



THE EMPRESS

BOOK 2 OF THE DIABOLIC TRILOGY

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To Sophia, Grace, Madeleine, and Estelle—
I can't wait to see you live your dreams!

OUR MOST CHERISHED SENATOR

Alectar von Pasmus:

May the light of the stars illuminate your every venture. I apologize for the crude medium of a discreet-sheet with my handwriting, but I dare not send you a transmission. You are likely receiving this note from my trusted messenger ten to twelve days from now. I implore you to crumple it to powder immediately after reading, and if need be, put this bearer to death to preserve these contents. He will not object to a death in service of our Living Cosmos.

I hate to impose upon you at this time of grieving for your beloved daughter, Elantra, but I must. I am the Vicar Primus now, but I sense I will not be for much longer. As the foremost Helionic at this imperial center, I am compelled to send you my desperate plea for assistance!

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We of the faith are all alarmed by the last hour's events here at the Chrysanthemum. The Senators von Pasmus have always been ardent champions of the Living Cosmos. Now, it is your hour to show you are no exception! Our divine Cosmos requires your zeal and your strength. I will be displaced from my position soon, so I will not have the power to act myself.

I know you to be a great man, Senator. The day you denounced the late Senator von Impyrean for his heretical and unseemly interest in the sciences, I felt most astir with joy. You were instrumental in striking down blasphemers set on breaching the sacred mysteries of our divine Cosmos. An entire faction of the Senate sought to destroy the foundation of our empire in the name of the "sciences," and they might have succeeded, but for your words in the Emperor Randevald's ear, your steadiness driving his striking hand.

So I must ask you to be brave once more.

Like a two-headed viper, our enemies have reared a new pair of fangs to poison this galaxy once again. And I tremble to tell you who this new head is, though you must have guessed.

It is our young Emperor Tyrus von Domitrian.

You are aware that I have served as the Vicar Primus at the Chrysanthemum for over a century. I have been the voice of the Living Cosmos for those Grandiloquy who exercise power in this galactic court. I've ensured this center of our Empire remained untainted by those outdated faiths that should have been abandoned on old Earth. I am instrumental in maintaining the spiritual welfare of this court, and I am as much a fixture here as any of the

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Grandiloquy, so I speak with authority. Two Domitrian sovereigns have sought my counsel!

Young Tyrus, though, looks elsewhere. And I am not writing as an old man, peevish at being overlooked. I could accept being thrust aside if I knew the proper reasons lay behind it, but at the time of this writing, I know an unholy plot is afoot. I do not know what narrative will be propagated about the recent events, but I will tell you my truthful, firsthand account of the Emperor's coronation.

The Emperor Tyrus smuggled Luminars—a particularly fractious, heathen sort of Excess (you know better than anyone!)—onto the Chrysanthemum. With their help, he ambushed his own grandmother, our beloved and faithful Grandeé Cygna. He united planet dwellers against his fellow Grandiloquy, but it was the least of his misdeeds.

You surely have seen his Convocation transmission. He speaks of a new era, of restoring the sciences so he might solve malignant space. This is ludicrous! But I know the dreadful influence putting such ideas in this young Emperor's mind.

The creature he means to take as his wife.

It pains me to speak of this to you, to a father so new in his grief, but I must: Tyrus von Domitrian means to wed the Diabolic, Nemesis dan Impyrean, who murdered your daughter, Elantra.

You must think these vile words to be false. I wish they were!

Nemesis was intended to be the fire sacrifice at the new Emperor's coronation. His grandmother, Cygna, demanded it, and Tyrus agreed to it. Instead the Emperor liberated

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the creature Nemesis and condemned the Grandée Cygna in her place. Then—and I shudder to recount this—the Emperor killed his grandmother and expressed his intent to make this Diabolic his Empress.

An Empress!

You have not misread this. I can hardly fathom it.

A Diabolic, a subhuman, an abomination—to be our Empress!

The rumors always spoke of young Tyrus as a madman. Then, other rumors: he was feigning madness all along to escape the malice of his own family. Well, I fear he must be mad after all. He must be! We all know what Diabolics are!

These are not people. Nemesis dan Impyrean is not a person. She is a genetically engineered monster. She was only fashioned to appear human, yet she is not. Diabolics are stronger and faster and crueler than we are, merely for the protection of a master. We know this. Nemesis should have been killed the moment it became known she wasn't Sidonia von Impyrean, her mistress, but rather an imposter posing as her.

And all the violence that followed . . . The death of your beloved Elantra, the murder of our Emperor, now this . . .

This cannot be tolerated. This cannot stand.

I was aghast. I refused to anoint the Emperor if he clung to this creature. If I lose my position—which seems likely—it is because I made a stand for you. The Emperor spoke to me with such insolence upon my refusal: he informed me that this was a new age and I was not necessary. I've advised the Domitrians the entirety of my life, and this

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bastard of some Excess speaks so to me! Then he embraced Nemesis and kissed her before all our appalled eyes.

I do not know how to stop this. I do not know how to act. So I beg for your help. The Emperor Tyrus von Domitrian means to wed Nemesis dan Impyrean. A “dan.” A subhuman. He is mad to entertain the idea.

I know his cousin Devineé has been afflicted with grievous damage to her mind, but she is also the single living Domitrian who can take Tyrus’s place. To you, Senator von Pasmus, the foremost territory holder of this Empire, I plead for this: stand against this new Emperor. He must be made to see reason, or he must be replaced with an Emperor who does not spit in the face of the Living Cosmos. If he will not change course, and naturally, restore me to my position as Vicar Primus, then he must be replaced with a Domitrian who will.

And before you think I propose something daunting, I will tell you: Tyrus does not have my blessing. He does not have the blessing of the rest of the body of the faith. You, Senator, know the implications of this! Tyrus is a clever boy, but he was appointed Successor Primus by the last Emperor merely due to familial tensions; Randevald took no care to cultivate him, to teach him what a successor must know.

Tyrus von Domitrian is totally unaware of the weakness of his position.

Now is the time to strike.

—Fustian nan Domitrian, Vicar Primus

1

SOMEONE had poisoned me. I knew it with a single sip.

That someone was about to die.

I glanced around the crowded presence chamber, hoping to spot the doomed idiot who thought to poison a Diabolic. This was hardly the first attempt on my life in the harried days since Tyrus's coronation. There'd been the young Grande Austerlitz, who tried to stab me in a surprise attack. I'd been bemused enough to tolerate his clumsy slashes for a few moments.

It seemed wise to be diplomatic, so I gave him a chance. "Stop this at once," I told him, dodging his next slash, his next.

He just bared his teeth and dove at me. I sidestepped him and hooked his ankle in mine to flip his legs out from under him. He screamed out as he tried to launch himself back to his feet—so I delivered a kick to his head that broke his skull open.

Days passed before the next attempt. This one had been a fanatical

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junior vicar. She gave away her intentions with the shout of, “Abomination!” just before she tried to pull me into the air lock with her.

I tore from her grip and batted her away, knocking her into the air-lock shaft. The blast doors sealed closed behind her—clearly some automated timer she’d set up in advance—and I met her eyes in the split second before the door to space popped open behind her and vented her into the darkness.

When criminals were vented to space for execution, the onlookers were supposed to turn their backs and look away. It was a gesture of deliberate disrespect. The condemned were so unworthy, even their deaths wouldn’t be watched.

For this bold woman who’d attacked me, I felt a strange desire to watch her float away. She’d seen the fate of Austerlitz and still mounted a direct attack. This was the least I could do for one of such daring. There were a great many Grandiloquy who loathed me, a great many Helionics who scorned me with every righteous fiber of their being, but few were bold enough to act upon their malice.

Helionics viewed creatures like me as subhumans. The “dan” in our names meant we were beneath them in status, yet now their new Emperor meant to wed me. They would have to kneel to a creature. A Diabolic.

The assassination attempts weren’t a surprise to me; the infrequency of the attempts was. A mere three attempts on my life in ten days? It was actually somewhat disappointing.

I welcomed the familiarity of feeling in danger. It tightened my focus, made my heart pick up a beat. My gaze swept the crowd as I drew the goblet to my lips, because surely my would-be assassin was fool enough to watch me drink this poison.

Yet I realized in moments that too many eyes were fixed on me to guess which pair might belong to my poisoner. I should have realized

it at once. After all, everywhere I went now, I was watched, I was scrutinized, I invited discussion and opinion.

“Do they ever tire of staring?” I’d wondered the first night after the coronation, when I’d noticed the unnatural degree of scrutiny.

“This is just life as a Domitrian,” Tyrus told me.

So my assassin . . . There were too many candidates. The crowd for the Day of Pardon was simply too thick, and there was no guessing who’d meant to end my life. Too many of these people watching me probably wished to do it.

Then a familiar pair of pale eyes met mine, and Tyrus inclined his head toward the exit, telling me silently that we needed to part ways with this company of Grandiloquy. It was time for the ceremony, which we would spend with the Excess.

I dipped my head in acknowledgment. The Day of Pardon would be held in the Great Heliosphere. It was an important imperial holiday, one of the few aimed at pleasing the Excess, who lived on planets, rather than the ruling Grandiloquy space dwellers.

On this day, Tyrus would enjoy the Emperor’s privilege of commuting the prison sentences of several Excess who’d converted to the Helionic faith. I aimed for the exit, knowing Tyrus would meet me there. Then my steps stilled as I passed a cluster of revelers gathered before Tyrus’s cousin and her husband.

I always took note of those who flocked to the Successor Primus, Devineé. She was Tyrus’s last immediate relative and consequently heir to his throne. In my eyes, she was the greatest threat he faced. I’d damaged her mind beyond healing, so she couldn’t plot on her own behalf, but others could use her as a puppet. Had it been up to me, she’d be dead already. It was Tyrus’s decision, though. She was the last of his family, and I’d disabled her. He’d view her murder as monstrous.

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And then . . .

Then the realization crawled into my mind: there was a weapon of murder in my hand that could not be blamed on me or traced back to me.

I made up my mind. I walked over to my intended's sole living relative. As my shadow slid over her, her foggy gaze rose to mine.

"Hello, Your Eminence. Are you enjoying the festivities?" I said pleasantly, looming above her.

Devineé blinked up at me dully, unable to comprehend me. I set down my goblet seemingly offhandedly, just beside hers. I made a show of unwinding my elaborate twist of currently chestnut brown hair, then arranging it anew (unnecessary with the hair stilts that arranged my locks in any style, but many women fussed over hair anyway).

"Fine conversation," I said to Devineé. "We must speak again."

Then I plucked up her goblet, leaving mine behind. And so quickly, so easily, it was done. I headed out to meet Tyrus for the ceremony, hoping that by the time it concluded, we'd hear news of it: confirmation of the death of his deadliest foe.

"You look beautiful," Tyrus murmured to me as we neared the heliosphere.

"I know," I said.

We were both wearing reflective garments of silver, interwoven with veins of liquid crystal. Though I'd gone with auburn hair and a darker skin tone, Tyrus looked the same as always, pale and lightly freckled, with clever pale eyes and light, sharply angled eyebrows crowned with tousled red hair.

Just outside the Great Heliosphere, I hesitated. It wasn't like me to be nervous, and I wasn't, per se. . . . But I just knew I was about to

commit an obscenity, marching into the Great Heliosphere and taking an honored place during the ceremony.

Tyrus guessed the turn of my thoughts. He leaned in closer to me, dropping his voice. “There will be no issue with zealots today. We’re not broadcasting this live, so we can edit any incidents out of the transmission. We’ve also borrowed a vicar. This is a holiday for the Excess, so they comprise the audience. They will be more favorably disposed toward us.”

He meant toward *me*.

Of course he did. Tyrus had been careful with every move of his reign so far, since he was the sort to think ten steps ahead before making a single one. I’d been eased slowly into public life over the last weeks.

First the galaxy was transmitted glimpses of me from the dramatic scene at the coronation, when Tyrus declared his love for me and embraced me before all, consigning his grandmother to death in my place. My prisoner’s garb had been modified in the transmission to a lovely, tasteful set of rags, and my unpigmented hair to a mane of effervescent gold. I looked a lost princess from a tale, not a Diabolic.

The transmission was effective in one respect: Cygna had received all the blame—rightfully—for the late Emperor Randevald’s death.

The galaxy received just that glimpse of me, enough to set the Excess on their planets across the empire wondering who I could be, wondering what story lay behind my appearance in public life. Tyrus believed the best way to strip a secret of its power was to glare a shining light on it from the angle of choice, to exhibit it fearlessly rather than seek to hide it. He followed up on that first glimpse by introducing me as his future Empress—and a Diabolic—at his first Convocation.

Thousands gathered in person on the *Valor Novus*, the central

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starship of the Chrysanthemum, and avatars from light-years away appeared to fill the rest of the seats in the Grand Sanctum. It was the greatest chamber on the vessel and only used on such occasions as the first time a new Emperor addressed the powerful of his realm.

Tyrus planted the question about me with one of his allies, and then gave his prepared answer: “My fiancée will be a symbol of the new era we begin here today. Her name is Nemesis dan Impyrean. Some will be scandalized that I have no intention of wedding a member of this Empire’s elite. I say, let them be scandalized, for I love Nemesis above any other. She is the most honest, courageous, and worthy candidate I can imagine as the Empress of this galaxy, and I know you will come to admire her as I have.”

He’d had the sound dampened in certain parts of the chamber in advance, anticipating the stir of voices. Many of the traditional objectors, though, dared do nothing but cheer. Tyrus had taken Helionic prisoners at his coronation. He intended to release them now that the danger of his grandmother was past—provided their relatives in the Senate showed themselves cooperative in this transmission. Thus, those few objections were squelched, whereas sound was amplified from those allies Tyrus could count on to cheer and applaud.

Every major figure in the galactic media of Eurydice received a personal message from Tyrus. He’d greeted each of them, and his words included the “coded language” indicating they were to support me cheerfully in public.

Before more questions could be asked, he forged onward to his lofty hopes about restoring the sciences to tackle the menace of malignant space. This time he selectively muted the Grandiloquy so the cheering of the Excess could be heard. Airing both of his most scandalous intentions at once divided the outrage, as he’d hoped.

Then, on a final note, when cheering swelled at the conclusion of

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his first Convocation speech, Tyrus reached out, took me by the hand, and drew me to his side to exhibit me at the very finest. Far from my natural, colorless albinism, I appeared hued with brilliant black hair and bronzed skin, stenciled with effervescent glow over the cheekbones, in a gleaming dress of cascading gold sheets.

A beautiful woman, not a Diabolic. That's how I appeared.

Yet illusion could only get us so far. I knew that in my heart.

Now, here we were at this first real test of whether my public image was being received as Tyrus hoped. With Excess in the audience, they'd hopefully be too amazed to find themselves at this great event to bother dwelling on who—or rather, what—I was.

Tyrus and I stepped into the Great Heliosphere. I was painfully conscious of every single flicker of my lashes, every twitch of my muscles. Now that everyone knew how human I was not, it had become more essential to seem human than ever before.

The crowd within the Great Heliosphere lapsed into silence as we drew into the sacred chamber of diamond and crystal, and then they were dropping to their knees, hands to their hearts in salute to the Emperor.

"Rise," Tyrus said. He never kept them lingering on their knees as Randevald had been wont to do.

We moved through the parted sea of bodies, and Tyrus glimpsed Astra nu Amador, a nervous young vicar who worked for Senator von Amador.

Tyrus inclined his head in silent thanks to Astra. She returned it with a smile. She was ambitious enough to see that she might become Vicar Primus if she impressed us, replacing Fustian nan Domitrian. Tyrus and Fustian had been at odds since the coronation, when Fustian refused to bless me. Fustian would not have performed this ceremony with me present.

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Now, as I raised my eyes to take in our surroundings, the sheer force of the light blasting in through the windows truly registered, though it cast only a faint warmth over my skin. The heliosphere was designed to refract starlight in myriad ways for services. No mirrors were needed to amplify the starlight this close to the red hypergiant star, Hephaestus, for the Ritual of Pardon.

So large, so bright was Hephaestus that the distant, smaller stars of the Cosmos were drowned out against the black. The crowd would have appeared but silhouettes against the great blaze of its light, but for the glowing pigment under their skin that set their features in stark relief. I didn't recognize any of the faces.

We stood alone in the innermost circle as the Vicar Astra set about placing sacred chalices throughout the chamber.

The Excess prisoners shuffled inside in a silent line. They'd all converted to the Helionic faith in prison, and they were the fortunate dozen due to be pardoned this year as reward for their penitence.

Tyrus's role in this ceremony was brief. He stepped forward, and the men and women knelt before him, displaying their pitifully bared heads, where they'd shaved away their hair to exhibit their faith. He spoke the short litany of pardon, and then the vicar took it from there.

Astra moved between the converts to aid them in shedding their clothing. Then she led each of the converts by the hands to the window to position them in the glare of the sacred hypergiant. The naked men and women pressed up against the window, spreading their arms, their fingers, soaking light into every square centimeter of their skin.

Tyrus took my arm, nudged me gently, and we stepped back, and back, as the vicar slowly adjusted the optics so more light from the hypergiant could seep into the chamber.

Then the hypergiant's light grew so bright, it seemed to lance into my pupils. The white skein of starlight scorched my eyes, and my hand

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flew up instinctively to protect my face. Through the veil over my vision, I heard the rustle of other people raising their hands to do the same. Then heat followed, a great, terrible wave of it that pummeled the air about us, stinging my skin, and I knew it was too much heat.

Something was wrong.

The pardoned men and women scrambled back from the windows, dark silhouettes contorting as their terrible screams knifed the air. The vicar's garb flared ablaze and the oil chalices spouted columns of heat.

I comprehended several things all at once: flames, hundreds of bodies all about me, and one exit.

This was a death trap.



S.J. Kincaid originally wanted to be an astronaut, but a dearth of mathematical skills made her turn her interest to science fiction instead. Her debut novel, *Insignia*, was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize. She's chronically restless and has lived in California, Alabama, New Hampshire, Oregon, Chicago and Scotland with no signs of staying in one place anytime soon.

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