

## Chapter 2: No Return to What Had Been

*Perspective: Khonatir bi-Mutanacer, citizen of Koroma*

*Date: the ninth day of the ninth moon, Alkharre, of the year 473, C.Q.*

A fork of lightning split the sky, momentarily blinding me, and thunder boomed directly over my head.

The reverberations nearly threw me from the sky.

Flapping my wings wildly, I managed to correct my course and stay aloft. But resisting the direction of the roaring wind seemed futile on my own, without the support of a flight of other Sholanar, so I surrendered to its tosses and turns.

The rain increased from a downpour to a torrent, soaking me so thoroughly that water trickled into the crevices of my armor and drenched the leather beneath. Even the oiled linen of my pack was probably saturated.

It felt like a punishment for leaving Hisalir.

I briefly closed my eyes, fresh tears spilling down my cheeks and mixing with the rainwater.

*I want to go home... The plea felt wrenched from the deepest part of my soul. Please, Almighty, Dalaanem, let me go home...*

Although perhaps it would be a mercy if the Divine did not answer that prayer.

My last glimpse of Mutanacere had been a week after its destruction, and at that time I had not really understood what had happened. I knew home was gone and I was changed, and little else.

I had not wanted to know what had happened...

*"Khon!" my brother called from a distance. "Khon!"*

*I remained still, wrapped up in my bedroll.*

*"Khon!" he called. "Khon!"*

*I did not raise my head or open my eyes. Every part of me felt numb, no sensation left in my skin or my tongue or my heart...*

*“Khonatir!” he yelled, louder than before.*

*I wished that I would turn to stone or just simply die right there. What was the point of anything when everyone and everything I loved was gone? The last eight days since I had woken and found my home destroyed had felt like eighty years — I could not imagine living even a single more day with this numbness so deep that it ached.*

*Only one thought still fluttered in my mind and pulsed in my veins: Who could have done this evil?*

*Koroma was not at war — our king had not only prevented Zahacim and Bhalasa from drawing us into their conflict but had settled their war to our advantage — and regardless there was not a single law of war that Mutanacere’s destruction did not break.*

*Who could be so evil as to hurt my family and my home so deeply?*

*“Khona-tir,” Hisalir said, his smooth voice curling into a growl. “Do you not hear me calling you?”*

*I did not move. Surely he understood — yes, he had spent the last few days collecting supplies, but he was older and had put aside his grief to take care of me — surely he understood I lacked the same strength.*

*Silence from my brother.*

*Then Hisalir said quietly, “You will not waste your gift.”*

*And fear consumed every part of me — driving away the numbness like fire burning away every drop of moisture — I convulsed uncontrollably on the ground, heart shaking in my chest and pulse roaring like the most violent rapids, the mindless terror my only world—*

*It ceased.*

*I heaved a breath of relief, glad that it was over.*

*Even as I recoiled from the strange sense of pleasure creeping through my veins.*

*The sensations enveloping me, the scent, the feel, the taste, the blackness on the backs of my eyelids — all of it reminded me of the destruction of Mutanacere...*

*Then the fear consumed me again.*

*Ceased.*

*Pleasure and memories of Mutanacere overwhelmed me.*

*Then again. Cease. Overwhelmed. Again. Cease. Overwhelmed. Again...*

*Until I lost consciousness at my brother's feet.*

When I woke, I did everything to forget what I had experienced. As I did every time he used conjury upon me.

The sensations and the reality that Hisalir had done that to me... I avoided and dodged and quelled every hint of realization.

But a thousand impressions and hints since had revealed the truth I so dearly did not want to acknowledge: Hisalir was the destroyer of Mutanacere and the murderer of our parents and everyone and everything else I had known and loved. My *brother* had committed this crime. And not in a fit of passion — no, it was planned, with a cold heart and a steady mind, and executed precisely in accordance with his objectives. For he had used the ruin of Mutanacere to strengthen his own magic.

Just as he used me to build his insurgency.

Though I was not cruel, I was skilled with weapons and fascinated by the martial arts.

He had used those passions, just as he had used my love for him.

I knew that. I had known it for some time. But, even as a sense of uncleanness spread through me, oddly juxtaposed with the drench of the rain, I still missed him. He had destroyed our family and our people, and still I missed him. I could not help it, though I knew of his evil, for I loved him.

His absence ached in my heart and tossed me about on the winds of the world more brutally than the storm's gales ever could. He was my home, and I had abandoned him.

A sob burned in my throat, and I cried, overcome by grief, as the gale and the rain battered me like a leaf torn from the branches of his tree. I did not know where I would find myself when the storm would subside, but I lacked the energy to care. Like that leaf, now that I was torn, I could never go back.

*"Almighty, Dalaanem!"* I shrieked, my voice so thoroughly shredded by the wind that the prayer was more thought than spoken. *"Please, let me go home!"*

No answer.

Lightning flashed, and thunder rumbled overhead, and the slap of raindrops turned to the lash of sleet.

Only a little magic was needed to melt the bits of ice before they could reach me, but I did not bother with the spell. The painful impacts distracted me from my heartache, numbing the intensity of my emotions, and the chill seeping through the heat of my scales deadened the newly-forming bruises as well. Hisalir tormented me with conjury so often for the sake of training that some oblivion seemed welcome...

Hours passed as the storm raged. So many pieces of sleet hit me that my wings and my body throbbed like a massive bruise. The armor covering my head, chest, arms, and legs only protected so far. The cold burned in my bones, my teeth chattered, and my scales were frozen on my skin.

It did not matter. Hisalir would prefer a corpse to a traitor.

Finally, the storm subsided, the clouds dissipating, the light of the afternoon sky inundating the world. The rich scent of newly wetted earth rose up on the great currents of slow wind born from the aftermath of the tempest.

Peace after violence.

Regaining my balance, I tensed my wings, flapped, and caught a current.

A stench, one of fetid corpses and old blood, soured the pleasant smell.

Then the wind abruptly dropped away.

I fell, screaming, from the sky. My wings flapped wildly, but there did not seem to be any air at all—

My body slammed against the unforgiving ground.

All the breath burst from my lungs, and bolts of pain incinerated my bones — all of my flesh.

I wondered why I had not died.

Then a scratch started in my palms. Heat ignited in the small of my back, then simmered down each nerve. And a pleasure began to brew in my belly...

*Conjury.* As I remembered my brother's lesson, I closed my eyes and exhaled a breath through my nose. *Those who wield it do not die. Nothing less than the cleave of head from body or the attack of a more powerful conjuror can kill them.*

A tear spilled from the corner of my eye.

*Even death has no place for me.*

Pleasure oozed through my blood as my wounds healed. Bones reformed, veins large and small closed, muscles resettled, nerves linked... A healing more powerful than any a healer could give — yet not truly healing, for with each injury treated, as it fed on my pain, the conjury left a scar. Damage in the structure of my bones, the weave of my muscles, the walls of my veins, the connections of my nerves.

Damage that would only disappear if I inflicted the blackness upon another.

It was not a price I could pay.

So the damage built with every battle wound and sparring accident — and now this.

*I should have been more careful...* I spat out blood from my mouth. *But what does it matter if it kills me sooner? I have nowhere to go.*

More tears spilled down the sides of my face as I stared up at the dim sky.

Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, the conjury reconstituted all of my broken parts.

Only when it faded, having catalyzed all the pain it could find, did I sit up, desperate to know how far the storm had thrown me off course.

The tears fell in a shower.

Above me was the dimmed version of the sky in which I had first learned to fly, and beneath me... was all that was left of Mutanacere.

Twisted by the evil of conjury, the cruelty of alchemy, and the sin of blackened sorcery.

Amid my village's three hills was a- a- a black *burn*, as though the earth had been blazed and seared and *melted* into a substance no longer natural. A substance littered with pale bits of bone and gray particles of ash. A substance viscous, like quicksand, yet with a certain black shimmer, lending the impression that it was a hole, a chasm... an eye. A monster's eye.

My brother's eye.

Molten with black flame.

That black flame called to me, resonating in my blood and skin and bones as though it were a part of me and I was a part of it, and pleasure shocked through my body, the sweetest pastry, the creamiest milk, the tastiest stew, other darker, decadent relishes of flesh and blood, the sick sensuality of cruelty...

Crying out, I beat my fists against my chest, desperately trying to rid myself of the pleasure.

*Please, Almighty, Dalaanem! I begged. Please do not let me derive gratification from my own home's destruction!*

The sick sensuality grew stronger, building, brewing, feeding off the screams in the air, the haunting echoes of my family and my people...

Intoxicating...

Even the bloodlust of battle could not compare.

The sharpening nails at the ends of my fingers clawed at the scales on my face, trying to rip them loose...

*What sort of monster finds his family's pain a source of enjoyment?*

Blood spurted from beneath a torn scale.

And suddenly the pleasure vanished.

*Thank the Almighty,* I sighed, slumping against the chasm's surface. Then, remembering that it consisted of the remains of my family and my people, I crawled off of it as quickly as I could.

At the chasm's side, I pushed myself onto my knees, bowed my head, and lifted my voice in first the funereal prayer and then the dirge.

Though at first weak, my voice grew stronger, harmonizing over the screams, singing praises of the Almighty and paeans of the first Quest, lamenting the deaths of those I loved and rejoicing in the happiness the hereafter would bestow upon them. I did not know whether those slain by conjury could even attain that happiness, but my home deserved to be mourned.

And perhaps singing the lament written by the first Quest meant that our entreaties for mercy would reach them.

None but they could help my home now.

As the last note of the dirge rang out, tears poured from my eyes. More tears, five years of tears, a flood of tears, endless tears, enough tears to drown me but not enough to wash away my sorrow.

*Perhaps I should simply stay here, offering lamentation in return for not being able to save them...*

When I had left Hisalir's camp, I had planned to travel north and try to gain an audience with her Highness Princess Riqeta Shehenkorom. But, as I flew over the forests surrounding the western sea, my heart began to long for something Hisalir had forbidden: a visit to what was left of my home. I did not know if I would ever have another chance. So, changing course, I flew hard, spending both days and nights in the sky, and was now finally here at the start of autumn. The storm had actually speeded the last bit of my journey.

*Now that I am here, perhaps I should simply stay...*

When I met her Highness four years ago, I was still somewhat innocent, a grieving boy, more deserving of her pity. But now so much blood drenched my hands... And not legal bloodshed, like hers, bound by the laws of engagement, but the bloodshed of innocents, people who had not attacked mine nor known of our declaration of war. It seemed impossible to think that she would help me.

*I should just stay here... It is no place to belong — there is no one left here to love me — but it is all I have left now that Hisalir is gone...*

Curling forward, wrapping my wings around my body, I touched the edge of the chasm and whispered, "I love you, Ammi, Abbi, Koromile. I do not deserve your forgiveness, so I do not ask for it, but I do love you. May the Almighty save you."

It was probably my imagination, but the echo of the screams seemed to fade a little...

I sighed. I wished I could just absorb the conjury, but that was not how magic worked. Once issued, a spell existed in the world until its purpose was done. It could not simply be recalled. With sacred magic, like my sorcery, re-absorption was a difficult prospect, but it was orderly, disciplined, controlled under a determined hand. Conjury, however, lacked any sort of orderliness, so, to recall it... It might only empower it. Though not enough about conjury was really known at all for such determinations.

I shuddered at the thought of trying such experiments with the precious remnants of my home. If their souls still lingered, the wrong spell might only worsen their suffering.

At least I could stay.

As the sun drew near the western horizon, I removed my broken pack (my weight in the fall had crushed the frame, but at least there was nothing to break inside) and set about the beginnings of a small supper at the edge of the chasm. The place reeked of evil, and any other would have been driven insane by the clouds of black magic and the screams in the air, but I was a conjuror. I *liked* the pain.

At least it let me stay.

The meat, though smushed, cooked well under the shelter of my wings, and I lifted the pieces to my mouth.

A series of thuds reverberated over the open plains.

Familiar sounds — I myself made them whenever I flew.

Wings. Rapidly growing louder.

*Who would approach these ruins?* I wondered. *The dim light, the scorched land, and the screams surely warn many away...*

Something glinted in the sky beyond the western hill.

Something gray, bleak and lusterless amid even the dim clouds that shadowed Mutanacere.

A gray glint I knew.

*Khelabir!* I caught my breath. *No!* Frantic, I turned this way and that, desperate for shelter.

The hills were bare of even grass. The land was open as far as my eyes could see.

Digging a hole would take sorcery, and he might trace it.

*I cannot let him take me!*



As much as I missed my brother, returning to him would be folly of the highest order. I was a traitor now, and death at his hands would be torment unrivaled by anything the seven nations could ever inflict.

But there was nowhere to hide!

I scooped up my food and tossed it in my broken pack. Slinging it over my shoulder, I searched the land again.

*Almighty! Dalaanem! Please, save me! I do not want to go back to his evil!*

Suddenly my eyes fell upon the chasm. It was, according to my grasp of magic, not truly an endless hole. Hisalir was powerful but not so that he could change the foundations of the land itself — at least, not yet. Moreover, the chasm was not dangerous to me: I possessed both conjury and alchemy, and, since both sorts of magic were endowed by my brother, they had a chance of stealing just a little leeway from the spells cast here. Not enough to undo them but perhaps enough to hide.

Hiding amid the ruins of my home would itself be unrivaled torment. Such a sacrilege to my murdered parents and people.

But I could not discern another path.

So, wrapping my wings tightly around my middle, begging their forgiveness in low whispers, I crawled onto the viscous quicksand, first pausing at the edge to test whether it would hold my weight, then moving further and further.

Until I was closer to the center than the edge.

The gray glint in the sky was quickly growing from a spot of color into the shape of a man.

I pressed my hands into the burn, shuddering at the spongy but sharp texture. The substance showed indents where I put my weight, but it was simultaneously hard and coarse, as though made of pointed shards of glass. Only the alchemy in my blood kept it from cutting or swallowing me.

Drawing upon that same alchemy, I held it beneath the plane of my concentration and demanded, “Let me in! Do my bidding! Reshape!”

Nothing happened.

Khelabir was now almost close enough to make out the pieces of his armor and the black bits of soot into which conjury had turned his scales.

Whimpering, I pressed harder into the texture. "*Reshape!*"

Nothing happened.

I opened my mouth to try again. Then I remembered Hisalir's lessons... *Why am I using words? Words are for spells made from Iclia's magic, not for these monstrous forms. So...* Instead of speaking, I imbued my command into the substance. In that wordless order, I left no room for pleading, for reason or discussion. My will simply *had* to obey, and that was the end of the matter. No matter what it cost.

The burn yielded beneath me, and into it I sank, deeper and deeper until all of me was enveloped.

Not even a small opening remained — the quicksand itself funneled away my exhalations and brought more air for my inhalations.

A pained smile curled my lips. Hisalir had actually tortured me to make me master this magic, and now I finally controlled it when I was trying to leave him. And that, too, in the ruins of the home he destroyed with it.

Somewhere atop the chasm thumped a pair of boots — Khelabir's landing.

Though he surely knew what this place was, the sacrilege of walking *on* it did not bother him. Nor did it hurt him — he was a conjuror aligned with its master's will, so it was entirely a source of pleasure to him.

My stomach churned at the thought of him *enjoying* my home's destruction.

A few steps.

Then he called out, "Khonatir! Your brother sent me to find you and bring you back to him!"

No response.

"I know you're here, Khonatir!" he tried again. "Come back! Your brother misses you so! He didn't want his requests to force you to leave! He only wants what will make you happy!"

Pain widened my smile, drawing down the corners of my lips.

His words were truth enslaved for the service of lies. If my brother missed me, it was because he had lost a skilled and an unquestioningly loyal soldier, one that could never turn against him, unlike his power-hungry lieutenants.

All he had needed to keep me was his love. But to truly love me would imperil his control of his evil powers. And that he would never do.

It was not that Hisalir was incapable of love.

It was that he chose to rid himself of it...

*The little blunted dagger fell from my fist mid-swing. As it had kept falling all morning.*

*My lower lip trembled, and, unable to help myself, I began to sob.*

*I wanted to learn how to use the daggers so badly, but I just could not seem to do it! Ammi would not let me enter the fall festival competition if I could not do the basics!*

*Stamping my foot, I picked up the dagger and threw it with all my might at the wall of my family's tower.*

*"Whoa, Little Brother!" a deep voice laughed. "Be careful with those daggers!"*

*I spun around, and there was my brother, newly returned from the capital.*

*Nearly six and a half feet tall at sixteen years old, Hisalir towered over my four-foot-frame, his shoulders broad and his limbs muscular, looking as heroic as our fathers. And the smile on his face...*

Oh, how brightly he had smiled! How merrily his eyes twinkled! How full of love was the heart behind his gaze.

How could I not miss him when I remembered that sight?

*Sniffing loudly, I ran to him, and he laughed again and scooped me up into his arms. "Little Brother," he said again, stroking the still-delicate membranes of my little honey-colored wings, "why are you so upset? As I was entering the village, I saw a number of your age-mates practicing, and your sequence is the best I have seen for your category."*

*My chest swelled with pride, but the praise did not fully soothe away my frustration. Jutting out my lower lip, I whined, "I want to be better, Hissy!"*

*Hisalir chuckled, not even blinking at my embarrassing nickname for him, and placed me on my feet, before crouching in front of me. Tipping my chin up, he looked into my eyes and stated, "Khonatir, you are excelling at weapons for your age. You are better at them than I was at seven. And I will help you train further."*

*Those words made everything better, just like his words always did. Beaming, I tossed my arms around his neck and chirped, "I love you, Hissy!"*

*My brother grinned, those deep green eyes that perfectly matched Ammi's and mine crinkling at the edges. "I love you as well, Khon. I would do anything to make you happy."*

*I giggled, already happy that I had such an amazing brother, and kissed his nose. "I missed you so much, Brother!"*

*"I missed you as well, Khon," he replied, pressing his lips to the side of my head.*

*Then the side-door opened behind us, and our mother called out, "Hisalir! You cannot keep avoiding this discussion!"*

*I turned toward her, wanting to hug her as well. Abbi and I had been lonely without Ammi and Hisalir while they visited the king.*

*Hisalir's arms tightened around me, before he put me down. "Go, Khon. Ammi and I do need to talk." He nudged me toward the street.*

*At the gentle prompt, I did run to the gate and opened it, but, instead of leaving in search of my friends, I hid behind the high ring of bushes encircling the grassy lawn around our tower.*

*"Hisalir," Ammi said, stopping in front of him and resting her hands on his shoulders. "The words are harsh, but I must speak them: what happened during that meeting with the king's court and the nobles is not acceptable. You are my heir, Hisalir; more decorum was required from you."*

*The bit of my brother's face I could see showed the deepness of his scowl and the flash of silver on his creamy Mutharrim skin. "Ammi, I was only defending you. The other nobles spent the entire reports section praising each other, yet no one praised you, though your county is healthier and happier than all of theirs. Even King Doman-korom said nothing to honor you. Though you were the one who saved our neighbors' crops this past harvest. I was only trying to remind them that they should not forget your many kindnesses."*

*"Hisalir," Ammi said, softening, "the purpose of those acts is not to receive their praise. The purpose is always to serve the Almighty and please the first Quest, Hisalir. No lesser*

*reason is worthy of our efforts. Yes, we always need to consider our political power, but compassion without a demand for gratitude earns far greater power than generosity in exchange for acknowledgment. We do not need to pursue their flattery, my Son."*

*Hisalir pursed his lips as he looked up at her. "Compassion should be rewarded by gratitude, Ammi."*

*Ammi sighed. "I see that you are still upset. But these are my views, and the doctrine our family follows, as true servants of the Quest. Perhaps, with reflection, it will become clearer to you."*

*My brother's scowl deepened further, before he also sighed. "Perhaps. May I join Khon?"*

*Ammi nodded, offering a small smile. "Please do tell him to come and give me a hug."*

*"I will," he agreed, hugging her briefly. Then he strode toward the street.*

*I ran further away and waited for him to find me.*

*A few minutes later, Hisalir did. Giving me another, tighter hug, he drew his daggers, real daggers, and went through the competition sequence with me.*

*But, even though he was smiling, a spark of anger remained in his eyes...*

In the days and years following, that anger brewed and boiled and blazed until all the love, the goodness, and the piety in his heart shriveled to evil. Once he started to question our mother's adherence to faith over all else, he opened his mind to challenges about why she did not pursue wealth when the other nobles did, why she believed certain things were right and others wrong, why she mattered at all... He pored over books about conjury, disputed our mother's and the king's judgments, theorized about alternate forms to the Quests' civilization, questioned why he should not indulge himself regardless of whether that caused harm to others... He chose for himself evil at every step of the way.

Upon reflection, now, in my majority, it was clear to me.

This path of horror all began on that day.

On that day, he had loved me...

...and today he hunted me.

Despite the sweet things Khelabir was saying as he paced across the quicksand, reassurances that my brother cared for me, that he would forgive me and welcome me

back, I could not believe my brother had sent him for any other purpose. The invasive sense given by conjury whispered of his rising anger, of the murderous intent in his heart... Hisalir would have sensed the same, and yet he had sent him.

Because Hisalir himself planned to do much worse.

Why would he not?

He forced conjury upon me when I did not want it, used it upon me whenever I disappointed him, allowed his lieutenants to break my bones in sparring — hurting his family only increased his powers.

He had *murdered* our parents and our people. Why would he *not* murder me when I had proved myself disobedient?

“Khonatir, come!” Khelabir called, his heavy steps vibrating through the burn. “Your brother will forgive you for letting the prisoners go! Just return to him! He misses you!”

My mouth opened in a soundless cry.

How I wished what he was saying were true!

But, as I hid in the crushed bones of Mutanacere, I realized that I needed to stop wishing that.

For what Hisalir had done... there was no forgiveness. No redemption. No return to what had been. His evil was committed with full knowledge and purpose, and all the love in the world would not tempt him back from the cruelty he craved. I had already tried and failed.

I needed to leave the memories of his former self behind.

*Though, once I do, I will truly be all alone in the world...*

Yet more tears welled in my eyes...

“Khonatir!” Khelabir yelled now. “This is your last chance! You have exhausted my patience *and* your brother’s!”

When no response came, he spread his wings in a swoosh of sound and launched into the air.

*There goes my last chance...* Though I knew his departure was a ploy to lure me out, the tears rushed down my face and mixed with the alchemy-infused earth. *Oh Dalaanem...*

A sudden shift in the cruel magic, something forced away.

A rich voice, hoarse with pain, whispered, *Please, my Son... Do not remain where his influence will remain upon you.*

I caught my breath. *Is that- is that- Ammi? Is it really her? "Ammi!"* I whispered.

*Please, my Son, remember Dalaaneman...* whispered the voice.

Nothing more.

But my heart could not believe I had imagined my mother's voice. Thrumming, swelling, it pulsed with the pure courage she had always given me, the resolution that I was truly worthy...

*Despite everything, perhaps she truly does not loathe me!* A smile, a happy one, spread across my lips, tears of relief soaking the tainted soil. *Perhaps she may love me again one day... My gratitude to You, oh Almighty!*

Then the weight of her words fell upon me.

She wanted me to leave. Not only Hisalir but also her, and Mutanacere alongside her.

Leaving meant that I would likely not return. This part of Koroma was quietly becoming Hisalir's, and, once I left, it was possible I would not be able to cross the boundaries again.

Leaving also meant that I would not have any more chance to lament my home's loss.

It meant my last piece of home would be gone.

But Ammi seemed to think that was what was necessary, and I knew I could not stay where Hisalir might find me, and yet I did not want to leave. I could not abandon my home! Yet she had told me to go!

The conflicting thoughts tore my heart in two, igniting a wisp of conjury...

I wrapped my arms around myself, desperate for comfort, and the movement nudged the sword-hilt strapped to my belt behind my right sword's sheath.

*Her Highness.*

A memory flashed in my mind of her stern face, crowned by a silver circlet.

And a drop of peace found its way into my bleeding heart.

Though I did not know why, suddenly I felt sure that she would at least listen to me.

That conviction was why I dared to sneak out of the quicksand, dodge Khelabir's watchful gaze, and resume the journey north.

I could only pray her Highness would have the mercy to show me the path to a home.