

Shadow Pyre of the

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PROLOGUE

Esen

BLOOD AND CHARRED FLESH. That's all the coliseum was ever used for. Esen tried to prepare himself for the looming Fire Purification, but how could anyone be prepared to watch someone burn to death? When possible, he avoided attending events in the coliseum, but no one had been able to escape today's spectacle. Not unless they wanted to be "reeducated".

Guards in sleeveless black uniforms escorted a group of human prisoners to the base of a large pyre. Even from the stands, the height difference was obvious as the Gurvel soldiers towered above their captives.

The other spectators around Esen stood completely still, only moving their lips to whisper softly to their neighbors. He opened his mind and touched the forethoughts of those around him. Not surprisingly, the Gurvel on this level of the coliseum were hiding their fearful thoughts behind blank crimson faces. Glancing across the arena, his chest tightened as he saw all of the human citizens who had been forced to watch as well. Their punishment would have been far worse than reeducation if they had refused.

A sudden silence fell over the crowd. He looked over to the left where the king's advisor, Khartsaga, had stepped forward on the viewing platform, his arms raised to gain the audience's attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, King Chono and I welcome you to this momentous occasion!"

From where he stood, Esen could see hints of gray growing on the sides of the advisor's otherwise short black hair. Much like himself, Khartsaga was still young for a Gurvel, probably only a few hundred years old.

The king and queen both leaned forward, eagerly listening to Khartsaga's every word. To them, the advisor was something akin to a prophet because of his connection to Firekin. But the real power came from the leader, who stood behind the throne with white hair that stood out in stark contrast to the black wall behind him.

Ever since that terrible Shadow War when King Chono had partnered with Firekin, the cult had grown in popularity throughout the city. Esen hadn't seen their leader attend many events in person, but these prisoners in particular had been caught scheming against the cult's presence in the city. Something that hadn't been attempted in over a century.

"Today we'll have not one, but twenty Fire Purifications," Khartsaga said. "These humans that you see before you have broken not only the king's trust but the trust of every law-abiding citizen in Galynkhot."

Movement in the pit below drew Esen's attention away from the speech. Another set of guards led a small group of human children toward the viewing platform. Esen's breath caught in his throat. Why had they brought children to the coliseum? Some of the prisoners had noticed the procession as well and began calling out for mercy.

"We have Fire Purifications because they remind us of our past," Khartsaga said. "A couple centuries ago, my father, Ukhel," Khartsaga waved behind him toward the Firekin leader, "created the Fire Stimulant, allowing Manipulators to control not only objects, but fire itself!"

Some of the children tried to run to their parents, but the guards held them back, forcing them to continue walking toward the viewing platform where Khartsaga continued on, seemingly oblivious to their cries. Esen glanced around him to see if anyone in the crowd would stop this from happening, but no one dared move.

“At that same time, King Chono wisely accepted the advice of Firekin and used the Fire Stimulant to wage war on the Speki, our greatest enemy.” Khartsaga paused as cheers erupted around the coliseum. The Shadow War had killed an entire race of people. It had been genocide, not glory. Even now, King Chono’s guards were still hunting down the last remnants of the Speki, all for the sake of the New Age.

Drummers began a strong and rhythmic cadence as Khartsaga continued, playing just low enough that the crowd could still hear him. The guards took the prisoners up to the top of the pyre and began binding them to wooden stakes.

“But the Fire Stimulant was not the only discovery that was made. Thanks to my father, the Eternal Flame, we learned how to control the most fearsome beast in all of Amidral—the shadowmongrel!” Khartsaga leaned forward and held his fist in the air as the crowd erupted in more thunderous cheers.

A woman beside Esen scrunched up her face in worry, but luckily everyone else was too entranced to notice how the ridges above her eyes bent in concern. Until the Shadow War, no one had ever dared to tame a shadowmongrel. There were only two in this part of Amidral and Firekin now controlled them. With that kind of weapon, few had the courage to contradict them.

Finished with their task of binding the prisoners, the guards saluted the king, each by moving a fist from his forehead to his chest. King Chono stood up and joined Khartsaga at the front of the viewing platform, signaling the guards to step away from the pyre.

“Today we celebrate this Fire Purification ritual,” Khartsaga continued, “because these humans have chosen to blaspheme the New Age with their rebellious meetings. We use fire as a reminder of what Gurvel glory can attain. May the New Age rise!”

The guards each lifted a vial of Fire Stimulant to their lips and drank the dark amber fluid that had drastically changed the forces of power in Amidral. Before, Manipulators had only been able to control inanimate objects, but now, with the Stimulant’s power, they could create fire. And because the vast majority of Gurvel were Manipulators, it had made them a force to be reckoned with. As a Seyr, Esen would never be able to control fire, but then again, it wasn’t an ability that he coveted. Not when it was used like this.

Murmurs filled the crowd as the guards crouched into an offensive position and in unison moved their arms toward the prisoners, sending blasts of fire toward the dry wood.

Screams echoed off the coliseum walls as the prisoners began to burn. The children’s cries grew louder as they were forced to watch. A little boy with hair as black as the coliseum dropped the book that he had been clutching to his chest as he fell to his knees and vomited. One of the guards grabbed the book and flipped through it before tossing it onto the pile of wood and yanking the boy to his feet. Esen’s heart broke as he watched the boy staring into the raging inferno.

A heat as hot as the pyre burned in Esen’s stomach, flushing his already crimson cheeks a deeper shade of maroon. No one was going to stop this. No one was going to fight against Firekin. This small group of humans had tried to. But they had failed.

He leaned over the railing, forcing himself to look at the thick black smoke and smoldering pyre. Fear and maybe a healthy sense of logic kept him from jumping into the coliseum at that moment. He wouldn't get more than three steps before the guards arrested him. Not today, anyway. It would take more tact and strategy than that.

A knot twisted in his gut, mixing with the heat of anger as he looked over at the Eternal Flame of Firekin. The cult leader was smiling. No. That was too jovial. It was more of a smirk. And why shouldn't he be filled with gleeful confidence? He was arguably the most powerful Gurvel in all of Amidral. At this point King Chono was nothing more than a figurehead, following Firekin's every whim. Who could fight against that kind of power?

The image of the boy kneeling in the sand before the smoldering pyre filled Esen's mind. It would only get worse from here. Even if he failed, he had to do something or the tension raging in his core would surely rip him apart. Passivity was no longer an option. He continued to watch the horrid display in the arena below, all the while trying not to dwell on the inevitability that he would likely end up burning on his own pyre someday.

CHAPTER 1

The Games

*Long ago, when the four races still lived in peace with one another,
rumors of a new dark threat spread throughout Amidral.*

Twenty Years Later

Ronan

RONAN PULLED THE PRISONER out onto the sandy arena, trying to keep a grip on the struggling man's arms. The black walls of the coliseum towered above them, covered in small holed pockmarks like all the other buildings grown from Sklera. Directing the rock-like plant to grow into a structure like this took Sklera sculptors hundreds of years. Under normal circumstances, he might have called it art, but this was where people were sent to be slaughtered. It was a bloodbath. Not art. Standing guard at The Games was never a coveted position, but human soldiers didn't have a say in the matter.

Sensing the condemned farmer's next attempt at escape, Ronan tightened his grip on the man's wrists a moment before he tried to yank his arm away. It was Ronan's sharp instincts that had earned him the rank of top soldier in the king's human militia. Not that the position meant anything. They'd never give him an official title. Even if they did, he wasn't so sure he'd take it.

Up on the higher seating levels, humans peered down into the sandy pit, looking anxiously to see if it was their loved one he was dragging in. On the lower levels, Gurvel lounged in their seats, watching him and the prisoner as if they'd come to see some kind of play. They were no better than piles of Sklera dust. Today wasn't a mandatory event, which meant every Gurvel spectator had chosen to come and watch the innocent die.

Now that they were in the sun, it was easier to see how dirty the farmer's simple work shirt and slacks had become during his time in the holding cells. Some of the dirt had likely rubbed off on Ronan's uniform but no one would be able to tell. All the king's militia wore outfits that were as black as Sklera. Kendra used to tell him that he looked good in black because it matched his hair, but that had been years ago. Back when they had still dreamed of someday working their way to freedom.

Looking up at the viewing platform, he waited for the king's signal to start The Games. At the moment, it looked like he was talking to his advisor, Khartsaga, so Ronan stood in the center of the coliseum, forcing down the heat of anger that threatened to boil up inside him as he held onto the trembling man.

The murmuring of the crowd crescendoed into a thunderous roar as they waited in anticipation. He gritted his teeth, feeling the eyes of the stadium directed at him and the farmer who likely hadn't done anything worthy of death. And yet they came to watch. Some of them had even brought their children and pampered pets as if it was some kind of weekly family event.

A Gurvel woman in the stands across from him had her pet fox with her today. Its tail was dyed hot pink to match the brightly patterned shirt it had been dressed in. The very idea of owning another living being made his stomach churn. No human in Galynkhot would dare keep a pet. Not when they heard whispered slurs directed at them while walking the streets. *Gutter pet*. The derogatory phrase was becoming all too common.

Finally, a loud gong signaled the crowd to quiet down. Everyone's attention turned toward the viewing platform where King Chono's tall figure stepped forward to address the crowd. Ronan and the other soldiers guarding The Games saluted in unison, each by raising a fist to his forehead and moving it over his heart in homage to the king.

The sun glinted off King Chono's regal white uniform embellished with red and gold embroidery that suggested flames climbing up the sides of his tunic. The white brought out his deep crimson skin and graying hair. A fitting appearance for the king who had waged war against the Speki with fire and shadowmongrels.

With the crowd's attention, the king waved over Khartsaga. His uniform was black but had the same red and gold embellishments along the side. Ronan and the other soldiers saluted Khartsaga by raising a fist to their forehead and snapping back to attention. He kept his hand in a fist and clenched it harder than he should have. Khartsaga was responsible for increasing the weekly number of Games from one to three.

"Welcome one and all!" Khartsaga said, his voice echoing around the coliseum. "Today, I'm happy to announce that the queen will give birth to our long-awaited heir in the coming week."

Khartsaga paused as the crowd cheered. The king and queen had been trying to conceive for centuries. Gurvel didn't produce many offspring, so last year when the royal couple announced their pregnancy, the celebration lasted for weeks.

"In honor of the queen's fast-approaching due date, we will begin adding Fire Purifications after each Game, starting today. May the New Age come!" Khartsaga nodded toward the gong.

Tapping it gently around the edges, the Gurvel gong ringer readied the large instrument and slammed his mallet against the vibrating metal to signal the start of The Games. Ronan released the farmer's wrists as the Champion's side door opened across the coliseum.

The man crumpled to the ground, clutching handfuls of sand as a sob escaped his lips. Ronan kept his face straight despite the burning anger coursing through his veins and walked back to the side of the stadium to stand in parade rest beside his squad mate. Manton kept his hair cut close to his olive-toned skin, unlike Ronan who kept his black hair just long enough to run his fingers through. They exchanged quiet looks of understanding and readied themselves for the coming spectacle.

A set of drummers played a cadence to enhance the experience, but it was soon drowned out by the jeers and shouts of the crowd. Abaka, the current Gurvel champion, stepped out of the Champion's door and waved at the crowd as he entered, showcasing a long scar down the side of his arm. The thunderous roar grew louder as he grabbed a sword from the rack near the entrance and held it up above his head, his deep blue tunic open down the middle to display his crimson skin.

The farmer was still trembling in the middle of the arena floor where Ronan had left him. Abaka threw the sword down in front of the terrified man as the roar of the crowd swelled. A sword was always handed to the human defender, not that it did them any good.

Grabbing the sword with tentative fingers, the farmer slowly rose to his feet, holding the weapon out before him with a trembling hand. Even while standing, the man looked like a child compared to the lumbering Champion towering over him.

Abaka laughed and dropped into a firm stance while reaching into his pocket for a small vial of amber Fire Stimulant. Another clash of the gong signaled the start of the fight. With hands clenched into fists behind his back, Ronan focused on the farmer whose shirt was already wet with sweat.

A burst of flame shot toward the farmer's feet. He barely managed to jump out of the way by slipping on the sand and falling flat on his back. Abaka shot another ball of fire that burst upon the sand right beside the man. With each burst of flame, heat surged through Ronan's core, but there was nothing he could do.

Ever since the Shadow War, the Manipulators in the city of Galynkhot favored the Fire Stimulant above all other Stimulants. They saw it as a symbol of purity, but Ronan was all too familiar with what it really stood for—death.

Manton nudged Ronan from the side. Wiping the scowl off his face, Ronan quickly straightened back up at attention. The heat in his core abated slightly, replaced by a cold shiver. He quickly glanced at some of the other guards, but none of them had appeared to notice his momentary slip of emotion.

The farmer flailed the sword before him, shielding himself with his other arm as a blast of fire whipped past him. The fights were never fair. Gurvel and humans were both allowed to use any means necessary to win, but that meant nothing if you didn't have Seyring or Manipulation powers. Humans couldn't possess either power, so The Games were just prolonged death sentences.

Abaka lunged toward the frightened farmer and landed beside him in a sweep of fire. His hand that held the flame brushed against the man's shirt and singed the edges. The farmer quickly rubbed the embers away and thrust the sword toward Abaka, but the champion easily dodged the attack and shot another burst of fire at him. This time it collided with the man's chest and caught his shirt on fire. The man flew back into the sand from the impact and screamed as the fire burned through his shirt, singeing his skin. Quickly tearing the garment off, the farmer scrambled back to his feet.

Not skipping a beat, Abaka jumped into the air, a sneer spread across his burgundy lips. The farmer barely had time to shield his face with his arm as Abaka shot a series of short blasts toward him mid-jump. Sand sprayed up as the Gurvel Champion landed and towered over his prey. The farmer glanced around for his sword but it had been flung close to where Ronan and Manton stood at the side of the stadium.

The crowd started chanting Abaka's name, stomping together in rhythm. The sound echoed off the coliseum in a sea of noise. Ronan gritted his teeth; this was the part he hated most.

But he was powerless. If he so much as nudged the sword closer to the man, his whole squad would suffer the consequences. So despite his hatred for The Games, Ronan kept his face blank and stood his ground. He wouldn't jeopardize his squadmates for some farmer he didn't even know.

Diving toward them, the man scrambled to grab the sword, spraying up sand at Ronan and Manton. With a wobbly hand, he held the sword out toward Abaka again.

The Champion kicked the sword out of the farmer's hand and wrestled him into a headlock. He squeezed his arm around the farmer's neck and looked up at the crowd, smiling as they cheered him on. After a moment,

when the man's body became motionless, Abaka threw the corpse aside in the sand, like a child finished with a toy.

Beside him, Manton shook his head and stepped back inside to retrieve the next prisoner. In a few minutes he returned, dragging a miner covered in dirt toward the center of the coliseum where Abaka waited with a new sword.

The next fight went much the same way. Abaka drank another vial of Fire Stimulant and threw blast after blast at the prisoner until he dropped his sword. Like before, he wrestled the man into the same choke hold, but this time something would be different. Ronan's instincts told him to glance away and he was glad when he did. The audible snap of the prisoner's neck breaking sent a shiver down his spine. Throwing the new corpse aside, Abaka stood and raised his hands in the air, the scar on his arm visible as he accepted the praise of the satisfied audience.

Cheers thundered around the stadium while Ronan and Manton dragged the bodies out of the main part of the arena and dropped them in a wheelbarrow near one of the exits. Abaka caught Ronan's eye briefly as he passed them by, his eyes void of any empathy or guilt at what he had just done. To him, humans were nothing more than an entertaining pastime. Pets to be played with. Ronan had never spoken to the Gurvel, but he could practically feel the condescension radiating off of him.

"Poor wretch," Manton muttered, nodding at the corpse of the farmer in the wheelbarrow.

Ronan looked at the frozen terror displayed on the farmer's face. Firekin claimed that The Games would somehow bring about the New Age where all creatures would prosper, but after witnessing the merciless slaughter of hundreds, he knew better. Keeping quiet was the only way to survive.

Manton placed a hand on Ronan's shoulder and nodded toward the prisoner entrance where they usually stood guard.

"Why don't you head back to the barracks early? I'll stand guard during the Fire Purification," Manton said as Gurvel guards started setting up a small pyre in the center of the coliseum.

A wave of nausea churned in Ronan's stomach as he watched them set up the platform and pile on extra wood. Now that they were going to be more frequent, he wouldn't be able to avoid all of them.

Up in the viewing platform, King Chono leaned over, listening to Khartsaga. When it came to Firekin, the king hung onto every belief as if it were some kind of righteous mandate.

Manton stood at parade rest by the prisoner's entrance while Ronan slipped inside the Sklera door. Two Firekin guards with bare chests and white pants passed him as they dragged a woman with short brown hair into the coliseum. She glanced back at Ronan with eyes as dark brown as Aprika's eyes had been. His mouth went dry as they pulled her into the coliseum and shut the door behind them.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Ronan turned and walked down the long hallway, passing cell after cell filled with people who were awaiting their own gruesome deaths. Most of them had been brought in for petty crimes. Even before the number of Games had increased, the king had mandated a certain number of humans be apprehended each week to keep tabs on the growing population.

There were only three punishments for humans in this city. The Games, Fire Purification, and death by shadowmongrel. Luckily the king hadn't used shadowmongrels for a couple centuries, so none of these prisoners would have to suffer an excruciating death like that. But even so, The Games were a horrible way to die.

One face looked familiar to him as he passed by. Looking closer, he realized it was the man he had arrested yesterday for insulting a wealthy Gurvel merchant. He forced himself to look each person in the eyes, feeling the weight of their fear and anguish pushing against his thoughts like a tangible pressure. This was the part he was forced to play, so he let the pain linger in his mind as punishment.

CHAPTER 2

Speki

At first, the darkness was just a rumor and nothing more.

Reports of terrifying visions and bodies found frozen in fear spread through every town like phoenix fire.

Eira

CROUCHING IN THE DIM CAVE alcove next to her brother, Eira closed her eyes and focused her attention on the cultists up ahead. She blocked out the minds of chroma snails and bats so she could focus on the larger group of sentient beings further down the passage. They were still too far away to read even their foremost thoughts.

She touched the leather pouch at her belt, resisting the urge to take a pinch of the Prime Stimulant. They had very little left and needed to save it for their target. Like all Stimulants, this one would extend her regular mental abilities, but it had limits. If she took it too soon, the effects would wear off before they found the Gurvel they were looking for.

After centuries of searching, they had finally found the Firekin headquarters.

She opened her eyes and turned to Einar, his shaggy hair standing out against the dark stalagmite behind him. Like all Speki, he looked similar in appearance to humans except for his pure white hair and violet eyes. They had been evading capture since the Shadow War and were finally in a position to avenge their people.

“There are some structures ahead. Probably cages.” Einar’s comforting voice resounded in Eira’s head as he looked at her with eyes that had the faintest wrinkles forming on the edges. Usually Manipulators like Einar couldn’t send mental messages like Seyrs could, but the strong bond they had formed made it possible.

“That tip paid off, then,” Eira thought back. *“This is where they’re taking the captives. We’re not close enough for me to read their forethoughts, but there’s a large group of people ahead. Probably a mixture of cultists and captives.”*

Eira felt the dagger at her belt. Usually they only killed one person at a time. Today they might not have that luxury.

“Sis, we don’t have to do this, you know,” Einar thought to Eira, rubbing a small pink crystal stuck to the cave floor.

She met his eyes and lifted an eyebrow in response. Einar shifted his weight and looked back toward the entrance. *“I know we’ve been looking for this place for centuries,”* he thought, his voice ringing in her head like warm bells, *“but we don’t have to go through with it. We’re the only ones left, Sister. If this mission crumbles like ashbark, the world might lose the last remnants of our people’s knowledge.”* Images of the two of them standing in

front of a mass of pupils eagerly awaiting instruction flashed in Eira's mind. She could feel his longing as if it were her own.

"Nar, we've been through this," she thought to him, tearing her gaze away from his longing eyes. "The minute we started teaching, we would be captured and killed. Besides, who would we teach, the Gurvel hunting us or the humans that have no potential for Seyring or Manipulation?"

"Dear Sister," Einar thought dryly, rolling his eyes at her. "While rare, there are humans who have powers. Just because they don't live as long doesn't mean we shouldn't teach them what we know."

"Nar, we've come so far! This is it! This is Firekin's main base," Eira thought to him, trying to shift the conversation back to their goal. "Their leader has to be here. Besides, we're assassins. This is what we were trained to do." She scooted closer to him and put a hand on his knee. "We owe it to our people." Einar gave a halfhearted smile as he met her gaze.

After centuries of chasing rumors and interrogating fringe cult members, they had finally made it. If everything went according to plan, they would find the cult leader, kill him, and get out before any alarms were raised.

Icy hatred shot through Eira as she imagined the damage she and her brother would unleash upon the cultist leader. King Chono may have ordered the genocide of her people during the Shadow War, but within decades she and Einar had uncovered the existence of a darker mastermind behind the whole attack. And when they found him, she would relish the opportunity to make him suffer the same fate her people had.

Once he was dead, she would gladly devote her full attention to making her brother's dream come true, even if it was next to impossible to find the students he so desperately wanted to teach.

Footsteps approached from the hallway. *"They're changing guards,"* Eira thought to Einar. She carefully felt out the approaching guards and crept into their minds to suggest a small illusion, one small enough that she didn't need to take the Stimulant to create it.

As the guards drew near, Eira closed her eyes to concentrate and projected an image of an empty alcove as they passed by. With such a minor illusion, the guards didn't notice her presence in their minds. She and Einar waited until the sound of footsteps passed and all was quiet except for the soft echoing plink of cave water dripping occasionally down the walls. Now was their chance.

They carefully crept down the cave tunnel, keeping to the right side where the shadows were darkest. After a few minutes the light flickering off the walls grew brighter and the sound of a crackling fire and scuffling boots echoed against the walls.

"It's a large cavern," Einar thought to her, closing his eyes as he felt for the inanimate objects around them. Without the aid of Stimulants, Einar couldn't manipulate the objects from so far away, but he could sense that they were there. They hadn't been able to replicate a Fire Stimulant like the Gurvel had created, but they still had the Prime Stimulant that lengthened the distance and duration of Manipulation and Seyring. However, Toracini mushrooms were difficult to find in the wild, so unfortunately their reserves were running low.

"The cages are on the far side," Einar thought, opening his violet eyes. *"I'm fairly certain there are some crates or boxes right near the entrance. We might be able to hide behind them before we're noticed. Assuming you don't trip on your own feet like last time."*

"I didn't trip," she thought, continuing to edge toward the cavern entrance. "You moved a rock from under my feet."

"Who else is going to keep you on your toes?" Einar thought, flashing her a smile.

At the edge of the cavern, she looked up and was surprised to find that the ceiling reached higher than she could see in the dim light. At the center a small fire burned where a few of the cultists had gathered, the flames flickering against their bare crimson backs. Even the females tried to show as much of their skin as possible, wearing only white pants and a wrap around their chests for modesty.

Since none of them were looking this way, she and Einar quieted their minds to avoid detection and slipped behind a couple of wooden crates. Eira closed her eyes again and felt out the minds around them. There were numerous cultists scattered about the cave and a large group of humans clustered together in one of the cages. Ignoring the captives, she continued her scan, searching for strong emotions of respect or fear targeted toward a specific person. Against the back wall, there was a small group of Gurvel and one human. Here she paused.

Strong waves of anticipation and nervousness radiated out from this area. However, upon further reflection, it seemed that these feelings were related to whatever task they were performing. There might have been some respect directed toward a certain individual, but his thoughts didn't possess the level of confidence that she expected the main cult leader to have. Disappointed, she opened her eyes and looked at her brother.

"I don't think he's here, Nar," she thought.

"Well, we've come this far. Let's at least get the humans out. Maybe one of them knows something." Einar peeked cautiously over the crates and ducked back down. "That fellow guarding the cages looks particularly dimwitted. How do you feel about jumping into his mind?"

Eira raised an eyebrow and peeked around the crate. A tall female cultist was adding a greenish crystal to a boiling cauldron a few paces away from their crate.

"There are too many of them. How would we get the captives out?" Eira asked.

"Jump like a moss frog, burn like a phoenix." Einar smiled confidently.

"Surprise worked in our favor last time, but there were fewer guards," Eira thought. "Besides, I thought you wanted to survive this so you could teach."

"I can't teach if I don't have a pupil, and one of those humans might be a Manipulator," Einar answered. "Besides, I thought you wanted to find the cult leader. We need more information if he's not here, and those humans are our best chance."

He was right. They might not get another chance like this, so she agreed.

Pushing down her disappointment that the cult leader wasn't there, Eira focused on the task at hand and slunk behind another set of crates. With Einar close behind her, she waited for a female cultist to pass by before stepping behind a pile of rocks and stalagmites.

They worked their way around the edge of the cavern until they were close enough to the Gurvel guarding the cage to take control of his mind. Normally an impossible feat, controlling another living being was what Speki assassins specialized in. With the help of a Stimulant to boost their powers, she and Einar could invade someone's mind and control their body. The procedure required the use of Seyring and Manipulation, so assassins were trained in pairs. Her fingertips tingled with anticipation. Moments like this made the decades of training well worth the pain and effort.

She reached into the small pouch at her waist and dropped a pinch of silvery powder into her mouth before handing the bag to Einar. The familiar bitter flavor hit her tongue as she closed her eyes and felt the surge of power flow through her veins like a warm pulse.

Einar's comforting and warm presence entered her mind like sunlight on a cool spring day. With practiced skill, they started to push their way into the unsuspecting guard's mind. The Gurvel was apparently distracted with worry over what punishment he might receive for sleeping in so late that morning, which made it all the easier to slip into his thoughts undetected. Like walking through a cold wall of water, they entered the guard's mind and compelled him to pull out his key and unlock the door.

The humans inside backed to the edges of the cage, waiting with wide eyes for the guard to enter. But they had no need to worry. With goals aligned, Eira and Einar compelled the Gurvel to lie down on the ground and pushed his mind into a deep sleep.

Finished with their task, Eira and Einar separated the connection, shivering slightly as they pulled away from each other's warmth. It was always a disconcerting feeling, but Eira comforted herself by grabbing Einar's shoulder.

They peeked around the rocks, but no one seemed to have noticed the odd transaction. Now they just had to get the captives out alive. She glanced inside her pouch. There was barely enough powder left for two doses. With a sinking feeling, she handed the pouch to Einar. It had taken them years to find enough toracini mushrooms to make that much Stimulant. Yet again, they'd have to bide their time until they could face the cult leader.

Khartsaga

WITH BATED BREATH, KHARTSAGA watched as they began their next experiment. A stout cultist stepped toward the human test subject and drank a vial of yellow liquid. The small group leaned closer to see if this was the Stimulant that would finally allow the user to control another living being.

For years, they'd been studying the mysterious green crystals that grew in this cave. The Verdant Crystal, as they'd decided to name it, was incredibly potent. On its own it caused massive headaches, but, theoretically, if combined with other ingredients it had the potential to allow someone to use both Manipulation and Seyring.

His palms grew moist as he waited. Surely this time, they had found the correct ingredients to make the Stimulant work. His father, the Eternal Flame, could only be kept waiting for so long before discipline became necessary.

The Gurvel who had used the Stimulant frowned and turned back toward the rest of the group. "Nothing. I can't even lift a pebble, let alone make this gutter pet raise his finger."

Khartsaga jotted a note down on his sheet. That was the fifth failed experiment this week. They only had a handful of hours before his father arrived for a performance check. Could they squeeze in one more test?

"Wait," the short Gurvel said, looking off toward the front portion of the cave. "There's someone here. No. Two people. They're trying to hide their thoughts, but somehow I can still hear them."

Beside him, Tarkhan, the assistant assigned to him by his father, took vigorous notes. They had Seyrs patrolling the hallways. If there really were intruders, the guards should have detected them. The only way

anyone could have slipped in unnoticed was by hiding their thoughts. So how had this cultist pierced their mind barriers? Was their failed experiment actually some kind of serendipitous discovery?

“You two, go check it out,” he ordered, pointing at a pair of nearby cultists.

In perfect obedience they carefully wound their way around testing tables and barrels of supplies until they reached the area near the cages. Suddenly, their postures became stiff. Something had caught their attention. Using Manipulation, each of them quietly lifted large rocks from the edge of the cave and sent them hurling behind a stack of crates.

Khartsaga took a step forward, curious to find out who the intruders were. There had been rumors about a handful of Gurvel who were resistant to the New Age, but so far no one had openly contradicted the teachings of Firekin.

“Advisor, it’s two Speki!” One of the cultists cried.

Speki? A delightful surprise. His father was sure to be disappointed about the failed experiment, but perhaps gifting him with these two Speki would make up for the blunder.

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