

A
MACHINE
DIVINE

D E R E K P A U L

A Machine Divine

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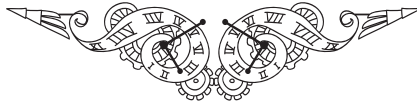


For my mother,
*who read to me nightly and
encouraged me to be my best in all endeavors.*

For my father,
*who provided me a blessed life and
nurtured my passion for the sciences.*

And for my sister,
*my greatest inspiration
and influence, both in my creativity and in my being.*

And to you, dear reader,
thank you for sharing in this journey!



KHAMARA





CHAPTER 1



A brief swish of light, a fluttering of emerald, her prize had revealed itself, and now the hunt was on. Callie watched as it swan-dived into a pile of cut daisy petals and fallen leaves. She crawled through the brush, counting her heartbeats. *One.* Her hands clasped tight around a makeshift trigger of rope and birch. *Two.* Her breath held the sharp air of dawn. *Three.* Trigger pulled, and the trap sprang upward. She jumped through a mist of dew and dust and let out a high-pitched whistle and then a call. “Cloud!” A stunning white fox came barreling through the thickets toward her knees. “I got one.”

They made their way toward the trap that was now swinging in midair from an oak tree. Sunbeams leaked through the forest canopy, spotlighting the leather cloth, which began to shriek and rustle violently. “Seems to be a lot more than a sprite in there. What else have we caught...” Callie lowered the bag and peered inside. A burst of green illuminated her face. *Definitely a garden sprite, but something else too.* She reached in and grabbed a small furry creature by the scruff. A squirrel nipped and clawed at her hands.

“Hey! Hey now, come on.” She placed the squirrel carefully into her hunting bag. “There you go, a little bit more room for ya.” The fox sniffed at the bag in curiosity as Callie knelt to tie up her other traps. Five in total, a good day. The sprites buzzed and whistled as she roped them together. She stared intently at the bags as the noise continued to rise with excitement.

“Do you hear that?” Callie asked, looking at Cloud. He pointed his nose over at the sprite traps. “No,” she said, “in the distance.” The ground began to shake, forest trees swayed with the rumbling earth beneath them. “Stay here,” she warned, dropping her gear at the base of a nearby oak. Looking up, she plotted her path skyward before jumping for the nearest branch. Her hands grasped the first one, then another higher up, her limbs acting in one fluid motion as she climbed the large oak. She perched on top and peered in the direction of the thudding noise. Forest trees bent and swayed; something massive was coming down the mountain.

Above the canopy emerged the head of a rock golem. Callie could make out the vines and foliage that wrapped around its body as it continued to bob in and out of the dense woods. “It’s Drvo,” She whispered to herself with a smile. She watched as the gentle giant pushed its way through the green. A sea of sloping canopy moved in rippled waves at the golem’s touch. As it grew closer, she waved her arms. “Hey, Drvo! DRVOOO!” Her attempts went unnoticed as the golem slumped down the hill, focusing intently on every step so as not to disturb the forest vegetation. Its bulky body was made entirely of rock; it was a creature born and carved from the hillsides. Callie knew today was a special day for the friendly golem.

Callie took one last look around to absorb the forest she'd grown up in. Behind her was the small and humble town of Vana, which she would soon leave for a bigger and more bustling city. She'd be exchanging oaks for towers and fields of daisies for a maze of steel and travertine. Perhaps she too, a creature with a spirit shy and crafted from hillside, would come out of hiding. Perhaps she too, would know what it was to be welcomed. She let out a deep breath and shimmied down the oak to where Cloud was waiting faithfully below. The quaking thuds of Drvo's steps grew distant. She picked up her satchel and rifle, gave Cloud a scratch behind his ear, and made her way back toward town as the five sprite traps swinging from her back sang in a high screeching chorus of captured light.



Callie plopped the bags on an old wooden counter. A bullish man with copper-rimmed glasses glared down at the sacks before meeting her gaze. "And how many do we have today?"

"Four garden sprites and two moon sprites." She pointed to one of the bags. "This one contains the two moon sprites."

The bullish man shifted his glasses and peered into the bag. A soft purple light reflected off his lenses. "Nicely done, Callie! Very good. Twelve for the lot!"

She cocked her head. "Aren't moons worth three?"

"Ah, right. Ok, fifteen for the lot then."

Callie nodded in agreement. The shopkeeper smiled and took the sprites to the back room. She turned toward Cloud, who had left her side to investigate a wall of brass

trinkets in the corner of the store. The shopkeeper came back out, handing her coins and the now-empty traps. “Callie, you have a real talent. Vana is going to have a hard time surviving without you.”

“I appreciate the dramatics, but I think things will be just fine.”

The man cracked a smile as Callie and Cloud turned to walk back into the streets.

The sidewalks were filled with a joyful chaos. The annual Midbloom Festival was Vana’s greatest holiday. Strands of valencia flowers arched over cobblestone streets. Extravagant vendors, in an effort to outshine one another, placed their ripest crops on dancing mechanical platters. Brass gears flipped plates of slow-cooked meats. Outward, to catch your nose. Inward, to draw you close. Robotic arms shot out toward Callie’s face, offering her bouquets of valencias and lilies as she and Cloud weaved between strangers.

She passed under a series of large floral arches, each one containing the colors of a different city. Vana, green and yellow for its lush forests. Elurra, blue and white for its arctic tundra. Dyria, with violet and black to represent the seas they tamed. The last and most excessive arch contained the image of a lion, the symbol of Riali, with red and gold in honor of the capital and its abundant harvests. Nearly every flower was a valencia. A native bloom renowned for its adaptability in appearance and grown skillfully by Vana botanists.

The deep thumping of drums beats alongside the fluttering of flutes and brass. Callie continued to lace through the crowd, spinning out of the way of oncoming traffic, her dirty white tunic swishing with the sudden

movements as she made her way to her uncle's pet shop—a small brick add-on at the end of the city square.

She arrived to find her uncle gesticulating wildly in an attempt to sell an indri lemur to an elderly customer. The festival must have drawn some extra foot traffic as the feed and hunting shelves were in disarray. Callie walked over to one of the displays, the shop smelling of pine and damp animal fur. She took a second to watch a young shrew attempt to burrow its way through the glass containment before she grabbed a nearby cage and headed outside.

The squirrel nipped at her fingers as she plunged her hand into her satchel and placed him into the cage. "I know you're not happy here, little fella. You want to be back in the trees. But you got a cozy new home and a few acorns to munch on." It glared at Callie from its cage. "I know, I know. But you fell into the trap, and that's how it works. Out there, I'm your enemy, just the same as all the others. I can't make you like me, but I hope you can at least understand."

Cloud sniffed the squirrel one last time before heading over to his favorite patch of sun that peeked onto the corner of the porch. Callie set the cage beside the door and took a seat on the front step. On the other side of her was a caged land squid, its tentacles poking through the wood bars and reaching down the front patio steps. Tethered to the cage were a group of wild ahriman—batlike creatures with one large eye at the center of their foreheads—each fluttering about, curiously watching the bustling street. A miniature hippogriff nuzzled at Callie's ankles, tangling its leash against a brass buckle on one of her boots.

Callie lifted her arms back into her hair and pulled out two wooden sticks. A flood of dark auburn tumbled

down her neck and shoulders, punctuated by blueish-gray feathers swooping outward like the spikes of an aerodynamic porcupine. She positioned the sticks into her leather boots, untangled the hippogriff leash, and let out a sigh as she placed her chin into an open palm. Her fingers tapped against her lips, expressionless, as she and the beasts watched from their perch. The crowded streets continued to swarm. *Vana's wildest day of the year*, thought Callie, *and the real animals have yet to arrive.*



Asher Auden had half a trunk of biology supplies to acquire before dusk settled and the festivities began. His parents were not helping speed up the process. His dad, Murphy, stopped to haggle with every store owner in Vana, and his mom, Cara, was gushing to every remote acquaintance about her son's acceptance into Langford. Asher just wanted to get it over with. He had evening plans to attend to.

"Asher! Asher!" his dad snapped for his attention. "Don't you need a seeding kit for botany class? We're right by Saint's Animals."

Asher groaned. "Yeah, Dad. But can we make it quick?"

They pushed through the crowded street and headed toward the corner store.

Asher could see Callie staring off into the crowd. A leather armband around her bicep contained small, hanging feathers that matched the ones in her disheveled hair. Her plain white tunic was stained with grass and dirt; she must have just come back from hunting. Asher's mom went barreling toward her at first sight. "Callendra! Sweetie!"

Callie's head turned briefly in shock, her eyes like a frightened rabbit's. Cara Auden knelt down and bear-hugged Callie, pinning her arms against her body and trapping her in a cage of visible discomfort. She kept up the relentless affection. "How are you, dear? Are you all ready for school?"

"Hi, Mrs. Auden." Callie attempted a half smile. "Yeah, I'm ready."

"Ooh, you and Asher, I'm so proud of you two!" Cara cooed.

Murphy added, "The only two in all of Vana to get into Langford this year! It's quite the accomplishment."

Callie shrugged and gave Asher a nod in acknowledgment.

Asher chimed in, "Not that big of a deal, Dad. Professor Fenske is the one who got us in."

His dad was taken aback. "Not a big deal? Of course it's a big deal! You're headed to Riali; you're going to be a famous scientist when you get out. And Callie. Well...actually, I'm not sure what you're studying."

Callie let out a muffled laugh. "Animal behavior. It's a dumb degree."

Cara shook her head. "You two are so negative. You both have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. People from all over the world would give anything to be in your position."

A booming voice emerged from the doorway. "Well, who do we have here?" Callie's uncle came walking out of the shop. "If it isn't the Auden gang. How are you doing, Murphy?"

Asher's dad gave a big smile. "Hey, how are ya, Augustus?"

"I'm good, I'm good. Happy Midbloom! Do you have a float this year?"

Asher's dad blushed. "No, not one of our own. But I did a little bit of woodwork and design on the Baenum float this year. They're quite the engineers."

"Oh, I'm sure we're in for a treat. Come in, come in!" Gus waved them into the store. "What can I do for you all today?"

The adults walked inside, Callie's uncle looking to make a sale and Asher's dad a deal. Asher lowered his hand to let Cloud take a sniff before rubbing his cheek. Awkward silence blossomed.

"So, I saw you have some shrews in. They're pretty great for gardens." Asher ruffled his hair nervously.

"I know. Don't you think about doing one of your experiments on one of them." Callie shot a glance toward Asher, who was unsure if she was joking.

"No. I. Uh. I wouldn't." Asher looked around, already looking for an escape route; a group of loud, well-dressed Riali boys provided a brief distraction from the conversation.

Callie got up from the stoop. "I bet they'll have pretty nice labs for you in Langford. Should really help you out a lot with the science stuff."

Asher sighed. "Yeah, it'll be great to have more resources. Fenske's lab is wonderful and all, but Vana just really isn't the place for a geneticist."

Callie raised her eyebrows. "Why is that?"

"Well, to be honest, it's mainly the people. They don't seem to care much about biology or education or whatnot. They're just different from me. I'm really hoping to make some new friends while I'm out there."

Callie nodded. "Makes sense, I guess."

The Riali boys in the street began to holler at a group of Vanatian girls. *The Midbloom crowd is starting to pick up*, thought Asher. He looked back down to find the mini hippogriff sniffing at his neatly buckled shoes. “Is Cloud coming with you?”

Cloud’s ears perked at the sound of his name.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t he?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just curious what the animal policy was like, ya know?” Asher shook his foot as the mini-griff bit into his sock.

“He’ll be staying in the sanctuary during class hours, but I’m allowed to let him out under guidance. I think he’ll enjoy it there. Plenty of other animals and a good amount of land at the sanctuary.”

“Right,” said Asher. “Well, uh, I think we both have metaphysics class together. Professor Fenske mentioned it to me.”

“It’s a core class.”

“Yeah, I think it is...” Asher bit his bottom lip and lowered his head so that just enough of his messy black hair could cover his eyes. He stepped aside as a burly customer walked up the steps between them. Callie nodded to the customer as he walked past before turning her attention back to the bustling streets. A group of scruffy-looking Vanatian boys that Callie recognized from school had started yelling at the Rialians. “It’s getting rowdy out there. Do you have plans for the festival tonight?” she asked.

“Liam and I were going to watch the ceremony and walk around a bit. Nothing too crazy. You?”

“Not really. I saw Drvo walking into town earlier, might try and catch him if he’s around.”

A loud crack came from the doorway as Mr. Saint swung the screen door open for Asher's parents. "Pleasure doing business with you, Audens."

"Likewise, Gus."

Callie's uncle turned toward Asher. "Asher, good luck in school this year. I'd ask you to watch out for Callie, but I don't think she'll have much of a problem."

Callie shook her head in embarrassment.

"Callendra, there's been a man standing by the door looking at that squirrel for the last five minutes. Go help him out—and try to *actually* sell the squirrel this time."

Callie rolled her eyes and half-heartedly waved goodbye to Asher before making her way to the customer and her newly caged friend.

Asher raised his arm to wave goodbye. "Thank you, Mr. Saint. Bye, Callie."

He turned toward the street but was pulled back by his mother just in time. A Vana boy had sucker-punched a Ralian, knocking him straight back onto the front steps of the porch. A full skirmish ensued. The Auden family skirted to the edges of the sidewalk, just outside the storm of dirt and dust. The well-dressed Riali boys had no hesitation when starting their brawl with the Vana locals.

Perhaps they're drunk, thought Asher. These outsiders always seemed to treat Vana as their stomping ground during Midbloom, acting as if their money means more than Vana's dignity.

He tried his best to discern meaning behind every fist. But a dirty farmer's tunic or iron-pressed vest aside, who would want to walk around caked with blood on such a bright and joyful day? Groups of adults flocked to pull the fight apart, each boy with blackened eyes and fat lips. The Vana boys

were being scolded by their elders as the Riali boys sneered, both groups continuing to shout and curse.

“Come on, time to get home,” said Asher’s father. They had begun to head back when Asher noticed a sudden cessation of the yelling. He turned around one last time. The fighting boys and the bustling Midbloom crowd all around them stood frozen, eyes glued to the sky, as a dark shadow crept across the dense streets. From the clouds emerged a massive airship, making its descent into the center of Vana’s town square.