

Chapter 1

The Testing

Jibbawk was a lean creature even for his nine-foot stature, much leaner than the other Shadics he would compete against today. Jibbawk, like all Shadics, was covered from head to toe with poisonous quills. Some were longer than others, but they were all as sharp as hypodermic needles. Jibbawk used his long beak to pinch a quill on his forearm and run the length through his beak in a grooming fashion. He liked to be clean, so he did this often. Other Shadics weren't so thoughtful about their appearance. For instance, Maddawk, the Shadic behind him was balding because dirt clumps clogged his follicles. He also smelled as foul as the Dedite Slicks, the very swamp the empire used to decompose dead servants and criminals.

Jibbawk and twelve other Shadic slaves, shackled by their feet and hands, were lead through tall archways lined with pearl-white tiles and lit by enormous skylights thirty feet overhead. Jibbawk was fourth in line, but he felt like he should have been first.

The slaves stopped at a smaller hallway guarded by a Shadic female. She was much shorter and her quills were hidden by armbands, neck collars and ceremonial tape that covered her body. She used a long thick key to unlock the shackles that bound the first Shadic's wrists then led him down the dark hallway and out of sight. She said nothing, but didn't have to.

Fifteen minutes later, another Shadic was taken down the hall. Twenty minutes later another Shadic left. None returned, although they were supposed to.

Jibbawk's turn came. He walked down the narrow hall. There were no lights along the way and the closer to the end Jibbawk got, the darker it became.

Jibbawk reached the door at the end. There was no handle so he waited. Finally, it opened. Light blasted him and his red irises focused to pin points. He stepped into the light while simultaneously plucking two long quills from each forearm, holding them like daggers.

Shapes came at him like arrows. Jibbawk could barely see in the light, but it didn't matter. He could see well enough. He stabbed the flying creature, keeping the long quill in his hand.

Jibbawk took a step, but there was nothing below his feet. He fell.

He reached out blindly, grabbed a branch and swung under it like a circlown. His momentum spun him all the way around the branch. He kicked and released and landed on a thicker branch. He executed his move efficiently and just in time, too.

His eyes had adjusted to the bright light only to see a handful of the flying creatures barreling toward him. They were kiets. Kiets had long, plump bodies, six legs, two with sharp claws, and a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. Shadics normally hunted kiets for their delicious thorax juices, but taking on one or two was far different than a whole swarm of them. Trying to breach their nest to get eggs, was near foolishness. The closer one got to their hive, the more vicious they became. Obtaining just one egg was a suicide run.

Jibbawk threw his quill and landed it inside a kiet's biting mouth and leaped out of the way of another one. He landed on another branch and leaped again. Jibbawk's powerful, clawed feet and beak were the only feature that still resembled the birds from which Shadics had evolved.

The buzz of wings vibrated the air. Jibbawk flung out an arm, releasing shorter quills. Three kiets were impaled and fell to the forest floor, over two hundred feet below. Jibbawk jumped to a gnarled, dangling mossy plant and pulled himself up to another branch.

Up the tree he climbed, batting off and stabbing attacking kiets. When he neared the crown of the tree, he saw the Queen. She was bigger than Jibbawk had imagined. Her long body was wrapped around the trunk. She was laying eggs along the underside of the tree branches, sticking them with gelatinous slime. Surrounding her were hundreds of freshly hatched kiets and a dozen very large warriors. One dove at Jibbawk, but he leaped off the branch, catching another with his hands. The warrior kiet flew past and turned midflight. Jibbawk swung back and forth dodging others. As one flew passed Jibbawk snatched its wing, ripping it off. The kiet spun and fell, making a shrill cry.

Jibbawk plucked quills and flung them with skill and speed only years of practice could explain. Soon his forearms were bare, but he had more on his upper arms. Jibbawk was fast, almost a blur. The kiets were persistent, blind to the death and raining out of the tree like falling leaves.

Jibbawk negotiated every attack until he reached the branch on which the Queen sat. She screeched loudly at him, opening her round mouth filled with a hundred barbed teeth. She could easily survive Jibbawk's poison. Hundreds of her loyal children were returning from foraging.

Jibbawk leaped at her. She screamed, unafraid of him. She snapped, repeatedly. He snatched her thick throat with one hand and plunged his other into her body. Blood sprayed on Jibbawk as he pulled out her heart. Once she was dead, the other kiets went into a fury. One slammed into Jibbawk and knocked him in the head, another clamped onto his back and bit off a dozen quills and another tore out a chunk of Jibbawk's leg muscle. He didn't cry out or stop. He simply reached down to where the Queen's tail pouch started and ripped it off like it was nothing but a leech cloth covering a lantern.

Inside the pouch was what Jibbawk wanted, eggs.

Jibbawk dodged another attack and took another bite on the forearm. His head was about to be severed by the snapping teeth of a warrior kiet, so Jibbawk let go. He fell like a meteor.

Half-way down he reached out and grabbed a string of moss. His fist clamped shut, stripping the mossy clumps from the stem as he fell. His descent slowed until he came to a stop. A few more leaps down and Jibbawk was on the very branch that led to the hallway he'd come from. It was a tunnel delicately carved into the side of a mountain of solid stone.

The door opened, and Maddawk came out. Jibbawk pushed past him, dragging the egg-filled end of the queen behind him. Maddawk looked at the tail and was visibly confused. He backed away from Jibbawk.

Jibbawk passed the other Shadics who all, once seeing the queen's tail behind him, gave him a wide berth. He emerged from the long hallway to a large room that curved sharply to the right. The female key-keeper stood and gaped at the egg sac. She hurried Jibbawk around the curve and into a huge viewing room. The back wall, floor, and ceiling were covered with the same pearl tiles. Hundreds of seats twenty rows high filled with Shadics of every shape and size and status. The opposite side of the great viewing room was a very thin, razor-sharp mesh. They could see the entire tree from here.

Jibbawk strode easily past a hundred Shadics. The more powerful a Shadic was, the more quills were taped down or hidden by cloth. Jibbawk being a slave, was barren of dress, tape or adornments.

At the end of the crowd was a section for the elder Shadics, which included the Resident Ruler, Cal-Kaw and the High Priestess, Ixawk.

Cal-Kaw had a traditionally clipped beak, another sign of his superiority and his quills were wrapped by metal arm bands and a golden-laced bandage. Further hiding his body was a cloak made from the scaled skin of minit sea serpents. At first glance the scales looked white, but a rainbow of colors reflected off them in the bright light. He smiled. "So you've brought us the queen's tail, have you?" Cal-Kaw leaned back in his great throne carved out of a reddish marble and cushioned with a sponge-like padding. "You've done well. I am pleased."

The crowd burst into applause.

"Yesssss, I'm glad you are pleased," Jibbawk said, rolling his 's'es like a serpent.

Ixawk placed her hands together reverently, her eyes beaming. "You are either very brave or very foolish of only which your survival will judge." She was required by law to pluck every last quill from her body so her lean, powerful shape could be seen by all who were allowed to look upon her.

Jibbawk laid the sac at Ixawk's feet. His blood mixed with the slime of the pouch and pooled on the stone floor. "I'm just doing my duty as besst as I ssee fit." Jibbawk believed his lineage to be the oldest and most powerful, but there was more to it. He knew he was to be the first of the Infinite Rulers, but didn't dare say it in front of Ixawk or Cal-Kaw.

The oldest stories say that the Shadics must conquer all the habitable worlds in the galaxy and those that succeed will become immortal and will rule forever. Ever since Jibbawk was a youngling in training, he knew he would be the first Infinite Ruler and that all others would bow before him.

"You have brought us sixteen eggs and so will be awarded one point for each. I've never given out so many points before." Ixawk looked over Jibbawk's wounds. "You may wrap yourself before the next challenge. I look forward to seeing what you'll do next," Ixawk's dark skin looked almost soft between the large pores where quills use to grow, and her eyes were as red as

Jibbawk's. She stood and waved a servant over to her. "Take the eggs and prepare them for the final feast."

Ixawk took two gold armbands and cupped them onto Jibbawk's forearms. They pinned down a section of longer, more dangerous quills called the flalanx quills, which had tapered edges and flew straighter and farther when thrown. They also had the most potent poison. "I hereby issue these; alanx-bindings imbued with the seal of the great ruler. They symbolize your victory here and are proof to all that would oppose you that you do not need your flalanx quills to conquer your enemies."

Jibbawk bowed deep and for a long time before he was led away by a younger slave to be bandaged. As he passed a couple of elders wrapped in various colored cloaks and adorned with sparkling jewelry, one leaned to the other and said. "No one has ever killed the Queen. I did not think it could be done by one slave Shadic. Contestants are only required to scavenge a few eggs to pass this trial."

Before Jibbawk left the great hall, he heard the resident ruler Cal-Kaw call out to the crowd. "Let Maddawk begin his trial. For his sake, let there be more eggs to collect." The crowd roared.

Jibbawk was bandaged tightly and led to a waiting room. There he stayed until all the Shadics in the Trials today got to fight the kiets and collect the required amount of eggs for the feast. It was the first of three tests. It tested strength and agility and was a hallmark of the Shadic race.

The others completed their test; Maddawk collected more eggs than the rest, though he could only carry eight. Jibbawk was not surprised.

