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OF  
UNITY

LAST OF THE SEEKERS

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NITISH SHARMA

CHARACTER MOMENT

Hide and Seek

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## Hide and Seek

AHMED KEPT HIS cloak pulled tight around him and its hood low over his face. Will and Jillian had left him on top of Castle Oschen's ramparts upon his own urging, but that didn't mean he was unafraid of the hundreds of Gurmians, his enemies, that surrounded him. Unease rose to pain, and he navigated along the edges of the crowd sensing the raw anger and despair in so many. In this state they'd not think twice before killing him.

Despite the chainless dimitherite manacles that were clamped tight around his wrists it seemed that he could still sense the environment around him. He hypothesised that the manacles blocked active magic, that which a mage needed to intentionally cast or chant a spell or action words for. Subconscious magic, like his sense continued unimpeded, but this still debilitated him. He felt helpless without his magic, remembering again the prison cell in Jeuadi. Without magic, the fear he felt because of it, was painful.

He cursed the timing of their arrival. Fleeing from his home for the decision he made was hard enough but arriving here the moment the sultan had enacted his plan of Gurmian slaughter and shock made everything more dangerous. Heads had flown over these walls and bodies had been piled upon the beaches below the castle. Regardless Ahmed was determined not to shrink on the duties his faith prescribed.

He slid behind a barn that stood against the castle wall. There was a secluded space there that was sheltered from view and used as neglected storage. There was one entrance so he could see if anyone was coming. Ahmed settled within and cleared a space. He didn't have his prayer mat or anything to clean his hands and face with, hopefully Alhurah would forgive him. Ahmed uncovered his head, stood straight, and raised his hands. He chanted a prayer before falling to his knees and continuing. He did not end until he stood again and bowed. In sitting position, at the end, he asked Alhurah for his protection and for clarity as he reaffirmed his determination to seek answers about these Gurmians. How they lived and what they thought of his people, and to understand how his and Will's pearls connected them.

Ahmed opened his eyes to a terrified little girl who, it seemed, had crawled out of a cavity under the barn, well hidden until she had revealed herself.

"Y-You are... demon..." she gasped, opening her mouth wide.

"No!" Ahmed fell before her, staring with pleading eyes, his limbs stiffening. "Shhh... I'm not going to hurt you." He held out his arms, his palms showing, and smiled. The girl hesitated, she was five- or six-years-old. "See. I'm not a demon."

"You're not going to make me a slave?"

"No." Ahmed laughed.

"You take slaves."

"I don't. Do you know what slaves are?"

"Working people, but you don't let them stop." The girl calmed but shrunk back. "Saaomarrhadidirim."

"Saomarhadian. You were close." Ahmed's tension fled ahead of a cooling wind. He sat cross-legged in front of her hoping to keep the girl from screaming or rushing away to alert everyone about him if he let her talk. "I am Ahmed."

"I'm Elise." Elise couldn't keep her eyes on him.

"Am I scary to you?"

"Yes. You're a demon."

"That's not a nice thing to say of people."

"Ma and Da say you look like a human, but ya got a hunger for children inside."

"I don't eat children; they probably don't taste nice."

"I'm bitter." Elise whispered. Her eyes widened. "Do you like bitter?"

"No. I like sweet things."

"I like sweet too." She smiled.

"I'm human, like you. See?" Ahmed offered a hand. Elise didn't take it at first, then she poked his palm.

"Why is your skin dark?"

"Why is yours white?"

This seemed to confuse her.

Ahmed laughed. "Humans are not all the same. We're different in many ways and similar in many more."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen—"

"What were you doing?"

"I was praying."

"That's a funny way to pray. Where's the priest?"

"The sermons of my religion are accessible in our language, so even the poorest can understand the words of Alhurah and can seek his guidance alone."

"Ma says to pray before bed, but the priest does it better in church. I don't understand him though."

"Does he speak another language?"

"Maybe."

Ahmed didn't know this. Perhaps not all Gurmians could understand the fine details of their god's guidance. "I speak common, that's not so strange."

"No." Elise smiled.

"What were you doing there?"

"Playing. I'm hiding."

"From someone?" Form someone trying to find her. Ahmed tensed.

"No... alone. Everyone's sad so no one wants to play."

"Oh." Ahmed resisted a frown. He knew his sultan made a mistake committing this morning's slaughter. Alhurah forgive him. "Even your friends?"

"Their parents keep them close, afraid. Pa's gone..." Elise's lip quivered. "Ma won't leave the piles." She curled up, making herself small.

"Some people are bad people... misguided. I am sorry." Ahmed whispered unsure how he could explain but knew he couldn't in a way she would understand.

"I should go to Ma." Elise stood.

If Ahmed let her leave she would alert the everyone in the castle. He could rush to the keep seeking Sir Robert's protection, but Elise might be faster in reaching her Ma. He could sense an emptiness in her she was trying to avoid, whether she knew that or not. She was looking for a distraction. He needed to do something until Will and Jillian returned or he saw Sir Robert.

"Do you want to play Elise?" Ahmed smiled.

She hesitated then nodded. "I want to play."

"You hide and I will find you."

"I'm the best hider! It'll be hard." She smiled then rushed away. Ahmed breathed a sigh of relief. Now he just needed to stall long enough.

Ahmed strode with care through the castle, his hood up again. Unable to find Elise in this courtyard he searched the next where many piles of the dead were placed within. Copying everyone else, who masked their lower face with cloth, Ahmed did the same. No one could escape the stink nor the wailing of devastated relatives. Maybe Will and Jillian has also sought a distraction when they left him upon the ramparts. Lucky them.

As Ahmed searched through the courtyard, the pain he sensed sent waves of coldness through him and his ears rung as if the pain were shrill screams. He remembered the same pain felt in the desert and in Ortie. Everyone, soldier and camp follower had a horrible story of facing his people. Some whispers were stories of desperate struggles amid a battle. Others of a raid or another of escaping from enemy territory. His people had ravaged this land until its fields were blackened and unfertile, something the Gurmians did to his land many times too. Few spoke ill of his people or believed in the propaganda told to them without emphasising some tragic event that happened to themselves, a friend, or a loved one first. He wondered if that was a natural conclusion for wronged people. He always made the same conclusion when hearing of the atrocities committed by the Gurmians. Wasn't that the same line of thinking? Will and Jillian and maybe Sir Robert weren't like the unbelievers who ravaged his country. Elise was just confused and wanted to feel better, she didn't want to hate him. There had to be others.

Ahmed silenced his thoughts when he noticed someone move from behind a thick door frame under an overhang. He crept towards it and ducked under.

“Caught you!”

Elise jumped, gasping. “But how’d you see me!”

“You moved.”

“Again!”

“Should I hide?”

“Yea, I’ll find you in one second.” Elise grinned. “But go away from this yard, it stinks.”

“Sure.” Ahmed was happy to guide the game now. He walked back towards the inner most courtyard, through the open gates. It was closer to the keep which meant a greater likelihood to see Sir Robert or intercept Will and Jillian when they returned. He kept his mask on as others did. Ahmed found a space against a wall and behind a well. He leaned back, hard to see from those in the courtyard.

What of his pearl, and Will’s? Ahmed felt for his, nestled in a pouch at his belt. He felt its warmth. He remembered Nizid and the story of the Dread Riders. Could the object he held be a Seeker’s Stone? If he held Godly Magic, or Creation Magic, Alhurah forgive his blasphemy, surely it would have felt... stronger. This object had done powerful things like incite memories that felt so real that he had mistaken them for reality in the past. The voice it brought always spoke in cryptic but helpful ways. It had guided him to save Shoran— Ahmed clutched the pouch that held his pearl. His actions caused Shoran’s death. If he hadn’t betrayed his people, then maybe Shoran would still live.

“Found you!” Elise stood in front of him.

“H-How... you are good at this.”

“Are you sad too?”

“Do I look sad?”

Elise nodded and Ahmed just wanted to talk it out. “I lost a friend, my best friend. We used to play together growing up.”

“It’s better playing with friends cause you don’t have to talk to yourself and pretend you’re them.”

“I had a lot of fun playing with him.” Ahmed smiled, holding back tears. His face must have looked terrible because Elise hugged him. His heart jumped.

“I’ll be sad with you.”

“Your Pa’s going to be alright Elise. I’ll pray for him.” Ahmed said what he knew had happened and why Elise’s Ma wouldn’t leave the piles. “In my language we call our father baba.”

“Baba.” Elise broke into tears and Ahmed returned her hug. He understood now how Mehmet felt about his adopted Gurmian children. Mehmet had learned to love his enemy because not all Gurmians were his enemy. Now Ahmed was here, playing with a child he was told to hate. She playing with a teen she was told to hate. Ahmed swore under his breath, overcome with the image of Shoran’s smile. Elise wiped her face.

“We had fun... you should find your Ma.” Ahmed eyed the gate to the main keep. He’d chosen his hiding spot close to the gate and was confident he could rush inside now if Elise left to find her mother.

Elise nodded. “I like you.” Then she walked off. Ahmed pushed away from the wall only to avoid crashing into a Gurmian man.

“Hey boy instead of standing by the well all grim like why don’t ya help with the—”

Ya Alhurah.

“S-Saomardrim!” the man shoved Ahmed against the wall and pulled away Ahmed’s mask, confirming his find. Ahmed flexed his fingers and cast an energy spell, but his wrists burned, and nothing came forth. The man threw him to the ground in view of everyone. “Alarm! Saomardrim! Alarm!”

Everyone massed around him. Enraged shouts and glares, violent gestures, it happened so fast and Ahmed never had a chance to react. Time then slowed as they blotted out the sun, dragging him a few meters and pulling him up against the castle wall. His heavy stomach crashed against tightened ribs. Two soldiers pinned him by his arms while others, civilians too, jeered at him.

“They beheaded my sister!” someone shouted.

“They burned my home!”

“Poisoned the village’s river they did!”

“Enslaved my boys!”

“Kill him!”

“String him up!”

“Quarter him and feed him to the dogs!”

Ahmed resisted, trying to pull away, but he was held tight. "I didn't do any of that! You were wronged, this war is wrong!" They didn't stop shouting for his death. He was wrong to come here. Alhurah had written that he should die today for his crimes, for killing Shoran, for letting go of his master, for betraying the trust of his sultan. One of them hefted his hatchet, gripping it and glaring as if deciding how to strike. Ahmed's mind raced, pounding with strain. He had to do something.

"H-Hear... wait... take me to your grand marshal." Ahmed frowned, trying his best not to look threatening or sound sarcastic, nothing that would be taken in the wrong way. Will promised the knight would protect him.

"Oh so you can assault him eh? Never!"

"I want to parlay."

"No parlay!" a woman shouted. She placed a hand on the shoulder of the hatchet man. "Be done with him."

"Gurmians are a noble people." Ahmed spoke as calm as he could, snuffing down a burning pain in his chest.

"Flattery tis all—"

"No, I mean it. I've been told it. Please take me to Sir Robert. Allow me to surrender to him as is custom."

"It's too dangerous." Hatchet man advanced, lifting his tool. The soldiers holding Ahmed stopped him.

"It's the grand marshal's law here. We ain't animals. We'll kill the heathen with the marshal's blessing."

Ahmed suppressed a relieved smile as he was hoisted up and dragged the short distance through into the innermost keep, followed by the mob. The guards at the gate noticed him and didn't stop the mob. Sir Robert was in the courtyard pointing out a section of wall to a steward when he met Ahmed's eyes. The knight didn't react, but Ahmed was terrified, a sliver of hope left. He was tossed to Sir Robert's feet and looked up at the knight who didn't meet his gaze. The mob calmed at the sight of their grand marshal.

"Sir he's Saomardrim." A soldier jeered. "He's the enemy! Here my lord, take my dagger. I promised my mother I'd avenge her brother with Saomardrim blood." The soldier held out a notched dagger. Such a weapon would stick and twist resulting in an agonising death, but Sir Robert was here now. Sir Robert approached and took the dagger. He examined it then advanced on Ahmed. The knight held it to Ahmed's throat. Will was wrong! Ahmed fell back in an instinctual attempt to flee from the dagger. He tired casting in vain one more time, his wrists burning.

"The worthiest god is Alhurah and there is no greater god than him, so says the Father."

"Heretic!" someone spat.

Sir Robert threw the dagger to the ground and glanced at everyone around him. "Do you presume that I would kill him?"

"My lord." The soldier fell to his knees. "I am sorry. I wouldn't dare let you sully your hands." He drew his dagger.

"Enough!" Sir Robert shouted. "Does it fill you with relief to kill a boy sixteen summers old for the crimes of others?" Sir Robert asked, his tone serious and firm. He glared at the soldier who'd given him the dagger. "Does this massacre bring back those you lost?" no one answered him. "Does it!"

"Someone's gotta pay sir."

"Maybe that is the problem! This morning we suffered a barbaric response from the sultan. The heads of our loved ones flew in the sky and washed up upon our beaches. I, like you, desired to slaughter every last Saomardrim I saw but then my squire came to me with him." Sir Robert pointed at Ahmed. "What did I see in the two boys? Friendship. Friendship."

"Enemies are no friends!"

"Your enemies are upon the battlefield soldier, not in this castle nor in the villages, towns, or cities. Do not think yourself righteous for slaughtering an unarmed boy. Do not think his death will do anything to repair the void in your heart. None of you have enough sense to see this."

"He will grow and become a killer. He will kill now if we let him free."

"And so may your children. Should we kill them too? Manis does not demand unfettered murder, not against anyone who does not directly threaten you or yours. We all threaten his people and his people's children. Take your anger and pain to battle, not within the confines of my army. This Saomardrim is under my protection and if he is harmed so will you be. Let him go."

"But sir—"

"How dare you all enter this keep without permission. You would disrupt my army and jeopardise the king's campaign yes?"

"Never sir." The soldier stood to attention.

"Remove yourselves." The soldiers led themselves and the mob out, anger deflated. Ahmed, his heart racing, was helped up by Sir Robert.

"Th-Thank-you."



DAWN OF UNITY – CHARACTER MOMENT: HIDE AND SEEK

“You were to make yourself discreet.”

“I was playing hide and seek.” Ahmed spoke before thinking.

“You what?”

“I am sorry. I got into trouble.” A horn blared from outside the castle and Sir Robert, seeming to recognise it, looked towards the sound. “These are good people, but misguided. My own people are misguided. This war has warped us and caused us to hate so much. They hate the pain they feel and the person who caused it, but I hate those same sinners too.”

“You are well enlightened on this.”

“I am just trying to understand.”

“Return to the keep and keep yourself safe.”

Ahmed obeyed, realising how overwhelming discovering the truth really was.