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OF  
UNITY

LAST OF THE SEEKERS

1

NITISH SHARMA

CHARACTER MOMENT

A Squire's Duty

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Published by Boundless Adventurer Publishing

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Dawn of Unity Character Moment (Last of the Seekers, Book 1)

First edition April 2024

[nitishsharmabooks.com](http://nitishsharmabooks.com)



## A Squire's Duty

THE PELL SHUDDERED, cracking under Will's fierce strikes as his blunted sword collided against it. At the far corner of Castle Ochsen's training field Will could see all the hurried preparation for the deployment to the war front. Sir Robert had dismissed him for a while, instructing him to practice. Other squires were also training and the pages among them watched with intrigue. While most squires were near his age, a number were adults who either never convinced a noble to knight them or could not afford the responsibilities that came with knighthood. He was most comfortable in this position on the field. No one could sneak up on him or surprise him, both of which always brought pain.

Knighthood mattered little to Will. His hope was to be of use to his master who'd thus far showed him nothing but kindness. Will thrust at the pell, forcing it to bend tight. He released, letting the pell correct itself. War was an uncertain prospect. He wasn't afraid of blood or death, the warden made sure of that. Will shuddered. He was uncertain about killing and what the experience of battle would entail. Will made three strong slashes at the pell. He was determined to see this through.

From across the field, he saw a squire approaching with a blunted sword slung over his shoulder. As the squire neared a tremor soar through Will, and he had to push harder against the ground with his feet to steady himself. It was the squire from Suthenburg, the leader of the three who'd almost killed him. The squire strode forward, smiling, but not putting Will at ease. Will instinctively shrunk back, but then raised his sword in a more defensive motion.

"Whoa!" the boy lifted his free hand and laughed. "We got off wrongly."

Despite the change in the boy's more considerate voice and gestures compared to their last meeting, Will did not open his defence. This boy was not the warden, not Isen Prison guards. He could deal with him.

"Do you really think I would attack you in full view of all these squires and pages? The girls?" The squire gestured to a group of noble girls watching the training from the keep facing side of the field. "My name is Klaus. What my friends and I did back in Suthenburg was severe, but can you blame us?"

Will raised an eyebrow. They tried to kill him.

"You... a squire? It's laughable! It's inconceivable! You want to prove yourself? Do so now."

"Wh-What do you mean?" Will found his voice. He shifted, eyeing Klaus with caution.

"Honour your master and show me what he has taught you." Klaus lowered his blunted sword in a downward ready guard. Will raised his sword higher in response.

"I must practice. That's what my master wants and there's not much time until we leave.

"One duel will not burden your practice." Klaus looked back at the noble girls, catching their eyes. He waved. Will looked between the two with slight comprehension of Klaus' desire to show off.

"I must go."

"A challenge is given. You risk your own honour and that of your master if you reject the duel."

"That's not what—"

"The choice is yours, coward." Klaus thrust his sword point towards the ground and yawned. "Matters little to me anyway. I will either beat you or you will prove yourself worthless.

The warden's voice crept into his mind, each insult heavy on Will's ears.

"I accept." Will raised his sword to ready guard and gripped it tight. He would not stain his master's honour, not after how much trouble it seemed that Sir Robert faced because of him.

"Good." Klaus returned to a low guard and eyed Will, waiting for an attack. Will swung forward and Klaus caught it mid-swing, tossing the blunted blade aside and up. He shifted and batted Will's legs from below. Klaus had barely moved. He waved at the girls again. "Is that the best Sir Robert had to teach you?"

Flushing red Will swung, trading several blows, but he could not break through Klaus' defence. Too slow to intercept a jab, the tip of Klaus' sword thud into Will's side. He grunted, lowering his blade then swinging it back up

to intercept Klaus' next two strikes and missing a third. The two parted and Klaus waved again to the girls, flourishing.

Will exhaled, watching for his next moment to strike as Klaus turned his attention back on Will. Will swung but was countered. He shifted to a new position. Klaus expected it and moved to block, but Will changed direction... a feint, he remembered his master saying. Klaus made a awkward block, allowing Will's blade to slide off and smack the squire in the side. Klaus's cheeks grew deep red as the girls laughed.

"Nicely done Will." Sir Robert's voice came from the flank. The knight stepped in between the boys. "That is enough practice for today, you have other duties to attend to." Sir Robert offered to take Will's sword and Will handed it over.

"No." Klaus grunted. "We're not finished." He tried to flank around Sir Robert towards Will. The knight caught Klaus in motion, batted his sword aside, and shoved him sideways. Klaus staggered but caught his balance.

"Have more honour than that boy." Sir Robert frowned. "Attacking an unarmed foe does not gain you any respect. This fight is done. Now bow and leave with dignity." Sir Robert gestured for both boys to come together. Will bowed to a reluctant Klaus, who did the same, then he followed Sir Robert from the field. "So, Will, how did you get into a fight?"

"He came to me and said that his challenge had to be accepted."

"So, you were goaded into a fight."

"He threatened your honour if I refused."

Sir Robert snorted. "No honour is tarnished if a fight between boys is refused. It is better to have a level head for these things. Do not let any opponent drag you into a fight you are uncertain of or for any trivial reason. That squire can do naught to tarnish my honour."

"Yes master." Will frowned.

"I am pleased you are willing to defend my honour Will. That back there was a fine feint."

Will smiled and chuckled. "Thanks master."

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In Sir Robert's quarters Will sat at a large table polishing his master's plate armor until he started to see his face in each piece. There were many pieces. It was a puzzle to him how each fit together and how his master could move within such a case of steel. Sir Robert entered the room, catching Will's look and nodded. The knight examined Will's work.

"Well done." Sir Robert backed up and tossed his cloak over a shoulder. "We shall soon make for our ship. Have you packed the clothes?"

"Yes." Will pointed to a set of large bags on the other side of the room.

"Good. Now help me undress from my chainmail and surcoat." Sir Robert detached his sword belt from his waist.

Will stood and looked over his master. "Where do I begin?"

"Start with my arms and work down. There are ties for my pauldrons from behind. Loosen them and take those pieces off." Sir Robert removed his cloak.

Will walked around his master and fiddled with those ties, removing the pauldrons over Sir Robert's shoulders. "Is it difficult to move in such armor? Is it heavy?"

"You will see that there are many plates which all move in relation to the others. This retains the wearer's flexibility. I will teach you the names of each as you undress and redress me." Sir Robert presented his elbows.

"These for example are my couters, they protect my elbows from blows. It is riveted together with the vambrace over my lower arms and the rearbrace over my upper arms so that they move as one."

Will removed the armor.

"Look here." Sir Robert twisted the plates like an arm would if it were underneath, clanking as they moved unrestricted.

"And is it heavy?"

"Hardly... well it is no silk gown. Do you know the feel of that?"

Will thought back to the feast in Suthenburg. "It fit well and slid without effort over my body. Very light." Will accepted the arm armor and placed them to the side. Sir Robert presented his surcoat. Will removed it, revealing the chainmail underneath.

"Indeed. Armor, even full plate, is heavier than your normal wardrobe but it is not so heavy as to be debilitating. In time you will learn to easily run, jump, and twist within it."

“It always seemed that knights in plate were heavy. They walk slow. Maybe the plates hurt them?” Will hefted his master’s chainmail over his shoulder and put it aside.

Sir Robert padded his gambeson revealed under the chainmail. “It does not hurt. With the proper padded gambeson or lining, armor will not cut into your skin and press sharply against it.”

Will helped Sir Robert out of his gambeson, revealing his master’s under-shirt. Next, he worked on the cuisse, poleyns, and greaves which were all riveted together in an order like the rearbrace, couters, and vambraces. Will removed the sabatons off his master’s feet. Revealed underneath Sir Robert’s leg armor were his mail leggings were attached to a belt harness around his waist. “Why are there many layers?”

“A knight must protect against any possible weapon. Chainmail is best against slashes. Plate can protect against slashes and jabs. Padded armor has some resistance against blunt weaponry. If one layer fails the other will work, God willing. Multiple layers also cover gaps between the plates.”

Will slid off the leggings. Now Sir Robert was stripped to his cotton underclothes.

“Now you see me bare and vulnerable William. The knight you imagined with awe and fear has been taken away by our Lord.”

“No master... I would not wish it.” Will blushed.

Sir Robert laughed. “Come, redress me now in my plate armor. This, unlike what you undressed me from, is more plate.”

Will retrieved this armor, examining again from his polishing the intricate gold painted designs, blue and red colours on the pieces which shone without limit.

“Now work from my legs and back up.”

Will slid fresh chain leggings over his master’s legs then followed up with an arming jacket, a linen padded jacket with chainmail sleeves and string ties. “No gambeson?”

“This arming jacket commits the same function, but the ties help to better lift the armor and distribute the weight of the plates evenly. This also helps keep the armor flexible and retains a lighter feeling.”

Will placed new sabatons over his master’s feet then greaves around Sir Robert’s legs, this time unriveted and which clipped together, enclosing the leg. The riveted cuisse and poleyns were next, strapped to the arming jacket. “You’ve trained me, and I’ve cleaned your armor, delt with your supplies, and dressed you. Is this what a squire must do?”

“And you accompanied me to a feast. You learned much there.”

“Thank-you master.” Will wrapped a chainmail skirt around Sir Robert’s waist to cover any gaps in the armor underneath.

“Ah yes, eager eyed thirteen-year-old boys who served as pages dream of squiredom imagining that now they shall finally see battle and win honour. In normal circumstances anyway.” Sir Robert chuckled. “Are you so eager?”

“I don’t know...” Will no longer knew what eagerness felt like nor what a passion was. The warden never let him feel such things. Then he remembered how after Sir Robert had forgiven his escape attempt on the King’s Road and afterwards how he committed to learn, seeking to please the knight. Was the desire to do so some kind of eagerness? He focused on his task. Will lifted Sir Robert’s breastplate, it had some heft, but he could manage it. He placed the front plate over the chest and the back plate over the back, buckling them at the shoulders and around the waist with the lower plackart.

“The question of what a squire must do is an interesting one.” Sir Robert rubbed his goatee. “I have never considered it. Know at least that while squires do indeed see more battle than pages their responsibilities increase. You train so that one day you can perform on your own. You learn to arm me so that one day you can do so yourself. You serve me to learn loyalty such that you may be loyal to your betters. You serve me my daily bread and drink, clean my clothes and armor, and repair my broken gear so that you may learn hard and honest work. Such things shall help you to build your own path in life. These are ideals foremost.”

“I don’t mind the service.” He couldn’t articulate how grateful he was to his master, and not alone to face the anger of his own people. Will strapped tassets to Sir Robert’s front sides and partly over the mail skirt, for greater protection.

“And I am glad for it. You serve well.”

“Thank-you master.” Like the leg armor, Will placed riveted arm armor over Sir Robert’s arms followed by a gorget over the top of the breastplate to protect the neck and gauntlets over his hands.

“Are you prepared then to protect me within a battle? Extract me if injury befalls my person? Bury me with all honours should I fall?”

Will's lip quivered, speechless for a moment. "It won't be like that." Losing his master would be like losing everything he'd gained of himself and his life since escaping prison.

"Manis only knows." Sir Robert smiled. "You have a duty to those I command as well. Should you fall into command then that duty is yours. Remember the code I taught you in Suthenburg?"

"I do." Will finalized the dressing by attaching a small shield with his master's coat-of-arms over his left chest then helped Sir Robert into a clean white cloak. He fetched his master's sword belt.

"A page may be excused for such a duty, but as a squire the responsibility becomes yours. If I so wished, you would train with and teach the younger pages, look after them, and administer my justice should it come to that." Sir Robert accepted his belt from Will and fastened it around his waist. "As squire you have some authority over the soldiers and camp followers here."

Will looked over his master. Sir Robert's previous armor paled in comparison to the armor he wore now. Sir Robert seemed to stand taller, as his armor reflected the light. He looked stronger, healthier, induced greater fear.

"Some knights instruct their squires to guard prisoners. Would that be appealing to you?"

"No." Will shivered.

"I assumed so. You have done well Will. Now for your... oh!"

"Master?"

"Before we get you armed, I need you to fetch our horses from the stable ship and take them to the stables. Groom them and bring them to the keep. I will arrange for the armor."

"Armored horses?" Lord Jerold's knights came to Will's mind, the beasts standing tall in gleaming steel and coloured cloth, the awe of wealth on full display.

"Do you have experience tending horses?"

"Ponies, donkeys, and plenty of farm animals."

"Ha! Well, there should be someone there to help you for the parts you do not know." Sir Robert threw his cloak to the side. "I will await you with the armor at the entrance to the keep."

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Will waited with an adult squire who'd agreed to help him walk his horses to Castle Ochsen's stables. He watched his horses be lifted by crane from the stable ship to the docks, and the stable hands release and calm them. The horses, his master's destrier and his own courser had strong builds, gleaming coats, and dwarfed Will as he stood beside them. He and the squire guided the animals through the crowds from the docks, up over a bridge, and into the castle proper to its west side. There stood the stables, crowded with horses and stable hands. Will approached the stablemaster, a bearded man who looked ready to fall asleep, occupying a table underneath a tent just outside what was his quarters. As Will hailed him, he flipped through his notebook.

"Come to rent a stall have ye?" the stablemaster asked.

"Yes, for Sir Robert's horses."

"And you are?"

"Sir Robert's squire."

The stablemaster took a closer look at Will and nodded. "Very well. The grand marshal's spot is already reserved. The fee is one gold."

Will handed the man a gold coin. Though Sir Robert still had to pay, it had been discounted. Will and the adult squire led the horses to the stall then the squire left. Remembering vaguely what to do, and seeing what tools were provided within, Will started to brush the destrier. The courser huffed.

"My lord?"

Will heard the person who'd said that but figured it wasn't for him.

"My lord?"

Was it for him? Will turned to face a boy not more than ten-years-old.

"M-Me?" Will asked, not yet used to being called a lord.

"Sorry, but this is my job, and your horses are newly come." He smiled. "If it please you I can care for yer horses. You must've more important things to do."

Will's hesitation in answering made the boy frown. "N-No... my master asked me to care for the horses. It is my... duty." The destrier bobbed its head as if in agreement. "I can take care of it."

"Master Emil will get mad at me if..." the boy hung his head. "Sorry my lord. I won't disturb you." He entered an adjacent stall and began to tend another horse. Not sure what to say Will resumed brushing the destrier. Again,



the courser huffed and then stamped its feet, snorting. Will noticed the boy sneaking a look from his stall and caught his eye.

“My lord... can I suggest...”

“Call me Will.” It felt uncomfortable being call lord.

“Can I...”

“Sure.”

“You ought to feed the horses first. After a long journey they must be hungry.”

“Hungry?” Will blushed.

“Yeh.”

Will looked around and noticed a bag of feed and troughs for the horses. “Then do I brush?”

The boy just blinked but seemed to expect Will to say more. A nervous shiver crept up Will’s chest. “Fine, I could use your help. What is your name?”

“Curt sir. Stableboy from Mochau.” Curt rushed over and pulled a trough towards the destrier. He took a pitchfork leaned against a wall and aired the hay within the trough. The destrier bobbed its head and started to eat even before Curt finished. “There’s naught any grazing for a horse aboard a ship.” Curt patted the horse and scratched its side. “He’ll be thirsty too.” He looked past Will to a large wide barrel filled with clean water. Before Curt could move Will walked to the other side and pushed it forwards. “And he’ll need grains after hard work, but grass is best. Sir Robert’s horse is well weighted, his diet’s well balanced.” Curt smiled, directing himself to the destrier. “Isn’t it? Huh?” the destrier huffed before lowering its head towards the water. A warmth seemed to beam from Curt as he spoke and it was slipping off onto Will who could feel it hovering at the edges of his skin, a tingling.

“He seems happier.”

“I know! Destriers are tricky, they can be hotheaded but this one is calm, and he’s been stuck in a ship’s hold for a few days. I’ll get them out to the fields though.” As the destrier backed away from the water Curt pulled on the straps around its face. “My lord you’d remove the halter once he is safely stabled.”

“I don’t know how.” Will frowned, cursing his lack of knowledge.

“It’s fine. It will help keeping him here for grooming.” Curt pulled up a coiled leather rope nearby and attached one end to the horse, and the other to the stable wall. He then fetched two brushes. “Here I’ll show you if it pleases.”

Will nodded, interested in learning. He stood beside Curt and copied his sweeping brush motion.

“You gotta brush in the direction of his hairs and not around the legs or face with hard brushes, it hurts.”

“Like this?”

“Yea! He’s liking it.”

A strong earthy stink rose in the stall singing Will’s nostrils. “Wh-What’s that?”

Curt bent under the destrier’s legs. “Oh he put out a big one.” Curt laughed. “Once I cleaned an entire stable filled with warhorses and we had a mountain of poop down which you could pour the river of pee, but everyone was happy the stable was clean, especially the horses.”

Will couldn’t help but smile, feeling a strange joy he’d not felt since long ago. He’d had enough of cleaning stink that he’d never want to do that, but to Curt it seemed just another part of the job and one he was happy to do if it meant his horses would be pleased.

“Here, lets pick at his hooves.” Curt put the brushes aside and retrieved a pick. He ran a hand down the destrier’s leg and pinched at the bottom, causing the horse to raise the hoof. He showed Will how to pick out the dirt lodged in it, flicking some onto Will’s face by accident.

“S-Sorry my lord.”

Will laughed. It came out a hoarse cracking before he bit his tongue, sending shots of pain into his head. Had he ever laughed in the past seven years until now? “It’s fine.” Will wiped the dirt off his face.

“Curt God damn you!” Emil shouted, appearing from behind and startling them both. The horses huffed, one neighed. Curt’s eyes widened and his face paled. He scrambled from where he was to stand before Emil. “How dare you let our grand marshal’s squire tend the horses, that is your job alone!”

“S-Sorry master... S-Sorry...”

Emil’s face was red. Will frowned and shivered, the echoes of Emil’s shouting pounding at his head. The warden’s shout rode the wave of Emil’s anger. His legs trembled as much as Curt’s body did.

“I ought to make you do naught more than clean the horses’ shit. No brushing, no feeding, no saddling, nothing.”

“Please no...”

Will leaned against the destrier to regain his balance and forced himself to focus. Emil was unfair. “Stop.” Will ordered. Emil shot a look at Will, his expression lightening. “I allowed... allowed Curt to help me. It is my choice. Leave him b-be...” no, he was too forward. He’d be hurt now. Will shrunk back.

“If that pleases you sir.” Emil nodded, to Will’s surprise. He wasn’t going to be punished? “Curt get working.” Emil growled. Curt rushed back to Will’s side and Emil fetched a coil of rope before exiting.

“Let me f-finish... here...” Curt was almost in tears. A sweat broke over Will, unsure of how to calm Curt or himself. The silence helped them both as Curt finished saddling the destrier.

“How does...” Will’s voice broke. “I mean... how does the stablemaster treat you?”

Curt didn’t make eye-contact. “He’s an angry man.”

“Tell me.” Will flashed a weak smile. Sir Robert seemed to care more than the next noble about the happenings of his camp. Will figured he could try that too. “My master, the grand marshal, wants to know. He’ll make things right.”

“No sir, I’ll be sent home then none will provide for my family... none.”

“My master won’t send you home... unless you lie.” And even when Will had been untruthful, Sir Robert understood why. The knight did not abandon him.

“Master Emil shouts at me... a lot.” Curt started in a muted voice. “He threatens to banish me and makes me sleep in the cold and rain. I make small mistakes... sometimes... I’m sorry, but master punishes me.” Curt rubbed his back. A hot flash surged up Will’s back and an anger boiled in him. The look Curt gave and his tone of voice, his back, Will could recognise it in himself.

“He wh-whips you...” Isen Prison surged into Will’s mind, threatening to wither him, made more vivid when Curt nodded his head. “I will bring this to my master!”

“No! Please do not sir. Please, please don’t tell anyone. It will make everything worse! I’ll be punished or banished or paid less.”

“He shouldn’t do that to you. What does he even do? It seems you do all the work.”

“He greets the people with horses and takes the stabling fee. I do all the horse care.” Curt frowned, clenching his fists.

“It isn’t fair.”

“He takes the fee for himself and tells his superiors the wrong number of horses and what breeds are here. I-I seen it.”

“What? He’s cheating his own allies.”

Curt paled. “I didn’t mean to say that...” He rushed to Sir Robert’s courser. “I can show you the rest. Let’s just finish... let’s...”

“We have to do something about the stablemaster.” Will said, standing tall though it sent shivers through his skin, a strange mix. Sir Robert always did good to those around him. What if he could do that now for Curt?

“No... please let’s just finish.”

What if his master disapproved. Will’s high tipped to the peak then began to slide down the other side. His master would cast him away. Sir Robert would throw him from the walls if he disturbed the order in this place especially when everyone was busy preparing for the deployment. Will looked again at Curt who had gone to the courser pretending everything was normal. Curt trembled, refusing eye-contact. Will, resisting the pang of worry in his gut, took a few shaking steps forward. If he wanted to ensure no one would ever experience what he had experienced with the warden, then he could not let Curt suffer under a cruel master.

“The stablemaster must have a record of the horses he keeps, and we can count out the horses here, right?”

“My master—”

“No, he’s not your master, don’t call him that.”

“But...”

“Masters shouldn’t be so cruel to their apprentices and shouldn’t be cheating his superiors... Sir Robert.”

“But if he sees.”

“You’re teaching me the breeds of horses here, that’s all.” Will smiled.

Curt glanced over the horses, a tremor in his lip. “O-Okay.”

Will and Curt roamed down the length of the stables making a record of every horse that was present, their breed, and when Curt could remember, the person who owned the horse. Curt was happy to complement the horses he’d

seen often, who bobbed their heads when he came by. Stepping outside both were flushed red. Stablemaster Emil and his quarters stood across them.

“You’re afraid too!” Curt said.

“Yea but,” Will took a deep breath. “I have to.” Sir Robert was being cheated and as his squire he needed to do something.

“But *I* have to talk to him.”

“Relax. Just bring up the issue with the broken reigns.”

“We shouldn’t have cut them. He’ll notice!”

“He won’t. Keep him talking, I’ll be quick. Where does he keep the key?”

“In his stall in a box on top of the barrels.”

“Okay. Don’t worry. Let’s go.” Will was worried. This was against everything his body wanted him to do, but he *had* to do it. Curt walked first, gingerly, then his step gained confidence and he engaged Emil in a conversation. Not a moment later did Emil shout, ordering Curt to take him into the stables. When they were out of sight Will walked over to the stall and looked around at the people, unworried about being seen.

He found the box and took the key from it then used it to enter Emil’s quarters. Will eased the door shut. The small room contained a straw bed, shelving with books and scrolls, and a desk and chair nestled against the far wall. A side table sat near the bed while a thin stream of light penetrated the room from a single window. Will found the small space comforting, a feeling which fought the nervousness of being caught.

Will rifled through the top of the desk and found a ledger wide open. He scanned the pages, focusing only on the numbers, which he could read. They seemed to match his and Curt’s count. Were they wrong? Will scanned slower through the shelving. Maybe Emil maintained a fake ledger to show his superiors, would it make sense? He had to keep his gains somewhere too— Emil burst into his quarters, dragging a teary-eyed Curt with him. Will’s heart leapt into his throat.

“Why are you in here! Even as a squire to Sir Robert what right do you have?”

Will’s mouth dried as his vision blurred and Emil’s face morphed between Emil’s own and the warden’s.

“Get out!” Emil shouted, unconcerned with who he was speaking to. As Will fled he watched Emil shove Curt against an outside wall. “You stay there and do not move until I tell ya. All day. All night. Wretch!”

A few soldiers approached Will and he didn’t hold his gaze on them for long. “Get Sir Robert. I have something to show him.”

“So, is it true?” Sir Robert turned from Emil to Will. “You broke into the stablemaster’s quarters and pillaged through his personal items?”

“Yes.” Will croaked. “But he’s cheating you master. He’s stealing the stabling fee for himself.”

“He lies!” Emil shouted. “Heed no mind to that boy—”

“That boy is my squire stablemaster. I have not known him to take such actions without consideration, so I will hear him out.”

“The stablemaster beats and shouts at Curt and punishes him too severely for minor mistakes.” Will continued.

“As is my right. He is in my care.”

“Emil is right.” Sir Robert nodded.

Will, a little shocked, gestured to Curt who sat in a corner next to a standing soldier. “He whips Curt. It’s too severe!”

“I’ve not seen this passion in you before Will. Do you have any proof?”

“The ledger... but...” Will frowned and dropped his head. “It didn’t look wrong.” Will’s heart pounded against his chest. Sir Robert was going to have him sent back to prison.

“Keep all three of them under guard.” Sir Robert said after a moment of silence. “Alert the castle steward and tell him to bring a group of auditors with him. They will assess the condition of this stable and determine the truth.”

Will drifted towards Curt as a group of soldiers surrounded them, a tingle prickling the surface of his skin. Over the next half hour, they waited as the auditors searched through the stables and counted the horses. They entered stablemaster Emil’s quarters and spent several minutes within.

“Sir Robert, my lord. Please stop this, what need is there?” Emil moved to leave. “I am wasting time here; I should be attending to the war preparations.”

“I assure you that no one is more inundated with work than I am in that regard stablemaster. You can wait.”

Two guards intercepted Emil. His face reddened and he huffed, giving Curt a grave look before pacing where he stood. The auditors, led by the steward approached. Sir Robert pulled them aside and they spoke in hushed voices. Will shifted, feeling dizzy. He was right, he had to be, please make it so, but Will knew he'd be cast away if he had been wrong.

Sir Robert approached. "An inordinate amount of gold was found well hidden stablemaster Emil."

All weight lifted from Will's body. Exhausted, he fell back against the stable wall, but no one noticed.

"How did you come by this?" Sir Robert asked.

"An inheritance." Emil spoke with a straight face. "My brother died in the Holy Land."

"Do you record all ledger items accurately?"

"Of course, I do! No mistakes."

"The auditors found several issues with the writing in the ledger. The steward suggests we analyze it further and test the ink. He thinks it's been written over many times."

"Impossible." Emil stamped a foot.

"Then there is the issue of the older ledger. It is heavily damaged."

"Well, the stablemaster before me was careless."

"Perhaps. There are pages missing. Where are they?"

"How would I know!" Emil broke a sweat.

"Emil you will be held securely until the steward can analyze the ledgers fully. I order this because I suspect you of tampering with the ledgers, rearranging, erasing, and forging entries."

Sir Robert's men seized Emil as he protested. "I deny it all! It's a trick by my ungrateful stable boy!" Emil tried to lunge at Curt, causing the boy to cry and flinch before the men pulled Emil away.

"The stable boy too."

Sir Robert's men seized Curt. Petrified, Curt's face paled and all but his lips quivered. Will pushed off the wall, a painful pang propelling him.

"Master please no. Curt helped uncover this, he isn't a part of it."

"We cannot be sure he knew nothing about this Will. He never came forward with this alleged theft and is therefore suspect."

"No, he is not!" Will growled. "Curt's been mistreated and was afraid of retaliation to be able to do anything. He deserves to be awarded. And he did come forward, to me." Sir Robert shifted and raised an eyebrow. Will quieted his voice. "P-Punish me instead... I'm sorry."

"What would you do with Curt then?"

Will considered how knowledgeable and enthusiastic Curt was about horses and caring for them. "Promote him to stablemaster."

Some soldiers around them laughed, but Sir Robert kept a calm face. "Why should I allow that?"

"He's more knowledgeable and energetic about this work than everybody here. He'd do this better than anyone." Will snuck a glance at Curt, who was still petrified in the grip of Sir Robert's men. Will looked away, shaking an image of himself from his mind.

"I cannot leave a boy to oversee the stables, especially its finances, not if I want every horse owner here demanding to speak with me."

"Then give him help... he could train someone else, anyone."

"If I look through all those men who have answered the king's summons I could find a man who knows of this work or who was proficient in his home."

Will needed to find some reason to portray Curt as valuable and his master was not making it easy. "That man will need help."

Sir Robert sighed. "Thus Curt could continue his profiteering."

"He is not guilty! Just keep him under watch!" Life while under suspicion was still unjust, but it was better than a cell.

"Boy, is all what my squire claims true?" Without orders Sir Robert's men tossed Curt to his feet.

"M-My l-lord... grand marshal s-sir." Curt nodded. "Yes. I hate Emil."

"That's the reason the lad screwed over his master!" a soldier jibed. Sir Robert glared at him.

"You did come forward to my squire and for this and Will's strong defence of your person, On my squire's honor I will leave you do your duties as they are. As I search for a new stablemaster I will have our steward oversee you and deal with the finances. You will be watched." Sir Robert crouched and lifted Curt up, straightening him.

## DAWN OF UNITY – CHARACTER MOMENT: A SQUIRE’S DUTY

“Steel yourself and serve me well for if you do not and if you are found to be involved in Emil’s alleged fraud then Manis will divine to me a suitable punishment.”

Curt opened his mouth, voiceless, then nodded. “Thank-you grand marshal sir.”

Will couldn’t help but smile, noticing it happen before he was prepared, then Curt turned to him.

“C-Can I hug you sir.” Curt asked.

“I think...” that was enough for Curt to embrace him and send shivers racing through Will. They parted and Curt reported to the steward. Sir Robert gestured for Will to follow him, and they fetched their horses.

“How do you feel Will?”

“Terrified.”

“I see.” Sir Robert smiled. “You did all that against what you thought best. Today you’ve shown confidence Will and did a commendable thing, assuming Emil is guilty, but it seems he likely is from what the auditors tell me. Why did you do it?”

“It’s what you said.” Will’s voice hushed. “About chivalry and how knights need to protect the innocent. Curt was hurting and I... I couldn’t let anyone else suffer that. You also said good order in the camp is important. I just figured it was my responsibility.”