

READING SAMPLE

Flare Shifter

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A giant fist slammed down onto the glass counter in the small jewelry shop demanding attention. “Goldsmith!”

Ryder Dundalk dropped the thick wax casting he was detailing and jumped to his feet. The journeymen and apprentices behind him halted their work, waiting in uneasy silence while the master smith found out what the problem was. As Ryder hurried through the curtained doorway separating the front shop from the grime of the studio, he found Janish trembling with his back to the wall. With a silent motion, he released the young apprentice who fled quickly out of sight.

“Lieutenant Haz,” Ryder soothed, his worn voice well-practiced in pacifying. “How may I help you?”

The reptilian officer towered over him by at least two heads. The Drahk’s navy trousers and sleeveless shirt carried the badge of the House of Tiro, master of the Assassins Guild as well as all artisan and merchant guilds on Mindaris, the primary populated world of the Algol binary system. Ryder folded his hands and looked up into angry brown eyes within a gray, lizard-like face, careful to keep his aged white head tipped in subservience.

“The tiara that was delivered for Lord Tiro’s daughter is damaged!” the Drahk snarled in heavily accented Mothertongue as he tossed a wrapped object unceremoniously onto the counter.

Ryder's heart thudded in his chest—it was his work. He had hurried to finish the delicate piece several days ago, well ahead of its scheduled due date, and knew that it had been perfect when it left his hands.

“Lady Anja was highly displeased, and when she's unhappy, *I'm* unhappy, Dundalk! I have better things to do than play messenger for a child.” The officer leaned on the counter with both hands, looming over the goldsmith with the menacing sway of a seasoned fighter, his spiky crest splayed in irritation.

“Well, let me take a look at it,” Ryder answered in a placating tone as he opened the velvet pouch and pulled out the shiny golden tiara. Two prongs on the top ornament were crushed and the right half of the circlet was bent in an unnatural angle. It was obvious that the diminutive crown had “encountered” something large and solid after it had been flung across a room, but at least the valuable inset gems were still in place. “Oh, I see. Yes, this will need to be mended.”

“I want it fixed and delivered in person—today. Overlord Bálok arrives in Algol tomorrow and Lord Tiro wants this ready for the girl to wear for the ceremonies.”

Ryder clamped down on a sudden swell of anxiety to keep it from spreading across his face. “Of course, Lieutenant Haz. I'll bring it myself.”

“Good—you deal with Anja,” Haz sneered. “If she's not satisfied, it won't be my head that rolls with her father. Got it?”

The shop door slammed behind the Drahk, rattling everything in the studio. Ryder closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. The prospect of being anywhere near Tiro, or anyone else in the vicious reptile's house, made him intensely uneasy. It was a deadly game he played, one which could blow up in his face in the blink of an eye. After twelve long years, he ought to be used to the charade, but he doubted that day would ever come.

Scooping up the damaged gold, Ryder walked briskly back through the curtain and over to his workbench against the far wall, pushing aside the pieces of wax and carving tools scattered across the scarred wooden surface. As he sat down on his stool, he let out a silent breath, listening to the quiet sounds of the metalsmiths behind him who had resumed their work without a word. It always took time for tension to settle down after a visit from a volatile reptilian client. Just last week, a journeyman from a shop across the

way had been hauled off for questioning after being accused by a nobleman of stealing a large sapphire. No one had seen the young man since.

“Tevan,” Ryder called softly to the ranking journeyman of the shop, “as soon as I’m finished, I’ll deliver this myself to Lord Tiro’s mansion and then head home directly. Please lock up tonight after everyone’s gone.”

“Yes, sir,” came the muted reply from his second-in-command. He could hear the worry in the younger man’s voice, but there was nothing he could say to allay the journeyman’s well-founded fears. Picking up his pliers, Ryder focused instead on the shining gold in his hands and straightening out the mars to his creation put there by a spoiled young woman.

When the tedious task was finished and he was satisfied with the repairs, the goldsmith painstakingly re-wrapped the sparkling jewelry in a soft cloth and placed it carefully back inside the velvet pouch. Throwing on his guild jacket bearing Tiro’s badge of ownership, he nodded once to Tevan and stepped through the curtain into the front of the shop where Janish paused in his sweeping to look up at the master smith with a fretful frown. Tucking the velvet bag protectively into his jacket, Ryder opened the glass front door of the small shop and stepped out into the wide pedestrian zone lined with bustling shops, gingerly closing the door behind him.

Walking briskly, the goldsmith headed toward the northern gate of the artisan quarter. The streets in this privileged, walled neighborhood were grimy, but not as bad as most in the decaying capital city. At one time Tessin must have been a grandly beautiful place to live he thought wistfully as he ran an admiring gaze over the elegant facades. The engineering was remarkable, designed to withstand and harness the natural pulsations from Illia and Abdil, the eclipsing binary suns at the heart of the Algolian system. Sleek vehicles had once filled the avenues, built with sophisticated pulsedrive engines, the same technology that had powered the starships used for interplanetary commerce between Algol’s worlds. And at the apex of Algolian achievement were the people themselves whose metabolism had fluidly adapted to the binary’s manic revolutions and cyclical stellar flares, allowing them to loosen and reconstruct physical form in the blink of an eye.

Ryder dropped his glance to the dirty street as sickened grief washed through him. The brilliance of the Algolians’ abilities had become their downfall. The rapacious

Drahkian Empire had blown through the system hundreds of years ago to inflict ownership over Mindaris and the other two peaceful worlds of Algol. Tessin's architects and engineers were long gone, their creations left to ruin. The Drahks were interested in only one prize—the lucrative trade in valuable Algolian shapeshifters.

The goldsmith's thumb slid around the wide ring on his left hand, twisting it in habitual agitation. The Drahks were obsessed with gold, so he wore silver. The simple band had been one of his earliest works, crafted as his private tribute to everything the Algolian worlds had once been and all that his people had lost.

The golden light in the afternoon sky was intensely bright from the red giant Abdil's two-day pass in front of Illia, the white dwarf. The heavy iron gate under the stone archway in the wall stood wide open at this time of day and Ryder passed through into the central district of Tessin occupied by the Drahkian gentry and their servants. The sidewalks buzzed with reptilian pedestrians and scattered Algolians, and the streets were crowded with heavy Drahkian vehicles brought to Mindaris from off-world.

Tiro's residence and the Assassins Hall with its adjacent walled compound lay northeast of the artisan gate. Ryder made his way down several long blocks and up the street leading into the wide open square in front of the spired Guild Hall, one of the last grand Algolian structures left standing in the Drahkian quarter. Crossing the square and traveling north along a wide, busy avenue, he fixed his gaze on the monumental stone facade of the great house which dominated the view at the end.

Like all other Drahkian buildings, Tiro's holdings were ostentatious, rigidly symmetrical, built to the larger scale of the Drahkian physique. The mansion alone occupied an entire city block. Designed to convey the power and status of the resident lord, the bottom story of rough-hewn gray stone rose over four times the height of an Algolian, while the second and third story faces and windows were trimmed with opulent carvings.

As he drew close to the mansion, Ryder knew better than to go anywhere near the grandiose main entrance reserved for reptilian nobility and followed the sidewalk around the block to the back of the house. He approached the steps of the rear entrance where a tall, navy-garbed soldier was posted and stood silently at the bottom, waiting to be addressed.

“Business?” the Drahk grunted, taking note of Tiro’s insignia on the goldsmith’s jacket sleeve.

“I was told to bring a purchase to the Lady Anja,” Ryder stated solicitously with his eyes dutifully lowered.

The guard took out a handheld device, spoke a few guttural Drahkian syllables into it, and a few moments later, the heavy door was opened by a reptilian woman in a long, plain linen dress. “Come with me,” she ordered flatly. Ryder climbed the steps past the guard and walked nervously through the entrance, wincing internally as the door closed behind him.

The vestibule was open, lofty, and wide. The rays of a golden star were set into the center of the floor and the white marble walls were adorned with elaborate tapestries, statues in niches, and gilded sconces. Male and female reptilian servants, smaller in stature than the elite Ka Drahks, scurried along the sides of the hallways carrying bedsheets or trays of dishes, and the biting, acidic smell peculiar to the Drahkian ruling class hung thickly in the air.

The reptilian household bristled with tense anticipation over Bálók’s pending visit. Heavy footfalls echoed off to the left and Ryder turned his head to see a company of Drahkian soldiers coming down the center of the hall toward the vestibule. When his eyes caught sight of the fluttering folds of a dark blue cloaked figure, Ryder’s heart skipped several beats—an Algolian truthsayer followed on the heels of the approaching armed reptiles.

He quickly dropped his gaze, but not before he caught a glimpse of hardened iridescent eyes skimming over him. He’d seen truthsayers many times before in his business with the noble houses, but never this close. All Algolians were by nature deep-feelers and sensitives, capable of picking up images and feelings through touch, but truthsayers were bound to their reptilian masters as tightly as any assassin. Ryder blanched—one touch of a truthsayer would tell the Drahks all they needed to know to bring his life crashing to an end.

The female servant stepped back against the door and made a curt motion for him to do the same while the party marched past and veered into the main hallway leading into the heart of the palace across from where they stood. An abrasive, gravelly voice rang

out from some unseen point up ahead of the company, echoing off the walls with terse, clipped orders.

“Step it up! Lord Tiro is waiting!”

Ryder recoiled. There was no mistaking the lacerating tones of Ramád, cousin to Lord Tiro and head of his troops, wicked with a knife and quick to anger. The Drahkian party broke into a run while the servants on both sides of the corridor flattened themselves against the walls to allow the rushing soldiers to get by.

As the clatter of boots receded, the serving woman pushed herself away from the door and quickly moved down the hallway to the right, motioning the goldsmith through an open doorway into a richly decorated chamber. “Wait here,” she directed. “Lady Anja is on her way.”

Ryder took a deep breath, working to calm his shaking limbs when a high feminine voice issuing orders sounded outside the chamber. He bowed his head and clutched the pouch in his hands as rustling taffeta skirts flounced through the doorway, trailed by two Drahkian guards.

“Did you fix my tiara?” the young woman asked waspishly.

“Yes, my lady,” he replied, holding the velvet bag out in front of him.

“Here, let me see,” she snapped, reaching over to snatch the bag. As Anja began to loosen the cords, Ryder realized with a jolt that her hands were Algolian and just as dangerous as those of a truthsayer. Without thinking, he drew in a sharp breath and glanced up into a youthful face covered with finely-pebbled reptilian skin.

Realizing his mistake, Ryder hastily dropped his eyes. The young woman paused and surveyed him closely, as if really seeing him for the first time.

“What?” she demanded imperiously. “Why did you make that sound?”

“Forgive me,” he mumbled, grasping for anything to say which would deflect attention away from himself. “I was startled ... you’re very pretty,” he dissembled, hoping the flattery of an old man would camouflage his discomfort.

“Oh,” she replied, instantly mollified. Apparently quite used to compliments, Anja returned her focus to extracting the contents of the velvet bag in her hands, this time handling the delicate jewelry with care.

“It’s stunning, Master Dundalk!” she exclaimed as she held the gold up in front of her. “I was so angry at my fath—when I saw that the tiara was bent,” she quickly

corrected. “I just *had* to make Haz take it back to get you to fix it.” She eagerly placed the dainty crown through the strands of her thin silvery hair, thoroughly delighted with her new trinket, while the two guards behind her exchanged a glance and nodded.

“Now I’ll look beautiful for the overlord’s visit,” she crowed. “Father will be so pleased!”

Ryder tipped his head in acknowledgment, relieved beyond words that the young woman’s whims had moved in a favorable direction. Acutely anxious to get out of Tiro’s mansion, he attempted to politely excuse himself. “If there is nothing else, Lady Anja—”

A bloodcurdling scream sliced through the air from somewhere deep in the bowels of the vast house. Anja and the two guards whipped their heads toward the open door, taking on a decidedly feral bearing as they pivoted away from the goldsmith and moved out into the corridor where the servants had all stopped in their tracks, looking back over their shoulders in the direction of the scream. Ryder could have sworn he saw a glimmer of pleasure flit across Anja’s youthful features.

The commotion in the hallway grew louder as a sobbing man came running, making a desperate flight toward the nearest exit, followed by distant shouts and thundering boots. The voices of the servants in the hall rose to a murmur, adding to the confusion as they moved out of the way of their Drahkian masters who poured out of rooms along the corridor, drawn by the horrible sounds of the fleeing Algolian.

Ryder inched closer to the doorway, terrified of what he might see, and caught several brief glimpses of the Algolian figure who had stumbled and fallen to the ground midway down the hall, blocked from further flight by the gathering throng of Drahks moving to intercept him. The man’s silver-gray hair fell around his face and he was bleeding profusely from numerous cuts in his translucent skin as he tried weakly to push himself up off the stone floor.

With angry yells, a pair of Drahkian soldiers arrived, snarling with aggravation, and pushed the man back down to the floor.

“No more, no more, no more,” the Algolian begged repeatedly between choppy, fractured breaths.

Weirdly, the noise in the cavernous space ceased altogether and the only sound to be heard was the ragged weeping of the captive man bouncing off the walls of the wide marble hallway.

Frozen in shock, Ryder looked on. The Drahks just stood there, coldly immobile as they siphoned off the palpable terror emanating from the wounded man. A raw, gurgling splutter issued from the Algolian's chest before it stopped abruptly.

For several moments, nothing happened. Ryder swallowed, wondering if the crowd would turn on him since he was the only other Algolian in sight. As if awakened from a spell, the reptilians began walking away, going about their business as if nothing unusual had occurred. One of the soldiers picked up the fallen Algolian's lifeless body, hoisted it over his shoulder, and stalked back in direction from which the group had come.

Shaken, Ryder stood in the doorway, unsure of what he should do. He heard the faint rustle of Anja's dress, and as he watched her disappear down the hall in the opposite direction, one of the guards walked over and grabbed him by the shoulder, pushing him back toward the vestibule. "You're done here, goldsmith."

A deluge of violent, jagged images poured into Ryder's mind through the Drahk's painful grip. Pictures of barbarous cruelty tainted with fear and harsh treatment bombarded his system so fast that he nearly fell against the wall. His stomach clenched and his hand flew to cover his mouth to keep himself from heaving.

The Drahk laughed and pushed him roughly forward. "We've got a queasy one!" he called out loudly. The servants in the hall glanced up and moved aside to give them a wide berth as the guard hustled the goldsmith toward the door. A second guard ran to Ryder's side and caught him under his other arm. "Let's get him out of here before he pukes."

Ryder floundered against a new onslaught of violent images, barely managing to stay on his feet as he was unceremoniously half-carried through the vestibule where a servant stood holding the heavy wooden door open. Laughing derisively, the Drahks shoved him through and let go. He stumbled past the sentry and managed to make it down the steps before he fell to his knees next to the wall and emptied what little was left in his stomach.

Trembling, Ryder rose and worked his way along the side of the building, leaning heavily on the rough stone with his left hand to keep himself steady and upright until he made it around the corner out of sight of the sneering guard. Propping himself against the wall and gasping for breath, he labored to clear his head and body of the turbulent,

sickening energy, closing his eyes as a surge of sorrow bled into his battered emotions. The pitiful sounds of the murdered Algolian's agony replayed themselves in his mind and wouldn't let go—another soul lost to the never-ending nightmare on Mindaris.

Picking up his feet, Ryder hobbled his way down the avenue, past the Guild Hall, and back through the gate to his neighborhood as fast as he could manage. Nausea gripped him in swells and he felt an urgent need to wash as soon as he got home. He hurried past the lively business district and pushed on into the blocks of stately residential dwellings, desperate for the safety of his tiny apartment. As he flew down his street and entered the narrow passageway between two townhouses leading to the servant's quarters at the back, he was brought up short by the disconcerting sight of a woman out on the stoop who had turned to lock up the apartment.

By the stars, a new housekeeper must have started today. The last one disappeared over a week ago, an all-too-common occurrence among Algolians.

Ryder cringed. He had always been uneasy about strangers entering his private space, but the servants were sent by the guild as a privilege of his rank which he dared not refuse, unwelcome intrusions made tolerable only by the fact that he rarely, if ever, saw them. He came to a stop several paces away as the woman dug for the key in her pocket.

"You can leave it open," he rasped, clearly startling her with his presence. She jumped slightly and cocked her head to peer up at him. She was small, youngish, with plain clothing and an unremarkable face. Her left eye was not quite centered, but the right one seemed to bore straight into him for a split second before retreating behind a bland veneer.

"I had a delivery to make this afternoon, so I'm home early," the goldsmith muttered as he stepped to the side of the path and motioned for her to pass, eager for her to leave so he could get inside to wash.

The woman nodded in acknowledgment and dropped her eyes, pulled the hood of her threadbare sweater up over her head, and walked swiftly past him toward the street.

Ryder dashed through the door and pushed it closed. The stench of the encounter with the reptiles seemed to cling to every inch of his clothing and skin, and he hastily kicked off his boots and peeled out of his clothes as he ran through the darkened flat to the bathroom. Flipping on the light and hot water tap, he closed his eyes and started to

shift, allowing the time-worn facade he wore as a shield to fall away. Tousled white hair, slightly wrinkled skin, and stooped posture dissolved into the momentary fog of transformation, resolidifying once more into a tall, well-toned figure with muscular shoulders and smooth, translucent skin. Rheumy gray eyes became suddenly clear, sparkling with a sheen of iridescence.

Letting his head fall forward, Ryder shook out his long, silver-gray hair and splashed water over his face, running wet fingers through the silky strands again and again to clear away the cloying smell. With agitated abhorrence, he attacked his skin and hair with soap, scrubbing and rinsing, until he finally began to feel like himself once more. Panting from his frantic efforts, he leaned heavily on the sides of the sink and looked up at his dripping reflection in the mirror.

If the reptiles found out what he was, he'd be arrested on sight or killed outright—shapeshifting was forbidden unless it served a Drahkian master. It was a risk he lived with since the alternatives were just too hideous to bear. The youthful and strong were the Drahks' prime targets, exploited as tools in their vicious games or else used for sex or fodder like the man he had just seen, brutalized and thrown away for the gratification of the gentry. But in his mind, even worse was the risk of being transformed into one of Tiro's vile assassins, forced to kill and become cruel—like *them*. It was beyond unthinkable. He'd made his decision years ago to wear the mask of age to keep his true form hidden and there was no turning back.

Ryder closed his eyes and made himself take several long, steady breaths to calm himself down. He was back in his haven, the only place where he could safely relax without the worry or fear of being discovered. The strain of the day slowly seeped away and he refocused his attention on rebuilding his comfort zone for the remainder of the night.

Grabbing a towel, he rubbed his skin and hair dry as he walked into the bedroom and threw on a long robe. Returning to the dimly lit living room, he reached down, switched on the lamp next to his chair, and froze. In his upset and haste, he'd completely failed to notice that everything in the apartment was polished and tidy, and that the pungent aroma of roasted potatoes filled the entire space.

"I'll be damned," he murmured, stooping to pick up his jacket and strewn clothing from the kitchen floor before casting them onto the small table. The oven was off, but

still hot to the touch, so he snatched up a couple of pads and cracked open the door. “How in the world did I make it past this?” he wondered aloud as he pulled out a brimming pot filled with herbed potatoes, onions, and carrots. All the other housekeepers who had been sent over the years had never done more than the bare minimum—laundry, sweeping, restocking the tiny kitchen on occasion, if he was lucky—but no one had ever made him a meal.

Suddenly ravenous, he spooned the vegetables onto a plate, grabbed a fork, and carried them over to his arm chair in the living room, settling in to enjoy his unexpected feast. After the first bite, he paused, sighing with pleasure, and finished the plate slowly until every last bit was gone. He could easily have eaten twice, three times as much, he reflected with surprise.

Reaching over to set the empty plate onto the side table, he stopped short when he found his father’s old book lying beside him. He could have sworn he’d left it over on his drawing table across the room after he’d finished his latest sketch of the story’s heroine.

Tossing the plate to the floor, Ryder lifted the thick volume and sank back into the soft chair, running his fingers reverently over the beautiful design tooled into the leather cover. Such things weren’t made on Mindaris any longer; the reptiles had no patience or money for anything that didn’t serve them directly. This aging text was the last tangible thing he had left of his father and was his only treasured possession. He’d probably read it several hundred times while he was growing up and could most likely recite the entire tale from memory, word for word.

Flipping the book open, he gingerly turned the first few pages and let his eyes glide over the remembered words. It was a fantasy story, full of color and lively characters, love, and an adventure that sucked him in with the very first words. Before he knew it, he was lost in its pages, chasing goblins, hunting for clues to find a hidden city, running alongside a beautiful companion, and swept into a country where he found new friends.

The last of Algol’s light faded away unnoticed. Somewhere far into the night after nodding off to sleep, the old book slipped from his fingers and fell with a thud to the floor, jarring him out of a restless dream. In his groggy confusion, he was sure he heard the claws of a goblin scratching at the door behind him and wondered distantly if his father would come to scare it away.