

Chapter 1: Nowhere Else to Go

Perspective: Khonatir bi-Mutanacer, citizen of Koroma

Date: the third day of the eighth moon, Belsaffe, of the year 473, C.Q.

The head slipped off the edge of my blade and fell onto the grass.

I curved my right sword down for the next head.

Only to find that there was no one left.

Corpses littered the bloody ground around me, many missing heads, some limbs, all the spark of life that had once rendered them beautiful.

A spark stolen by me.

The fog of battle cleared, the roar of pulse in my ears eased, and I landed and retched on an open patch of reddened grass.

Images flashed before my eyes — the looks of alarm on the faces of the Ezulal and Nasimih villagers changing to horror as they saw the skull insignia on my platoon's armor. The desperation with which they raised their swords and charged to meet us. The wariness of even my platoon as I leaned fully into the call of blood, swooping down to deal death. The tears of the women and men my platoon abducted as I decimated the rest of their defenders. The terror of the children as they fled. And underneath all of it the stink of conjury, the sense of wills twisting and shattering beneath my own, the wild fear of the ones I killed, the paralysis of the ones I was sent to capture, the utter despair that clung to everything like a sinister mist and the utter *glee* it brought me...

The memories of today invoked the memories of other battles over the last three years — until my mind was a raging torrent of fear and rage and agony and blood—

I screamed and fell to my knees, landing in my own vomit, my hands clamping over my ears to drown out the sounds and the sickening *pleasure*—

"Please! Help me! Someone! Anyone!" I begged.

No one answered.

"*Almighty!*" I shrieked. "*Dalaanem!*"

No answer.

I closed my eyes and slumped onto the ground, wrapping my wings tightly around my body like a funeral shroud, wishing for death.

How could I have thought that anyone would answer?

No one cared about the cries of a monster.

For that was what I was.

A monster.

“Ammi would be so ashamed,” I whispered, knowing the truth of those words yet desperately wanting to see her once more...

I could not remember what she looked like. The blood and fear of the last five years had washed the memories away. All that remained was the thought, words printed on a page, that my mother was of the Sholanar, tall, beautiful, with curly umber hair, chocolate skin, honey scales, and forest-green eyes. Once, I had been told that I looked remarkably like her, her face almost exactly except with a mustache and a beard, but I doubted that was now true.

Mine was the visage of a monster.

My beard was long gone, and my mustache had been torn off last year as well. And what remained was a blackened caricature of a face.

My mother would have turned away.

Small wonder, that.

In the last five years, I had killed many, and so many had been brutally violated and killed in front of me, and I had done nothing to help them.

I had not even realized when my own mother was murdered, too busy in my own minuscule pursuits to notice her need and too blind to understand that the blood I saw thereafter was hers.

More vivid than her face, or the face of my father, was the memory of realizing they were gone...

Sensation returned with a burst, and I opened my eyes with a gasp.

Everything was unfamiliar.

My body, from my toes to my wings to my hair, felt odd, strange, foreign, like someone had made a replica of it and then stuffed my soul inside. My skin itched, my wings prickled, my organs cramped uncomfortably, my heart was drumming unevenly in my ears, my brain felt sluggish... Almost as though I was on the verge of illness or pain but not quite.

What had happened to me?

The last thing I remembered was a scream...

"Finally you wake," said a voice — my brother's voice.

I twisted my head and found that I was lying on my back, my wings crumpled on either side of me, in a barn that I was not sure I recognized.

But leaning over me was the blurry figure I did recognize. The only thing that was familiar.

"Hisalir," I breathed, trying to raise my arms, wanting to reach for him. All the uneasiness and discomfort faded in his presence...

"Khonatir," he replied and grasped my shoulders, helping me to sit up.

And look into his eyes.

Which flickered with black flames.

They had not done so before!

I gasped and reeled back.

Then observed him more closely.

In appearance, he was the same as ever. Beautiful, with green eyes, lustrous bronze hair, mustache, and beard, and glowing red chips flecking his creamy skin, a perfect blend of our mother and his father.

But something darker flickered beneath...

Something that called to the strangeness within me...

I whimpered, not understanding what had happened to me, and glanced up at my brother, hoping he would explain.

Hisalir was watching me, his expression steady and hard in a way I had never seen before. "You did not accept your gift, Khonatir. I am disappointed."

The quiet words curdled my stomach. "I am sorry, Brother," I whispered, though I did not know for what I was apologizing. I could not recall any gift. Other than the screaming, the last thing I remembered was breathing in the sweet perfumes of our village...

Hisalir pressed his lips together and straightened. "I suppose I must feed you?" He began to walk toward the far side of the barn, from where I could hear a few voices.

I nodded reluctantly, not wanting to make him more angry. "Abbi said he was cooking our favorites for tonight."

Hisalir paused mid-stride and flashed me an odd look over his shoulder. "Khonatir, six days have passed."

"What!" I gasped.

He turned and faced me, that odd expression twisting his features. "Mutanacere is dead and destroyed. Our parents are gone."

He had delivered those words so coolly, as though speaking of people who meant nothing to him, yet with the savor of anticipation. Though I had not realized it then, his expression brimmed with not grief but cruel pleasure — pleasure in *my* grief.

For a moment, I could not believe what I was hearing. Then, as the words sank into my mind...

I leapt to my feet, rushed out the door, passed a few of Hisalir's friends, and jumped into the air. Ignoring how my wings twanged painfully, I flapped hard and thrust myself in the direction of home.

Flying far faster than I had walked the same distance, within half an hour I reached the circle of hills.

The village was gone.

All that remained was a blackness, like the opening of a deep hole or a chasm, surrounded by the echo of screams...

It felt like a part of me. Calling to that strangeness within me like Hisalir's darkness had done...

I fled from that thought and came upon a realization that felled me from the sky.

My parents were gone. I would never see them again.

Dropping onto the tarry surface of the blackness, I wept, wishing I could sink beneath it and join whatever remained of my parents...

When Hisalir found me a long while later, I clung to him, wrapping every limb around him, snuggling against his form.

He was all I had left in the world. He was the only person left who loved me.

Nothing mattered besides making him happy.

Except other things did matter, and that belief had blinded me to them.

For it was this endless service to Hisalir that had turned me into a monster. The fulfillment of his orders and the satiation of his desires had blackened every shred of my soul. And, though I had acted only out of love for him, he did not love me in return.

There was no escaping that clarity.

What a fool I had been.

But still I had to return. There was no other place for me to go.

So slowly, carefully, I picked myself up, stood, straightened, drew water from the late summer air with a spell, and cleaned my armor.

Another spell churned the earth such that the bodies were subsumed beneath the surface of the soil. The first burial I had given in the last five years, and still a crude one, as I needed to return soon, but the least I could do for those I had killed without cause.

Then I flew away.

Not without a glance back.

There was nothing significant about this little village, built half in the trees and half on the ground, near the coast of the western sea. Nothing unusual or notable — the attack was only because Hisalir's new ally wanted more land, and Hisalir himself wanted to spread the fear of his name and to obtain more captives.

But I would always remember it, though I did not know its name.

For here I had awoken from the stupor of bloodlust.

And even though I had no future, I would always remember that.

The thought carried me all the flight back to Hisalir's camp.

Lost in thought as I was, it was only as I approached the forest clearing where the camp was situated that I heard it.

A sound that was too familiar, that had haunted me since the day of my parents' death...

The sound of screaming.

I knew what it meant when it came from wherever my brother was.

Stones of dread sank in my belly as I swooped down into the trees.

The screaming sharpened into a word...

"Dalaanem!"

The reverential address of the first Quest Leader, our Lady Queen Aalia the Ideal of Light.

"Dalaanem!"

The name all children were taught to invoke when their need was great — the name I myself had only just cried.

"Dalaanem!"

The sound of it was a blow to my heart, ensnared though it was by conjury, and at once it felt as though the pulse of my blood would stop and start anew...

It was not the first time I had heard such screams, but the clarity I now had rendered them all the sharper, as though I heard them anew, for the first time...

As I descended, the leaf-laden limbs of the trees no longer shielded my eyes.

What words could describe the utter depravity of what was occurring below?

Hisalir's followers, men and women alike, seized captives from a rudimentary wooden pen, threw them onto the ground, and tore off their clothes. Then took whatever they wanted however they wanted. Uncaring of consent, of choice, of even the slightest particle of decency.

I nearly vomited again but controlled it because I could not show weakness.

My magical and physical strength, my skill with weapons, and my status as Hisalir's brother protected me, yes, but only as long as I did not reveal the revulsion that brewed within my heart.

They were worse monsters than I was.

Wanting to escape their notice, I landed just beyond the camp, murmured the day's password which would allow me through the wards, and walked through the shadows toward my tent, which I had placed close to the boundary.

The screaming peaked, and I resisted the urge to cover my ears.

All I wanted was silence...

Brown flashed in front of me, and I looked down to see a severed head thump the base of a tree. Blood spilled from the neck and dyed the long tresses of hair.

A woman's head, newly removed. Still bearing her last expression of mind-breaking terror.

I suppressed a shudder and passed it.

More thumps — more heads.

The twists of conjury strangling my heart crooned at the scent of blood, both dried and fresh, at the death in the air...

The heads of the ones who fought us, then, as well as the ones who were now being slaughtered.

I looked away, sick to my stomach, but unsure of what I could do. Unsure as I always was...

Black smoke oozed along the ground, calling me, yanking me sideways several steps when I did not immediately respond.

Clenching my fists, I turned to meet the gaze of my brother.

Swollen eyes the color of the void looked back at me from a face equally as black and misshapen, set above the snout of a wolf and a maw filled with bloody fangs, the molten black flames within rendered starker by the red chips speckled across his cheeks and forehead.

Hisalir's true face.

Usually hidden beneath a mask of false beauty but now revealed.

A face echoed by the faces of the worst of his followers.

It was a mark of conjury, particularly powerful conjury, and the potential for it underlay my own face, but I had managed to suppress its formation for the last five years.

From the twist of Hisalir's mouth, I would not be able to do so much longer.

"Brother," the very worst of the monsters spoke, "I am glad you succeeded in your task, but that pleasure is overtaken by disappointment. Where are your trophies? Have you no pride in yourself?"

The statements and the questions were designed to manipulate me into apologies and obeisance. That had been growing more apparent to me for some time now, and today, now, after that moment on the battlefield, it was too clear to deny.

But what else could I do but do as he asked? Even if his happiness no longer ruled my world, I had nowhere else to go.

"Well?" he demanded, his voice a harsh rasp, not the smooth, deep resonance it was in his false form. "Must I force an answer from you, Khonatir?" Black coils of conjury undulated around his arms.

Tears burned behind my eyes. How could he treat me this way? I had so long loved him, sacrificed every happiness for him, obeyed his every whim without question — *why* did he not love me in return?

"*Khonatir.*" His voice gained the quiet, dangerous edge I most feared, that his followers also feared from the manner in which they were shying away from him amid their evils.

If he had to repeat my name once more, the conjury within my own body would turn against me. And I did not know what he, or his followers at his command, would do to me while I lay unconscious.

So I answered, casting my gaze down, "I beg your forgiveness, Brother. I was too immersed in bloodlust to remember to take any trophies. It has been some time since I last earned a chance to fight, and the pleasure of it overtook me." This was true. It had to be true, as it was impossible to lie to Hisalir with his grasp of both conjury and water sorcery.

Though he surely knew of the emotions roiling beneath, the words seemed to appease him, for he nodded, just once. "I will forgive this oversight one more time, Khonatir. After the next battle, I expect to see you join in the festivities, as is your due. This manner of stifling your own nature is not healthful, nor should it be tolerated."

Not my nature — the conjury's nature. The sudden bitter thought caught me by surprise. But it was true: suppressing the conjury to the degree I did was slowly wrecking my health. I just did not care.

Hisalir suddenly grinned, his fangs glinting wickedly sharp in the waning light of the sun. "We can begin to remedy this defect tonight, Brother."

I took a steadying breath. So I had not really appeased him.

Turning his fearsome head, Hisalir called out over his shoulder, "Khelabir! Give my brother the girl. No, not that one, and not that one either. That one, yes — the daughter and heir of the count. A nice gift for our little victor. Don't mind her scratching — your claws are sharper. Yes, into his tent. Well done."

The giant form of one of Hisalir's favorite lieutenants, Khelabir, a new Sholanar recruit in the last year who had managed to acquire conjury himself, ducked out of my quarters a few minutes later. A wild leer curled his maw, and he walked over and slapped my back hard with his gray wing. As I staggered, trying to catch my breath (I was a broad, muscular man, but he was the biggest person I had ever seen), Khelabir taunted, "Khony, you've never even slept with a woman, have you?"

I despised that belittling nickname, but the question mocking my choice hurt even more.

Another one of Hisalir's favorite lieutenants, Neqqes, a short Areteen man with as much muscle as Khelabir and the first to join after Hisalir restarted his recruiting, stepped to my brother's side. "I would wager not, Khel," he said, snickering, his monster's face contorted with malicious delight, "and I doubt Khony has the guts to really enjoy some pain. He winces every time one of them utters even the softest scream."

"Well, I don't expect him to choke her during his first time," Hisalir commented, smirking at me even as he spoke as though I was not right there, "but even a bruise or two should be an adequate start. It's been too long delayed, as it is."

Khelabir and Neqqes laughed and agreed.

Vomit once again rose up my throat.

Who did I think I was fooling? *These* were his brothers, not me. He had replaced me long ago, even while I was right beside him, and yet I continued to obey him without question.

My heart felt as though it was shattering anew. I was desperate to become the brother he needed, but he already had the brothers he wanted. Why would he love me when he had them?

“Does Khony need a few lessons?” a woman purred, prowling forward to stand between Neqqes and Khelabir.

I tried to not recoil at the sight of her.

That woman, one of the Nasimih, Suvona, was the vilest person to walk the land of Icilia after Hisalir himself. Her conjury and her grasp of magic were second only to his, as were the cruelties she inflicted. Her true face, which was warping over her features as I watched, was nearly as terrible as Hisalir’s own. She was his sister even more than those men were his brothers. More than I was.

“He’s already had plenty of lessons,” Hisalir replied. “He was there during my first time, and he has been watching for years.”

“Very true, my liege,” Neqqes said. “Although I doubt his ability to obey you this time as well.”

“But he will,” my brother answered. Then spoke directly to me, “No more chances, Khonatir. I have been more than patient with you. Accept your gift and your destiny.”

There was no alternative attached to that statement. I obeyed, or only the Almighty knew what he would do to me.

I swallowed and bowed. “Yes, Brother.”

He nodded. “Go.”

I bowed again and forced my shoulders to stay straight against their jeers as I walked to my tent and lifted the flap.

A scream. “*Dalaanem!*” Then a snarl and the lunge of sharp nails for my face.

I dodged, accustomed to Khelabir swiping his claws in my direction during sparring matches.

More jeers from outside.

With a quick spell, I ignited the lamp set by my cot and then stepped inside and let the flap drop behind me. Another spell muffled enough sound for privacy and a taste of respite from the screams without catching Hisalir's attention.

The Nasimih girl, hardly more than sixteen years old, snarled again and tried to attack me, straining against the rope that tied her neck to the central pole of the tent. The coarse linen rubbed raw against her throat, but she seemed beyond terror now, feral in her desperation to protect herself.

I pressed my lips together. So this is how Hisalir will force my hand. Conjury is the fastest way to suppress her attacks, and I would use it to protect myself. Then, once ignited, it would seduce me into inflicting myself upon her. If any thoughts of defiance lingered, his threats and my desire to please him would kill them. Thus would he destroy the last barrier between myself and evil entire.

For Khelabir was right.

Not only had I never forced myself upon anyone, I had never even engaged in willing intimacy.

Not even the first time my brother had coerced me, when I was still much younger and much easier to manipulate...

A booming laugh marked the first incé sound I had heard in weeks. And on its heels strode my brother into the cave.

I beamed at the sight of the face I loved most and, jumping to my feet, ran to him, desperate for some contact, some affection, after all of these weeks of grief...

Hisalir's lips thinned, and he raised a hand.

I stumbled to a halt, the tears that were always too close these days welling. Why did he not want to hug me?

Hisalir turned and made a beckoning gesture.

Then into the cave — our sanctuary now that home was gone — came several young men. Three of the Areteen and one of the Ezulal.

“Hisalir,” I started.

He arched a brow, and I quieted. Then he grandly declared, “Khonatir, meet our new friends, who will join us as we embark on our destiny. They are...” He began to list their names.

The young men glanced curiously at me, and I tried to seem strong — though I did not know why they were and did not want them here. But it was easy, at least, to look impressive as Hisalir wanted: with my wings, height, and natural muscle as one of the Sholanar, I was already taller and bigger than all of them, though they were older.

But I did not feel strong.

After Hisalir had made this cave in the unclimbable part of the Hafébunna cliffs, he had left me alone for four weeks, and I was so, so lonely, and my grief was like a raw, bleeding wound, and I still felt so uncomfortable in my own body, and—

“Bring them,” Hisalir ordered.

Three of the young men snickered as the rest went back outside.

My forehead crinkled. Were they bringing supplies—

They brought in a large wagon, one designed to be pulled by a horse, which held several long, linen-wrapped bundles.

The bundles were squirming.

Even as I watched, my brother had them unload the bundles and give one to each person present.

It was only when I held mine and felt its warmth that I realized what it was.

A person.

A girl.

A crying girl.

I held her to my chest, not liking the sound of her cries, wanting to comfort her—

In front of me, my brother and his new friends tore open the linen, grabbed the girls, and —

I ran, taking the girl with me, to the little room my brother had let me have in the back of the cave. The stone was shaped such that it formed a little alcove, so I had some privacy. Some protection from the other girls' screams.

There, on my cot, I carefully laid the girl down, opened the linen, and wrapped her in blankets. Then, wiping her tears, I said the kind things my mother had liked to say to her people and made a little stew from my provisions. I served it to her and gave her my clothes, and I promised that I would never hurt her.

Despite how upset she was, she seemed to relax a little around me, and that made me happy.

So I continued to care for her, hiding her in my room while respecting her in every way I could...

In the end, my efforts were worthless. When Hisalir found her alive and unharmed, he killed her brutally in front of me, a lesson on the consequences of weakness.

Because I did not save her, I had really done nothing for her, nor had I done anything for any woman since. I had failed them all, and my mother would have hated me for it.

Yet Hisalir's threats, his pressure, was a mountain atop my head. If I did not obey him... I would have no place to go. I would belong nowhere.

The thought broke my heart into pieces.

But, as I looked upon this girl, whose father I had killed and whose home I had destroyed, I decided she was the one I would not fail. Whatever it cost me, even if it cost me the only place I belonged.

So I unsheathed my swords and, before she could scream again, tossed them onto the floor, away from me. I raised both my hands and sat on the ground, folding my wings and hunching my back so I looked smaller. Then I said quietly, "Unlike those others, I am not interested in harming you, Countess."

The girl snarled in response. Then, as I held still, the edge of the ferality in her gaze dulled, until she began to appear somewhat rational, incé rather than a rabid beast.

I sighed, relieved. Her rather quick recovery meant Khelabir's conjury would likely not change her irrevocably.

A few more moments passed.

Then, rational thought mostly returned, she narrowed her eyes and hissed, “I saw you kill my father, monster. What trickery is this?”

I winced at the epithet — she was more correct than she knew — and replied, “You have no reason to believe me, but this is no trick. I do not want to harm you, not in any way.”

“Then what *do* you want to do?” she sneered.

The question hit me in a way she likely did not intend: how long had it been since anyone had asked *me* what *I* wanted to do? Even in mockery?

Hisalir controlled me. He did not love me, so he did not ask. His followers presumed I was his unthinking servant, and they were not wrong.

So the last time anyone had asked me that question...

Tears filled my eyes. The last time had been my father encouraging me to make my own recipes for the summer festival — the project with which I had been preoccupied when he was murdered.

“You seem miserable,” the noble said, cutting through my thoughts.

I sighed again and shrugged, savoring despite myself her attentiveness, even if it was only for the sake of protecting herself. “I am miserable. It does not matter.” I tilted my head. “Would you allow me to help you escape?”

The girl scowled. “I do not believe you.”

I raised both hands in the gesture of entreaty. “Please, Countess, there is no other way. If I do not hurt you, the others certainly will.”

“And what will happen to you if you do not hurt me?” she asked, eyes narrowing to slits.

I swallowed. I did not want to believe it, but I had seen enough of Hisalir’s cruelty... “I would share your fate,” I admitted, to myself more than her. “If not worse.”

The admission did not seem to be what she was expecting. Startling, she recoiled again and then properly examined me.

At six feet ten inches, I was tall even for one of the Sholanar, and my wings at full span were twenty-five feet. Years of training with the sword, bow, and spear, begun in my childhood, had rendered me broad in the shoulders and the chest, and every part of me was hard with muscle. But my face, much to Hisalir's anger, remained soft. The lack of beard and mustache actually enhanced the roundness of my chocolate cheeks and nose, and my almond-shaped green eyes did not burn with the black flames of conjury. My scales, on both my body and my wings, were still honey, though now a dark honey, not black as conjury would have tainted them. My head was even covered by something of a helm.

A monster's visage, to be certain, but admittedly a lesser monster's. And certainly not one tainted by conjury.

The young countess' scowl tightened and then finally faded. "Well," she said with a sigh, "perhaps the Almighty has changed your heart for my hour of need."

I jolted. Surely the Almighty possessed better vessels than I!

"Well," she said again, "how will you help me escape?" She rubbed at her neck, pulling at the linen rope abrading her skin, and winced. "And could you cut this rope?"

I quickly drew a knife, rose to my knees, and, sliding my gloved fingers between the linen and her throat, carefully cut the rope. The noble began to slump to her knees, and I caught her, touching only her elbows, and lowered her to the ground. Gaps of her skin showed amid tears in her clothes, so I retrieved a blanket and wrapped it around her (my clothes would have hung off her thin frame like blankets, too). Then I removed a large package of strips of meat from a clay jar by my cot — my supper — and offered it to her.

The girl stared at the food, then my face, then the food, my face, the food, my face—

"I offer it to you freely," I whispered.

Just at that moment, a voice, my brother's, called from outside, "How goes your first time, Khony?"

Panicking a little, I whispered urgently, "Countess, scream!"

The countess cast me a nasty look but opened her mouth and uttered a long, pained scream.

Cruel laughter. "An acceptable start, Khony!" Then he said, more sternly, with the edge of a threat, "Do not fail me."

I swallowed but managed to answer steadily, "I will not, Brother!"

He laughed again and left.

I wished I dared to believe that the Almighty would accept my prayers. Nothing less than divine aid would prevent my brother from checking on me again.

"Brother?" the countess hissed, glaring at me.

I tried to smile but could not. "By blood, yes, but by nothing else." Speaking the words aloud only deepened the wound.

A trace of sympathy touched her gaze, and finally she accepted some of the food and began to eat. "What is your plan?" she mumbled around bites.

"Hmm..." I considered my brother's camp. Based on what I had observed in the past, my brother and his followers would likely not be fully alert past midnight. Their cursed *festivities* were incredibly draining, with the amount of conjury expelled and the ways they stole their pleasure, so they usually chained whatever captives had survived in the pen before losing consciousness for the night. "To be certain of your escape, it would be best to wait until the first hour after midnight. No one will be awake, and my magic can blanket any sounds." I was careful to avoid saying 'we' and 'our' — I was still the villain who killed her father.

The countess nodded thoughtfully, chewing on another strip of meat, and then asked, again scowling, "What of the other people from my village? My mother, my aunts, my brother, everyone who was taken with us?"

I hesitated but answered, gently, "A number of them may already have perished. And you cannot go back."

"I know that," she bit out, "but what of the others? Or does your change of heart extend only to me?"

I stared at her. I had not thought of that, but... *I cannot fail them. I cannot step back from saving them. Though it is no remedy for my actions. I exhaled a sigh. With simply not assaulting the countess, I already defy Hisalir beyond the point of pardon. Let me then not lose this opportunity for greater good.*

"Well?" the countess demanded.

Resolved on my course, I dipped my head. "As you ask, Countess."

She snorted as she shoved the last piece of meat in her mouth. “Your manners are better than expected, monster.”

I winced at the epithet but did not protest. Nor did I offer my name, nor ask for hers — I doubted she cared to know mine, and, though I wanted hers, she likely would refuse to give it.

I could not bear more rejection. The Divine had not answered my prayer, and Hisalir wanted to twist me until not even a shred of me remained. No one wanted me. This noble only cared to save herself and her people; beyond that, she had no use for me.

I was all alone.

Blinking back more tears, I offered the countess my bed and urged her to rest. While she pretended to sleep, I ate quickly and collected what few possessions I valued.

Nothing had survived Mutanacere’s destruction, and, in the years since, I had tried to avoid attachment to material things, fearing how easily Hisalir could take them away. But my weapons, armor, clothes, blankets, and sturdy pack would be useful, as would my stash of provisions, and I possessed a single keepsake, the hilt of a broken sword, that I wanted to take with me.

Once my pack was filled, I laid down beside the cot and forced myself to rest. Though sleep remained distant with all of the weight on my mind... the memories of the people I had killed... the sounds of the screams that my spell did not fully block...

Blood and bits of flesh flickered across my vision in the darkness of the tent...

But Hisalir did not return.

Thank the Almighty, I sighed.

Some time after the last screams trailed off, roughly an hour after midnight, I rose to my feet. In the light of the lamp I had left burning, I sheathed my swords, slipped various knives and daggers in the spaces within my armor, and slung on my pack. Then I turned to the countess.

She was awake, sitting up, hazel eyes glinting in the lamplight, and staring at her hands.

“Countess?” I asked. “Are you ready?”

The noble shook her head. "Where will I go after this?" Her voice fell to a low tone. "Even if you do not rejoin your brother's forces, there is still danger from him — he could follow us and recapture us, and then we would not have anyone left to aid us."

The analysis was quite prudent... Pursing my lips, I considered what I knew of my brother's plans. "If you would accept advice from me, I would say you should travel to Rafáma." I referred to the largest village of the western sea. "My brother will not attack such a large city for some time."

"But eventually he will," she said, piercing me with her glinting eyes.

I nodded. "Yes. I am unsure when that will be, but he will attack someday. Perhaps..." The words tasted sour on my tongue. "Perhaps you should leave Koroma."

A look of revulsion contorted the countess' expression. Then she sighed and replied, "That is a decision for another day. Dalaaneman will guide us."

I jolted, for the second time that day. The suffix she now used for that sacred address... it meant 'our Lady.' A form only used by those who believed they were in the company of the likeminded pious. Did she... could she actually believe that about me? Was it really true?

Oh, how I wanted it to be true! I missed how it had felt to belong in the Quest's faith...

"Well," she sighed again and stood, wrapping the blanket I had given her around herself like a shawl. "Lead the way, Koroyi."

I startled, again, at the respectful Koromic address for a man, tears coming to my eyes, but managed to not embarrass myself by weeping. Preparing myself for the work to come, I took a stride toward the door but paused, noticing something that bothered me. "They took your shoes."

She glanced down at her feet. "They did."

"My boots will not fit you..." I knelt and tore strips from the linen covering my cot. Nudging her feet until she lifted them, I tied the rags over and around until the whole of each foot up to the ankle was covered up to the ankle. Then I rose, avoiding a glance at her expression, and listened carefully at the door.

The water vapor in the air around the camp carried impressions of stillness, quietness, bodies gone to sleep... Only a few remained awake, the surviving captives, in the pen as predicted.

I stepped outside and beckoned for her to follow.

Except for the odd follower asleep on the ground, the camp was empty, even of sentries. Hisalir's enemies were not bold enough to strike back, and, regardless, his power was such that his wards were sufficient protection for the night.

Those wards ensured that there was no way in or out without the coveted pass-words that signified his express permission.

Except for one loophole, which I, who had watched him design the spell in his youth, knew.

Still, the use of magic was to be avoided — though even he could not detect magical catalysis, Hisalir had other spells sensitive to the spread of magic itself. Ones which I also knew but did not yet have a way to circumvent. Muffling spells were out of the question.

But they were not necessary either.

Opening my wings slightly and letting them bear part of my weight, I strode through the camp, the countess alongside me, her light Nasimih feet rendering her step quieter and faster than mine.

Navigating the maze of tents took only a few minutes, and soon we were at the pen.

The women and men seemed about to scream until they saw the face of their noble, whose one look hushed them as effectively as a spell. It helped that the stink of conjury was already quite dissipated.

Working quickly, I undid the enchantments, made of Khelabir's earth sorcery, that magically locked the pen and sealed the captives' chains. Then, drawing a thin dagger, I unpicked the physical locks themselves (something Neqqes had made me learn last year when he was bored). Finally, I cut the ropes that bound their limbs and formed nooses around their necks — Suvona's precaution.

"Now follow him," the countess ordered, her tone firm despite her relative youth.

They obeyed, helping each other stand, and I led all of them to the boundary wards.

Invoking my magic, I let it pool beneath the plane of my concentration and imbued it with my will.

The wards flickered into visibility, like layers of heavy curtain and walls ringing the perimeter of the camp. Protection and detection both. None without a pass-word, each usable only once and in only one direction, could cross.

Drawing more magic, I cast a spell and wrapped a coat of water vapor around the forms of each of the villagers and my own. Then I used the vapor to mask our presences, enveloping us so thoroughly that it would seem we *were* air.

It was magic that my brother, with his deeply meticulous sorcery of the flood, could not do. The only magic that he could not and that I, with my more intuitive sorcery of the stream, could. Another quality that angered him, not because he did not have it but because I was poor at using it to satisfy his cruel whims.

Once the disguise was settled in place, I, with the villagers behind me, walked through.

The wards fell away, like wisps of mist drifting on the breeze.

Wary still of pursuit, I held the spell for a while longer, though dropping back so the countess could lead.

Overhead, the stars shone, casting somehow enough light that no spell or flame was needed to illuminate the way.

When the first rays of dawn lit the sky and the crash of the sea's waves reverberated in the air, I turned to the countess.

She glanced at me and nodded. "Dalaaneman will watch over us, Koroyi. Do not fear for us."

The thought was strange — to be full of so much trust that one did not fear.

How beautiful a thought!

Releasing my spell, I offered her a bow, befitting my lower rank, and replied, "May the Almighty protect you." The words sounded unwieldy on my tongue.

She returned the greeting, the remnants of her people huddling behind her. Gratitude, even respect, tinged her voice, but not affection.

Understanding that my welcome was at an end, I spread my wings and pushed into the air. Several hard flaps drove me up through the canopy.

The miles of forest, with azure water to the east, spread out below me. Beautiful, yet only a reminder of my loneliness.

And now where do I go? I closed my eyes. With this defiance, I have thrown away the only place I belong. There is nowhere for me to go... No home, no family, no love, no one to care for me...

A pair of faces flashed in my mind. The only faces to have worn concern for me since my parents' murder. Ones crowned by royal circlets.

Crown Prince Naman tej-Shehenkorom and his wife, my hero, Princess Riqeta Shehenkorom.

Perhaps now that I was leaving my brother... perhaps now they would help me.

It was the only hope I had.

Tucking in a wing, I spun around toward the northeast, extended both, and flapped hard.

My heart shattered into little drops of pain as I flew away from Hisalir.