

DIVINE INSTRUMENT

TRICIA MCCAMBRIDGE

"MY QUEEN, ARE YOU CERTAIN THAT YOU WOULDN'T LIKE EVEN one of us to walk you to your room?"

Cerdwyn stopped walking before she could enter the keep, fighting the urge to sigh as she turned to face the four guards at her heels. "Yes, I am certain that I will be fine. Thank you for all of your hard work today. I believe that we have made strides toward quieting the agitation that has been developing since King Pell's disappearance."

"Very well. I wish you a good night, your grace."

"And you as well," she said with a gracious but brief look as she turned to enter the keep. Despite her dismissal of them, she heard no sign of the guards' departure as she quickly increased her distance from them. She was certain that as soon as she was out of sight, at least one of them would be sent to follow her and stand guard in the keep; the current chaos in the kingdom was too great and the risks too high to leave the queen truly alone.

However, the queen had not had a moment alone in weeks and it was truly beginning to wear unbearably on her nerves.

As soon as the queen rounded the corner away from the still chattering guards, she dropped her royal countenance and buried her face in her decorated hands just in time to catch the first of the tears that plunged from her exhausted eyes.

"Pell! Seraphine" she wailed the names of her missing husband and infant daughter as quietly as she could into her palms as she continued to walk quickly toward her room. "I'm sorry!"

The queen leaned her weight against the wall as she moved as quickly as she could as she stumbled through the seemingly labyrinthine corridors of the keep to her chamber, her horror of the thought of being caught in such an undignified state propelling her forward, all that prevented her from crumbling to the floor in a wet, writhing heap.

Finally, even through the tears that obscured her vision, the queen saw the massive, intricately carved dark oak door of her chamber come into view. She hurled toward it, falling over an uneven surface

in the stone floor beneath her and scuffing her hand against one of the sharper surfaces. She cursed, but threw herself upward toward the door that now stood extravagantly before her. She threw the door open and slipped inside, slamming the door shut behind her.

Inside her chamber, she looked around, desperate to find some shred of the comfort that she once found here. The massive expanse of the room draped with luxurious, thick fabrics and filled with sturdy, furniture of exquisite woodworking lay before her the same way it had every evening before. The absence of Pell—who ordinarily would already be waiting in the room before her, sprawled in what he believed to be a seductive pose on foot of the enormous bed directly in front of the door—was tangible and filled the cavernous space with an eerie emptiness; Cerdwyn could feel the memories that she shared with her now absent husband like ghostly hands pawing at the inside of her mind and at her arms. The cold of the room gripped her core—it in itself now unbearably empty of her daughter—and she wrapped her arms around herself and kneeled down to the floor, doubling over until she leaned over her knees and her forehead touched the ground.

Cerdwyn shot up from the floor with a start, her eyes darting toward the direction of what she knew was the window despite her inability to see it. The haze in her eyes and the small warm pool that her hand sat in on the floor coupled with the saliva streaming from the corner of her mouth indicated, even through her agitated

state, that she had fallen asleep. She was uncertain how long she had been unconscious, but she could see that it was now completely dark. She used the heel of her hand to clear the film from her eyes as she rose from her crouch on the stone floor, finally opening her eyes to inspect the window before her.

There was nothing out of the ordinary to be found.

Certain that she had heard something, she crept toward the large window as she felt the beating of her heart intensify in her ears. As she reached the small table that sat before the large window, she stood on her toes to lean over it and take in the dark view beyond; again, she found nothing but the sprawling dark city below.

Drawing back onto flat feet, away from the window, her still damp hand brushed against something hard, cold. She looked down to see the small statue depicting the goddess—her goddess—Atelia, the goddess of life, her hands held up gracefully, in what appeared to be a dancer's pose, her robes swished around her ankles despite being frozen in bronze. However, something was off: her position was skewed such that she faced the far corner of the room and stood just a bit to the left of the direct center of the window. Cerdwyn far from obsessive in her neatness despite her general preference for tidiness, but she was fanatical in maintaining the positioning of the visage of her goddess. No one else—aside, of course, from the missing king—was permitted in this room.

Someone was in the room with her.

Cerdwyn froze in place as

panic set in, crawling up her spine slowly, ceaselessly, from her limbs. She could feel eyes on her, burning in the darkness of the veritable cavern of her room. Her hands took on a mind of their own, freeing themselves from the restriction of her terror-addled mind, and fumbled, grasping the first—the only—sturdy object within reach. She looked down with wide, swollen eyes to see the precious, bronze statue clutched between both hands. She shook as the weight of the sacrilegious act came over her, but she found herself unable to loosen her grip, her breath ragged as her hands tightened with terrible force around the holy figure against her will.

She could sense him coming up behind her. He was silent over the sound of her own heaving breath, but something inside her told her that he was there.

She spun around just as she felt his breath on her neck. Before a thought could form, she spun around, momentum and muscle driving the bronze effigy of her goddess into the side of his skull. He fell to the ground, cracking his head against the stone floor.

While he was dazed, Cerdwyn smashed his right hand with her heel and kicked the dagger toward the door and blood pooled copiously around her stationary foot. She stood next to the now unarmed man, raising the bloodied statue up, ready to smash it into her attempted assassin's head in a moment.

"Who are you?" she said, attempting to summon all of the regality that she could into her voice though

she could hear it wavering wildly.

The man coughed weakly before responding. "The god of the inferno will purge this kingdom." He spat the blood pooling steadily in his throat at the queen, though as a result of draining strength the majority was caught and fell in strings down the side of his face. "Fuck the whore-queen!"

Cerdwyn lowered the statue and set it back upon the table, weakly attempting to correct her positioning and wipe some of the dripping gore from her glorious face. Recognizing the futility of the effort, she hurried toward the door to alert the guards, who by now were certainly within the immediate vicinity of her chamber.

She took only a few steps before she caught sight of the would-be instrument of her murder laying on the cold stone floor. She felt a fire raging in her core as she bent down to gently pick up the knife. She had just caught sight of one of her sore, inflamed, still damp eyes in the glimmering side of the blade when she gripped the handle tightly in her hand. She quickly stood up and whirled around to face the man whose blood was contaminating the floor next her husband's side of the bed. She did not pause when she reached the failed murderer's side once more, immediately plunging the dagger deep into his chest. She only struggled for a moment to release his ribs' hold on the instrument before lifting it high above her head again to plunge it into him once more.

She was unsure how many times she had repeated this process before she fell over in exhaustion into the vast pool of blood that now warmed

the cold stones of her floor. She laid there for some time, staring at the far-away ceiling of the chamber for some time. Eventually, Cerdwyn mustered the strength to stand, slipping a time or two in the liquid that now coated her once fine gown. She stumbled to the chamber door, dragging it open enough to slip through to locate one of the guards.

A guard had been just down the hall from her chamber, and it was only minutes later—after repeatedly verifying the queen’s physical well-being—that they both entered the room to inspect the corpse.

“Who was he, your grace?” the guard asked bending down alongside the body. He inspected the now hollow, gruesomely hacked chest of the intruder, refusing to meet the queen’s gaze.

“A cultist. He said he worshipped the god of the inferno.”

The guard grimaced. “Fanatics have been bold since the king’s disappearance. I’m glad you were able to—” he hesitated “—fight him off.” ✱