

Prologue: The Way It Would Always Be

Perspective: Khonatir bi-Mutanacer, citizen of Koroma

Date: the twenty-fourth day of the fourth moon of the year 468, C.Q.

Blood soaked my brother's leathers, but the wild, happy grin on his beloved face drew a smile to my lips.

"Brother!" Hisalir exclaimed, laughing as he strode inside my chamber and tugged me from my low cot to my feet. Then, in an unusual but thrilling burst of affection, he spun me around and pulled me to his chest. "Brother!" he said again. "Today is the day!"

My smile widened. "What is so special about today, Brother?" I tried to not wince at the thick ooze of blood smearing from his clothes onto mine. No matter how many times he hugged me when he was so covered in blood, I loathed the feeling. But I did not want to complain.

He laughed again, the thick resonance of his voice soothing away so much of my concern for him, and said, "Today is the day we fulfill our destiny!"

I did not know at all what he meant, but I chuckled anyway, my scales flaring with light, my wings fluttering at the edges, happy that the anger plaguing his mind these last years seemed to be gone. "Should I tell Ammi and Abbi the good news?" I asked. Our parents and I had fretted for so many long nights that nothing would ever make him happy.

Hisalir leaned down slightly and tapped his forehead against mine. "Perhaps later, Khon. They were called away and left suddenly an hour or two ago."

"Oh." My scales cooled a little — I had wanted to show my suggestions for new summer festival recipes to Abbi tonight. But our parents were nobles — the lives of so many people depended upon them, and sometimes their tasks were too urgent to delay. "May the Almighty protect them and help them achieve success!" I uttered my habitual prayer.

Hisalir drew me back from his embrace and raised an eyebrow. "Why the unnecessary show of piety, Khonatir?" he asked, sounding amused. "Have you suddenly become an elder, Little Brother?"

I ducked my head, chastened. I did not want him to be unhappy with me, and he was always telling me to not just do things without thinking. He did not like to correct me — he was trying to teach me to become a better noble's son — but I was just always making mistakes. I was always making him unhappy. He was amazing, and I was simply not.

Thankfully, though, for once, Hisalir's good mood seemed beyond my ability to ruin. He

simply laughed, kissed my forehead, and tugged me out the chamber door behind him.

I beamed. He had not had time for me in so long!

Hisalir sped down the steps of our grand tower, walking so fast he was almost flying, and I spread my wings a bit to keep up with him. Giggling, I exclaimed, "Brother, why the hurry!"

He tossed a grin at me. "I have a gift for you!"

"Really!" I bounced as I glided from one step to the next. He had not given me anything for my last few birthdays, but he had been immersed in his own studies. How I loved that he had thought even a little of me!

"Yes!" Hisalir laughed and pulled me down the last steps to the ground floor, across the entry foyer, and then out the main doors.

I glanced wistfully back at the closed entrance to the assembly hall. Hisalir said our parents had left, so they had, but I would miss them. I always did, even if they were gone for only a few hours.

From beneath the doors to the assembly hall seeped blood.

Deep rich red blood, like the starkest color of the plains sunsets.

Before I could ask Hisalir about that blood, he was leading me through the streets of our village.

The towers were bright and white against the azure sky, the hedges surrounding each a warm green, and all the streets were filled with our neighbors going about their tasks. Children chased each other, the clang of the smiths' hammers echoed off the stone, the masons flew with bricks for spring repairs, the farmers chattered as they unloaded their carts, the scholars debated loudly at corners.

Mutharrim like my brother, Sholanar like our parents and me, Nasimih, Areteen, and Ezulal. Women and men both. All children of glorious Koroma.

I smiled and inhaled the scents of our village, savoring the perfumes of stone, iron, fire, and roasted meat.

As Hisalir and I passed, everyone stopped for a moment, even the children, and offered brief bows and curtsies, murmuring respectful greetings, seeming as delighted by Hisalir's joyful grin as I was. The blood on his clothes mattered little in comparison to that.

My chest swelled, proud as always to see how much our people loved my brother. He was Ammi's heir, the future count of Mutanacere, our hope and light, and he was amazing. And far from thinking it was only bearable that one of the Mutharrim like him should rule over a village where there was no one else of his kind, everyone thought it was just perfect.

Hisalir's birth father, Ammi's first husband, had been adored by everyone, and Abbi, my birth father, Ammi's second husband, had done everything to honor him and make it clear that Hisalir really was the rightful heir. It did not matter that his father was many years departed or that Ammi had remarried — Abbi loved Hisalir, as much as he did me. That was why he had never missed an occasion to remind everyone that Hisalir was the next count and not me. And I in turn had always supported his efforts — Hisalir was my big brother, he had cared for me though he was only nine when I was born, and he loved me. As I loved him. It was right for him to be my liege.

Hisalir was the future of Mutanacere, and all of us prayed for his happiness.

This was the way it would always be.

Everyone's faces brightened further as Hisalir smiled and nodded in return to their references. A few of the villagers, friends of my brother, even began to follow him before stopping, drawn like bees to honey.

As we neared the edge of the village and the outward slopes of the hills cradling it, Hisalir quickened his pace and began to angle southwestward, in the direction of the barley fields.

"Is my gift there, Brother?" I asked eagerly. Hisalir never did anything without reason, so the gift must have been quite special to be hidden outside the village.

"Yes, only a few more minutes," he replied, patting my head, which came only to his shoulder.

I loved how tall my brother was. Most of the Mutharrim only reached a bit over six feet, but my brother was nearly seven feet tall, just like our mother. I dearly hoped to be as tall as him by the time I reached my majority.

A wind blew through the fields of grain, lifting the membranes of my wings and smelling of harsh smoke mixed with the scent of fetid earth.

I wondered whether someone was trying to clear some weeds and was struggling to control their flames.

The odor was rather unpleasant, the only thing marring the perfect spring day and the swift, exhilarating walk with my brother.

Ignoring the stink, I breathed in deeply and beamed.

Some minutes later, the sprawling folds of a large hill dropped away to reveal a barn.

“Was this not abandoned last spring?” I asked. “The families thought it was too isolated to be useful, and they planned to tear it down in the fall.”

“I asked them to let it stand,” Hisalir said, slowing to a stop in front of its entrance. “I kept your gift here.”

My scales flared in excitement.

He released my hand, only to grip my shoulders. “Ready?” he asked, his gleaming deep green eyes gazing into my matching ones.

I nodded eagerly.

Hisalir pivoted and threw open the doors.

Hazy light filtered into a dim space full of small tables littered with papers, crystals, and bits of weapons. A bookshelf in one of the nearer corners contained several large tomes, with unfamiliar titles. Blankets fell over the railing of the small loft built overhead on the far side. The remnants of animals were long since cleared away, as was any hint of straw, but the area still retained a musty scent underlaid with the sour notes of muck.

Beneath the loft was a single remaining stall.

In it was a woman.

Her gown was torn in multiple places, her arms tied over her head to the beam behind her, her hair loose, and her lips clenched around a piece of cloth. As soon as she saw us, she began to struggle, yanking at her bonds and yelling into the gag, the irises of her eyes rimmed in white.

“Oh!” I exclaimed, starting toward her. “Please, there is no need for fear! We will help—”

“Little Brother,” Hisalir said, “do not be deceived by appearances.”

The words rang oddly.

I turned and found a strange expression on his face.

Green eyes narrowed to slits, lips thinned and split wide, baring his teeth — he was... he was terrifying.

“This is the path,” he stated.

Then he strode forward and crouched over the woman.

Cloth tore, and the woman screamed. And kept screaming.

I took a step and remembered that I needed to trust my brother, always, always, always, but the screams were so loud, and I could not think, and, and— I covered my ears and spun around, trying to stifle the assault, falling to the ground, curling my wings over my body, wishing desperately that I was anywhere but here—

Wetness, the ooze of blood, wept from my nose and ears—

My vision flashed, colors leaching away and bursting back, the world swirling beneath the lens of water, darkness overtaking every flicker of light... All underlaid by those cries...

My consciousness receded and returned, ebbing and flowing like the tide, paralyzed by such a fear that my heart was exploding in my chest and my intestines shriveling in my middle, my sanity flaking off in little pieces...

The screams fell away, then cut off in a gurgle.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Khonatir!” Hisalir called, singsong. “Little Brother!”

I opened my eyes and raised my head to see the silhouette of a giant form looming over me.

Amid the darkness of that form shimmered the deep rich red of blood.

That form resolved into the figure of my brother, his blood-coated lips split in a broad grin.

“Hisalir,” I said weakly, lifting my arms for a hug. “What happened?”

He bent down, grabbed my shoulders, and flipped me over, onto the cramp-riddled folds of my wings.

Pain pulsed through the sensitive membranes at the impact of my weight.

I caught my breath. "Hisalir—"

He climbed atop me, gripping my waist with legs and my shoulders with his hands, and bent down, peering into my eyes.

"Hisalir," I whimpered, frightened by the darkness in those beloved green jewels.

"Khonatir," he crooned. "Accept your gift."

"Gift?" I whispered. "But, Hisalir, I do not—"

A hand moved from my shoulder to over my heart. Gentle, soft, the brother I adored.

Then sharp nails plunged into my chest.

Piercing fabric and flesh, drawing the wet spill of blood.

And blackness spilled into my veins.

Spreading in my blood, sparking down every nerve, consuming every shred of self.

Agony flamed. Burning me alive.

And I was the one now screaming, struggling wildly, my back arching, my middle convulsing, my arms and legs and wings thrashing against the ground, trying to escape, begging for it to stop—

"Hisalir, help me!" I screamed.

Blood bubbled in my mouth and spilled out the corners.

"Accept," a black voice murmured in my ear.

"Ammi!" I sobbed. "Ammi!"

The claws bit deeper, and more blood gushed from the wounds.

My sanity fractured. Then shattered.

Nothing made sense anymore, everything disjointed bits of sensation. Nothing connected.

No thought. No movement.

Break.

Blood.

Dead.

My vision lost all gleam of light, and my consciousness vanished.