity of the relics was maintained, but they still bore the dents and scratches from countless battles.

Small plaques displayed the names of the honorable dead. The spirits he prayed to belonged to the same men who used such weapons and armor. Despite his reluctance to respect living authority, Marc never made the mistake to speak ill of the dead. On this trip through the throne room he noticed that a plaque for his uncle Baodín was notoriously absent. Traitorous men were not allowed a place of honor.

Alix took his standing position to the right of the High-Chieftain's throne. To the left of that seat was Marc's mother's. Both were ornate, high-backed chairs made of polished maple hardwood. The backs of the chairs were the site of intricate carvings of ancient runes that few living even knew the exact meaning for. Marc stood on his mother's side of the throne, still a child, next to where Alon stood staring at the thrones' runes with obvious interest. Besides the three princes, the room was devoid of other people until the small groups from the Sulla and Zacúto families arrived.

Omar Sulla the Second, an aging merchant and first cousin to Marc's father, wore a rather puffed out blue garment and had ornate rings on every finger. The Sulla family came from the same warrior background as the Zanisba, but they were put in charge of the trade and collecting tribute for the entire city. Omar the Third, and some other men Marc did not recognize, came behind in less decadent attire. Marc kept his eyes on the tall spear that the Sulla patriarch used like a walking staff. The septum spearhead had a narrow spear point and two bladed protrusions that curved up on both sides. The Sulla's gathered in front of Marc and Alon, facing the thrones.

As if on cue, the Zacúto procession followed the Sulla. They looked far closer to their warrior bloodline with armor, tied back hair, and sizable beards accented with beads

carved from bones. They were recognized as traditionalists and thus the majority of them lived outside the walls of Amur where they maintained herds or fished along the Rizor River. They came to a stop near Alix and no words were exchanged. Their spear, whose head had the look of two ordinary spearheads that were forged perpendicular to each other, was carried by Farooq Zacúto. The man, older than Marc's father by less than three years, looked on the bloated physique of the Sulla patriarch with a sneer. Omar the Third shot back with a muffled laugh.

Marc resisted shaking his head at the other leaders in the clan. Both houses shared blood ties with Zanisba, but continued to exhibit form of hostility between each other that stemmed from a millennium old feud. If living in a clan had taught him anything, then it was that families could create more bitter enemies amongst themselves than any foreign power.

The room stayed quiet, except for the flames of the braziers, until Captain Duarte announced the noble procession. "I present to you: Ambassador Princess René and Prince Rasheid."

Everyone in the room turned towards the newcomers out of respect for their titles. Marc's siblings walked the path with their hands open at their sides. Sheid looked much like he did before the rain and his eyes were staring at their father's throne. There was no acknowledgement from the Zanisban heir that his younger brothers were near it. René's eyes went to the space on the wall between the circular window and the thrones. Marc knew the space was where banners hung to represent each clan with their respective

colors and emblems. At the center of the section of wall was the Zanisban emblem of the three spears. Two of the spears represented on the banner were already in the room.

René caught his eyes and they both smiled. She made sure to smile at Alon beside him. He had not seen René in days because of her ambassador duties, but he was glad to see her again. The grace of her noble heritage could be seen her body's movements in each stride. Her chiton gown was comprised of various shades of blue and went to her ankles. Marc was convinced that she could run on the polished stones and never lose her balance. Although considered an adult of the clan for the past three years, she still possessed a girlish figure. Her beauty would rival their renowned mother's once she developed more of her womanly form. To show a more desired feminine appearance, she wore an intricately woven belt around her hips.

Marc could see that Captain Duarte was waiting for Sheid and René to take their place on their father's side of the thrones. When they did he said, "And now I present Matron Catherine and High-Chieftain Rasheid Zanisba the Ninth, rulers of the Allied Clans." The captain then closed the doors behind the couple to behave as the sole guard. However, Marc could hear more movement beyond the door. He guessed that many of Clan Zanisba's top officers waited in the courtyard should the need for them arise. A reflex caught Marc when his father looked at him and he stood straighter than if a rod was tied against his spine. He recognized the regal presence in the room from the combined nobility, and even the similar appearance of Sheid to their father, but the Zanisban chieftain was almost beyond comparison.

Showing his rare form, Rasheid the Ninth wore a cloth head-wrap that was set with a blue oval gem at his forehead. It was the closest thing the clans had to a crown, but even the poorest of warriors wore head-wraps into battle, instead of helmets, to prevent their hair from blocking their view. Instead of a tunic, Marc's father wore an open robe of blue with the faintest amount of silver embroidery. Most of the needlework on the robe came from a combination of dark and light blues that bore a resemblance to the runes on the thrones. In the High-Chieftain's left hand was the third spear from Clan Zanisba's emblem. This spear's head resembled the blade of a straight sword with small holes along its center ridge. When swung the spear made a unique whistling sound that let all on a battlefield know where the Zanisban patriarch could be found.

Catherine regarded each of her children in turn. Her own gown was a more opulent version of René's with silver embroidery replaced by small blue and red beads. The red represented her birth family of Clan Tarvoy, in the central region. Her long, dark brown hair flowed past her waist, where more blue and red beads were located. Marc's mother had kept her form despite having four children and neither her beauty nor her noticeably ample bosom had yet to decline in her thirty-seven years. Her face was a guarded which meant Marc could not discern what she was thinking or feeling. Marrying into Clan Zanisba at age fifteen, three years earlier than a man could marry, had taught her this skill and it served her well.

Rasheid the Ninth used his hand to guide Catherine to the dais so she could sit. He turned and placed the base of his spear into a hole carved into the stone. Omar the Second and Farooq came forward at the same time to place their spears in similarly carved holes

next to the Zanisba's. The image they created was the inspiration for the spears on the Zanisban emblem. Once the spears were in place, the High-Chieftain took his seat.

Their leader surveyed the room, letting silence fill the air to show his patience. His steady voice replaced the silence soon enough, "Our clans gather in times of joy and in times of strife. Unfortunately, strife approaches us from the south beyond and across our borders. I've been assured that word has reached your ears about the deaths of scouts and the clans attacked by tribal forces. This meeting of our families will be brief or we risk losing more women and children to raids. I have received reports from Commander Gata himself requesting the aid from our clan. It is our duty to see what other chieftains can spare for the Southern Clans at their time of need."

"You speak of war," said the Sulla patriarch, his cheeks flushed.

"He speaks of defending our southern brethren, Omar. If the tribes want a war, then we will give one to them," said Farooq. That brought mutters from both sides of the room.

"The act of tribes raiding villages is as predictable as the seasons. Odds favor that these are individual tribes lashing out and ill-prepared for winter," said Omar.

"What about the scouts?" asked Farooq.

"What about the scouts? They were unlucky and overwhelmed youth. It is foolish to stand against vastly superior numbers. We trade with several of the border tribes and they have remained peaceful for nearly two decades."

"It is more foolish to let the tribes to continue their raids unchecked," said Farooq.

“The friendly tribes you speak of, Omar, have been slain or disappeared in the wake of a combined tribal threat,” said Rasheid the Ninth.

Omar opened his mouth to retort, but Alix stepped between their chieftain and the spears to say, “A threat helmed by Shao Decando’s son, Shane.” From the looks on the faces of most people in the room, it was not information they had learned before. “The tribes are unifying behind him or are being pushed aside. The armies of the Southern Clans are not prepared to handle this threat. We don’t know their numbers, but we have a solid twenty-thousand warriors at the disposal of the High-Chieftain.”

“More if you count the Muthar,” said Farooq.

“Yes, and the city guard too,” said Omar. “But are we to leave Amur defenseless?”

“The Muthar have been pulled for our interests in the north,” said Rasheid. That statement told Marc why their fortress showed little activity that morning. It was a mystery that he had little hope in discovering if Alix had not already told him, especially if Alix had not been informed about it in the first place.

“You dispatched the Muthar without my knowledge,” said Omar. The accusatory tone was clear and Marc realized that Omar had made a mistake.

It was Catherine that came to the defense of her husband, “And without the knowledge of Farooq, but he understands that the chieftains of Clan Zanisba have bonds to the Muthar that extend beyond their use as guards of Amur’s wealthy merchants. The Muthar’s expedition will benefit not just our clan, but the all the people within the Allied Clans.”

The Sulla patriarch's cheeks found a deeper red hue. "What business does—" started Omar, but what cut short when Rasheid slammed his fist on the throne's armrest. Marc felt his muscle tense in response. A quick glance to Alon showed that even he dared to look at Omar the Third with some distain. Omar's paler skin and soft shape showed that he was never a warrior himself, nor had he sweated in the shops like the craftsmen he employed. Catherine's words had been gentle compared to what could have been said.

"That business is not for you to question matron or myself about," said Rasheid so each word was clear. "With scouts and families dying, we need to decide on a course of action."

Alix was given the opportunity to continue and paced between the families, "Shao fielded fifty-thousand in the last tribal war. Shane could field even more if the recent attacks reveal his cunning. When Shao was faced with an Allied Clan army he was caught and the tribes dispersed back to their homes in defeat. With a massive army of our own, we can accomplish similar results. Commander Gata has five thousand warriors establishing our frontlines. He promises another ten thousand if he can get the support he needs over the first half of winter. Twenty thousand of our own can supply that support and more can come from both the Eastern and Northern Clans if the war is declared. Once the lines are established, then we can pull back extraneous warriors back to Amur."

Omar seemed to have calmed down, yet still had more words of contention, "Starting a war in winter can fatigue the men." What did the man know about fatigue, Marc thought.

“Our warriors are not afraid of a little chill, Omar. It is still fall and we did not start this war, but we can put an end to suffering of the common people.” Instead, Marc thought, the suffering would go to the warriors. “The House of Zacúto pledges its spear,” said Farooq as he stepped forward to grip the weapon. He continued, “Its warriors and its honor to its chieftain’s decision.”

“I will agree to this war if two thousand Sulla warriors can stay behind,” said Omar.

“Sulla warriors are Clan Zanisba warriors and that decision is not yours,” said Alix.

“It was a request, High-Commander,” said Omar.

“Granted, Omar the Second,” said Rasheid. “Two thousand city guards will be pulled to join the main army. Those staying behind will assume the duties of departing the guard members until their return.”

“Fine,” said Omar. The older man attempted to stand straight and look strong as he grasped the spear that once belonged to proud warriors, not merchants. “The House of Sulla pledges its spear, its warriors, and its honor to the chieftain’s decision.”

Rasheid stood and stepped off the dais to grab the Zanisban spear. “It is with heavy heart and mind that I pledge the spears of Clan Zanisba and its people to war against Shane Decando and any of his allies.” The respective wielders pulled their spears free and members from the lesser two houses filed out. Rasheid regained his seat and set his spear in another carved hole next to the throne. Captain Duarte closed the door behind the guests and went next to Alix.

Those left in the room relaxed some and those standing surrounded the base of the dais. Marc was separated from his older siblings by Alix and Captain Duarte, still mulling over the official announcement of war. War would change the dynamic at the academy. He wondered if any of the tenth year cadets would be pushed to graduate early. Many of the younger trainers would be sent off to battle and that meant less one-on-one combat training. Then there was the strong possibility that General Tamarris would be leading his own forces into the war as well.

Rasheid spoke at a different pace and at a quieter tone, “Alix, I hope you’re confident in having so many go south. I don’t think it was the cooler air of winter that worried Omar.”

“The other officers agree on this plan and Hugo here,” said Alix patting Captain Duarte on the back, “will personally choose the men in need of some fighting experience outside the wall.”

“I have more than one border to protect,” said Rasheid.

“Your suspicions in the North have been settled?” asked Alix.

“For now,” said Rasheid. He rested his chin on his left hand, elbow firmly on the armrest. “Sending Jerrún was a good idea, Alix, an idea that you should have shared with me. Don’t let it trouble you though. I also sent scouts to the south, ten of the Muthar in fact. Shane is indeed the new leader, but he is not alone. Shane has brothers and old friends of Shao on his side.”

“The situation is that dangerous?” Alix looked stunned beside Marc.

“Indeed it is, dear brother. Eight of the Muthar are dead or captured according to the two that survived to bring me this information. They just returned last night. Between all of these reports is why I’m willing to send so many of our own to meet their ancestors. How will you use the armies?” Marc had underestimated his father again as he was able to slip scouts past the well-informed master strategist.

A cleared throat gave Alix the time to recover, “I will seek a small order of men from the north, then. Their cavalry can act as better equipped messengers between the front lines and the clans. The western and central regions have been on alert, but will stay in their homes. Commander Belo’s infantry can be ready to march—”

“The Eastern Clans’ forces are still recovering from the last war. Clans Tamarris and Thell have less than two thousand warriors combined.”

“With less than ample numbers you should remember that the black-clad infantry makes up for their size with fervor in battle. As I was saying, Belo’s infantry can be ready to march before the tournament is over.”

“Ah, yes, the tournament,” said Rasheid to regard his younger sons. “I’m proud of you, my boys, for earning the chance to go to Chilant Anon. I’m sure you are proud of your Cecil, Hugo.”

“Of course, High-Chieftain,” said Captain Duarte. “A pity that I cannot be there to show my support, but my duty lies here.”

“Mine as well,” said Rasheid. “Despite the war, we will send our cadet entrants to the tournament. However, the warriors that have earned their way as well can forget the frivolity of a tournament victory when there is real glory to be found on the battlefield. If

the qualified warriors still want to be at the tournament, then they can act as guards to my sons. Otherwise, the plans for the tournament will go as discussed.”

“With modifications because of the war, correct?” asked Alix.

“Correct. Marc and Alon here, Cecil Duarte, and Trenus Maviel will be escorted to the tournament by Rowan and his *entire* infantry so that the cadets can reach Chilant Anon without issue. We must appear strong and vigilant for the sake of our allies and to our neighbors.”

“Yes, father,” said Marc. Alon repeated the words after Marc. “I will do my best.” He looked into his father’s eyes and did not see the boyish quality that he shared with Alix.

“Rasheid,” the High-Chieftain said to his natural heir. Marc’s brother obediently bowed his head to their father. “Prepare your cavalry. You will depart on the last day of autumn and will be riding to Clan Gata. Your uncle and I will write up your orders before then.” Rasheid the Ninth sighed at Alix before continuing. Marc assumed that he missed something on Alix’s face. “Advise Commander Gata from pitching a large-scale battle until Alix’s cavalry arrives with the rest of our forces.”

“As you command, father,” said Sheid. He bowed from the waist and said, “Clan Zanisba’s banner will be the first that our enemies see on the field.”

“You are dismissed, my sons. I’ll see you at the evening meal.” Three Zanisban princes bowed and turned from the dais. Captain Duarte walked ahead of the brothers, leaving the throne room in birth order, to open the doors for them. Marc heard his father speak again before he left the throne room. “Alix, I need you to stay until Rowan and the

cadets leave to coordinate the messengers and ensure that—” Marc could not hear his father once the doors shut to the throne room once Alon passed through. There was no way he could try to overhear the discussion in the throne room with the amount of guards and officers still in the courtyard. Nor did he want to even flirt with the consequences of doing so. Sheid and Alon took the north exit from the throne room’s courtyard, Marc did not know where Alon had to be before the meal. The clouds had passed the open ceiling and the maple tree was cast in the glow of a fading afternoon.

He took a leisurely stroll around the tree before heading to the south exit, the way he entered from. His lingering departure allowed him to hear Captain Duarte emerge from the throne room shouting orders for messengers to be brought to the throne room. The way Clan Zanisba operated meant that the messengers would be sent out of Amur before the ink on the parchment could dry. News of the war itself would reach the whole of Amur before the sun rose again.

There was enough time for Marc to return to his room, where Luca should be waiting for him, so he could finalize his meeting with Sophia. Then he would just have to wait until the rest of his family turned in for the night.

Sophia Cureto

The cold night air that came from his open bedroom window could not ease the sweat on Marc's palms and wearing the coarse servant's tunic over another set of clothes made him itchy and wholly uncomfortable. He stood behind his bedroom door, anxiously, the beating of his heart pounding in his ears. To calm his nerves he grasped the intricately-carved wooden handle of his dagger that was sheathed at his waist. Any of the boots with custom sheaths had to remain in his room because they would be recognized by the castle's guards. Against Luca's wishes Marc had found a way to take the dagger with him because he could be identified by it. His fingers traced the familiar visage of a horse's head carved into the door, and then he froze. The sound of footsteps echoed on the stone hallway beyond his door and Marc's grip around the dagger grew tighter on reflex. The roaming guard passed in front of his door and moved on until his footsteps faded out of earshot. It was only then that Marc released his breath.

Luca stirred from the bed against the far wall. From what Marc could tell she was still asleep. The two of them spent much of the night timing the patrolling guard's routine. He even took note of the last time a door shut nearby, and that was over an hour ago. The last time he tried to sneak out it was Sheid who had caught him and had escorted him back to his room. Days away from seventeen and still a child expected to stay in the castle once the drums signaled curfew. Nobles throughout the city maintained such rules for their youth, but commoners often ignored the restraints on youth. At the tournament in Chilant Anon he would be afforded more leniencies, or so hoped.

The moment came for him to open the door, but he hesitated. The risk of punishment kept his eyes on the handle. His time at the academy had shown all manner of punishments enacted on cadets. He forced an image of Sophia to the front of his mind and shook off the risks. Sacrificing his body to earn a spot in the tournament did not promise him a victory. Spending time with Sophia, however, gave him the strong opportunity to experience some joy.

He released his grip on his dagger and adjusted his tunic to cover the weapon. Looking once more at his room, Marc was satisfied that the bundle of clothes he buried under the sheets should fool any prying guards. He glanced at the painting on his wall, a rendering of an ocean bay he had yet to visit for himself. He wanted someone to witness such sights with him and he was closer to achieving that goal than ever before. He wanted that someone to be Sophia Cureto despite the rules.

He adjusted the head-wrap he wore, another borrowed item from Luca's brother, so that it would shadow his eyes and help prevent him from being recognized. With barely a sound, he opened his bedroom door and slipped out into his family's courtyard. The door closed with more sound than he expected, but nothing stirred. He crept down the hall, thankful that the rooms used for visiting relatives were empty. He could feel heat from the braziers that were still active, but their flames were low.

He had to rely on the stars, and other heavenly bodies, to light his way to the Cureto house. The hazy, blue night was dim to the point that he barely cast a shadow on the stones as he passed. Avoiding his usual path through the castle to the family stables, he veered down the servant's corridor where Luca's brother slept. Guards did not bother

to patrol where the servants dwelled. Marc cursed the borrowed boots that were smaller than his feet when he kicked a bench between a set of doors. He guided himself through the rest of the darkened passage with an outstretched hand brushing against the walls.

The scent of tarpan horses soon filtered through from the stables and Marc smiled. He thought it odd to smile at the smell of horses' waste, but he realized it was because his plan had worked thus far. He continued through the servants' archway that led into the stables. Like most of the old structures in the city, the stables had a wall around them large enough for guards to patrol its boundaries. Marc saw a pair of guards atop the wall and knew that they would see him when he passed through the stables' gate. These guards might not be fooled by clothes alone, Marc thought.

With the guards' eyes occupied elsewhere, Marc crouched. Staying at a low-profile, he stepped into the stable ground. The rough wool irritated his skin more in this position and it took effort not to scratch. His focus had to be on the guards as he grabbed a handful of earth and spat into his hand. He combined the elements into mud and then applied it above his brow and cheeks. The remaining mud and dirt was rubbed on the tunic. He had to wait for the guards to pass over the gate so they would see him coming and not be alarmed.

If Sophia had seen him then she would have laughed. He was far from resembling the groomed second son of the High-Chieftain. Even underneath the servant's guise he wore the simplest tunic from his wardrobe. *I am being foolish*, he thought. But he was willing to risk more than his refined appearance and title to be with Sophia.

What spell did Sophia put on me, he wondered. She would know all the combinations of herbs and other ingredients that Joep had taught her and it would not have been difficult to slip something into his food or drink during the times they ate together. Such a humorous line of thought; Marc knew that such powers and potions were restrained to the realms of stories. Stories like the ones his grandfather told him about princes who married for love, not politics. If it was a spell he was under, then he did not want it broken.

His parents did not tell him stories, even as a boy, and often repeated that he had a responsibility to the clan. One that could not be escaped from. At eighteen he would become a man and be able to make his own decisions. Marrying a woman like Sophia—without noble blood or a renowned family—was considered beneath nobility. The decision to elope with Sophia would be a dishonor to Clan Zanisba. It would also surrender the opportunity to earn any prominence among his people because it meant rescinding his role in the military. Doing so, along with wasting a decade at the academy, would mean exile. No other clan would accept him and if he abandoned the military during a war, he would be executed.

Regardless of the consequences, he would continue to woo Sophia and earn her trust. He had a year to figure out another way for them to be together. And the same amount of time to plot an escape from the Allied Clans if they could not be together otherwise.

When the guards were in position, Marc stood up and walked into the open. He did his best to assume a servant's gait. His shoulders relaxed and he shortened his stride.

Passing between two lengths of horse stalls and into the center of the courtyard, he was a mere thirty steps from the gate that would lead into Amur. A tarpan neighed from its stall on the north side of the stables. Marc tensed as the guards turned towards the disturbance.

There was no doubt that the well-trained guards had seen the disguised prince. Marc imagined their eyes on him, but dared not to look up so see if they drew their weapons. The rumors of war tended to put the guards on edge. He heard the ruffling of their armor, but nothing denoting a blade. Maintaining his servant demeanor, Marc walked over to the neighing horse and made sure to extend his palm towards the horse's nose before patting the creature at the base of his neck. Normally he could avoid the extra step before petting the tarpan, but he could not show the guards he was so familiar with this young horse.

On the right side of the horse, Marc whispered into his ear, "Easy, Rayner. Easy." The two-year old steed quieted at the voice of his owner. Marc had a heavy hand in training the horse since receiving him as a gift for his previous birthday. They had long ago become friends, but it would still be another year before he could ride him. Rayner was a beautiful specimen, even by tarpan standards, and was specifically bred for him at Clan Uhlan. The black muzzle gave way to a smooth dun colored body that featured an unusual black mane and tail. Rayner was fit for nobility and would be an important factor if he fled Amur at eighteen. Still, Rayner seemed intent on getting Marc caught that night. Marc gave his horse another pat, forgiving him.

He heard one of the guards clear his throat. "What business do you have in the High-Chieftain's stables?"

“Especially with Prince Marc’s horse?” the other guard asked. These men had to have been members of the guard for years if they could identify a noble’s horse so quickly. That fact almost forced Marc to smile in spite of himself—guards that could identify a horse in the darkness but not a prince with mud on his face. He bowed his head respectfully, brushing his chin on his collar, and stepped away from Rayner, Marc knew that hesitation could mean worse things than being recognized.

“Excuse me, master guardsmen,” Marc started in a voice in a higher pitch than his own, “I am on an errand for Prince Alon who has requested me to pick up a book that had to be restored after he had spilled wax on it.” It was no secret that Alon, Marc’s younger brother by three years, often stayed up late reading. The habit was frequent enough that their father had stopped trying to punish the boy for it. “And all I tried to do was quiet the horse before he awoke any of the others.” Marc was glad the other horses were not light sleepers or maybe, he thought, that they saw no need to stir in the presence of a servant.

“Why does Prince Alon need the book at this time of night?” the first guard asked.

Another test, Marc knew, and he had prepared for this as well, “I know better than to question Prince Alon when he has one of his headaches.” The last word lingered in the night air and Marc knew he had succeeded in his ruse when he saw the recognition on their faces. Since Alon was four he was prone to having intense headaches, like their mother, that would put him in a sour mood for hours. There rumor among the nobles at the castle, one that Marc did not believe, that Alon had a servant flogged one night because the man had failed to bring Alon some medicinal tea to help ease the pain. Alon

had told Marc that he enjoyed how obedient some servants were from then on and never questioned it.

“You may pass, servant,” said the first guard. “Open the gate,” he told the other guard.

Marc took a bow to hide the grin that was forming on his face and said, “Thank you again, master guardsmen.” Then he proceeded directly through the gate to enter the city that lay beyond it. Not the brightest of guards, Marc thought. There was not a servant he could think of that would walk through the city with a dirty face. The guards’ negative attitude towards servants, or their ignorance, was something Marc had counted on. They saw being a warrior as a prestigious honor while being a servant was just an occupation for women and those who couldn’t fight. He did not make the mistake of looking back at the guards who would, no doubt, be watching him.

The biggest hurdle, Amur Castle, lay behind him. All he had left was to meet with Sophia outside of her father’s house. He walked down the muddy horse ramp that led from the castle’s foundation and once again towards the main avenue to the north. If he kept a vigorous pace, then he could reach Sophia, at the northern center of the city, within an hour. He relied on the sky’s two moons to light his way, Mimas and Rhea. Mimas, the smaller of the two, held a bluish tint while Rhea was grey with a slight red glow. Marc studied both moons as part of his education and knew their paths would soon cross. They only crossed paths twice a year, and the second time signified his birthday.

He passed the castle’s main entrance without looking at the massive archway and stone-paved ramp up to the Pillars of Amur. It was a heavily guarded way for chieftains

and commanders, not mischievous third-born princes. The western part of the city was quiet, as were the nearby noble estates. Marc could count the guard towers, which stood like beacons of light along Amur's perimeter walls and spaced throughout the city itself. War had come to the Allied Clans' borders again and the nobles could rest on that fact. History had taught Marc that when one clan was affected by battle, then all the clans were. Those like the Sulla have grown complacent in their wealth thanks to the protection of the Amur's army and walls. It was why few, outside current and retired warriors, would dare travel away from the cities and clan strongholds on their own. There was not the threat of thieves or raiders, which cities outside the clans experienced, to worry about. Instead, untamed creatures frequented the uninhabited lands both within and outside the Allied Clans' borders, especially during winter. Marc feared what the wild beasts could do to a man, but encountering them would be a part of daily life without a clan for protection.

Although possible he could still be recognized on the main avenue, Marc knew it was the fastest route to Sophia. Keeping to the north side of the avenue, he passed large stone estates that rivaled some of the strongholds other clans maintained. These estates belonged to relatives like the Sulla, city officials, and retired high-ranking officers. The buildings were surrounded by fences that held yards for grazing or winter crops that were due to sprout soon.

The walk to Sophia's afforded him time to think, and he needed to think of something to keep his mind off of his uncomfortable attire. Marc, unlike many of his peers, enjoyed winter. Besides, it being the season of his birth. The rains allowed for

more time indoors for him to pour over history texts and maps without others knowing. Winter's effect on the sun meant shorter days and longer nights. To him, it meant the possibility of more secret outings to see Sophia.

The eerie quiet of the western side of the city was in sharp contrast to the city's center. Storefronts and workshops were landmarks on both sides of the avenue. Dispersed among them were the humble wood houses of Amur's citizens. Taverns' patrons could be heard shouting to each other or singing, filling their bellies with stiff drinks all the while. He envied them for their freedoms compared to those tied to the nobility. A title and power only tied him down. The craftsmen, farmers, and servants could leave the city and risk their lives to challenge nature and venture into the unknown. His knowledge and training, incomplete as it was, could still find him employment outside the clans.

A handful of city guardsmen walked in his direction on the main avenue, forcing Marc to veer down an alleyway. Avoiding the confrontation, he heard no discussion or even the slightest sound of pursuit. He sighed in relief and decided to stay off the main avenue until his return trip. As he leaned against the side of a wooden building, waiting for the guards to pass, he decided that he would not be restrained to Amur between military deployments. Not when he had the sense of adventure inherited from his forbearers. And especially not if it meant having to obey Sheid for the rest of his life.

Just one more year, he thought.

The paths around the houses transitioned from cobblestone of the main avenue to those made of hard-packed clay. After avoiding a few scattered pockets of citizens along the way, Marc made it to an intersection of some simple, single-leveled houses. None of

the buildings around him showed any light from within, yet he knew that Sophia was waiting in one of them.

He went to the well at the center of the houses, drew a bucket of water and washed his face of the mud.

“Ah,” he said as he patted his face dry on one of the tunic’s sleeves. “That’s better.”

He would have liked to remove the cramped boots, but his feet would have to endure until he was outside the wall. Finishing with the bucket, he inspected his reflection in the settling surface of the well. Bags had formed under his eyes and his stubble was more prominent than it had been that morning.

A door opened to his side and Marc’s surprise almost knocked the bucket off the well’s edge. “Who’s there?” a female voice called out, barely above a whisper.

Marc straightened his posture and adjusted his borrowed tunic. “Sophia?” he asked, almost in disbelief at her appearance. A wide smile spread on his face as he took her in. He could scarcely see the light blue dress she wore because of the hooded grey-fur robe she had on over it. The top of the dress, however, did reveal the slightest amount of cleavage. The sight was alluring, but he thought growing up with woman in his room for most of his life would prevent him from feeling any arousal at such a small amount of exposed skin. How wrong he was. He directed his thoughts back to the robe which was far too warm of an item to wear in late autumn. The hood also blocked her hair from view.

Sophia's face was the real reason behind his smile. A jewel among pebbles, her manicured brows and light red-stained lips showed a level sophistication usually found only among nobles. A part of him hoped that the cosmetics did not cost her anything drastic. He felt that she didn't need anything to supplement her natural beauty. Her hazel eyes consumed him with a mix of innocence and knowing that held him in place.

"Oh, Marc, it's you," she said, closing the door to her house. "I was getting worried that you had got caught." She rushed into his awaiting embrace. Her well-developed feminine form pressed against his and he wished there was not so much material between them. That wish masked the pain he felt as her hand found the spot on his right shoulder where Felix had struck a blow. They pulled away from each other to speak face to face.

He gathered her hands and held them to his chest and she smiled at him. "I was not going to let the city guards stop me from seeing you. Not tonight." Her hands shook against his chest, but he could not tell if she was cold, excited, or scared of being caught herself. He wanted to lay his lips on her shaking hands and blow his warmth and confidence into her. "Did your father find out about our meeting?"

"Not tonight," she said, repeating his playful tone.

There was so much he wanted to tell her. He wondered if she had learned of the war and a host of other things. Holding his tongue, he asked, "Will you follow me?"

Of course, my P—" She stopped. Blushing, she recovered from her near mistake, "Of course, Marc."

He let go of one of her hands so he could hold the other as he led her away from her house. Successful thus far, Marc just needed famer Groot to come through. His heart pounded a bit faster the closer they got to the tunnel that would take them out of the city proper. If Sophia felt his rapid pulse in her hand, then she did not speak of it. They would be alone as two people could be and, to top it off, together under the moons and stars.

Some houses they passed still held the scent of cooking fires. He too had eaten less during the evening meal hours before and was feeling hungry again. An instinctive sense forced him to look back at a tavern they passed. He felt compelled to turn west down a narrow alley to pass a row of houses before switching back to a northern route.

“What’s wrong?” asked Sophia from his side—walking together as his equal. Something he insisted upon during an earlier meeting and it helped maintain his disguise. She traded his hand to entwine their elbows when he hesitated telling her.

“Nothing,” he said. Sophia gave him a look that he could feel. She was a girl that would not take being lied to. Marc corrected himself, “I had a feeling we were being followed.” Being followed was something he was used to during the day, but being followed at night was a more dangerous proposition. City guards would not need to come to his aid if they were attacked. The dagger at his waist could protect Sophia if the situation called for its use.

“Other people do live here, you know. No reason to worry, Marc.”

He could have debated if her words came from knowledge of the city or innocence in the ways of the world. Still, her words calmed him. They were not harsh, like the tone many used with him on a daily basis. Even the way she said his name was

different. She used it like a word she just learned the meaning of. “If you say so, Miss Cureto.”

She pulled him off his stride, “You said not to call you by your title, so don’t force one on me. Now, I ate a light meal like you said and I’m a bit famished.”

He regained his step, “We are almost there, Sophia.” Marc no longer had the feeling he was being followed by the time they reached their destination. The recent rains made a small pool around the tunnel’s opening.

“We are going through there?” asked Sophia.

The water went past Marc’s ankles when he stepped into the pool. Leaning his head inside the dark tunnel, he could barely see the other side of it. “That is what I had planned.” He would have to carry her both ways. Not a happy prospect for his sore limbs, but he said, “Let me carry you to the other side.”

“And I was thinking that you would be afraid of getting dirty. I will let you carry me,” she said. “Please, turn around.” Without much of a warning, she jumped to latch onto his back. One of her arms wrapped over his shoulder and her legs held tight around his waist.

“What happened to your other hand?” he asked. His hands steadied above her knees.

“It’s busy keeping my clothes dry.”

“Oh,” he should have figured that out on his own. “You should eat more,” said Marc, trudging through the tunnel’s muck. “I can barely feel you.”

She tightened the grip of her legs, “Maybe you are just that strong.”

“Maybe.” He went as fast as he could through the tunnel without causing the water to splash. They emerged outside of the northern wall and it became much colder without the structures to shield them from the brunt of cool breezes. Waiting a few paces from the tunnel was a small, square wooden table with a pitcher of water, a pair of wooden goblets, and two covered bowls. All appeared to be as requested. If what lay inside the bowls pleased Sophia, then risking himself for young Tobias Groot was well worth the effort. There was a single bench at the table with just enough room for two.

Marc set Sophia down and gestured to the table. On the bench was a pair of blankets. “Is this all for us?” she asked, stunned. He set her back down and she went to the table.

“I don’t see anyone else around.”

She lifted a lid of one of the covered bowls and said, “Boiled custard with honey! How did you arrange all of this?”

“The short version is that I was owed a favor. Have a seat and I will tell you the rest.” Marc removed his head-wrap and tunic while Sophia set the blankets on the bench to give it some padding. “I thought you could use those blankets for warmth.” He untied the dagger from the tunic and placed it on the table.

“I have my robe, but no, I’m not cold. Aren’t you cold in that vest?”

He took his place beside her on the bench, shaking his head. The vest was sleeveless and unfastened that showed off the tone muscles of his abdomen. “So, do you like the view?” he asked about the scenery.

Sophia’s eyes were on him, “I’ve never seen anything better.”

It was his turn to feel the blood rush to his cheeks and he laughed. "I mean the fields, the hills, and even the river can be seen from here." He busied himself with pouring them water.

"Ah, those. Yes, they are beautiful too. So, I'm waiting to hear about this favor you earned." They ate the custard and Marc divulged how he came to the heroic rescue of a farmer's son.

When they finished their desserts Marc started a low fire, more for heat than light.

Sophia used the excuse of the additional heat to remove her robe. Marc finally saw her brown hair, usually half-way down her back, was fashioned into a loose chignon. Removing the hood caused some strands of hair to fall across her face. Not caring to adjust the loose hairs, Sophia asked, "Do you have anything else planned for this evening?"

"I need to remove these boots, then I was hoping to talk to you more tonight." He would have removed them earlier, but avoided doing so in case the sight of them sickened his date.

"And what would that be?" Sophia asked, the custard's honey adding a shine to her lips. Her seductive lips and tone changed when she saw that Marc's feet were blistered and bloodied. She went to his side of the bench and had him turn away from the table. "Your poor feet. What were you trying to do to them?"

"You don't have to fuss over them. I've had much worse damage to other areas."

“Nonsense, Marc. I’m a healer’s daughter, remember? I’ve seen much worse than this, so don’t try to be so tough.” She had to pull up the hem of her dress to crouch close enough to inspect his feet.

The word ‘failure’ came to his mind. “I’m sorry, Sophia. This is not the romantic night I wanted for you.”

She used some of the remaining water to rinse his feet. “This night has been already more than I could have hoped for.” A blanket was pulled from the bench to dry off his feet. The loosely woven fabric of the dress had slipped well past her knees. It took considerable mental effort for Marc not to steal a glance between her legs. He stared into her eyes as she massaged his feet. “Now do you have any other injuries you’re not telling me about?”

The only visible one he found earlier was the one the vest hid on his shoulder muscle. “Not tonight. You can ask me again when I get back from the tournament.”

“I knew you would qualify.” She pushed against his chest with both hands so he was forced to lie down on the bench. “Oh how I wish I could go with you.”

“Not even winning would please me more,” he said honestly. She kissed his lips for that sentiment. There was more he wanted to say before their relationship progressed to anything physical. What he had intended to discuss was forgotten once her lips brushed his ear and neck.

“I have heard women talk about how they wish their men luck before heading off to battle...or tournaments.” One of her hands freed him of his upper garment while her lips explored his chest for the first time. Her other hand worked his belt loose.

Marc felt a chill when more fully exposed to the night air. Sophia's touch warmed his flesh and her mouth travelled down his body. He managed weak, "Wait," but could not resist.

"We will both keep our honor and still find pleasure. Now, Marc, I want you to relax."

Consequences

He was disturbed too soon after Marc snuck back into his room. Exhausted, he barely had the energy to stash the borrowed clothes in his wardrobe for Luca to find. There came a hard pounding on his door at what felt like dawn to him. The birds out in the courtyard's garden had already ceased their first songs of the day and chirped over other matters. He stirred in his bed, with one eye peering open while the rest of his face remained buried in his pillow. Never a morning person, the last two years at the academy—with required days of early morning combat training, had only intensified his sour mood for the first hours of the day.

The pounding resumed on the door, but this time it was accompanied by a shout of, “Marc!” It was the voice of Rowan Tamarris.

That caused Marc to sit up in his bed, guessing that he must have overslept for Rowan to have come for him personally. Luca, not in the room from what he could see, must have failed to wake him. If that were the case, he would not reprimand her for it. She risked punishment for helping him already. Getting up from the bed, he scrambled to put on a pair of trousers and said, “I will be right out, sir.”

He opened the wardrobe and reached for his studded leather training garb, when Rowan said from outside, “Do not bother with the training garb. Just grab a tunic, but don't put it on.” A tunic in his hand instead, Marc closed the wardrobe and pulled on a pair of boots, that fit him this time, with some minor pain. He went to the door and opened it to find his mentor's imposing figure waiting right outside.

Nearly as tall as the door's threshold, Rowan seemed strong enough to hold the arch in place if the walls caved in around him. The man, too, was down to boots and trousers. Born in the east under the shadow of the Tribulon Mountains, he showed that the cold of morning had no effect on him. Scars were scattered on the visible flesh, with a recognizable faint white line diagonally across Rowan's prominent nose. On his left pectoral was the tattooed emblem of his clan. The ink showed a single salt cedar tree and below the tree there was a boulder.

Marc heard a few descriptions of the Tamarris emblem, but the one heard most was, "Men who grew from stone," and he believed it. Rowan gave Marc the Eastern Clan salute by placing the first two fingers of his right hand over the tattoo. Then he bowed his head for a moment, sending his wavy black hair across his face. Marc responded with the salute of his family by gesturing with his left hand toward his left hip, where a weapon would normally be. Then he raised the hand to his left temple and bowed his head with his eyes closed. Both were peaceful salutes and were only two of six that Marc had been taught; one for each of the clan regions and one for his own Clan Zanisba. He was surprised he mustered the proper response at all, but the movement was so ingrained since youth it had become a reflex. The seventh salute that Felix Enchel taught him he hoped to never use.

"General," started Marc, but Rowan turned and started to lead Marc towards the stables. Rowan's silence was not unusual, but Marc thought his combat mentor would be more personable after nearly two years of one-on-one training and living at the castle for most of Marc's life. He followed his mentor, shivering in the cool morning air and looked

at his own chest which was covered in tiny bumps. They came across few other people on their way through the castle, all of them servants. Marc felt short and scrawny walking behind Rowan. Left to stare at the man's back, he was reminded that Rowan showed himself to be a true warrior because of the lack of scars on his back. Only honorable officers were allowed to teach at the academy.

The sun had yet to clear the Tribulon Mountains far to the east by the time they reached the main avenue. It was early enough in the day for the city to be quiet still. Marc could see few people on the streets and only a single cart being led away from a noble's estate. "What is the plan for today?" asked Marc, unsure if he would receive an answer.

It was not until they were passing through the academy's gates that Rowan answered Marc, "The plan is to teach you some discipline."

Marc swallowed audibly. He knew he was due for some punishment and could think of several ways for such "lessons" to be administered. The only thing he had done to earn any punishment in the last day was sneaking out to see Sophia, unless he was late. He wondered again if he was being followed through the city. If someone saw what Sophia was doing to him outside the wall, then it would likely be his father that disciplined him personally. The guards at the castle's stables changed at midnight, and he just knew it wasn't any of them that could have recognized him.

As if on cue, cadets and trainers poured forth from the academy building. Marc wasn't late to training then—his night's actions were discovered. When it came to punishments, the one who needed it was always considered late. Rowan led him further into the courtyard to a space of grass where another officer stood holding two of the

wooden swords. Wooden practice dummies were placed in some of the dueling circles and targets had been set up for spear-throwing practice. Other cadets and their trainers began their routines; the sounds of their activities filled the air. Marc noticed that none of his peers were without their training garb and he began piecing things together.

Going out into the courtyard without armor was usually reserved for hand-to-hand training, but when combined with weapons it always meant punishment. Rowan reached the circle ahead of Marc and was tall enough to stride over the fence. Marc still had to jump over, remembering not show fear about what was likely to come. A few of the trainers looked on when they saw Rowan taking the swords from the lower-ranked officer. Cadets knew better than to avert their attention as such because they too could be reprimanded. Any pain Marc had the day before would soon be overshadowed.

The empty-handed officer left the circle and walked off to attend to other duties. There would be nobody close to prevent Rowan from taking the punishment too far. Rowan tossed one of the swords to Marc, who barely caught it along wooden blade. By its weight Marc could tell that the sword was different than the wooden ones he usually used. The sword's color and grain told him it was made from rosewood. Its weight made him fear that the sword was made with a dense metal rod inside. Marc had to use two hands to lift it properly before him. Rowan, however, gripped the sword in one hand with ease. In Rowan's hands the sword could break bones.

Rowan, in his strong, clear voice, said, "You underestimated the High-Chieftain, Marc. Your actions last night did not go unnoticed."

The sword felt heavier in Marc's hands at those words. He was not prepared to defend himself against one of the most renowned trainers at the academy. Proving himself against other cadets, mere boys, was nothing in comparison to Rowan with over a decade's worth of experience on Marc. He knew he was no match for Clan Tamarris' patriarch whose skill and strength was the reason why Alix had assigned Rowan to Marc in the first place. Training a prince was a rare honor and one that Rowan never took lightly.

"Ready yourself," said Rowan. Under the orders of his father or Uncle Alix, Marc knew that Rowan could be allowed to place a permanent reminder of the punishment on Marc's body.

Marc could not show his fear. He signaled that they could start. Without delay, Rowan lunged at him with an overhand swing. Years of training presented him with two options: to block or to evade. Parrying the swing was out of the question. Bringing up his sword to position, Marc managed to block the swing above his head. The impact, strong enough to dent both swords, sent vibrations throughout Marc's arms.

A second swing from Rowan drove Marc's sword to the ground. Before he could react, Rowan drove his elbow into Marc's jaw and knocked him to the ground. Marc's weariness wore off then, the rush of adrenaline made him feel a tingling sensation. It was far different, he noted, to be on the receiving end of one of Rowan's elbows. The pain in his mouth almost made him feel sorry for those he had elbowed in the past. Almost.

Rowan kicked Marc's right shoulder and sent him against the fence. His mentor backed away, "Get up."

The pain in Marc's shoulder was intense and surpassed that in his mouth. Enraged, Marc regained his footing and unleashed a series of swings and thrusts of his own. Rowan appeared to waste little effort in deflecting the attacks. He had to step back from his mentor to catch his breath. Having so little sleep did affect him, but he saw that Rowan's face was as calm as ever. The general evaded a misguided thrust and pushed Marc back to the ground with his other hand. Marc let out a frustrated yell as he began to understand his mistake.

"Do you want to strike me," said Rowan, tossing his sword to the grass to leave his arms out wide. "Prince Marc?"

Embarrassment added to Marc's anger as he stood again. In a reckless attempt to get some revenge on his mentor, he threw the heavy sword the short distance between him and Rowan. The force of the blow could have impaled a practice dummy, but Rowan batted the sword away with his forearm. Rowan lifted his foot, which flung his sword back into his waiting hand. At a speed second to Alix's, Rowan landed the flat of the blade across Marc's chest. The air was forced out of Marc's lungs and he stumbled back towards the fence.

Weaponless arms clung to the top beam of the fence. Marc struggled to draw breath. After the numerous punishments he received over the years, the one he experienced that morning was, by far, the worst. Rowan was behind him, another error realized when the sickening sound of wood resounding against flesh filled Marc's ears. The blow had the effect of further driving him into the fence and creating a stream of

warm liquid down his back. To draw blood Marc knew it had to be the edge of the sword that hit him.

Rowan turned Marc around, “We are done.”

Marc bowed his head to his mentor and saw the swelling on his chest, “Thank you for the lesson...” he gasped difficulty, “...General Tamarris.”

“And what lesson did you learn?”

Not to get caught, thought Marc. Saying such a defiant comment would have earned him another hit. “To obey the rules of my father,” he said. He clenched his jaw out of defeat, but brought more pain to himself.

“That is the lesson the High-Chieftain wanted you to learn. I hoped to teach you the value of sleep. The most skilled warriors can be defeated if they are not rested. Be ready to fight from the moment you wake and you will live a long life.”

Marc could almost scoff at Rowan’s lessons as he didn’t see how being beaten to train for actual battle was a way to live a healthy life, let alone a long one. The officer returned to the circle to retrieve the swords by the time the blood from Marc’s back reached his waist, staining his trousers. “A good lesson, general,” said Marc.

Rowan’s large hands grasped Marc and turn the boy so he could examine the handiwork on Marc’s back. A stable-hand, one Marc was accustomed to seeing deal with the minor injuries that were the product of combat training, came running with bandages and water. The servant, older than Marc by two years, asked, “Do you need me to wrap your wounds, Prince Marc?”

The mentor took the supplies from the servant's hands. "I will tend to him. Go," Rowan said and it was enough for the servant to leave as fast as he came. "Now put your arms up and don't move." Rowan washed the blood off Marc's back. Marc heard something drop into the water bucket.

Marc gazed around at the other cadets and trainers around him, but few were watching the scene and none met his eyes. He flinched when Rowan wiped a cold, damp cloth across his back that would clean the wound before it was wrapped. The temperature of the water would ease some of the swelling. He could feel Rowan's fingers probing the length of the wound. The poultice Rowan applied smelled of cinnamon and olive oils. The stinging sensation brought on by another liquid Rowan rinsed the wound with felt like part of punishment.

"Imagine if a metal sword was in my hand," said Rowan so only Marc could hear. "You would not be able to stand at all. You would no longer be among the living."

The herbal treatment numbed the pain around the wound as Rowan started to wrap it. Marc focused on a window on the academy's second floor while he waited for Rowan to finish. It was hard to keep still as Rowan made several layers with the bandages that weren't too tight. Marc was turned to face Rowan again and he was handed a large, bluish-green leaf. He saw that the leaf came from a pouch that Rowan was quick to put back in his trouser's pocket.

"Put this in your mouth, but don't swallow or chew. It should alleviate the aching in your mouth." The taste reminded him of mint. Rowan pulled the prince to him, and Marc found himself entirely in the shadow of his mentor. Marc tried to avoid meeting the

bold, brown eyes directly. Instead, he let his gaze wander to the right of Rowan's strong jaw-line. Everything about the man's appearance was fierce, but Marc was one of the few people who recognized the general's compassion. Not many trainers would dirty their hands by personally attending to the wounds of their cadets.

"Marc, I am sorry," he said in a sincere tone. Marc met the man's eyes then. "You will heal in time for the tournament, but not if you maintain your habit of disobeying your father. When I was your age the punishments were less kind. Cadets ended up with severed limbs and broken bones." Marc's mentor then showed something in his face he had never seen before, worry. "Your father does not need to be woken up with news of your transgressions and has promised a more severe punishment if you sneak out of the castle again." The worry on his face could have come from the onset of war, but Rowan eyes were difficult to read either way.

Rowan stepped back from Marc, and called out, "I need a pair of dulled swords and shields." A warrior near the equipment racks along the wall came over with the tools of warfare.

How Marc was supposed to have the energy to carry on with combat training was beyond him. He took the plain round shield and straight sword from the warrior, and readied himself for his training. "I will try to behave, sir."

"Set an example for your peers and they will follow you into battle when the time comes." Rowan strapped the shield to his arm and spun the sword in his hand, adjusting to its weight. "Remember to keep your shield up and in front of you. Let's begin."

By the time Marc finished his day at the academy his muscles were sore to the point where every muscle ached. His pockets were full of folded pages of notes that he would have to study. A borrowed gray shirt, a crude pull-over compared to a belted tunic, draped over him like a short dress. The sight of a prince in such attire was the source of much amusement for his peers throughout the day. After his morning punishment he knew he would not be allowed a horse to shorten his trip back to the castle.

The hourly drums sounded in the city and he would be left more than enough time to prepare for Sheid's announcement during the evening meal. Because his brother was three years into his adulthood, Marc was left with a few guesses at what type of announcement was planned.

Alix came by on his horse as Marc reached the stables. "Sorry I couldn't have you wait at the academy so you get a ride back home. Your father wouldn't have allowed it."

"No worries, uncle. I needed a bit more exercise," replied Marc with a fair amount of sarcasm in his tone.

"Indeed. A rider's conditioning is as important as his horse's." Alix unsaddled his horse and began to brush him. "Wibo here has won three summer races at Clan Cadoc." Marc took the time to brush Rayner in the stall beside Wibo's. Marc found that brushing his horse was relaxing and did not agitate his muscles as much as he thought. His uncle continued, "None of that would be possible if I didn't train alongside him. The tournament is not as simple as a race. The other competitors will be ready for you the same as Cecil who has trained with you."

"I will be ready for them once my body recovers."

“I know your father can be a harsh man, probably better than anyone alive, but think of the position he is in. If you hold any ill will towards him, then forget it.”

Marc couldn't look at Alix in the eyes at that moment, but looked at Rayner's instead. “I understand, Uncle.”

“I will see you at the meal,” said Alix as he walked away.

“Yes, uncle.” Marc entered into the passage leading to his family's courtyard and saw Alon leaning against a wall, waiting for him.

“Marc,” he whispered. “I think father is in your room.”

“Thanks for the warning.” He had taken a physical beating that day, not enough punishment on its own, and feared receiving a verbal one. Still, the rare occurrence of his father being in his room was the source of some stress. Alon went ahead of him to his own room and shut the door. Marc entered his room to find his father going through the papers left on the table. Smaller and years older than Rowan, Marc would have still preferred to battle his mentor than his father.

The weight of being High-Chieftain with a war to wage did not factor into his father's posture. Even in a common blue tunic, his father appeared like the noble chieftain he was. How the man came from nine generations of first sons was profound according to the histories Marc read. Leadership came naturally to his father since Marc's grandfather passed. Not renowned for being the best warriors or tacticians, Chieftains named Rasheid had been responsible for the Allied Clan's growth. Still, no one had challenged a Rasheid's rule and lived. “Never mind my presence, boy. Start getting ready

for your bath. A son, after all, is a fool if he thinks he can hide from his father.” Marc knew he had underestimated his father.

A shuffle to Marc’s side caught his attention and he entered his washroom. Luca was there, sitting onto a stool and prodding the coals under the bath. Fresh bandages and his shaving blade were nearby. He wanted to be clean again, but knew he would have to wait a bit longer. Luca’s wide open eyes tried to silently communicate something to him, but Marc mouthed, “Later,” so he could keep an eye on his father and began to undress.

Rasheid the Ninth regarded his son’s bandages, arms crossed, when Marc removed the borrowed shirt. Without the head-wrap he wore to the throne room, Rasheid’s straight black hair, parted in the middle, went past his shoulders and framed his entire face. Marc felt as if his father’s amber-brown eyes were evaluating the Zanisba family tree on the spot. Like a gardener observed a bush, seeing if it needed to be pruned.

The two of them had never seen eye to eye. In his father’s defense, Marc knew his father received word of every instance of his children’s misbehavior and Marc had outdone his predecessors to some degree.

Marc tried not to waver when his father pulled a dagger from an unseen sheath. The dagger’s edge was brought above his heart. The blade went to Marc’s chest and cut the bandages free. Rasheid pulled on one side to remove the bandages that had adhered to Marc’s back. “Those are quite a pair of bruises,” he said, noting the purple discolorations on Marc’s chest and right shoulder. Rasheid walked around him, studying the second son. “And a nasty cut on your back. Serves you right though,” he said, coming back around to Marc’s front, “for disobeying me.”

“Father, I—” started Marc.

“I don’t want to hear it, Marc. You are of Clan Zanisba and my son! The rules I set apply for my entire domain. Your wounds serve you right. Rowan’s punishment was kinder than the one I had in mind. After the tournament, if not for the war, I would train you some myself. I would have thought your Uncle Alix and Rowan were enough to keep you in line. Our top officers do not need to waste their energy dealing punishments on a thrill-seeking prince. Perhaps I’ve been too lenient with you.”

Less than a finger’s length shorter than his father, Marc felt like a small child again. He wanted to defend himself, but it would do him no good. Marc would remain silent unless asked a direct question.

“Both your brothers show more discipline than you have. When Rasheid trained under Rowan he did not take issue with staying in the castle after curfew or inspire other cadets to try and duel him. Ah, yes, I still need to write a letter to Cicero because of the incident with his son, Felix. You are a noble, a prince within the ruling clan, and thus should not be gallivanting around the city with a commoner. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, father.”

“If your blood runs so hot for a woman’s touch, then perhaps I can arrange a marriage for you sooner. Whatever noble girl I find will be happy to fulfill her duty to the Allied Clans. And you should be willing to do the same.” He walked to the door, but did not leave until saying. “If your loins need some release, then know that I’ve allowed your servant to provide that service for you—starting on your birthday.” The door slammed hard enough for its wood to groan.

Marc stood there, motionless, trying to get over the shock of what just occurred. The chieftain made the rules, and he could just as easily change them on a whim. He was sure many young girls in the clans, with enough generations removed from any ties with his family, would marry a young prince. However, his older two siblings had to marry first. He went back to the washroom to find Luca crying, her eyes red.

She went to him on her knees, and hugged him around his legs. "I'm so sorry, Marc," she said through sobs.

He put a hand on her head and stroked her head. Marc would not have guessed that the results of his outing with Sophia would have such consequences for his close friend. Nor did he expect he would have to try and comfort the twenty-three year old woman. "No, Luca, everything was my fault. Please get up." When she didn't, Marc pulled her to her feet.

"Now you will send me away, won't you? You will find another servant that can please you better than I can. One with a more ample bosom and a prettier face." Luca was on the verge of hysteria.

He held her face in his hands to ensure her attention. "Please listen to me. I would never send you away. I don't want to hear you say such things about yourself either. Do you hear me?" Luca nodded, tears still streamed down her face. Marc had her sit back on the stool and he sat on the floor beneath her. It was not proper for him to do so, but he didn't care. "You don't have to serve as my concubine either." Concubines were not common in the Allied Clans, to Marc's knowledge, but were widespread in other regions. The lesser populations of men after wars made such arrangements possible.

Luca remained quiet, wiping her tears, as Marc finished undressing and entered the bath. The water was warm and soothing, and Marc yearned to go to sleep, but no such luxury could be afforded until he made his main societal appearance for the day. “I would count my night with Sophia as a success.” There was no hint on her face that told him that she understood what he meant.

“You should not risk seeing her. At least for a while,” she said while scrubbing his back, mindful of the wound. He winced and Luca noticed, so she moved to attend to another area.

“And may I ask why not?”

“Because you are risking too much and I hate to see you suffering for the attempt.” She started to shave his face and continued, “When I first met you, your skin was without a single imperfection. Since you started acting out and pursuing girls while at the academy, you have many reminders of punishments in the form of lines that mar your appearance. And I’m not sure you realize that your latest wound is a strike against your honor.”

“If it means that much to you, then I won’t sneak out at night to see her anymore.” Luca moved on to trimming his hair. “But I don’t think I can stop seeing her altogether.”

“I can’t ask you to stop, but I can suggest it; at least until you are eighteen. She will wait for you if her feelings are true.”

“I hope you are right in that.” His relatives and friends alike were trying to shake him out of his foolishness. Despite his stubbornness, Marc would keep his promise to Luca.

It wasn't until Luca was drying Marc that she said, "I will serve as your concubine if you have need for me. I'm a woman, just like any other, but I have not been *pierced* by any man. I'd take that journey with you, Marc, before any others."

They both still possessed their virginity, though Marc felt that his was of a lesser extent thanks to Sophia. "Let's not discuss this matter until after the tournament, alright?" He had enough on his mind without altering the relationship with his servant. Unfortunately, his father had done that for him.

"As you wish, Marc."

Marc heard the voices in the dining hall before he reached its doors. The room must have been near capacity to warrant such a volume, he thought. It sounded like far more than the two hundred or so people that regularly attended. Marc could never keep track of the people who rotated through the castle as guests. Winter's limit on travel meant that most of the guests were Amur citizens or trainers from the academy. Only a select few received invitation to dine at the High-Chieftain's table. Marc was often forced to make attempts at conversation with people who wanted to share his father's power, not his father's food.

Four guards with freshly polished armor and weaponry opened the hall doors for the approaching prince. The doors, twice his height, had carvings that showed the story of food production across the four seasons. Winter's depiction, on the top half of the right door, showed the gathering of winter vegetables like potatoes and carrots. The dominant images detailed herding rune-oxen and hunting smaller animals. The carvings were

matched on the inside of the doors and Marc was fond of looking at them whenever a meal became a bore.

He entered the hall with little ceremony. Few people turned their eyes towards him, their conversations too important to focus on the lesser prince. The noise in the room rivaled the cadets spring battle exercises. A thousand chairs were placed around tables with countless candles on them. Marc looked at the stars shining through a window in the hall's domed ceiling. Square windows lined the walls much like the lit braziers.

All the tables, except his father's, were rounded and full of more faces than Marc could put names to. His parents sat at the head of a long rectangular table that faced the doors. Catherine sat at her usual place to the right of her husband. Marc went towards his father's side of the table where the rest of his siblings sat. To his father's left sat Rasheid and the seating continued down the table in birth order. Marc took the empty chair between René and Alon.

Catherine gave Marc a smile and a nod when he sat down, but she looked away when René resumed talking about some sort of new trade agreement with Clan Shadán. Talking about the economy with his sister, who he otherwise enjoyed, would put him to sleep. Marc gave his favorite brother a nudge, knowing that Alon probably overheard the lecture their father had given him. When is Sheid's big announcement?"

Alon gestured to the empty chairs across from them, "We are waiting for father's guests to arrive." The youngest Zanisba's tunic was a mix of cyan and muted blues that fit tight to his boyish form. Alon's shaved head reflected the flickering light from the candles.

“Ah,” said Marc. “So what are you getting me for my birthday?”

“Don’t you like surprises?”

“I dislike them as much as a general does on the battlefield.” Marc broke off a dried trail of wax from a nearby candle. Toying with the wax, he rolled it into a ball and let out a sigh. The well lit, but bare tables made for a rather dreary affair. The food would be brought once all those attending the meal were accounted for.

“It’s getting intolerably loud in here and I’m hungry,” said Alon, massaging his temples.

“Aren’t you the one who preaches that patience is a virtue?”

“After a long day, patience is only a virtue for trees.”

“I won’t disagree.” Above the clamor, Marc could vaguely discern the sounds of shuffling plates and cooking pots. His belly made a groan of protest. René got his attention by tapping his right arm. “Yes, René?”

“I haven’t been able to tell you before, but I am going with you—in my official capacity—to Chilant Anon.”

“As part of father’s war effort?”

“You’re a clever one. He wants me to meet with their council to see if they will offer their support. Their stockpiles could reach the front lines faster than those from Amur. I won’t bother you with the details. You must be excited for the tournament though.”

“I would say that I am. Although I’d bet on you to win the whole thing if you were allowed,” he replied.

René was competent as any cadet with a sword, but the rules of the tournament forbade women from competing. Her true talent was dealing with politics, and she was chosen for the role of ambassador over many male candidates. Marc wasn't sure if their father had awarded her the position because it gave her increased exposure to prospective suitors. Following the logic of politics he'd learned from his mentors, he knew that the smart move would be to wed René to Shane Decando to prevent the war before it began. But being wed to the savage was not a fate he wished on any woman.

“Uncle Alix thinks you can win. I think you can too.”

“For you I will, René.”

“It could help us win the support of the council...” She tilted her head to look past Marc at the hall's entrance, “Our guests have arrived.” René said something to their father, who then gave the signal for them to stand. The rest of those already in the hall quieted and stood also.

Alix led in the night's guests, the distinguished members of Clan Tamarris. Rowan walked beside his mother, Eithine. Next came his sister, Ayda, who was Sheid's age. Last in the procession was an officer whose name Marc did not know. It was near impossible for Marc to determine the man's rank without a signifying helmet or suit of armor. All were wearing the black and silver colors of the eastern region.

Rowan, along with his mother, sister and other relatives, had lived at the castle since before Marc was born. Ayda had become like an aloof cousin to Marc, and Eithine like a loving aunt. Rowan was the only of his immediate family to travel back to Tamarris lands during the winter months, but the war would have an effect on any plans

he had there. Marc never had enough courage to ask his mentor what he was doing at the ruined Clan Tamarris. It was not like Marc could question the personal business of a chieftain.

Everyone returned to their seats as the honored guests sat on Catherine's side of the table. Marc sat opposite Rowan who acknowledged him with a nod. The arrangement of the guests was unusual as they did not sit in order of age or rank, but Marc figured that it had something to do with Sheid's announcement. Instead, Ayda sat opposite Sheid and Eithine was across from René. Alix was normally in Ayda's seat but sat opposite Alon. To Alix's right sat the unknown officer.

The man's appearance would be difficult for Marc to forget. While most warriors Marc had seen during his life wore some form of facial hair, this man had none. Instead, several thin white scars covered his face. There was a disturbing concentration of scars around his mouth. The white lines of the scars appeared to be years old and contrasted with his dark complexion. A crooked nose, the likely result of several breaks over the years, added to the officer's sneer. His hair was similar to Rowan's, but the disfiguring elements made it difficult for Marc to determine if the two were related. The officer, as if noticing Marc's appraisal, glanced at Marc who then respectfully looked away. Anyone from Rowan's decimated bloodline would be important enough to be at the high-chieftain's table, although he had the demeanor of a mercenary.

Guests and family exchanged pleasantries, but Marc's eyes were focused on the archway leading to the kitchens. Marc knew that one of the main advantages to being of noble blood was the abundance of quality food.

The doors opened and servants bustled out en masse carrying plates full of food. First they came to the High-Chieftain's table to deliver the first course and goblets containing rich drinks. Then the other tables were allowed to be served. Marc paced his eating from the steaming bowl of vegetable soup in front of him. The next was a plate of bread with mixed berry marmalade, pale cheese, and various fruits. The main course was a well-done portion of rune-ox meat that Marc was almost able to steal a bite from before René slapped his hand away.

“Not yet, Marc,” she said.

Marc looked over at his father who had stood up alone in a sea of guests. The hall quieted and Rasheid began to speak, “Attention members of Clan Zanisba and our many distinguished guests! Before we resume the wonderful meal before us, my eldest son, Prince Rasheid, has an announcement to make.” Marc noted how his father's tone shifted from that of a stern leader to that of a gracious host.

Across from Marc, Rowan shifted in his chair—ill at ease. The crowd applauded as Sheid rose from his chair. Marc put on a fake smile and applauded his brother with everyone else. He knew the rules of court well enough to not draw any negative attention to himself. In his eyes, a sword was a preferable weapon to handle disputes than the thinly veiled aggression that came from the practice of politics.

“Thank you father.” Sheid cleared his throat and looked nervous, not a trait Marc saw often in his elder brother. “It is our clan's hope that I may one day inherit the role of Chieftain from my father. Then by showing my strength, courage, and compassion for

our allies, I may earn the right to become High-Chieftain like the Rasheids before me.

The three tenets, of course, all men should possess...”

Marc had enough speeches for the day and did not pay close attention until more applause came. Sheid continued, “...Like metal, the traits of men are best when tempered. That becomes possible when a man shares his life with a woman who can hammer in some sense on occasion.” The crowd laughed with Sheid and Marc rolled his eyes.

“Although their numbers are limited, a cost of defending the people, Clan Tamarris’ loyalty and honor has never been in question in this or any generation. It is for this reason and more that I plan to wed Ayda Tamarris—daughter of the fallen Chieftain Aydenor and Eithine Tamarris, and sister to reigning chieftain and general, Rowan Tamarris!”

The political blather was true in that case, thought Marc, but any noble worth their weight already knew Ayda’s lineage. The crowd cheered like they would for any marriage proclamation. Sheid returned to his seat looking quite proud of himself. That expression was more normal. The hall resumed its uproar of noise and people started eating their meats. Ayda could be seen blushing through her tanned cheeks as Eithine whispered into her ear. Marc’s father had a hand on Sheid’s shoulder in congratulations. René said something to their mother and made her laugh.

What Marc could not believe was that Rowan would become his brother-in-law. The marriage would solidify the strength of both clans. It would also serve to remind the people that the Allied Clans were bonded by word and blood; especially important when

a war would strain relationships between clans. René would be the next one to be married off. Her interests with Clan Shadán hinted that she could marry from one of their houses. Marc would wager that his parents would arrange his marriage with a girl from one of the Southern Clans.

Rasheid the Ninth stood up again when the meal wound down, goblet in hand. “A toast! Raise your drinks high, my guests. I wish my son and the lovely Ayda a long and happy marriage. May the trees where their ashes will one day be buried grow forever intertwined!” This toast was often used during engagement parties, as this meal had become. The marriage would call for more ceremony and traditions.

Most of those around Marc took deep gulps, and he joined them, half-desiring his goblet contained a fermented drink. Across from him, Rowan took a sip and closed his eyes. Marc could imagine that his mentor’s thoughts were racing. Sixteen years Ayda’s senior, Rowan should have been the one to get married first. It was odd for a man beyond twenty-five not to have a wife. There was plenty that Marc didn’t know about Rowan though, and the reasons could be just as plentiful. The state of Clan Tamarris, with no male heirs left in their house, needed Ayda’s tie to Clan Zanisba. The union could earn Rowan a wife of his own to continue the lineage.

The unknown Clan Tamarris officer toasted with everyone else, but hardly looked pleased at the betrothal. Marc wondered if the officer had the same feelings towards Sheid. They could become fast friends with that attitude. Rowan leaned to talk to the officer, but all he did was nod in response.

Food and drink expired—Marc was ready to get his much deserved sleep. After saying his farewells at his table, he headed back towards his room. On his way, he caught a figure's shadow on a wall. Being followed wasn't unusual and most often it was a patrolling guard. Marc heard a boot scrape against an uneven stone and he turned. It was just Alon and Marc resumed his walk.

"You know, I could have killed you," said Alon. The younger brother picked up his pace.

"With what?"

"My...umm...hands."

"So you qualify for one tournament and you think you can take me? I could be armed. What would happen if you failed to bring me down on your first strike?"

"Umm...but you are not supposed to have a weapon on you."

"That's not important. Just answer the question."

"Well, I—"

"You see? There! There is where you are the one who gets killed. If you hesitate you die." It was a lesson Marc learned years ago and he thought Alon knew it as well.

"As it turns out, I do have a weapon. Yours," said Alon, pulling out Marc's dagger from his sleeve.

"How did you get that?" Marc took the weapon out of Alon's hand and tucked it back into his boot. "You runt."

“I’m more observant than you give me credit for. It is not my fault I sit to your left during every meal and your dagger sheath is in your left boot.” Alon’s face was smug as he said, “You should have your cobbler craft me a pair or two like that.”

“Ask me again near your next birthday,” said Marc. “I hope you don’t plan to stalk your competition at the tournament. The people there are likely to kill you for stealing.”

“I have no need to steal their weapons; I’m a prince.” Alon, like Sheid, was comfortable with the title. “Disarming the other boys there should be just as easy.”

“I thought the same thing when I last competed. You may not even make it to the combat rounds.”

“What do you mean?”

“The tournament has an elimination round before the fighting begins. It is always a surprise because they change it each year.”

“Oh, then I guess we can’t train for that.”

“I suppose not,” said Marc. The best way he knew how to prepare was to maintain his speed and endurance. “But, when I get past whatever obstacles there are, you will be able to see how a real Zanisba fights.”

“Think you can regain your strength by the tournament?” asked Alon as they neared their rooms.

“With any luck I can. However, with Rowan escorting us, I suspect that we will have to practice our swordsmanship at every stop. Odds are we will encounter rain along the way, and even a passing trenarc or a pack of argarsún.”

Always the intellectual, Alon said, “Argarsún, maybe, but a trenarc? It is not cold enough for any of those to be roaming yet.”

“There is a chance of encountering a ter—”

“Don’t you finish that name. I don’t want to have nightmares while we’re on the road.”

“Very well. Get to bed and I promise I will stay in mine tonight.”

“It’s not like you can afford to be sneaking out of the castle anyway.”

Marc shoved Alon against a wall, not intending to hurt him. “We only get to be children once, dear brother. I want to enjoy it.”

“I hope you enjoyed whatever you did as much as the beating General Tamarris gave you,” said Alon, retreating to his room.

Marc spoke to Alon’s closed door, “You can have a beating too.” He heard laughter from the other side. “Sleep well, Alon.” He went to his room. Luca was asleep in her bed against the wall. Undressing in the soft candle light, he was too tired to make any effort to put away his clothes. Luca made a small noise and turned towards the wall in the midst of a troubled dream. Marc crawled into bed and stared up at the ceiling with a multitude of issues racing through his thoughts. He fought them by closing his eyes and letting his weary body surrender to the night.

Cousins

Bevran had climbed over a narrow estate wall and up three levels to reach Omar the Third's rounded balcony that led into his bedroom. Personally, he didn't see the point in having a third-story view of the city when so much of the scenery was blocked by Amur's walls. Peering through the open bedroom doors, Bevran saw Omar was busy entertaining two young women. "Order your company to be quiet and come on out, Omar," said Bevran from the balcony's railing.

"I will have your head," said Omar retrieving a sword and rushing outside naked to meet the intruder. He, just thirty years old, already had the swollen middle of a commoner twice his age and it made him slow. Omar had quickly abandoned his physique after fulfilling his required military service.

Bevran dodged the sword and put a dagger to Omar's neck. "If you wish to live put down your blade." Omar was red in the face, embarrassed and furious, but the sword clanged against the stones of the torch-lit balcony. "You have nothing to fear from me, Omar. And I have nothing to fear from you."

Omar tried to say something, but a hand on his mouth muffled the words.

"I will release you, but you cannot alert the guards. Understand?"

Omar turned around to face his visitor, "Bevran, is that you?"

Bevran pulled back the hood on his robe and sheathed his dagger, "And you were expecting someone else?" He bent to retrieve the sword, then tossed it to the ground below. "Now put some clothes on."

The naked Omar held out his hand in the direction of his room and one of the women brought him a nightgown. It likely belonged to the woman covering herself from Bevrán in the bed. “A curse will befall our fathers if we are caught here at this hour. You are an idiot.”

Bevrán, leaning on the curved railing, could have chuckled at how distraught Omar looked. “Leave us,” commanded Omar to the women. By the time he finished tying the gown’s laces Omar’s natural color returned to his face. Composure regained, he said, “I’ve heard that you were banished.”

“My banishment is a mild concern for the High-Chieftain,” said Bevrán. He knew he possessed the skill to sneak out of the city if he needed to. “War has delayed his judgment, but never you mind such matters that are not your concern. I have come into the understanding that our two houses seek similar goals.”

“I see you want to get us both killed,” said Omar.

“Don’t be so demure,” said Bevrán who pulled his dagger back out to clean his fingernails. “You and your fat father know the truth of my birth. Omar the First profited from his older brother’s early death, and my father tried to get rid of Rasheid the Ninth—unsuccessfully.” The result was his mother killing herself; a disgrace. Bevrán knew he could avenge his parents, succeed where his father had failed. Baodín Zanisba was able to kill Rasheid the Eighth with the poison of treachery, but not the Ninth. Never a prince, like his father, Bevrán did not see a reason to be subtle.

“Even with House Sulla supporting you, what do you hope to accomplish?” asked Omar, crossing his arms.

“I can eliminate two Rasheids,” said Bevrán. Alix would have to be eliminated too for him to inherit Clan Zanisba’s chieftain mantle. Every man had a weakness and he could find the ones held by his uncles and cousin. “Something your pitiful father is not capable of...”

“How dare you—” snapped Omar as he went towards Bevrán.

A dagger point to Omar’s throat stopped him. “Alone?” Bevrán finished. “I don’t forget that we are related, third cousins by my account. Your father’s trident spear means he has some right to the throne and, by extension, you.”

“Yes, but Farooq Zacúto has to approve of that. Something that man will never do. I’m no swordsman.”

An obvious statement, Bevrán thought. “Aren’t you forgetting the war?”

“Against the mad tribesman?”

“None other. Tisk, tisk, Omar. I thought you were in the throne room when the war was decided upon. No, don’t interrupt me. Princes Rasheid and Alix will be sent to fight, Farooq along with them, and your father will have two thousand of his men remain here.”

“You speak of treason. Your name is no longer considered Zanisba. Rasheid the Ninth has already removed you from the line of succession. Even Princes Marc and Alon would sit on the throne before you.”

“Why do you fill the air with things I already know? I don’t consider it treason as much as seeking opportunity. That is something that even your father will agree with.”

“I choose to keep my head, Bevrán.” Omar turned back into his lavish chambers.

The lines of succession could be corrected on paper. If he could find a way to get rid of the first two heirs, then killing Marc and Alon would be easy. Marc had trouble beating the worthless Felix, distantly related themselves. That young prince, who's birthday was the following morning, had already exposed one of his weaknesses: a woman. Loose-mouthed cadets have heard the prince mentioning a girl named Sophia. A few coins in the right hands led him to her. Following Marc had been easy. All it took Bevrán was one message to have the boy beaten. At the tournament Marc could be killed.

Bevrán threw his dagger at the wooden beam above Omar's doors to regain his attention. "I speak only of opportunity. Hasn't your father taught you anything?"

"That he has, but you have not done enough to persuade me to action."

The Sullas, merchant cowards the lot of them, always trying to bargain for a better deal, thought Bevrán. "I'm not offering you a spot on *my* throne, but I will need a high-commander at the castle when I become chieftain." That brought a gleam to Omar's eyes—Bevrán had him. "Keep your ears and eyes open. I will send word when the time comes to act."

"The war and your opportunity might have come and gone before spring."

"The Rasheid lineage won't see another spring. More things are in motion than I can tell you. Remain quiet and you will live to see my reign. I will be watching you as well." Bevrán retrieved his dagger and went to stand on the balcony's railing. "Farewell, cousin Omar," he said and climbed down the way he had come up.

Birthday Presents

There were some rustling sounds outside the room and Marc sat up, unable to see what was making the noise without getting out of bed. A small bit of light came from the window and that told him it was far too early for him to be woken. He had longed to sleep in and be excused from the academy for that one day of year that was truly his.

He narrowed his eyes in the directions of Luca's bed to see if she was still there. The bed was empty. Unusual, Marc thought, not even a candle lit. Luca prepared some light to be in the room if she was going to be absent early in the morning. The bedroom door opened and Marc rolled out of his bed to grab the wooden rod that lay under it. The headless spear was another line of defense if he needed it, but most often he used it when he wanted additional practice. A meager weapon for an otherwise nude prince.

Nervous sweat formed on his brow as he hid between his and Luca's beds. Assassins were not unheard of during times of war and if he could escape the castle, then a trained killer could find a way to slip in.

"Marc?" It was Luca.

He replaced the rod as quietly as he could and pulled a sheet to cover his morning growth from Luca. Marc had chosen to remain more modest in front of Luca over the past few days and she didn't need to see him in such a fashion. Especially on the day she had the permission to do more than see him.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she said. Luca had a chamberstick candle holder in one hand, the type where two of her fingers fit into a ring that allowed her to keep the wax basin level. In the other was a rectangular box. She set down both objects on Marc's

table, which was then covered in boxes and wrapped parcels of many sizes. Luca shut the door and said, “I was trying to have all your gifts ready for you to open when you woke up.”

“Much appreciated, Luca.” He slipped back into his warm bed, propping the pillows behind him. “I’m up enough now, but I could use some food and drink.”

“Right here,” said Luca, handing him a plate and a goblet. “Why are you sweating?” she asked when she brought the candle to his bedside table.

“Oh, just a dream I was having.”

She wiped his sweat away with her sleeve. “Please don’t be so troubled, Marc. You’ll need your strength.”

Marc nodded then ate his morning meal. When Luca busied herself in tidying her area of the room, he hurried to put some trousers on. Luca lit more candles and opened the window further for him to see the mass of gifts waiting for him. In his youth he would tear into his presents with the joy that only children possess. Each rip of parchment or lifted lid prompted smiles from him before and made his room a disorganized mess. Having a servant brought organization to the chaos and Marc grew up to realize that his relatives probably had gifts sent to remain in the good graces of his family. Seventeen that day, he could recognize the ploy of his extended relatives with their lavish gifts as a bid for power, something most nobles wanted. He had something through his blood that lesser nobles couldn’t buy and he couldn’t rid himself of easily.

Going through the gifts had become a more tedious process. Marc had ink and parchment out so he could record the individual items with their senders because letters

would have to be written in response. Such letters he was exempt from writing himself thanks to Luca teaching herself how to write. He went for the parchment-wrapped gifts first, most likely perishables and items that had come locally. Family members who lived at the castle, were practical by giving him books and some of his favorite foods. Captain Duarte, and Cecil by extension, gave a wooden figurine that matched Marc's visage. Father's guards are indeed watching me carefully, Marc thought.

"May I use the washroom to freshen up?" asked Luca.

"Of course," he said. She caught his attention when she pulled close the curtains that separated the washroom from the bedroom. Her modesty only came when she had "nature's visit", but they had lived together long enough for Marc to know it was not her time yet. Without the nerve to question, he returned his attention back to the gifts.

Having his birthday in winter meant that his relatives from more distant clans would not waste resources to make small deliveries to Amur. The rest of the gifts could arrive over the next few days or even as late as the spring, but that did not matter to him as too many presents at once would clutter his room. The recording process continued at a steady pace.

Luca had entered the bath when someone else knocked on his door. Marc put on a vest and opened the door. "Hello mother," he said, letting her into the room.

Catherine pulled him into a hug, something she only did in private. The simple embrace made him feel younger and she was able to do so without aggravating any of his wounds. Only his mother could do such a thing without seeing the wounds for herself.

The faint aroma of the kitchens lingered on her clothes, but Marc could smell the scent of flower oils on her hair. It was a scent that didn't change since his boyhood.

She sat on his bed and bade him to sit beside her, a custom she always used when visiting him. Both creatures of habit, Marc obliged her. The two of them had been closer before he had started at the academy and before a servant was hired to take care of him. "You have grown up so much in your seventeen years, yet there is so much further for you to go." She smiled at Marc, but he could see she was hiding some sadness behind her eyes. This was not the usual tone of their conversations.

"Next year's birthday will bring many things your way and there is your future to be concerned about. Your father...and I," she added with reluctance, "have discussed what we need to do in order to have you betrothed before your next birthday comes. Your father feels like it will be the event that breaks you from your reckless behavior. We have come up with three girls around your age that would be suitable for marriage into the clan."

Marc let out a long breath. His mother's words were expected, even without his father's words days earlier, but he thought his mother would understand. Didn't she hear the same type of stories about romance that his grandfather told? "Why does father want to marry me off when Uncle Alix has no wife or children?" A small splash came from the washroom—Luca, no doubt, was listening to the conversation.

"That is a matter between your father and uncle."

"What about René?"

“She has her suitors and may be married by the summer if an agreement can be made in the midst of a war. René will talk to you if you asked her.”

Marc stood from the bed and couldn't stop himself from saying, “Why are you and father so quick to be without your children? He just wants me married to tame me like an ox, so I can be worth something to him! Are you happy with your arranged marriage?”

Catherine trembled for a moment. Her eyes were resolute on his as she rose to backhand him across the face. The rings on his mother's hand made the slap sting, but he deserved it. Perhaps he did have his father's temper. Marc had never spoken to his mother in such a manner. His parent's relationship was not his business, but he didn't doubt their loyalty to each other. Though they were allowed to affection in public, as the rulers, they never did.

“Now listen, Marc, I'm not trying to be cruel.”

He sat back down on the bed, still experiencing the shock of his mother hitting him. “I'm listening mother.”

“Your father chose the clans where to draw the girls, but I chose which three have the right potential to marry one of my sons. I know you aren't fond of Sheid, but I helped choose Ayda for him the same way. The weddings of nobles are arranged, but I want the final choice to be yours. The three girls and their families will be present at your brother's wedding in the spring. Your father and I, plus anyone—and I mean anyone—else you want, will help you select the correct bride.”

He guessed that by “correct” bride was one that would be as loyal to the clan as she would have to be to him. All that meant to Marc was that he would get to choose the parading horse he would be forced to ride if he ever wanted a legitimate family of his own. Who he chose to give him advice on the matter would not make the situation any easier. Marc dreaded having to live and bed someone he didn’t love.

“As you wish, mother.” He already had two women loyal to him and not even remotely tied to his family’s lineage. Both Luca and Sophia could be trusted with such a scenario, but he didn’t want them to suffer at his side. Alix or Rowan would be wiser choices.

Silence filled the room once more, even Luca was quiet in the water, and remained for several minutes. “Have a good birthday, my son,” said Catherine. She kissed his forehead and left the room. The door did not make a sound as she closed it behind her; not an easy task as Marc had found out for himself. Being stealthy, it appeared, was in his blood.

Anger was in his blood as well. Marc pulled the wooden rod from its hiding spot and snapped it on his leg. “Why couldn’t she tell me about this on any other day?” He tossed the pieces against the closest wall. Ignoring the throbbing in his right leg, Marc went back to his table where some gifts remained. His anger diminishing with each tear of fragile parchment.

A few of the gifts he saved from opening until the end, a ritual. Alon had wrapped a small whetstone and a note that confirmed Marc’s suspicion that the tool was for his boot-dagger. René had painted and framed another landscape to mount on his wall;

something he would do when he was in a better mood. Alix gave him several rolled maps of regions Marc did not have maps for already. He opened one and saw that it contained a historical representation of where the Zanisba lived before Amur. These maps, Marc thought, deserved to be used—not shelved.

Rowan gave him a wooden oval shield that had eight metal braces in curves radiating from its center pointed-boss. The wood was painted Zanisban blue, with painted white runes between the braces. Marc inspected the shield, its size intended for use on foot, and the crafter's signature matched Rowan's. It was a personal touch from his mentor and surpassed his father's annual gift: an evening feast in his honor. The meal was a bore, a time for people to fawn over him.

Marc retrieved the gift hidden in his wardrobe when it arrived the night before. It was from Sophia, he knew, and he did not want to risk his father finding out Sophia's last name. Then again, because he was caught, someone already knew Sophia to be a Cureto. The gift had a considerable weight for its size and Marc untied the twine that held the parchment together instead of ripping it. It was not one he wanted to damage or record. As expected, Sophia included an assortment of herbs with instructions for how to use each small bundle. Moving the herbs around he found a second gift inside, still wrapped.

He hesitated opening the concealed gift. Instead he pulled his dagger out and sat on the floor between his bed and the washroom. Using the dagger he traced the outline of a stone, angling the blade so the stone would be loose. He pried the stone from the floor and saw that the dagger would need the whetstone after all. Marc removed a few more stones and stacked them aside to reveal a section of the floor that he could almost fit into.

He discovered the space years ago, likely created by one of his mischievous prince ancestors, and had since used it to conceal anything that risked confiscation. Empty when he found it, he had placed a number of small objects that line most boys' pockets: stone shards, bones, and shiny things. Mostly clear of those elements on his seventeenth birthday, Marc laid Sophia's second gift inside. It was cushioned by bags containing hundreds of silver coins.

The wealth gathered in his floor was enough to commission a house to be built. But it was not enough for him to start a new life with; not if he intended to maintain the luxuries he was used to. The coins were attributed to his always generous relatives and their many useless gifts, which Luca helped him to sell in the markets. He had little use for elaborate decorations, miscellaneous trinkets, and fancy tunics that weren't his size.

After some more contemplation about opening Sophia's second gift, he ultimately returned the loose stones to their correct locations. Marc promised himself that he would open the present when he returned from the tournament; a reward if he won or lost. Adequate time was needed to properly reseal the stone to the ones around it. Then he decided to completely cover the stash with a rug from Omar the Third. Omar's gifts were extravagant and the rug probably cost more than a commoner made in a month. The rug would stave off being sold because it served a purpose, but Marc intended to sell the rug and buy a cheap replacement.

How long did Luca need in the washroom, Marc thought. He leaned the new shield against his wardrobe, further appreciating the craftsmanship.

“A thoughtful gift you have there,” said Luca from the washroom’s arch. She was as nude as she could be. Candle light illuminated her from behind and Marc had to admire the shape of her silhouette. “I have one for you too.”

“Excuse me,” he said, moving past her to wash his face in the basin. Marc believed he understood what Luca had in mind to give him.

“Why are you being shy?” He turned around and noticed that the cold or arousal had affected Luca’s nipples. “You haven’t been shy in looking at me in the past. Why the change now?”

“You know why more than any. Just days ago you were crying because of what my father decreed. And you must have heard what my mother said.”

“Yes, but I can see that you don’t want to deal with your parent’s wishes for you right now.” She put her hands on his shoulders then moved them slowly down his arms. “And Sophia is out of reach for now. Other servants speak of the urges of young men, so why fight to see Sophia when you have a woman in front of you...” she held his hands and came closer, “...who has already proven her loyalty.”

“I thought you didn’t want this.”

“I’ve had the time to dwell on it and—” she kissed him.

Blood rushed to Marc’s extremities and he could not fathom why he enjoyed Luca’s lips on his. He could not compare which pair of lips felt better, Sophia’s or Luca’s. Neither was an appropriate match, he thought, when Luca needed air. Marc had never been so conflicted.

She moved his hands so they gripped her hips. Her hair, still wet, was close enough to brush his neck. “We can’t do this here,” she said in his ear, biting it. Pleasant tingling sensations went down his spine. The reasonable part of him wanted to ask why, but his instincts took over. Marc lifted Luca and carried her to his bed. She giggled when she landed on her back.

Marc didn’t join her on the bed as she watched him in all her glory. He had dreams about Luca that reminded him of his present situation, but he had not imagined what happened past that point. “Luca, I...”

“If it makes you feel better about this, Marc, then hear me now. I love you.”

Marc loved her too. And that is why he couldn’t take advantage of her. He went to his wardrobe and grabbed one of his robes. “I can’t do this to you.” He couldn’t do it for Sophia’s sake either.

“What’s wrong?” Luca sat up in the bed, covering herself with his sheets.

“I’m sorry.” Marc left his room and went to René’s door. He knocked and knocked again. Putting on the robe over his vest he realized that he did not put on a pair of boots. Adding ashamed to foolish on his list of traits, Marc was not ready for such an adult predicament.

René’s servant opened the door in her nightgown. “Prince Marc, what can I help you with?”

“Tamura, I can speak to my brother,” said René, coming from the washroom in a towel. Marc looked to the floor immediately. “Let me get dressed and you can walk with me.”

“Walk with you where? I don’t have my boots.” René smirked like Alix and shook her head. “I will explain.”

“Tamura, run to Prince Rasheid’s room and fetch a pair of his boots for me. You two are about the same size, correct?”

“Close enough,” said Marc. Borrowing a pair of boots from Sheid would be easy with him leaving the day prior for the war.

“I shall be right back,” said Tamura.

“Come in, Marc. I won’t take long.”

Too antsy to sit, Marc leaned on René’s table while he waited. His sister’s room was laid out like his, but had more decoration than he preferred. There were fresh-picked flowers in vases on her bedside tables. She had two gilded wardrobes, one on each side of the washroom arch, and her bed was covered with several embroidered pillows.

Tamura returned and handed Marc the pair of boots. “I hope these fit you. They were the only pair left in Prince Rasheid’s wardrobe.” She went into the washroom to attend to René.

The only pair, Marc thought. The boots were a vestigial product of Sheid’s academy years, with tears along the sides and a hole worn in the right heel. Marc put them on and they fit with some room to spare. More comfortable than the servant’s boots he had worn, there was no reason to complain.

Tamura came back into the room to pull an outfit out of one of the wardrobes, and then disappeared into the washroom again. Marc was going through the paintings against a wall when René reemerged fully dressed and hair tied in a braid.

“Those aren’t finished,” said René.

“I can tell, but they are good already.”

“Did you see the one I made for you?”

“I did. I like it more than the one you painted last year.”

“I appreciate that, Marc. Let’s get out of here though.” They left Tamura behind in René’s bedroom and left their courtyard altogether.

“So where are we going?”

“To grandfather’s shrine. You can explain yourself on the way.”

Marc came clean to René about his relationship with Sophia from their meeting all the way through the beating he received because of her. He did not withhold any of the details, except those concerning Luca. By the time he finished they had reached the shrine of Rasheid the Eighth.

A statue of the former high-chieftain was commissioned for the Garden of Fathers within a northern section of the castle. Only those of the Zanisban line were allowed inside the garden, and the garden was thus maintained by nobles. Aside from the forest where his family buried their family, the garden was the second most sacred place they kept. Rasheid the Eighth’s statue was among the company of the previous high-chieftains as they appeared when they inherited the throne. Even Rasheid the Ninth’s statue was in the garden and Marc could not believe how different his father looked ten years ago.

René had been silent for a time, not quite as good as their mother in masking her emotions as Marc talked. “I’m not sure what to say, Marc.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. You don’t have to remind me that Sophia is a commoner.”

“I wasn’t...it’s a romantic story though. Grandpa would agree with that much, but he wanted the best for you, too. What are your intentions with this girl? Remember, you cannot tell untruths in this place.”

“To marry her. She could make me happy, René.”

“Sophia is of legal age at least, but I have never heard of a prince marrying a commoner for any reason. And the only person who can permit such a union is—”

“Father, I know.”

“You aren’t thinking about eloping, or are you?”

“Not if I can avoid it, but our parents have already selected three girls for me.”

“Trust me when I say that I tried to talk them out of it. Uncle Alix came to your defense too. I don’t think you are ready for marriage. In a year I think you will be. Decide a course of action with Sophia by then.”

“It would be too late.”

“I don’t believe you are the type to take a mistress either.”

Marc wasn’t sure about that because of the feelings he also had for Luca, but he shook his head anyway. “You must know a few ways to get around marrying a commoner. Her father, Joep, was a sergeant in the city guard. Does that count for anything?”

“Not enough.” René looked to their grandfather’s statue. “But there are ways for a commoner to become noble.”

“Please tell me.”

“One way is for Sophia to come into enough wealth, like her father remarrying into a lesser noble’s house, for it to benefit our family in some way.”

Marc would utilize his entire savings if he believed he could arrange such a feat.

“And?”

“The only other way I know is if Sophia becomes orphaned and is either adopted into a noble’s family, or if she is taken into a chieftain’s household as a ward.”

“Joep would have to be dead for that to work. I pray for that not to happen. Her father is the only family she has left.”

“I can research other ways for you, but those are all I know.”

“Do you think our ancestors will hear my prayers about this?”

“You should go to the shadow of Mount Azorreth if you want them all to hear you.”

He had survived the formalities of another birthday meal. It drew a smaller crowd than Sheid’s announcement had, around four hundred, but Marc got to have his fill of his favorite pastries and rich drinks. It was an adequate amount of food to make him tired. There was a tradition he wanted to follow before he turned in for the night. One he needed to continue in order to avoid having to confront Luca before she went to sleep.

He climbed the railing of a passageway that led him up to an empty section of the castle’s roof. Climbing higher, Marc made it to the top of the dining hall’s domed ceiling—with only a few scratches on his tunic—for a priceless view. It was a clear night

and he could see for miles in any direction. The constellations of stars filled the blackened skies, but none of them were as prominent or noticeable as the moons, Mimas and Rhea.

Mimas was in the perfect center of Rhea. Marc stared at the celestial shapes in awe. They formed an image of a weary blue eye. A constellation of stars pointed straight down to the horizon as if it were the great eye's tears. He understood how the tribes and other cultures could worship the moons and stars, especially on such a rare night. Savages would sing songs and make sacrifices to their gods. His own faith was with his ancestors. They were in the soil, the trees, and the air. They were obtainable—not something impossible to reach. They could hear his prayers.

Marc stayed on that dome for what seemed like hours, watching the skies and letting his mind be still. The moons' trance on the young prince faded once they slipped out of their union. It would be another two hundred days before he could admire such a sight again. So much could happen in that time period. His people were marching off to war. There was a tournament to compete in. And, finally, he had to make a decision between love and loyalty to his clan. In the vastness of the world around him, Marc felt lost.