



DAWN  
OF  
UNITY

LAST OF THE SEEKERS

1

NITISH SHARMA

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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Dawn of Unity Sample Chapters (Last of the Seekers, Book 1)

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Please note that this novel contains scenes of violence, abuse, suggested sexual abuse, suicide ideation, torture, imprisonment, PTSD, and one scene involving violence within a place of worship.

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## Prologue

“DO WE NOT both believe in the Father? Is he not the one who created Erathas and all people?” the priest said. “Whether within Manianity or Alhurahism this is true. We disagree on who, Manis or Alhurah, is the true essence of the Father but wouldn’t the Father prefer us to co-exist peacefully?” His long, robe-like alb billowed around him. He placed his hands over his chasuble and smiled at the grand imam in front of him, then offered him a sacred stole. “Manis is a being of praise in Alhurahism after all.”

“But not one to be worshiped.” The grand imam accepted the stole, and examined its embroidery, oval and petal shapes layered over one another to create a golden flowering sun. This was the symbol of Manis. “Tis a simple gift,” the grand imam said as he handed off the stole to a nearby assistant and arranged his kaftan.

“To show my intentions are just that. Simple. Pure.”

“For one-hundred years have our countries fought start and stop. How will this gift excuse the blood on both sides?”

“It will not, but you can agree that it’s a start. Do I not stand before you, far from my home, standing in your Grand Mosque unarmed and without escort?” The priest gestured with arms spread wide at the massive, domed room. Huge pillars held up the vaulted domes decorated in colourful tessellations.

“You have shown either great trust or great foolishness.” The grand imam chuckled. “Your king wishes us dead. He shows no intention of peace.”

“Your sultan is the same, is he not? Tell me, what does Alhurah say?”

“I only interpret what he wills. I cannot hear him. Such was... was for people of long ago.” The grand imam led the Manis priest towards the Eternal Flame behind him, burring within a massive brazier. A power emanated from it, a type of Godly Magic. Long ago the idols around it had been smashed and Alhurah instructed that all should turn in its direction, if they could, to pray to God. “I am surprised the grand bishop did not come himself. Is there disagreement among you?”

“There is... tension. But all of us want peace. More than you know. The interests of the Church do not always align with that of the king.”

“Nor do our interests always align with the sultan’s. I do not represent all believers.”

“So maybe we can start to talk of pe—” An earth-shattering boom followed by the jolt of an aftershock ripped through the mosque. Dust fell from the roof and walls marring the patterned marble floors and carpets. Shrieks and shouts tore through the mosque door from outside. The priest almost fell into the grand imam. Inside the large space, imams and civilians looked around and mumbled while children clung uneasily to their mothers and fathers. The door to the Grand Mosque opened and a Saomardrim soldier stumbled in, his padded and chainmail armor stained with blood. “Gurmians! They are here. They’ve snuck into the city an’ are slaughtering everyone!” His voice echoed through the space, then his head snapped back. Coughing up blood, he fell forward and laid still, an arrow sticking out of his back. Onlookers in the Grand Mosque screamed and the grand imam held up his hands.

“Shut the doors. Quickly!” He glared at the Manis priest. “You. Seize him!” Two imams leapt forward and grabbed hold of the Manis priest. The man’s eyes widened.

“You have the wrong idea!” The priest struggled against the imams’ grip.

“You were a distraction. Meant to trick me!” The grand imam pointed a shaking finger at the priest.

“I had no knowledge of the attack! I was sent... I came to negotiate.” The priest’s face paled.

“Lies!”

“It is the truth!” His pleading eyes focused on the grand imam.

A booming thud against the Grand Mosque doors shook the building. A few more and the door cracked, swinging open. A dozen Gurmian soldiers flooded into the space brandishing swords, their plate and mail armor stained in blood. The men rushed forward, slashing and stabbing the imams and civilians inside. One man walked

ahead of them. His blue-gold robes billowed behind him and a black velvet chaperon sat wrapped around his head. A cape with the symbol of his domain, an impaled man, draped almost to the ground. He raised a flintlock pistol and fired, striking a nearby woman in the head causing her to fall on her side; smoke drifted from the muzzle. With the single shot used he tossed the pistol aside and drew another then strode towards the Eternal Flame, unmoved by the carnage around him.

“Verräter,” he spat at the Manis priest. The grand imam looked at the priest, and seeing no subterfuge in his eyes, he was released.

“Curse you, man of your king! Only a demon would do what you are doing now.” The grand imam glared at the Gurmian lord. The Manis priest trembled as he scanned the room with wide eyes. His insides threatened to spill. Saomardrim men, women, and children lay slaughtered around the floor of the Grand Mosque, staining the patterned walls, floor, and carpets with blood. The screams of pain and mourning amplified upwards into the wide domed ceiling.

“All Saomardrim deserve to die.” The Gurmian lord smiled. He raised his pistol and pointed it at the grand imam. The grand imam raised his hand and gestured towards the Eternal Flame. His eyes widened, skin tightened, and the anger in his voice seemed to shake the air between them.

“Those of the old days will come. Seekers who will end this war. They who can hear the voice of Alhurah. They who can contact him and travel to the godly realms alive. They will end this madness!”

The Manis priest looked between the lord and the grand imam. His attention moved to the Eternal Flame. The power that emanated from it grew stronger, pulsing with unbridled energy.

“And you!” The Manis priest shouted at the lord who had noticed the power in the Eternal Flame. The Gurmian lord raised an eyebrow, his grip on his pistol faltered, and the Manis priest continued, “I curse you! Manis be by my side. One of those Seekers will kill you for what you’ve done here today. This massacre will be avenged!” He turned and looked at the grand imam. Despair painted his face, pain from the blood spilt in such a peaceful place. He flashed a drained smile. Their attempt at peace was over, and now they’d die together.

The Gurmian lord fired his pistol.



**Part One:  
Empty Beginnings**

## Chapter One

LAUNCHING FROM THE crest of a mountain ledge he soared through star-lit sky, his wings stretched far outward resisting the glacial wind trying to shrivel his feathers. The bird of prey dived towards a grey castle nestled against the mountainside on an island in the Blue Mountains. It was surrounded by a deep almost circular ravine formed by the separation between the island and the mainland.

As he passed the light of the moon his shape shimmered a translucent pale blue. He made a mournful call, tilting his head at the castle. Mount Isen stretched tall in the northeast, a sentinel guarding the structure on its blue-grey slopes. All around him, a barren mountain landscape spread, covered in snow and ice. This remote corner of the world, frigid and empty, acted as a sanctuary for the beings the bird took the form of.

Gliding over a small chasm, only passable by a single icy stone bridge, he passed the two walls, the inner slightly higher than the second. Below in between the three keeps of the castle were crude gallows and a stockage where three people hung, their chains dangling off their frozen bodies, their wrists bound behind them and wrapped in strips of leather. There were two men and one woman.

He landed on a tower and hung his head for he knew what this place was and for whom he'd been sent. Watching a few unfortunate souls dragged towards wooden stakes, readied to be driven through, confirmed his knowledge of this place. It was Isen Prison, the most feared prison in Gurmanis, and it housed who he had come for. Despite the wind and snow, the prison stood, braving the elements, fulfilling its grim purpose as a place people were sent to die.

The bird flew high into the air. As he had done before with the other boy, he would do the same here. In an instant, he fizzled away, its form fading into specks of glowing blue.

---

Held by his arms, he stumbled up the set of stairs, shackles clanking around his ankles. Every muscle in his body throbbed with the echoes of recent pain and his vision blurred. The boy tripped and stumbled forward, prompting a grumble from the broad-shouldered guard who dragged him. The guard jerked him forwards from the top of the stairs into a long shadowy corridor carved through the rock deep underground, with barely two meters of space. The only visible light, a glow from a few blue-white crystals set into sconces.

The teenage prisoner, dressed in a short-sleeved tan-brown tunic and shorts with a thin vest overtop, had been securely bound. Shackles connected together by heavy chains hugged tightly around his neck, wrists, lower chest, waist and ankles, slowed his walk across the ragged stone floor, rattling with each step. Above the neck iron on his left side was a tattoo, half covered by the collar, that read **271**. Fresh red stains covered parts of his frayed and torn prison uniform.

Again, he slipped and his guard cursed.

"If you'd walk right, I wouldn't have to drag you," the guard grunted. A frown cracked the dried grime on the boy's face, through the shoulder-length strands of his dark brown hair hanging in his face and that partially covered his ears. He slid his fabric strip wrapped feet attempting to stand properly, feeling the hard leather sole and vamp underneath the strips. He glared at a second guard approaching.

"Night treating you well?" the newcomer greeted, adjusting one of his metal bracers. The other guard nodded and shoved the boy into the damp wall. He slumped to the ground, scratching his cheeks against the surface, his chains clanking.

"I'm outta here come morning. Could use the rest ahead of the trek down the mountains an' to Blueshade. This filth's cell is a little further down the hall, DOM-37B. Think you can take him there?" The newcomer's green eyes scanned the sorry creature and he raised a bushy eyebrow.

"Did ya take him to the mages first? Don't want him crippled or diseased."

"I did, don't you worry."

"He's the one, one the warden likes. The boy, the youngest prisoner, ain't he?"

“Yea he’s the one, killer of his own parents.”

A flash of heat rushed through the boy and his eyes grew wide as he remembered something from long ago.

“What happened?”

“Warden’s orders. Said today’s a special day for the boy.”

“An’ you? Gonna join the army?”

The guard smiled. “Ya. Infidel Saomardrim will fear my blade.”

“Leaving one hell, entering another.” The newcomer shook his head.

“Better than this place.”

The newcomer leaned close and whispered. “Warden’s not right he is. He’s got something wrong in the head what with the things he does to the prisoners.”

“Quiet! If someone hears ya, we’ll both be in serious trouble. Look, the people in here deserve this, as intended by the gods.” The guard looked back down at the boy. “They’re naught but murderers, thieves, rapists and madmen. Will you take him to his cell or not?” The guard gave the boy’s chains a jerk, sending searing pain into his raw wrists and ankles.

“Yea, just keep your voice to yerself.” The newcomer yanked the boy off the ground, and led him down the corridor. Hunched over and arms sagging against the weight of his restraints, the boy hobbled forward into a cell block and a new hallway. Two sub-blocks, cages, the bars intertwined in chains, contained a row of cells. Everything was still, mute, and against the dim light stray dust drifted in the air. The guard pushed the boy against the bars of a sub-block and keys rattled as he unlocked the door. The boy slid his face against the mesh covered square spaces between the bars and coughed.

An echoing metal grinding preceded the sliding of two bars; the guard kicked open the lower bar, which was always jamming, and swung the door to the sub-block open. He pulled the boy inside. They walked down the hall passing several cells until they reached cell DOM-37B. The guard slid open the solid metal door to the cell then swung open a second barred mesh covered door behind the first with a ringing creak. He threw the boy inside the squat rectangular space whose curved roof ran lower towards the back. It was barely enough space for a grown adult. Securing the boy in chains attached to the cell’s walls, and with a last look of sickened disapproval, he slammed and locked the cell doors with a heavy echo. The banging of closing and locking doors did not faze the boy. He’d grown used to it. Left in complete darkness he could only whimper before he blacked out.

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He woke to tortured screams echoing from somewhere under the cell block. Dim blue-white light illuminated the cell through the door’s cracks. The light revealed the stone walls, their surfaces coarse and bumpy, less one wall which had alternating patches of smooth, as if it had been plastered over. A foul stench came from a hole in one corner.

He tried to lift himself from the ground only to crumple back down into a shallow puddle of water. Burning pain radiated from him as he shifted to adjust to the weight of his chains.

The boy huddled himself together and squeezed himself tight. He closed his eyes and tears started to form. *‘Yea he’s the one, killer of his own parents.’* His parents came to mind, their faces ones of love and compassion he had once known. He saw his father’s weather worn skin, felt his firm touch. He saw his mother’s calming smile and heard her tender voice.

Halfway between sleep and wakefulness, he spotted a shadow creeping towards him. The shadow echoed his image, its shadowy hair cut so that it followed the curve of its head and came closer together behind its neck. The shadow’s round jawline stretched into a smile while the gash that was its mouth parted and it’s curved nostrils flared. Panicked, the boy scrambled to one corner of his cell. Red eyes emerged and the shadow growled at him.

“No!” the boy cried. “Go away.” Tears clouded his eyes. “I thought you were gone.”

“Gone? How can I leave you? I am you!” the figure growled and its arms reached out towards the boy. “Murderer!”

“No...no...” The boy shivered. “Green fields, rolling hills, the forest on the cliff,” he whispered, attempting to rid himself of the familiar vision. He saw his young self, his long hair neatly shaped and side-parted, eager to go to market the next day, the day everything went wrong.

“Memories of your home won’t make things right. You’ll ne’er make things right!”

“L-Laughter... children’s...”

The shadow took hold of one of the boy’s arms. “No longer king of your little treefort,” it teased.

“William! William!” The boy lurched upwards, looking towards the cell door, his eyes wide. That was his mother, that was his name. Why did she have to die? Why could he not be with her? In here, he had time, time and little to do with it other than to work and think, but he’d not *have* to think of things, they’d just find him.

*“If that’s the case I won’t eat. I’ll feed my son first,” Will’s father said, standing resolutely before his wife. Will’s mother looked at her husband, teary-eyed. From the other room a ten-year-old Will hid by the side of the door frame listening carefully.*

*“You don’t understand, Trent! It’s going to come; ya know that, then what? How’re we going to feed the baby? Will? How will we feed ourselves if you insist on not eating?”*

*“I know it’s gonna come.” Trent held his wife’s shoulders. “An’ I told you I’ll figure it out,” he said tenderly. He touched his wife’s stomach, gently tracing the new slight swelling. “The child is a blessing. Will deserves a brother or sister.” Hearing this, Will froze. A little brother? Sister? What would that be like?*

*“Half a year ago the Smiths had to abandon their—”*

*“No, don’t say it. I won’t abandon my own blood.”*

*“Then how? We can’t make food out of thin air,” Will’s mother stressed.*

*“We could take Will and run away; heard many serfs from other villages who ran from their lords to freedom.”*

*“But what kind of life will that be for Will and the baby? A life of fear? Where’d we run to? The cities wouldn’t let us in and the lord’s soldiers would hunt us. We’d die of starvation, sold into slavery or worse.”*

*“I s’pose so...” Will’s father reassured her, “we’ll find a way.”*

Will shivered. He tried to remember the names of his friends, but they slipped from his memory except for one. The one friend who turned out to be traitorous. As fast as his image came it vanished from memory. The shadow knelt in-front of him.

“You’d kill him too if you could,” it sneered. Will looked up at it. “Like you did them.”

An image passed through his mind. He stood over the bodies of his dead parents. His mother was still alive; she gasped as blood seeped out around her.

“Wh-Why...” she’d groaned.

The shadow rushed at Will and put a ghostly blade to his neck. “Murderer!”

“Th-That’s not true. Go away!”

“You can’t escape yourself and what you did, you never can.”

*Ten-year-old Will woke from his bed, nothing more than a raised straw mattress, in a room that doubled as storage. He turned in his bed and opened his eyes. A distant sound didn’t register to the half-asleep boy but he slid himself off and sat on the edge of the bed. His mother screamed. Will froze, fear making him hesitate. He rubbed his eyes. Someone shouted.*

*“M-Ma... F-Father...” Will’s voice broke. His father screamed. He walked forward, trembling, and approached the door of his parent’s room which stood half-open. Candlelight flickered as he peeked inside. A cold flooded over him and his heart threatened to stop. The entire world muted and blurred. His parents laid at the foot of their bed with several stab wounds, blood pooling around them. Will ran over and fell to his knees. The sound of shifting feet barely registered in Will’s ears before he was thrown aside from behind. Will fell onto his back and looked into the face of the man who would haunt his dreams thereafter. A ragged black beard hung from the man’s dark face, highlighted by splatters of blood. The man pointed a dagger at the boy, his dark wide eyes barely blinking, his face devoid of any emotion, and thick age lines across his forehead.*

*“He didn’t tell me they had a son,” he said flatly, his thin eyebrows pushing together. The man took a few steps forward. Will was too paralysed by fear to react. The man moved to strike, his bulky stature towering over Will, but as he raised his dagger he hesitated then sighed. He stowed his blade. “Your ma and pa were in it bad, boy. You’ll join ‘em yourself if you know what’s good for ya.” The man’s eyes met Will’s eyes for a moment, then he turned around and walked towards a small linen sack filled with coin.*

*“I’m not here to kill kids. Run off.” Will stood and lunged forward. He wailed, a sound somewhere between anger and despair, and attacked the murderer. The murderer stumbled forward before shoving Will off him and into his parents’ still bleeding bodies. The man huffed. He picked up the sack and fled from the room.*

*Will sobbed, knowing he had lost everything. A cold shaky hand touched Will’s cheek leaving some blood on his face. Will looked at his mother’s pale face; she struggled, barely alive.*

*“Ma... wh-what do I do?” Will panicked. He looked around frantically and tried to rush away to find water or linens or something to help her. Before he had the chance to go, Will’s mother touched his arm and he turned to look back at her.*

*“Wi-Will... l-listen...” she said with an exhausted and hoarse voice.*

*“Ma! Why...”*

*She coughed, splattering blood over her son's face. Will winced, but he couldn't take his eyes off his ma."*

*"Don't leave me! Please no... I don't know what to do..."*

*"Will." She smiled, staggering on her words, "Stay strong, Wi-William. He or she would have..." She placed a hand on her stomach, but lost her train of thought. Will looked over with watery eyes. She stared, lingering only a moment, then closed her eyes and lay still.*

*"No! Ma wake-up! No. No. Moth... er!" Will screamed and lost himself in his sadness. He hugged her body and laid by his dead parents stained in their blood. The only thing that marred the smooth pool of crimson on the floor was the murderer's knife. The world spun around him and blurred away along with the sound of his own cries.*

Will sobbed, hugging himself against the bitter cold of his cell. He kept trying to remember the faces of his parents but they became obscured, blocked by some unseen veil. Instead, the face of the murderer sharpened. When Will was ten he remembered the man as a ghoulish looking monster, but he'd only been repressing the man's true face. Recently, it had become more vivid. After that night, his life was never his own to live. Cold-hearted, stoic men were all he ever knew thereafter. Men who never listened to him, never believed him when he kept telling them he was innocent.

*He was a shadow himself, hollow inside, and he watched his body dissipating into a black red mist. He stood in his parent's room. Dizzy and confused, he stumbled towards the door. He was covered in blood. He fell. Tears filled his eyes. He crawled forwards, struggling to get up but crashed against the door frame. Struggling to stand straight, he looked back at his dead parents.*

*'Wi-Will... l-listen...' Will's mother spoke, but it was only in his mind. Will walked out the front door into the light of early morning. The sounds of chirping birds and blowing wind seemed muted. Will ambled down the main path to his village's center where the green rolling hills rose to the chapel upon them.*

*'S-Stay strong...' his mother whispered. Will reached the guardhouse and knocked on the door.*

*'He didn't tell me they had a son.' The distant voice of the murderer spoke. A constable opened the door and stared in surprise and concern at the bloody ten-year-old who had come to them.*

*"Home," Will said. They followed him back home and inspected the horrifying scene. They examined the dagger and noticed it matched with a set of daggers belonging to Will's father. They stared in disbelief at the boy.*

*The constables pinned Will's arms behind his back, and cuffed him in irons; the cold metal clicked shut tight around his wrists. All Will could do was stare at his dead parents oblivious to the dismay of the adults. He stared at the face of his dad. His father's eyes stared back, cold, lifeless and empty.*

Will watched the shadow standing at the door of his cell. It looked outwards, away.

"Where has your life gone?" it teased, saying each word slowly and with care. "Bound to a small rectangular cell, the purpose of your life merely to sit and to work." It turned back to face Will and smiled, a black jagged twist in its face. Will stood, arms sagging, pulling against his chains. Streams of black mist shot out, emanating from the shadow and clouded his cell. Will coughed and tried to advance, but the cloudy mist engulfed him.

A cold hand clamped his neck. His breathing grew strained and glowing amber eyes widened ahead of him. They glared at him as if admiring a trophy. Will's insides tightened, his eyes stung, and his voice left him. He tried so hard to look away, but could not. Sweat broke out over his skin. Some unseen force made him stare into the eyes, the warden's eyes. His vision blurred and his forehead throbbed in pain. It spoke with both the voice of the warden and that of the shadow.

'You are guilty, you are dangerous, and you are a monster,' it growled, every cold breath smelling of feces. Will's eyes watered. Monster... monster... the word invaded his mind.

Isen Prison housed the worst of Gurmanis' criminals, people like him. Its denizens were murders, rapists, traitors, terrorists, and those who slighted the royalty.

Night after night, the shadow tormented him when he was younger. Every night Will woke in his cell and cried. The other prisoners seemed lifeless and would not speak to him. The guards looked at him only with disdain and a desire to inflict pain. Slowly, his thoughts and self-perception deteriorated. He was a boy in a nightmare; he was afraid all the time. Will told himself no one cared about him and he deserved to be in here. He was alone and he was worthless. He slowly lost one emotion after the other and only despair, stress and detachment filled the void. He was wicked, evil even. Why else would he be here? He was the shadow, a demon of the worst kind. That was why, like the other prisoners, he also learned to be silent.

“N-No...” Will spoke into the dark. “NO!” he shouted, his voice bouncing off the walls of his cell. The shadow backed away. “Go. Away.” Will growled, glaring. The shadow smiled, floated backward, and faded. Will collapsed to the floor and gripped his throbbing forehead.

He listened to his own breathing and the faint noise of guards shouting at someone. Several thuds, a rod hiding flesh, barely reached Will’s ears.

A filled wooden tray and cup slid through an open slit underneath the door. He looked at the hard, dark coloured bread and thin cold soup. Will pulled the meal forward and absent mindedly shoveled it in.

Laying back and looking at the grey floor, he caught sight of his scarred hands and ran them through his dirt filled, slimy hair hoping not to find any lice. They would clean the lice out when he got them. His hair fell back into the left side part it naturally kept.

A pain pierced Will from his left shoulder, his brand. He ran his fingers across the angry scar, traced its **X**, the mark that forever tied him to this dark place. Cuts had been opened over it from the torture he suffered hours before. He held his chest, feeling the other brand they had given him, slightly larger than the fist of an adult man, an **M** for murderer. Will squeezed his eyes tight, resisting his thoughts and the memory those scars elicited.

---

*Bound by leather straps on a stone table, Will could only look up at the snowy sky. He’d met the warden for the first time. A guard fixed a strap in his mouth; it separated his teeth and pinned his head to the stone. It hovered over him, the red-hot branding iron. The blacksmith brought it close to his face and the heat dried his skin while the tangy sent of burning metal filled his nostrils. He stared wide-eyed at the sizzling prod.*

*“I won’t lie... this will hurt a lot.” Tears clouded Will’s eyes, he struggled to no avail prompting three guards to hold him down on the slab. Another pulled up his prison uniform to expose his right arm and chest which now heaved. The guards wiped away grime and dust then the blacksmith lifted the branding iron and pushed it onto Will’s chest. A second later another, smaller branding iron was pushed into his right arm. Yet another moment later, they pulled back his head to expose the left surface of his neck, and a mage dripped ink onto his skin before burning it into his flesh, forcing the ink to take the shape of **271**. The brands hissed upon his skin and the boy’s muffled screams were carried away by the wind.*

---

Will exhaled. He trembled and held himself tight, chains clinking as he moved his arms. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head trying to push the memory away. His head pounded with a dull thud. Will pushed the palms of his hands against his forehead. He’d remember so much on days like today. Why? Why did his memories torment him? He exhaled again and opened his eyes. The sore feeling became apparent to Will again as he slumped against the cell wall and looked into the dark ceiling.

It was his sixteenth birthday today.

Alone in the dark, he cried.

## Chapter Two

AFTER WILL HAD eaten breakfast, he pushed the empty tray towards the cell door and wiped any remaining tears. He crawled over to the corner of his cell and rose to his knees. Pushing lengths of chain out of his way and pulling up his tunic, Will urinated in the rancid hole. His cell grew thick with a nitrogenous stink before it thinned and dissipated. Will huddled against the back wall. He waited.

Shouting echoed outside as doors slid and swung open. A baton dragged against the sub-block bars, its clanging bounced off the walls, keeping in time with a hum. A hand reached in, grabbed the empty tray, and pulled it away. Will showed no reaction. He stared towards the grey ground ahead of him.

His cell door lock clicked. A guard slid the outer door open letting it hit the end with a ringing echo. Dim crystal light flooded Will's cell. He sat stoic.

The guard looked through the inner door bars and huffed. Behind him, in the hallway space between both sub-blocks, the cell block commander walked by with his papers holding a thin scepter with an octahedral crystal set on one end. Around him other guards unlocked cells and lined up the prisoners, collecting them outside in the sub-block. It was a cacophony of clangs, clinks, and rattles.

"Sun's up 271. Get-up," the guard ordered. He yawned and spat to the side. Bags sat under each of his grey eyes. Will touched the grainy floor and scraped up some dust as he stood. He pulled on one of the chains connecting him to his cell in order to hoist himself up. He hovered, taking a moment to steady himself. He blinked, face non-reactive, at the guard. The guard tapped on the inner cell door, signaling Will to shuffle forward and slide his shackled wrists through the upper tray slot. The guard was joined by another younger guard who leaned against the frame of the door and flicked dirt from under his nails. They acknowledged each other before the older guard adjusted Will's shackles.

"Cousins, uncles, brothers, sons, the men folk are nigh gone now from the countryside. All of em been conscripted into the war," the older guard complained. "I'm afear'd they'll take my son when he's grown, they will. Back-up kid."

Will obeyed. The older guard unlocked the inner cell door and stepped towards Will to unlock the chains binding Will to the cell.

"War needs men. Who are we to deny the king 'is men?" the younger guard answered the first.

"Cause erelong they'll be no one left on the farms. Army's good n' all, an' a crusade's redeemed a soul or two, but even the army can't keep it up without no farmers to work the fields, smiths to smith, hunters to hunt, tanners to—"

"Yea yea. I gets it."

"You just not got yer own family yet." The older guard loosened Will's leg irons and worked his way up to the other restraints. "I got a wife n' child to worry bout. Thing is, at the rate conscription is going, pretty soon they'll conscript women too."

"Ha! Come now, Fighter's Guild given birth to plenty capable female fighters."

"Right but once the men folk are dead, then the women folk follow, what's gonna be left to fight for, eh? Children will be all that's left and the Saomardrim will run o'er them like they were ants."

"Yer fancy... what's they call it... reasoning."

"It ain't fancy. Common sense, plain and simple." The older guard huffed.

"Well here's some sense. We got prisons here and there with degenerates ready to fight. Men in here make up a few hundred, the women another hundred or so. Then we also got us."

"Sure, you and plenty of others wanna fight. But the prisoners in here, they're needed to get the crowdite and other metals. Still gotta supply the armies." The older guard finished removing the restraints connecting Will to his

cell. He raised Will's arms and pressed hard on his wrist shackles, ensuring they were secure. Will flinched at the slight pain, and the guard examined his face.

"Been crying, have you?" he huffed, "I 'd think you'd forget that kind of thing."

Will stared blankly at him. The younger guard stepped forward.

"Remember this kid eh? 271? Six years ago, we took bets on if he would survive." The younger guard nudged his partner.

"That was 'afore we knew the warden fancied him and wanted to keep him alive." The older guard laughed. "Boy's still alive." The older guard looked Will in the face. "You ought to die already ya know, no one grows old in this place, one way or another."

"He's sure as any to be run through with a Saomardrim blade, I think. Probably deserves it too."

"Sure. Come on, let's go." The older guard gripped Will's left arm and ushered him out of his cell. He pushed Will against the sub-block bars outside while the younger guard slid shut Will's cell doors. "Saomardrim prisoner camps are dotted around the country I hear. All supplying material for the war. I think with the amount of people supplying material and the army still not getting enough, means this war is in real bad shape."

"Who says the army's failing?" the younger guard huffed.

"You've heard, haven't you? King Duggan's been hiring more mercenaries cause the levies ain't providing."

"You hear about Fritz from the infirmary? Poor sod killed himself. Found out his village was ravaged, razed to the ground. All the men young an' old were dragged off to war and the women, children, and the elderly hanged. His wife, children, and father among them."

"The king did that?" The older guard's eyes widened.

"Ordered it. Villages who won't submit their share to the war will get it. Burdens eliminated. God be merciful to Fritz upon his judgement."

"Suicides go to the Underworld."

The cell block commander walked down the space between the sub-blocks. He noticed Will pushed against the bars and strode up to him. From across the bars, he glared at Will.

"271," the commander barked. Will didn't react, his eyes dead. "To attention 271!" The older guard shoved Will and he blinked, looking at the commander. "When I call you, you listen. A night ago, I got a right shouting from the warden. You know how it is boy, it's happened countless times. Warden takes you into his quarters and you gotta serve him well. If not, I get the flack for your idiocy. Got it?"

"Y-Yes," Will croaked. The commander shoved his scepter between the bars and jabbed it into Will's side. The crystal lit up, sparks jumping from it. Tendrils of pain shot through his muscles, tissues, and bones rendering him shaking in rhythmic shearing hurt. He stifled his shouts. The crystal suddenly fizzled out and Will gasped, panting. The commander took it away and grunted.

"Lost its charge. When the warden wishes something for you to do, you do it. If I get yelled at again, I ain't giving you a change of clothes when you come back, an' you'll just have to live naked, ya hear?"

Will struggled to stand, echoes of pain subsiding, but he nodded. The commander moved onwards. Will was dragged to the prisoner line and attached to it. He stood there. He waited.

Will shuffled forward, chained together and flanked by two tall prisoners, watching the heavy connecting chain ahead of him swaying. The chains rattled taut, urging him along. Will lifted his feet against the pull of his chains and let his arms sag. The prisoners shuffled from the cell block through three barred doors and entered into a large rectangular cavern. Sharp tapered stalactites and stalagmites grew out from the corners, from the wrinkled and fractured grey-blue roof and floor, barely visible through dim blue-white spell crystal light.

"Keep yer heads down till we get down, y'all hear an' don't you forget to pray to yer mistress if ya care for it," a guard shouted.

Will stumbled forward, following the motion of his fellow prisoners. He looked up, hesitating a look. This complex, a system of mines, was carved deep into Mt. Isen and weaved itself in all directions leading through numerous tunnels and spaces. At the far end, three huge metal barred cages attached to giant chains, one large central one and two smaller flanking ones, acted as lifts

The thick air, hazy with visible dust, held a hint of rank mine water. Sounds bounced off the wall reaching every person in this enclosed place and the heat of every body multiplied to fight the cold. Some prisoners in front of Will started to mumble prayers, directed to the huge statue of a female standing on a step higher than the central lift, jutting out from the wall recessed to accommodate it. The goddess of slaves, criminals, and the imprisoned stared down at the prisoners with an expression of insanity, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was a young woman



wrapped in a straightjacket and chains and small fangs protruded from her lips and horns from her head. Will didn't understand this god because his parents had always taught him of Manis, the only inheritor of the Father's essence, the one most worthy of devotion, and through whom was the only way to the Father. The goddess depicted before him, in between wooden cross-beams, looked nothing like the allegedly benevolent Manis. Will frowned; in his mind Manis was anything but benevolent. Without warning someone shoved him. Will grunted and fell a little forward.

"Keep looking at the ground boy! You want to pray? Ya do so with your eyes on the floor!" a guard shouted behind him.

Will fixed his eyes on the ground. He shivered. Will and his fellow convicts shuffled towards the central lift and were locked inside. Will missed working in processing when he was younger because it was easier. The guards had initially put him there, where he would sort ore from rock, crush that ore with hammers and crushing machines, wash ore in troughs of running water with a brush, and roast ore in furnaces and pits.

The lift made a loud creak, and descended into the depths of Mt. Isen. They passed dozens of tunnels and caverns until they came to the lowest section. The air grew thicker and harder to breathe. They followed like sheep out and through a dim crystal lit tunnel, over a floor of wooden boards hiding drainage and ventilation pipes. Once they got to a larger, round cavern, not too far from the lift, they were pushed to their knees. The master miner, and his assistant approached and addressed the guards.

"Poor wretches," a guard teased. "Ore veins are of the hardest type. Can't put fire to it so you'll have to force it out with wedges. Gonna need every minute to reach yer quotas. Time to get to work." Guards systematically arranged prisoners along the length of the ore vein and linked each person to the other by chains adjusted to give the convicts room to maneuver. Escape by brute force was impossible in those restraints, besides, the convicts from Will's cell block worked at the lowest level and the only escape was up, through lifts and guards.

Everyone received the tools they needed to work and were expected to mine all day. Any attempt at using the tools to attack a guard, prisoner or oneself was quickly thwarted. Guards roamed the interior of the mines whipping slow workers, assigning tasks or socialising with their fellow guardsmen. A mage, who could react fast to the efforts of any prisoner attempting to end their life, was stationed nearby. Prisoners dug, cleaned, and groaned.

As soon as a guard was satisfied with Will's position along the vein, Will started chipping and digging a space to insert a wedge. Dust flew back over his face with every blow. The sounds of clanking chains and of metal on rock echoed through the chamber. Clink, tick, clink, tick. Time dragged almost to a standstill here.

"Faster fool!" a guard shouted. Will froze and braced himself. The swish and crack of a whip hitting home broke the rhythm of their work and the prisoner beside him moaned. Will flinched. The prisoners worked in silence, without emotion. There were no fights, no socializing among prisoners, nor any other typical interaction another prison may have between inmates.

Will was chipping at a rock fold when a hand clasped his right shoulder and yanked him up. Will jerked, dropping his pick.

"You, you're coming with us." the guard holding him commanded. He was from another cell block.

"I didn't do... wrong," Will pleaded, his voice flat. The guard dragged Will out of the prisoner line. A second guard unlocked the chains connecting Will to the other prisoners then he took hold of Will's left arm and both guards dragged Will deeper into the mine. Panic overwhelmed him, but his face was blank, hiding it. They dragged Will past other lines of prisoners, their blank faces focused on their own tasks. They entered a lift and took it up. Will stood between the two guards, head down, limbs drooping from his chains. His chest heaved and sweat trailed down his back.

"The boy stinks something awful."

"He's in his years of change, it makes it worse."

"You think if we dump mine water onto him it'll snuff out the smell?"

"I'm pretty sure that'll kill the boy."

"Maybe that's for the best."

"He's due to bathe soon."

"He's all yours then. I'm not blindfolding him and dragging him across the bailey." Will's heart raced, wondering where they could be taking him. They approached a smaller newer section of the mine and here the prisoner lines began to disappear. Further they went, Will's chains clanking, past rooms with wooden machines pumping water out of the slightly flooded tunnel they were wading through. They arrived at the entrance to a small round room where two guards and a sergeant crowded around, looking at the floor.

“Please, finish... work,” Will begged, on the verge of delirium knowing the punishment that would come if he didn’t finish. One of the guards holding him punched Will. He fell forward and coughed, claspng his stomach. The sergeant turned to Will, pulling him up.

“Be quiet, idiot!” he spat. A guard unshackled him.

“I-I... ah...” Will stepped back as the chains fell away. He rubbed his wrists where the irons had bit him. He’d always been shackled. At first their sight, weight, and restraining nature always tormented him and made him feel like the monster the warden loved to call him as. Over time they had become a normal part of who he was. Having them removed simply reminded him that they had been there.

The sergeant spoke again, “Climb down the ladder in this shaft.” He moved to reveal a hole in the floor. “You’ll fit in there. Go down. Tell us what ya find, you have two minutes or we smoke you out.”

Will nodded, choked down his nervousness, and shuffled towards the shaft. The rope ladder disappeared into darkness. A guard ahead of him, who wore a faded blue sash across his torso, held up a glowing blue-white crystal set in a sconce. It flickered, gaining Will’s attention, then darkened. The guard touched the crystal and blue-white light flickered back into existence, holding a steady dim glow.

Will hesitated, and the sergeant prodded him forwards. Will climbed into the abyss. He hit the floor with his feet, his grip-less leather soles almost slipping him; he could see nothing. Will took a few nervous steps, concentrating on not tripping, unable to walk as well unrestrained. A crystal torch was dropped down the shaft behind him. It flickered as it landed but was too thick to shatter. Will picked up the crystal torch and waved it in front of him to observe the walls. The space was no smaller than the cramped round room with the guards. They must have uncovered this room by accident as prisoners were mining. He searched for anything worth mentioning, feeling his way along the walls when his hand pushed against a hidden button. Stunned, Will retracted. The wall in front of him lowered making a soft grinding noise.

“What’s going on in there?” a guard shouted. “Any mineral veins of worth?”

Will kept quiet. When the door opened fully, Will stumbled forward, unsure if he should enter. Inside the new chamber, a wide set of stairs led deeper into the earth. As Will left the last stair, his foot sunk into the ground, triggering a loose stone. The rumble of sliding earth echoed around him and he stared ahead as glowing blue lines and symbols swirled and formed on the walls. They took more shapes, images of warriors and creatures, and Will couldn’t make much sense of them. Their light overwhelmed the light of his crystal torch.

Drawn were longships, mail armored men, large round shields, and prominently, an armored warrior holding up a longsword as he rode on the back of a half-bird, half-lion creature; a griffin.

The blue light turned red further down the hall where a round object sat on a pedestal. Above it, the glowing light traced out an imposing griffin on the wall.

Will walked down the vaulted hall past degrading statues of people he had no knowledge of and past two sealed doors he tried to open but could not. He approached the pedestal; the round gem captured his attention. No, not a gem, something more perfect, even flawless. About the size of a pearl, its outside reflected his image like glass and inside whiffs of coloured mist floated around. Overall, it retained a red look. Will tugged the object free and held it in his palm. He rubbed his fingers over its smooth glass surface. Slowly the object grew to fit snugly in his hand. Warmth radiated from it and up his arms, penetrating him like veins of heat and revitalizing every tired muscle. Will looked at it cautiously. It must be magic. It was valuable, perhaps. He’d have to give it to the guards. The object cooled a little, pulling away the warmth and energy it had given. Will hesitated; he wanted that again. Both shot back up his arms and filled his body. Will stood there and reveled in it. A decision made, Will stuffed the item into a fold in his tunic; he would not give it to the guards. He turned and retraced his steps.

Upon coming to the first room the door closed itself behind him. The guards above laughed. They’d thrown something down the shaft and it was generating smoke. Thick grey clouds packed the room and invaded Will’s nose. He coughed, falling to the ground. He struggled to reach the rope, finding it hard to breathe. Then the world grew dark.



When Will woke, the five guards were crouching over him and the room he was in glowed with crystal light. The guards, out of necessity and maybe even sport, had blasted the cave to get to Will. He coughed violently as he woke and someone pushed a waterskin to his lips. Will drank the cool liquid greedily only to have the waterskin pulled away and a guard shove his face back.

“Ahw, he didn’t die.” a guard grunted. Another guard re-shackled Will.

“You half-wit!” The sergeant grabbed Will by his tunic and brought the boy’s face to his. “Look what you did! You destroyed the cave. You won’t be getting any food for days. I will make sure of it. Back to your work boy, you’ve half a day to finish.”

Will was surprised they didn’t find the door but he was not surprised they blamed him for failure. His heart sank when he realised he had less time to finish filling his bucket and he’d be left hungry. Will gave the sergeant a hopeless and empty stare and was rewarded for it by being shoved to the ground. Cold metal bracelets clicked tight around his wrists, ankles, and neck. Will spit, blinked, and stared at the ground.

As the day was ending, Will gathered his mineral pail then ambled towards the exit. After depositing his pick and allowing guards to tighten and shorten his shackles, he showed his pail to the stone-faced guard who waved him along. Another guard lifted Will’s arms and patted him all the way down to his toes and checked his hair and mouth. Will remembered the object he had found and held his panic back. Not noticing any reaction, the guard nodded him onwards. The guard chained Will to the prisoner line in front of him and then passed the boy through but before they could move Will was grabbed and jerked back. He was turned to look at who had interrupted the entire post-work process. It was the guard who wore the faded blue sash. The guard’s tan eyes regarded Will with a deep suspicion.

“You didn’t find anything, did you?” the guard asked. His grip was accompanied by a slow burn, threatening to cast on Will. The man’s voice was calm and collected, not harsh or uninterested like the guards normally sounded. This suspicious tone confused Will and he didn’t know what to say. The other guard had missed the object and he was so close to leaving with it, but the sting of the burn reminded him of the rooms beneath the cell blocks, where men and women anguished, their existence known only by the screams.

The guard who had checked Will walked forward. “Naught anything on him. You sense something?”

“Maybe... nay... nothing.” The guard pushed Will into the prisoner in front of him. “Move em’ along.” Will was ushered to his cell, chained to it, and left alone.

He sat motionless against the back wall. In silence a weight pressed on his ears, the sound of stagnant air. Water plopped onto rock in a perfect rhythm, echoing through the cracks of his cell. It was a tapping he’d grown accustomed to.

Straightening himself, he took the pearl out and studied it. In the dim light within his cell the object emanated its own soft light, and a shifting mist swirled about its center. Will thought about his mother’s few charms; this was nothing like them. The pearl warmed him again, giving him energy. It was as if his muscles were tightening and expanding, allowing energy to flow. Will became suddenly aware of himself. He looked over his body. Why had he been born like this? Like a monster, like everyone saw him as? The thoughts of the shadow that had revisited him a day ago surfaced.

Will’s eyes followed the swirling of the mist inside the pearl. It drifted towards his cell door. A shape took form. In awe, Will watched his mother come closer and smile.

“William.” She raised a cloudy hand to his cheek.

“M-Ma...” Will spoke, looking up at her light translucent form, his locked emotions struggling to feel something.

“You aren’t a monster. You aren’t worthless and beyond saving. You are my son. My able son. Your life is precious and worth living.” She hugged him and kissed his forehead. Her touch was like a soft feather barely touching his skin and her nose nestled next to the gradual curve of his own. He stared at her wide-eyed, trembling. The apparition faded. Will sobbed into his arms, making himself small. His heart sank and his breath thinned.

Then something changed in him, something shifted within his being. The feelings he was used to started to push back, as if they were fighting something else. A sense of loss, less painful than emptiness and despair, filled him. Remembering his mother’s fruity voice, her pleasant face, her tender touch forced him to smile. Maybe he did have some worth left.

Will looked up. He looked at the pearl. The source of his sudden comfort pulsed in his hand. He tossed it aside, huddling in the corner and feeling loneliness and despair surge back. What had he felt? Had he smiled again? He didn’t remember what a smile looked or felt like. He could not smile. What was that object? Will hesitated. He looked down at a finger on his right hand. It rested inside an unknown pocket between the vest and tunic of his prison uniform. His eyes grew wide, feeling the new well-hidden cavity. This object was magic! Will swore there was no pocket before. He stared at the faintly glowing object then looked away. He skulked into a corner of his cell. Will shrank back looking at the ground.

A distant shout of pain tore through the air making him shudder. What a stupid object. It was like the shadow readily teasing him with the things he could not have nor feel anymore. Manis must be punishing him. Wasn’t it

enough that he was here? Why all the dreams and memories these past few days? He didn't want to remember; it made everything worse.

The mysterious object still glowed in the corner of his cell. He crawled towards it and picked it up, hesitating as he did. He placed it securely in his new pocket then curled up in a corner, unable to go back to sleep. Fine then, he'd play along, torment after all was supposed to cleanse his sinful soul. The screaming intensified. He waited. His purpose was to be a person who sits in a cell.

**Part Three:**  
**The Two Seekers**

## Chapter Eighteen

AHMED HELD UP his arm to shield his face from a scorching gust of wind. The floor of the canyon, only three meters in width, rose and widened. In the distance, the canyon walls separated and a large mesa drew closer. At the top stood the town of Nizid, rising out of the sandy desert and canyons surrounding it. To the east a large rock arch connected the town to three tall towers where a number of airships were docking and undocking as they were made ready for war.

Built from sandstone and wood, the pale tan-coloured walls blended in with the desert. Special stone was used to make the palace and mosque. The mosque's minarets stretched to the sky, towering above the town and was only dwarfed by the castle sitting atop its own rock arch. The four minarets marked the corners of the gold-domed structure, similar in style to the Al-Motros mosque, but weathered by sandstorms. Many colourful girih patterns decorated it and other important buildings. Will and Ahmed came out of the canyon and into the space between the canyons and the town mesa. They passed a few oval-shaped ghorfa, to which workers and a mage guided sliding desert skiffs loaded with grain. They could see the skiff docks under the walls on the mesa ahead of them. Ascending the path up, they were allowed through the gate.

Unease seized Will. People stared, but did not ask questions after looking at Ahmed with all his weapons and soldier's gear. Despite its location in the desert, the town was bright and colourful. It hosted many different people from all over Saomarhad. Southerners, mixed with northerners, mixed with desert tribes of all sorts. People rode horses, camels, and carts and carriages of all sizes. Peasants mixed with craftsmen and merchants while stray cats navigated through the crowds.

Various colours decorated the tightly packed streets, fabrics hung across open spaces for shade, and plants adorned building ledges. Even in the most hostile of biomes, life had erupted and prospered, after all, Nizid was a town of both culture and military. It was the center of the desert built north of the desert's largest oasis and over a large network of near surface water.

The boys wound through the winding streets under shade bearing fabrics and projecting latticework mashrabiya windows. Blocky multi-storey buildings flanked them built of tan and orange sandstone alternating in layers. They passed the madrasa, maktaba, and a park.

Riding under an archway they entered a square whose sides were lined with rows of cages and carriages around a central stage. Several merchants laid claim to groups of cages and had set up shop around them. Will stumbled forward as Ahmed abruptly turned to skirt the furthest side of the square. Will could see people, young and old, men and women, chained in the cages. On the stage other unfortunate people stood shackled while a merchant auctioned them.

"Slavers," Ahmed said without turning. "Many Gurmians who cannot be ransomed are either killed or sold into slavery."

"My fate will be the former."

"That could be better or worse depending on the master."

"I am no... no stranger to being bound and caged..."

"What?"

"What kind of master would you be?" Will looked at Ahmed's back. The Saomardrim boy hesitated.

"I don't take slaves," he said flatly.

Ahmed talked to the city officials, using his master's name and the sultan's writ to give him credibility, at the citadel, and got Will locked in its dungeons for the night. At least the dungeons were underground so cool air refreshed him. No sand blew into his face and he was allowed unbound. Will never thought he would actually like the cold.



Ahmed walked through the streets and descended into a network of roads winding underneath roads above him. As he walked, he observed people, carts, horses, camels, and a group of performing Romani as he took in the evening air. He stopped by the souk where he found some tropical dried and seasoned meat for the remaining journey. As he browsed, the merchant attending him eyed Ahmed.

“You’re not going to take anything without paying, will ya?” he asked.

“No.” Ahmed looked up from his browsing. “Why would I?”

“Huh, were you been all this time?”

Ahmed didn’t answer.

The merchant sighed, “Much trade from the east is tied up in customs nowadays, then what’s let through is claimed by the army, the emirs, and the sultan, for the war. Had to raise my prices, so did many around the sultanate I hear, less we lose every dinar we make to resupply. Times are tough for us all.”

“Only because of that?”

“Well, lands have been left in desolation after each Gurmian attack. Can’t farm burned land and the sultanate’s not got a lot of farmland...”

This Ahmed knew. In the center of the sultanate connecting east to west, arid land stretched far and wide. But there were vast greener spaces. “... Also, mind, emirs continue to increase their levies, cause only so many slaves can graduate from the military schools. People are getting pressed into action all over the place, sons, uncles, fathers, brothers. God be praised that most are told to defend their homes. Don’t think our sultan really wants to take Gurmanis land. Still, we suffer.”

“Sultan Yazid will make deals with far eastern powers. For more trade.” Ahmed was sure of it.

“I have yet to see it young man.” The merchant laughed. “That could be as hard as fighting this war. God forgive me if he wills this war. I just want peace. Many businesses would do better for it. You seem like a good sort. Still, are you taking or buying soldier?”

“I will buy.”

“Fifty fulus.”

Ahmed held in a gasp. “Sure.” He handed the merchant the bronze coins. It discomfited him that this merchant had suspected he was going to demand his wares. He was reminded of Al-Motros, Ni’ja’s village, their desolation, and the anger that had racked him. War was not an easy business and Gurmians were unrelenting, but his people couldn’t simply lay down and be conquered.

Ahmed walked down an alleyway, curving to the left, underneath several arches above and to the right. He’d arranged to sleep in the dungeon’s guard quarters as he did not trust the guards with his captive. He had to keep his eyes on Will, the boy was his chance to prove himself to the sultan, and he would not fail. A shuffle of feet behind him made his body stiffen. The assailant ran up a few strides, grabbed Ahmed’s neck, and pushed the tip of a dagger into his back.

“Dinar, dirham, fulus, now!” he growled. Ahmed closed his eyes and silently chanted a spell;

“Sakkhuaya vitalif sakkhuaya.” The mugger let him go holding his head and trying to regain his balance.

“Must you always use that spell? It makes my head so heavy with hurt.”

“Shoran! It’s good to see you.” Ahmed said, recognising the voice. He turned to embrace his friend in a delighted hug. “Don’t do that Shoran, I could have killed you.”

“But you didn’t! What are you doing here Ahmed? I thought you were still in Murzq.” Shoran’s eyes glowed with happiness.

“I was but the sultan tasked me with presenting to him a prisoner and a valuable artifact recovered from Al-Motros.”

“A prisoner? What a strange request. Is it someone important?”

“I can’t say too much about him, Shoran, because I don’t know what everyone else is supposed to know.”

“That’s fine. I trust you. There seems like no end to this war. More and more men come every day. I blame all the attacks by Gurmanis. It seems Al-Motros was only part of a larger plan. After its capture more assaults quickly overwhelmed much of the river defences. They captured the main road to Ortie from the north.”

“I know, that is why I am crossing the desert instead.”

“I should have known, you always plan ahead.”

“That, and I saw the road overrun. Have you been in an airship yet?” Ahmed couldn’t forget his friend’s affinity for flying.

“Yea, I went with the force that surprised the Gurmians at Al-Motros and Halsburg! They had no chance. I hate that we had to bomb our own town. I told you about the kind master I had when I was really young? He lives in that town. I hope he made it out.”

“He was the one who first bought you as a slave.”

“He was compassionate and fair. He may have bought me but I have come to forgive him. It was he after all who sold me to the mages, that led to meeting you.” Shoran smiled.

“And Halsburg?”

“The Gurmians retreated there. We leveled the town. No one survived.”

“We should catch-up. I bet you have gathered quite a few stories now.” Ahmed wouldn’t let the chance to talk to Shoran go by, and he had the whole night if they wanted.

Shoran blushed, “I haven’t been at war for long and only in an airship once. Most of the time I spent training for the inaugural flight.”

“That is still more flying time than I ever had, you need to tell me about it!”

“Here?” Shoran glanced around at the secluded alley.

“Somewhere better. How about the paradise gardens of Nizid? Ruea Bāgh? We can talk over something to drink.” The two walked a short distance to Ruea Bāgh, a large rectilinear garden close to the citadel, lush with desert plants among fountains and canals. The two boys passed by a *baradari* stage in the central courtyard where a number of people listened to a late afternoon poetry performance. They passed the central fountain and towards a corner where latticed *jali* screens separated the garden into smaller private sections. In a number of the sections people were spending time together, some talking, others drinking coffee and tea, and a few smoking from hookahs. The two approached a merchant who had been allowed to set up a coffeehouse. They ordered *salep*, a hot milk drink with cinnamon, and a plate of *makshufa*, hard almond candy, then chose a section cornered off by *jali* and sat across each other.

“When you’re up there it’s as if all the world can be your domain,” Shoran spoke. His smile beamed at Ahmed who could feel the strength of the boy’s enthusiasm. “Everything is so small but so different. You can see roads and buildings, even entire towns and cities and it’s hard to describe how the constructions look from the sky. Roads are networks, built-up areas are rigid and straight, farmlands have order and fields are almost all the same size. The largest of forests looks like fur on the skin of the earth, and oceans... actually oceans just kinda look the same as they do from the ground, big and blue.” The two laughed.

“Perhaps the army should hire an artist to go up there and see.” Ahmed smiled.

“Yeah! Then all the world would know how awesome it is.”

“I am glad it’s all you have dreamed of.” Ahmed took a bite of *makshufa*. It wasn’t made with more quality ingredients, like it was back home, but it still passed, sweet and nutty.

“It’s all thanks to you Ahmed.” Shoran looked away and hesitated. “I-I need to thank you again,” he muttered.

“You have already thanked me...”

“B-But you don’t understand how much it means to me...” Shoran looked up at Ahmed, tears teased the edges of his eyes. “I thought I would die a slave. I spent years working for my masters watching those my age free and carefree. I wished so much to join them. Some masters were harsh to me, others not, but you... you made me your friend. You treated me as an equal, educated me, everything. Then on that day you freed me... you can’t imagine how grateful I am.”

Ahmed’s eyes shifted. “Shoran, I know I...”

“I shouldn’t cry.” Shoran clenched his fists.

“No, it’s natural. There is nothing wrong with it.” Ahmed blushed, not so able with emotions.

“I don’t know how to tell you how much I have felt. I was so happy that I could be the master of my own life, as frightening and alien as that first was. And you are my friend, I ne’er imagined anyone would care about me, but you did. You made my dream come true. I feel ashamed I can’t give the same to you.”

Ahmed had used his influence to get Shoran into the airship academy, to train. Shoran hadn’t believed him until he received his recruit kit.

“So long as you are happy, I am happy. I spent most of my time alone in Murzq until I met you. Our friendship more than repays me.”

“Thank-you.” Shoran wiped away his tears. “You’re rising even higher now, aren’t you? A personal request from Sultan Yazid, what’s the end goal?”

“In his and Master Mahad’s eyes I have always been destined for the position of grand vizier.”

“Your hard work paid off.”



“Inshalhurah... but...” Ahmed slid his fingers over each other.

“But?” Shoran raised an eyebrow.

“The prisoner I am escorting...”

“The one you can’t say exactly what for or speak much about?”

“Yes. He’s our age... he drinks so much of my water.” They both chuckled. “But he’s not what we were told Gurmians are like, and it doesn’t seem like he’s had a good life. It unnerves me.” After spending time travelling with Will he realised Will was not so different from him. They both had limited knowledge of this war and both had not participated in it... until now. His duty was to bring Will to the sultan... to death. All he needed to do was his duty.

“Forget him. He’s just an obstacle on your path to greatness.”

“Is greatness all there is worth achieving?” Ahmed wondered.

“What else is there in a world of ambition? The power of such ambition might even spark much change, positive change.”

“Or commonly such power overcomes decency and reason and brings about ruinous change. It seems you have become more well spoken.”

“You rubbed off on me. Ahmed, you want this?”

Ahmed hesitated. The question was the same he had asked his elder brother long ago. “I knew something like this was coming, that’s why I studied hard and practiced any chance I could. I do want this... I-I do.”

“Then don’t doubt yourself.”

“I need some time to not think about it.” Ahmed took a sip of salep.

“If you have time before we part. Why don’t we play Tâb. I remember what you taught me and I know a few tricks now. That’ll get your mind off of it.”

“Sure.” Ahmed smiled. As Shoran fetched materials for the game, Ahmed slid a finger against the table. “Alhurah if this is your will...” Ahmed sighed. “You are most gracious, most merciful and all forgiving. Guide me with the knowledge of the Father, he who is all knowing.”

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Late was the hour when the Emir of Nizid, Emir Qasim, summoned Ahmed to his great hall. Ahmed entered into an octagonal room; each face marked by a pair of arches from which hung a lantern and adorned by red curtains. The upper level, three arches per face, hid a balcony that encircled the room.

The emir was nearing sixty-years-old, with barely a tuft of grey hair. He wore robes of silk that were coloured red, gold, and green, laced expertly. Ahmed was half asleep when he arrived.

“As-salāmu alaykum,” Ahmed said, bowing his head slightly.

“Wa alaykumu s-salām,” Emir Qasim answered, sitting upon a raised cushioned chair flanked by potted plants. In the arch behind him hung his banner bearing three crescents, sand blowing across them “I heard that you were in town. What I have heard of you is pleasing, you are a talented young man.”

“I am honoured, Emir Qasim.”

Emir Qasim gestured Ahmed to a cushioned space beside him, past the howz fountain in the center of the room. “I must ask how your master, Mahad Oman is? He and I are old friends and it has been some time. I know the hour is late but the day had me occupied. I must know.”

Ahmed took the seat. “My master is in good health; he recently left for Ortie via the Crescent Sea.”

“Alhamdulillah, but unfortunate he will not be passing through my town. As stoic as ever I assume?”

“If it pleases you.” Ahmed gave a vague response, not wanting to inadvertently insult his master. The emir laughed.

“He helped me a great deal, your master. If it were not for his mages, Nizid would have been overrun by feuding desert tribes. I am forever thankful and I am ready to provide his apprentice with all the help I can give.”

“I am glad to hear that, I will inform you if I need your aid.”

“Come now boy, let me bestow my generosity and expression of thankfulness at least once with a small gesture. Have a drink with me!” Ahmed smiled and accepted. Servants brought in a small table and chairs along with a fruity drink garnished with a bit of lightly alcoholic wine.

“I am sorry my lord but I cannot drink this. It is not permitted.”

“Come now, Alhurah will not smite us for such a small thing; a little from time to time is no problem.”

“Still...”

“Very well, very well.” The emir laughed and signaled his servants to get Ahmed a drink without alcohol. The emir also took a pipe and the two talked and drank for some time, occasionally laughing at an odd remark, or at Ahmed’s ignorance of Nizid.

“I am thankful to have my master; he has guided me well thus far. But of course, he too does not know everything,” Ahmed said.

“Master Mahad? No. Impossible! I have spent much time trying to think of something he knows not of. What is it he knows nothing of?”

“My master longs to see places now out of his reach. There is also an object he knows nothing about.”

“You are discrediting your master, Ahmed.” Emir Qasim laughed, “What is this object? You better show me the proof!” Ahmed retrieved his pearl and placed it on the table between them. Emir Qasim looked at it and gasped. “I have never thought to see something like this; it fits the stories spoken by the badū!”

Ahmed leaned forward astonished, “*You* know of this?”

“I am not saying I am completely sure but based on the descriptions I have heard from a popular badawī storyteller as a boy; I believe this object is very rare, and possibly very powerful.”

“What is it?”

“Long ago in the Ancient Eron, the early species of mortals looked to connect with God through one of their own. This person was chosen by the gods and given an object, quite like this. This object, called a Seeker’s Stone, was a device that allowed that mortal, later called a Seeker, to travel freely between the Underworld, Baseworld, and Overworld without having to die. The badū recall some other powers were utilised with this stone but they never specified what those powers were. The stones are said to hold the essence of magic, power, of Alhurah in them, maybe even the Creation Magic of the Father.”

“What was a Seeker’s job? He seems to be a glorified priest.”

“Oh no! A Seeker was more than a holy person. There was a Seeker for every major empire of ancient times and each had the job of being the bridge between the immortals, mortals, and spirits. They were expected to be a neutral party but ironically were also expected to see the gods’ will be put into action. However, they slowly came to an end.”

“An end? How so?” Ahmed didn’t want to miss any detail.

“Near their final days the last ten Seekers fell to corruption. Each one believed himself greater than the other and they fought for power. Disobeying God, one by one, they killed each other until only one was left. The gods were furious. The final Seeker, the champion, was banished to the Underworld along with his ten companions. The gods stripped them of their Seeker Stones and ended the existence of Seekers.

“In the Underworld Kalshaimar noticed them and gave them a chance to leave. For many years Kalshaimar and his spawn collected enough power to release the ten. To leave the Underworld, the ten became shadow mage knights, the first of their kind. These dark knights were able to travel between the Underworld and Baseworld at will making them powerful servants of the god of death. The champion became the commander of the ten. To this day the mystery still remains: where are the eleven and what might they be doing?”

“This sounds like a tale you would tell to frighten a child. It can’t be true.”

“A young learned lord like yourself has surely read some of the ancient histories or the scriptures of these gods; you know what Kalshaimar can do.”

“But this? I have never heard of Seekers and otherworldly travel.”

“Few have. If only you had the time I would take you to a badawī tribe and you could listen to their stories. All I am saying is that pearl of yours matches the descriptions.”

Amongst the grey stone, cold, and damp cell in which Will was in he found it easy to fall asleep, but remaining asleep was another matter. Sweating and trembling, a night’s peace for which he searched did not surface. Will was plagued by a memory.

*He smashed against the walls of his tiny solitary cell. Squeezed into an upright position, the eleven-year-old boy could barely sit in the cell. Hysteria gleamed from his eyes.*

*“Let me out! Please. Let me out!” he cried, begging for anyone outside. “I’m scared... voices... there’re voices everywhere.” On both his sides, some distance away, other prisoners screamed back and banged on their cells, some of the adults already insane.*

*Will looked at his hands. They melted, boiled, and bled. Liquid flesh crawled down his hands, wet and runny.*

*“N-No... no...” He fell backwards against a wall.*

*“William... come inside now...” his mother’s voice called him. Glowing green eyes, black pupils thin and sharp, emerged from the wall in front of him. Terrified he punched at the eyes trying so hard to make them disappear. A prisoner screamed in agony close by, another spoke in garbled phrases.*

*Will screamed and smashed at the cell again. Anger broke free and he tried to push at the locked hatch at the top.*

*“Please... help me...” he sobbed. A snake slithered over Will’s body and hissed at him. Behind it, the cell started to flood. Will could feel his mind breaking down. Weeks alone were quickly taking their toll, and all for accidentally dropping his pickaxe down a mineshaft. Someone above entered into the top cell. Electricity jolted down conducting through Will’s body; he screamed, saliva leaking out of his mouth, until it stopped. The hot energy boiled and burned him, and the smell of smoke filled his solitary cell, choking him.*

Will jolted back to reality. He woke in a cold sweat, panicked and hysterical. The warden was crouched in front of him.

“What’s wrong?” He reached out for Will. Will screamed and scrambled backwards. The warden advanced and Will lunged for him. They wrestled, the warden pinning him face first on the ground of his Nizid cell.

“It’s me, Will! Ahmed! Calm down!” Two Saomardrim guards rushed to the cell but Ahmed waved them off. Will sobbed and Ahmed adjusted, pinning Will’s arms behind his back. “I... everyone heard the screaming. You were having some sort of nightmare. Th-That was not a nightmare.” Ahmed looked at him with the same helplessness and fear etched in his face as Will had felt.

“Leave me be!” Will shouted and struggled against Ahmed’s firm grip.

“Dreams are especially susceptible to magic; they are magical things in fact... they leave blurry but readable images... Did that really...”

“Leave me be!”

“I am sorry; I must do my duty, if you were... um...” Ahmed cast healing magic over Will. He was no expert in such mental damage, but it would calm Will.

Ahmed slid off of Will and took a seat in one corner of the cell. He’d sleep here and make sure Will would be alright but shame still gnawed at him. If he had any empathy, he should let Will go free, after witnessing what had been done to him, but he couldn’t. He needed to finish this task, hand Will over to the sultan, then forget about him.

The sun was at its highest and the sandy desert seemed to spread in all directions forever. Rays of heat beat down on Will paired with the gusts of wind sending sand speeding over dunes. Ahmed was comfortable in his place on top of his horse. Sometimes he would dismount to lead the animal over the especially deep sandy areas. Ahmed took a long sip of water. Will longed for some but he knew Ahmed would not give him much as he had already finished his water.

“You seem content here,” Will commented.

“Not fully but yes, why would I not be? I am in my home away from the war in the peace of the landscape.” Ahmed smiled, a sudden enthusiasm on his face. “You can’t worry for any war, person or country here. Here the silence is pure and the sea of sand endless. All you have is the time to think, to wonder and to enjoy the Father’s creation.”

“Not fully?” Will held in a laugh, smirking a little.

“It’s nice, for a while, but the south is where I am truly home.”

“But I thought your people were desert warriors.”

“Another lie or exaggeration by your king. It is true that Saomarhad is mostly semi-arid to arid and there *are* large sandy and rocky deserts, but that is only on the surface. There are forests, plains, mountains and savannahs. In the northeast there lies the world’s largest wetland. In the south are jungles. Most people have been through a desert in Saomarhad because it is central to all overland trade routes.”

“I don’t know what all those things mean.”

“Of course, you don’t.” Ahmed chuckled.

“Is Saomarhad big?” Will asked, curiosity overcoming him.

“Big? Far larger than Gurmanis. It stretches from the Hertos river in the west to the Himeveralayan Mountains in the east that separate Saomarhad from Hrindnagara. It stretches from the Southern Ocean to the Free Lands in the north.”

“How do all those lords stay loyal to the sultan?”

“Not lords. You already know the sultan rules over the sultanate. He has many emirs who rule over emirates or important cities and towns. Each emirate, except for important urban emirates, are divided into satrapies ruled by a satrap. Then into eyalets ruled by a pasha. Eyalets are divided into sanjaks ruled by beys. Further divisions form towns, villages, hamlets, etcetera.” Ahmed looked back at Will to see if he understood. Will gave Ahmed a confused look. “Never mind.”

“What class are you then, or do wizards have their own class?”

“I am a nobleman as you say. There is no special class for mages however the grand vizier position tends to go to a mage.”

“Right, you told me, everyone seems to be of a higher class than me.”

“You should not worry too much about classes. In Saomarhad there are ways to rise.”

“Yeah but now I won’t get the chance to.”

“Right.” Ahmed’s horse slipped and he adjusted. Will was tugged forward.

“Can I have some water now?”

“No, you finished yours.”

“I hate the desert.” Will sighed.

As they climbed over the top of a sand dune, below them stretched dunes pock-marked with water filled depressions. Greenery persevered in the inhospitable heat and wind, rooting around the water. At its center under a cluster of broad-leafed trees sat an oasis and a small rest camp, bordered by a low rock face, all around its circular appearance. On one end small streams of water plunged into the oasis, emerging from within the rock.

The idea of fresh cool water lubricating his tongue made Will forget his surroundings. His foot hit a rock, twisted with a sharp jerk, and he skidded, dropping to the ground. His noose pulled tight, taking some of his air as he scraped his arm along the abrasive sandstone. Will grunted, an airy sound as air flooded back into his lungs.

Ahmed dismounted. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“M-My arm... leg.” Will heaved.

“Here, I’ll help.” Ahmed slung Will’s left and uninjured arm over his shoulder and led Will across the final steps to the oasis and to a crevice cut into the rock.

“Th-Thanks.” Will whispered as he stepped inside.

Ahmed refilled his waterskins, shared the food he had bought, then made sure his horse was comfortable for the night. Alone in the dusty atmosphere Will held his injured arm, his sleeve reddened with blood. Ahmed entered with a bag of surgical equipment and vials. He treated Will’s leg.

“Your ankle bones feel fine and I cleaned up the shear on your leg.” Ahmed pulled back Will’s sleeve and cleaned Will’s arm wound. Will watched him work under his Isen prison brand. It never let him forget who he once was. Ahmed refused to look at it. Once bandaged Will pulled his sleeve down and frowned as Ahmed cleaned up the equipment. It was a nice gesture but Will would not be alive to see it heal. He wondered if Ahmed could rid him of his brands, like his pearl removed his prisoner number.

“Can you remove my brands?” Will asked. “Maybe your magic could?”

“No. I don’t think that’s possible.” Ahmed frowned. “Those wounds are too deep. If a mage had intervened early then... maybe. One could use illusion magic to hide them, but such constant use of magic would probably kill him, and be sinful besides.”

Will was going to bring up the story about his pearl but thought against it. A prisoner tattoo was designed to be permanent. Ahmed’s magic could remove it with great difficulty, perhaps, but Will’s pearl had removed it easily. If only his pearl would decide to remove his brands. He’d like that.

“It’s too bad both our kingdoms fight. I would have liked you otherwise,” Will said, still grateful for Ahmed’s healing gesture.

“Yes... too bad. I would have liked you too.” Ahmed stared to the side.

“They say you worship the god Alhurah. You consider him worthiest of devotion.”

“We do. Mages are considered to be gifted by God, so long as they don’t practice dark magic or illusion magic. Illusion magic, like dark magic, mutates nature and seeks to mislead. This goes against the Father’s creation and is forbidden.”

“My master told me how the war began one-hundred years ago. He said it was the Saomarhad who attacked first under Sultan Biazid.”

“Ha! You have an ignorant master then.” Ahmed laughed. Will frowned and glared at Ahmed.

“How d’you think it started?”

“King Lundy started it. He attacked first.”

“Of course, you would say that. You don’t have any proof.”

“You don’t either.”

“My master told me. He does not lie.” Will said with a straight face.

“That is a naive answer. Even if your master did not lie, he could have been misled.”

“Maybe... it can’t be.” Will did not want to think his master was not as knowledgeable as he thought.

“The truth is more complex. During King Lundy’s and Sultan Biazid’s time there was prosperity. There were friendly relations between our peoples and merchants did much business between us. The citizens of both our nations even celebrated shared festivals together. It was the royalty, the nobility and our religious institutions that saw a benefit in war.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. You were a commoner, so politics were far away from you. I remember my home and Ortie so long ago. I like the variety there used to be. Men and women from all over and all colours together. The scents, sounds, feelings. It’s not that it’s gone, but it’s increasingly strained now.”

“I want to understand. I am a squire now. I should understand.”

“You’d accept the ideas of an enemy?”

“I would consider them.”

“Those in power, one-hundred years ago, of both our nations stockpiled weapons and levied fighting men. They grew anxious and did not see much wealth that the merchants were obtaining. On the other hand, our religious institutions mistrusted each other. The common people too. Zealots easily angered the masses and this soon became a problem for our leaders. Idle words repeated frequently became truth. Acts of violence, by both sides, once small turned into conflict. Jermecida, the holy city, was closed off to all Gurmian pilgrims. That city, mind you, is an important site for adherents of both Manis and Alhurah. Each side violently expelled the other from their lands. A crusade was called by your grand bishop and the war began.”

“So, the nobility wanted to start a war because they were bored?”

“They saw a chance to gain more land. In both our nations not a single piece of land was unclaimed, and the nobility continued to grow. They needed land to hold power. But the common citizens did nothing to ease tensions. They were galvanised by zealot preachers into distrust. At one point this war was fuelled by an idea that it was religiously right, now it’s strayed from that, but there could still be those who disagree. I have observed that most times it leads to corruption.”

“Then is there really a point to all of it anymore? My master said this war is draining Gurmanis of life and income.”

“I don’t know. In truth I spent long studying hard and improving my magic. I don’t know what it is like for the people in Saomarhad. I’ll tell you this though, I have heard of your king and no doubt he wants the extinction of me and my people. He sees us as all you have heard spoken of us. Perhaps he sees an opportunity to claim our lands for himself and his lords.”

“You know this?”

“I think this. Why else would a man be so driven to war despite the harm it is doing to his kingdom if not for his personal gain, and that of the classes that benefit him the most?”

“Like your sultan.”

“No. Sultan Yazid fights to protect his people.”

“Then what kind of man is he?”

“They call him Rashid al-Din, the rightly guided of the faith. His father was an unparalleled warrior and frequently led Saomarhad’s armies himself. Many said he took after Sultan Saadiq al-din, the greatest sultan of these crusades. Sultan Yazid remained in the sultanate and endeared himself with many influential people. He is a warrior, but he prefers not to fight, at least until King Duggan brutalised his father. Even in his youth he enacted policies and reforms that strengthened the sultanate. When the previous sultan died all the territories he gained were retaken by King Duggan and because Sultan Yazid had done so well strengthening the sultanate when his father fought, it remains strong.”

“My master told me that once King Duggan was a man of piety and honour, liked by his people. But that changed when his wife died. I don’t know, I was too young to understand what kind of man he was before.” Will was reluctant to believe the king was ever a commendable man.

“You show him no love nor any loyalty?”

“I have no reason to. His rule, his systems, in the end they ruined my life.”

“You’ve surprised me Will. This much I will admit. You were nothing like what I expected Gurmians to be.” Ahmed stared at him.

“Nor did I expect the Saomarhadians to be like you.”

“Now we talk as if we were friends. If only, in another reality, we were. You are uneducated but you ask many questions and that is important. But... why are you so curious? Why are you open with me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because I’m realizing the trick that was played on me. Manis left me in prison, made me suffer all those years, then gave me hope, gave me a new life. Now I go to die again. Or maybe I like talking to you.” Ahmed looked at him with surprise. He turned away; his brows knit in concern.

“Enemies... enjoying discussion. I have an idea of your past Will but, please, don’t make me regret my duty. I don’t want to feel bad for bringing you to God. One day this war will end as all things do, and on that day our people may once again be friends,” Ahmed laid down, resting his head on a small pillow.

Will thought, if captive and captor could have such a relationship then how come their people couldn’t? Ahmed was right; peace would come, but Will could not die before it did. He had to try to escape. After all, he was a captive and speaking of duty, this was his duty.

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