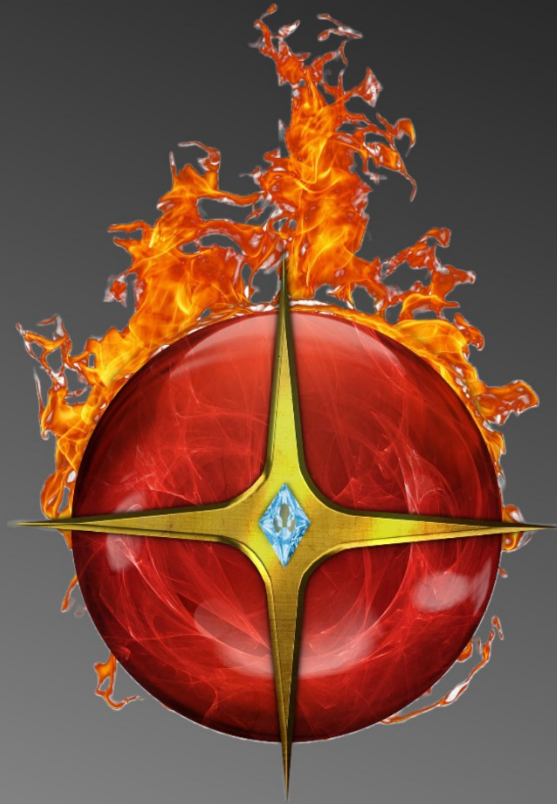




DAWN OF UNITY

LAST OF THE SEEKERS

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NITISH SHARMA

CHARACTER MOMENT

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Down the King's Road

IT IS ACCEPTABLE because he extinguished the lives of his parents! He deserved to be hanged.' A shiver soar through Will as his fingers clasped the reigns of his rouncey so tight that they began to numb. Through his skin, as if snakes were slithering just under the surface and tracing each scar and gash he bore, did Will feel the aftereffects of Sir Robert's hug. His head sat heavy on his shoulders, jumping between accepting Sir Robert's actions as pure kindness or if it was all some elaborate play in which the knight would torture him later.

Will looked up from his horse down the King's Road on which they traveled, its hard packed stone and dirt wound through the trees as their horses kicked up dirt. Sir Robert led the way, his cloak neatly draped from his shoulders to the back of his palfrey. Will's horse held a large bundle of Sir Robert's supplies on its rear and in thick saddle bags on its sides. On each flank the tall treeline rose, so dense that Will could not see beyond a few meters nor view the ground through the shrubbery. A mist lingered in the air, moistening his skin and filling his nose with the smell of various fragrant flowers. Again a shiver put him at unease.

"Ah! See those orange flowers Will?" Sir Robert asked without turning. He pointed to a group of flowers hugging a large rock. "Marigolds. You can use them in poultice form to treat minor cuts, scrapes, burns, and insect bites."

Will took a passing look. The echoes of Sir Robert's firm arms still pressed over his back and the warmth of his chest pressed over his own. His master had been going on about many things like this since they were kicked out of Burhbarrow, but despite Sir Robert's enthusiasm, Will could not calm enough to even answer. *'How can I ever trust you now?'* Yes he hid the full truth from Sir Robert, he didn't want to relive it all... *"ANSWER BOY! You are guilty, admit it and you can go home."* The interrogator's hands clasped his neck and his spit plopped across his nose. An airless wave hit Will and he almost slipped from his horse.

"Now where did we leave the discussion about the war?" Sir Robert asked. This man was going to torment him. If he wasn't going to send him back to the warden and prison then he was going to kill him. *'Had he been a sinner, he is not the same now. Willing to serve, willing to redeem himself, I will permit him that. I still believe he is a good person.'* Then why would his master say all that? Did he truly believe in his innocence?

"Sultan Biazid experienced a surge of nomadic peoples enter his realm." Sir Robert started. "It was likely that the high orcs expelled these nomads en masse. Most converted to Alhurahism but still they pillaged as they wished. The sultan drove them south into the Holy Land where a high number of Manians lived. Now they could pillage non-Alhurahians. Sultan Biazid was short-sighted. No wonder King Lundy and Grand Bishop Denis demanded a stop and when Sultan Biazid ignored them, they prepared for war. Now it was the sultan who attacked first. We've had war for one-hundred years since flipping from relative peace to a crusade or jihad and back again to peace."

Will's eyelids fell, he swayed before a sudden sharp pain jolted him back. His turbulent mind tired him. Sultan Biazid *was* short-sighted. How could you not expect anger from Gurmanis when you ignored the Manians living under you? Manis ignored everyone, so maybe it wasn't too odd. Will glanced at Sir Robert's back. If he turned away now maybe the knight would not see him go.

"Sit up Will, you are slouching. That is a fast way to wear out your back in the future."

Will sat up. His master had eyes in the back of his head. No matter. He'd wait for the right time.

Will and Sir Robert approached a wide area around the King's Road where the trees of the Roywood parted to let the evening sun glow through. At the center on a slightly higher circular piece of land stood a fort, one of many Sir Robert called the Roywood forts. The lower section of its walls were built of stone while the top was built of wood including most watchtowers except for the largest. A drawbridge led from the road up into the fort through which

the King's Road ran. A dry moat fitted with thick sharpened spikes surrounded it all. The same stakes pointed outwards around the base of the wall.

"This is where we will spend the night." Sir Robert said. He turned his horse. "Are you alright?"

Him? Didn't Sir Robert care more about his supplies? "Y-Yes master." Will nodded, unsure how to respond.

"Good. Stay close."

Will obeyed. Failure to do so always brought pain. They neared the gatehouse where three soldiers, one senior, stood.

"Hail travellers. Fine evening on the King's Road but this way's the war it is." The senior soldier spoke.

"Yes. We go to war, but a night out of the forest would be much appreciated."

"My lord." He referenced the colours Sir Robert wore. "May I ask your name?"

"Sir Robert Gillios. Grand Marshal of Gurmanis." The knight's tone even. He held up an unfurled scroll and within a moment of seeing the scroll's large seal the soldiers bowed. Will broke a sweat. Grand Marshal!? He'd heard of this position long ago. This meant that the man who, despite the kingdom labeling Will a murderer, led all of the king's personal and vassal forces had turned him into a squire. Why? *You can ne'er be loved by anyone else; no one will accept you. I will keep you alive, I will keep you close, you are mine.* Heat fled Will's cheeks at the voice of the warden.

"Grand marshal it is an honour. Do you not come with a retinue?"

"It is only me and my squire. I prefer it like this. Do you have space within the fort?"

"Of course! We will have the officers' quarters cleared for you."

"There is no need. I prefer a tent and a good fire."

"We will have the largest tent set up for you and your squire."

"Very good." Sir Robert rode forwards. As Will followed he caught the look of the soldiers who's faces shifted to those of Isen Prison guards. His muscles tensed and his ears twitched, preparing for some strike or shout. Will dropped his head and glared at his horse's mane as he entered into the fort.

They continued along the King's Road. Wood pressed against earth traced the path they walked, holding up elevated land on which stood the fort's buildings. The path was blocked near the center by a small gatehouse, flanked by two stone towers. It forced people traveling on the road to remain until the fort's inspectors could check their papers, items, and tax them. The gatehouse was accessed by a bridge leading to the stone buildings where the soldiers lived. All the other sections held tents or spaces for travellers to spend the night.

Will followed his master under the dimming evening light to a spot closest to the soldiers' barracks where a large tent stood. Will dismounted when his master did so. He noticed a derelict wall near the back. Perhaps the soldiers did not finish repairs. The drop would not be too far and in the dark no one would see him cross into the treeline.

"Will, you unpack only what we need for the night. I will arrange a meal." Sir Robert stretched. "Today's travel has been long and tomorrow we cross the mountains towards Suthenburg."

Will stiffened. "As you wish Master. Master?"

"Yes?"

"Why do you want to sleep outside?" Surely the grand marshal of all people would balk at the idea of sleeping outside. All nobles preferred more comfortable settings.

"I do not wish to bother the soldiers. It is largely safe here, so it is not any more dangerous." Sir Robert hesitated. "My son loved to sleep outdoors whether on a balcony of my manor or in our park." He frowned. This knight confused Will. He was doing everything wrong.

"Master, what do we need to unpack?" The look Sir Robert gave Will told him that he was supposed to know it as if it was common sense. Instead shame flooded him and he prepared to be beat or shouted at.

"Just our bedding. That will do."

It was dark when Will finished. He'd set their beds in the tent and started a fire. Sir Robert arrived with a soldier carrying a bowl of meat pottage, cheese, and white bread. Sir Robert sat across from Will and presented him with his portion, double the knight's. It tasted a little worse than in Burhbarrow but it was far from inedible.

"Soon the stars will come out one after the other." Sir Robert smiled before taking a sip of pottage. Will remained silent, unsure what to say. He glanced at Sir Robert, feeling only warmth. Behind the knight a falcon, the one who stuck around Will, swooped down onto the roof of the soldiers' barracks with a rodent in its claws. It picked at the dead animal, taking bites, under the glow of a lit brasier. Will was happy the bird had survived its fight with the creature.

"H-Have I..." Will choked. Talking back or asking questions led to pain.

“Go on.”

“Have I pleased you?” Will whispered. The warden’s naked form loomed over him.

“That depends.” Sir Robert chuckled. “Tell me what colour is marigold?”

A test? Will thought back. “Orange.”

“Who in Gurmanis prepared for war when Sultan Biazid refused to address the nomads raiding Manian homes? Provide names.”

“King Lundy.”

Sir Robert bit the last of his cheese and leaned in to the fire for warm. “You are right, marigold is commonly orange. King Lundy however was not the only one who prepared for war. He had the support of Grand Bishop Denis.”

“Oh.” Will shivered despite the fire. He failed. No doubt that meant Sir Robert would dispose of him now. If he could slip into the treeline and hide until morning he could follow the King’s Road back to his camp. He didn’t know where Sir Robert had taken him between his camp and Burhbarrow, when his master knocked him out, but he would figure that out when he got there.

Sir Robert eyed Will, which kept him on edge. “Will. I am going to speak with this fort’s captain to ensure all security preparations have been made. No one can slip through the walls.”

He would. He had to. This was it! It was like the warden said. No one cared about him, they wanted to hurt him. his master was going to get his weapons. Yes! He had to go now.

“I will be back. You seem tense... relax.” Sir Robert stood. “Finish your pottage. You will need every bit of the strength it provides when I train you for war.” He vanished into the dark. Will jumped up and scrambled towards the derelict wall, dropping his pottage over the ground. The falcon swooped down, almost clawing his face. It landed on top of the wall and made a rasping kack-kack-kack, flicking its head.

“Shh!” Will hissed. As he grasped the top of the wall his falcon pecked his hand. “Aha, hey! No!” Mad bird, he’d alert Sir Robert or the wall guard. “I have to go.” Will whispered. The falcon kack’d at him. Will forced himself up, despite the bird, and shoved himself over the wall. He tumbled, longer than he thought, and slammed right into a broken stake. He didn’t stop. His arm sheared against the stake’s jagged splinters and he fell, side first, into the moat, landing in a shallow puddle between two large stakes. Will screamed, pain hot where the splinters had cut him. he curled in, blood dripping down his limbs. No! He’d mistaken the length of the drop. Someone shouted from above. They’d spotted him. Will tried to move out of the moat, but the pain was too much. He pleaded they’d kill him here and not take him back to the warden or Isen Prison.

Will was clearly going to run away. Sir Robert frowned as he paced near his tent. He’d suspected for a long time as they travelled the King’s Road that Will was planning an escape so he made sure the place they set up camp was near the broken section, and had a few stakes cleared away. Yes, he’d seen it in Will’s demeanor and got a sense that the boy didn’t trust him enough. Why would he? He’d been hurt and betrayed for all his life. Was this what he deserved for the murders he committed? Manis must be cruel or was it Will? Trust was hard for Will, but it didn’t seem malicious. Will was scared, uncertain, and simply didn’t want more pain. If, as his master, he could help Will get past that then perhaps the willingness to serve he’d seen in Will would flourish. He could then be redeemed. Shouting from the walls confirmed it. Will failed. Time to get him back.

Three soldiers led the way around to the bottom of the fort where the moat directly under the derelict wall lay. They waved their torches erratically, carefully climbing in with a ladder and avoiding the spikes while Sir Robert stood above. When the torches converged he guessed they had found Will. There was no struggle, nor any sound from Will as he limped in between the grip of two soldiers, his pale face and trembling lip visible under the torchlight. Sir Robert took Will from the men and led him back towards the fort. As expected Will had not been injured severely. His wounds would sting and he might limp, for how long he’d determine inside the fort. Likely it would not harm their training time.

Will didn’t speak and only lightly resisted Sir Robert’s tug. Once they were back at their fire he sat Will down and fetched the poultice he had prepared. Marigold of course. Sir Robert cleaned his squire’s wounds, removed a small splinter, and spread the poultice over his injuries then slid next to his right.

“William.” He thought his voice was calm, but Will flinched. “I never saw my boy grow into a teenager like yourself, though I suspect he would be doing some silly things as well.” Sir Robert leaned in, happy he’d rightly predicted the rash decision making of a teen like Will. Sir Robert stared at Will’s lowered face. His eyelids drooped, his eyebrows sunk, and his lips held a slight frown. It was the most hopeless and drained expression he’d ever seen. “I promise

you that I am not your enemy. What I want is to see who you really are.” His own son flashed in his mind. His second chance, and Will’s. “You have a chance now at something different. I cannot imagine the difficulty, but I am unafraid of it.” Sir Robert slid an arm over Will’s back. Will tensed and Sir Robert rubbed his back in a calming gesture, but the discomfort remained, so he let go. Difficult indeed.

“S-Sorry.” Will whispered.

“Do you want this?” He knew Will found it difficult to decide for himself. “Consider what would make you feel better: to be here serving me? Alone? Back in— I apologise.” To mention that place seemed to tear Will apart. Whatever they did to him in there was assuredly worse than the murders he may have committed, though Sir Robert never thought for a second that Will was *surely* a murderer.

After a silence Will responded. “I would serve you.” He didn’t look Sir Robert in the face.

“Then you won’t be jumping over walls anymore?”

Will nodded.

“When the pain has subsided a little, sleep.”

Will nodded again.

He’d sleep in an adjacent tent and have the soldiers on alert, in case he misjudged Will. Compassion did not give way to caution, after all.

Will and his master climbed up the road as it twisted out of the Roywood and rose into the Wealdbeorgas. Around him the tall rock loomed as if uplifted by a hand deep underground. Yet the mountains, though no where near as tall nor cold as the Blue Mountains, gave him pause. Just pause. Not as much tension. Progress?

Will had fallen behind. The King’s Road was wide enough to ride beside Sir Robert for a while longer, yet he had slowed down. Last night lay heavy on him, but perhaps failure was a good thing. That morning all his actions were forgiven and his master pretended it didn’t happen, other than happily telling him that his wounds would heal in a day, so that they could train properly. Train to kill that was. This was the ever-cruel Manis’ plan. All this time trying to convince people he wasn’t a murderer led to becoming a murderer, but as he’d learned the Saomardrim were an evil people, so was he forgiven in killing them? The idea of the actual act made him the most uncertain.

Since the morning he eagerly listened to everything Sir Robert had to say. Maybe serving him would not be too hard and his master was right. He felt better like this. Not like he was alone in the forest, alone in his cell, and never with the warden. When he escaped he told himself it was worth anything to get away from the warden, and this knight could maintain that distance. He still feared a trick, but now he’d play along at least until proven otherwise. He’d show great diligence to Sir Robert.

Will sped up his rouncey and matched Sir Robert’s palfrey. His master smiled as he came beside.

“Hours from now we will be in the Barony of Suthenburg. The view from the Wealdbeorgas before descending is stunning.”

“I can’t wait master.” Will smiled.