

Network
Chapters 1 & 2

DIVINE MEASURE, BOOK 2

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A Note on Language

As the author and the majority of the characters in almost all of her books are Canadian, this work is written in Canadian English, with Canadian spelling.

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Chapter 1

As Nora pulls into the underground parking garage, she admires the glass walls of Roy Thomson Hall. She glances at Steven in the passenger seat. He looks straight ahead, an expression of boredom on his face. She supposes Toronto's little concert hall pales compared to some of the venues he's played in the UK and Europe.

Although there's no concert first thing on a Tuesday morning, the lot is open to the public, so it takes a while to find a spot. After they pull in, Steven steps out of the car and retrieves his cello from the back seat.

Nora gets out of the car.

"If you need to get back, it's okay," signs Steven.

"I have plenty of time. I'd like to check out your new office."

Steven smiles. He touches her face and kisses her.

She takes his hand. They take the elevator up to the ground floor and the performer's entrance.

Nora signs with one hand. "You nervous?"

Steven lets go of her hand to respond. "A little."

“Really?”

“It’s always a little intimidating starting a new job. I’m sure there were people internally who were hoping for a promotion.”

“If there are, it won’t take them long to find out you were the better choice,” says Nora.

Steven swipes his key card, opens the door, and leads her into the green room. A tall Asian woman greets us.

“This is Ji-An, principal cello,” says Steven. “I’ve told you about her.”

Nora nods.

He turns to Ji-An, speaks, and then signs what he said. “I’d like you to meet my girlfriend, Nora Lansing.”

Ji-An’s eyes widen, and she says something.

“Yes, she’s deaf,” says Steven.

Ji-An’s lips move.

Steven’s brow wrinkles. “Deaf people enjoy music, you know.”

Ha. Nora makes a show of rolling her eyes.

“What?” asks Steven.

“Not that long ago, you assumed I couldn’t dance because I couldn’t hear,” she says.

Steven glances furtively at Ji-An. “I know better now.”

When Ji-An speaks, Steven interprets. Slowly—he’s still learning—but well enough. “We’re practising on stage today. You want to come see it?”

Nora nods and follows her. On the way down the hall, something nudges at her mind, as if someone is trying to get in. She looks at Steven. He turns his head and smiles.

“You feel something?” She asks.

“Like what?”

“Like enhanced carriers trying to connect.”

“No,” he says. “There are only the two of us.”

Nora exhales. Two of us, as in two enhanced carriers of the MV, or Martha’s Vineyard, gene. It’s a recessive gene, and those who inherit it from both parents are always deaf; those who inherit only one copy are hearing. Every so often—no one knows how often—the gene is enhanced, producing an unusual aptitude for math or, in Steven’s case, music. It can also create a mental connection with other enhanced carriers, but this requires at least five to be in proximity. Rajendra is also in Toronto, so he could be close enough. But even including him, that’s still only three.

“Toronto’s a big city,” says Nora. “There could be others we don’t know about.”

Steven raises an eyebrow. Fair enough. He just moved from London, England, which far outranks Toronto in population.

“Okay, a midsize city,” she says.

Ji-An opens a door, and they enter another corridor. It leads to the stage, a pit at the centre of a modern amphitheatre.

Nora walks around the musicians setting up their instruments until she’s at centre front. Looking up into the seats, she imagines it during a performance, with the lights low and hundreds of faces staring down. Not her thing. She feels queasy just thinking about it. But it is Steven’s thing. He’s been on stage almost his entire life, and he loves it.

A light flashes in Nora’s peripheral vision. She turns her head, and the theatre is replaced by a sunny place. There are people there, indistinct and blurry, but there. It looks familiar. She’s seen it before. Someone holds out a hand.

Steven waves a hand in front of her face.

“Bring back painful memories?” He smirks.

She stares at him, momentarily confused as to why he’s here. Then she realizes she’s back in the theatre. She was always in the theatre.

“I’m sorry. It was a joke,” he says.

“I know.” He’s referring to her stage debut, which also turned out to be her finale. It involved sheer terror, a fortifying drink, or three or four, and a large quantity of vomit down the front of a fellow actress. It happened years ago, at university. When she told Steven about it, the incident finally entered the “I can laugh about it now stage.”

Nora’s head spins, and she staggers.

Steven catches me. “Are you okay?”

She nods. “Just tired.”

“You can rest in the green room.”

“No, I need to get back to Milton before my prep period is over.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?”

“Fine.”

“I’ll walk you to the door.” Steven puts a hand on her back as they leave.

Chapter 2

Nora stands aside and gestures to the polynomial equation she just wrote on the whiteboard. “Who can tell me the first step in solving it?”

A few students, mostly in the centre of the U-shaped desk configuration, raise their hands. Three boys to one side carry on a discussion. One of them laughs. Nora crosses to the door and flicks the lights off and on twice.

A presence tugs at her mind. She sees a flash of a sunny landscape—the same place she saw at the theatre two days ago. She pushes it aside.

The boys who were talking stare at her. She takes a breath and directs their gaze to the front of the room. One girl on the opposite side of the U keeps her nose in a book. Nora asks the boy next to her to get her attention.

When she looks up, Nora points to the whiteboard. “What’s the first step?”

She looks at it for all of three seconds. “Forty-six.” She goes back to reading.

Nora waves a hand at her. “I didn’t ask for the answer. I asked for the next step.” She’s bored, and Nora can’t blame her. Nora used to be her. Except that when class moved too slowly for her, Nora sneaked in advanced mathematical theorems instead of novels.

A student points out the window, and everyone else turns to look. Nora is about to flick the lights again, but then looks outside, too. Flashing orbs dance around the parking lot, specifically around her car. She feels herself being pulled away again and wonders if those lights have anything to do with it. Whatever it is, she doesn’t have time for it now.

She crosses the room and closes the curtains. “Eyes on me.”

When the blue light flashes to signal the end of class and the start of lunch period, everyone rushes out of the class. Nora closes the door behind them, sits down at her desk, and closes her eyes. Someone is trying to get her attention. Best to find out who it is and what they want.

Almost immediately, she’s back there. She doesn’t know where “there” is, but she’s been there before. She used to dream of it regularly when she was a child. It has bright sunlight and long grass stretching in every direction. On the horizon, a large body of water, still as glass. Is it a real place? Did she used to connect with other carriers in her sleep?

She walks toward the water. It occurs to her she shouldn’t be able to decide where to go. The connection between enhanced carriers isn’t like the telepathy you read about in books. It’s more of an occupation. They temporarily reside in someone else’s body and see through their eyes. She stretches out her hands and looks at them. Definitely her hands. The slim gold band with the I-love-you handshape sits on

her left ring finger. Steven wears one, too. If he's going to mark his territory, so is she.

"Welcome."

The word forms inside Nora's head. Up until now, using the connection to look through each other's eyes, they would use their hands to speak, and the person watching would see it. Of course, the communication was strictly one-way.

"We're glad you could finally join us."

She looks around, but doesn't see anyone. Then a misty shape appears and starts to solidify.

The sunlight flickers off and on. She's back in her classroom. A hand sticks through the small crack of the open door, and the fingers work the light switch.

Nora gets up and opens the door to find her friend, Sandy.

"If you want to go out for lunch, we need to hurry," says Sandy.

"I'm tired," says Nora, "and not really hungry."

"You have to eat."

"I'm not sure I can. My stomach's all tied up in knots," she says. "Dinner with my parents tonight. They're meeting Steven for the first time."

"Really?" asks Sandy. "They've never met him?"

"Only by video conference before he moved here, and that's not the same."

"No, it's not," says Sandy. "I'm starving, so I'm going to go get some lunch. You sure you don't want to come?"

"I'm sure, but thanks."

After Sandy leaves, Nora sits back at her desk and tries to relax. She breathes deeply and closes her eyes. A glimpse of sunlight, then it vanishes. She adjusts her position. After a few minutes, she opens her eyes again. Whatever was there is gone.

She pulls out her phone and finds Rajendra's number. Then she presses the video camera icon and props the phone against a stack of books.

When his face appears on screen, he's uncharacteristically presentable. He's cut his hair short. Instead of his usual t-shirt, he's wearing a white shirt with a collar.

"You look very scholarly," says Nora.

"Why, thank you, so do you," says Rajendra.

"I'm glad I caught you between classes."

"You didn't. I ducked out when I got your call."

"No, go back to class," she says. "It's important."

Rajendra waves a hand in dismissal. "It's special relativity. I read all of Einstein's work last semester. Trust me, today's class won't cover anything I don't already know."

"For someone who thought education corrupted young minds, you're sure taking to it."

Rajendra taps his temple with an index finger. "The key word in that sentence is 'young.' My mind is mature. Uncorruptible."

She smiles. "I guess we'll see."

"So, what's up? Or did you call just to tell me how fine I look?"

"Definitely not. I was wondering if anything weird has been happening lately?"

"Define 'weird'."

"The earth lights following you around," she says.

"Sure, I have seen them again, but they're not weird anymore."

"They disappeared for months, so why are they back now?"

"Maybe preparing for this year's crop circles," says Rajendra. "It's May already. Surely to all the gods, planting season starts soon."

"I'm no farmer, but I assume so. It hasn't snowed in almost three weeks. Spring might be here for real."

“You might have warned me about winter before I decided to move to this frozen wasteland.”

“You might have done your own research before making such a major life decision,” she says. “I’m not sure the lights are here for crop circles. Even if planting happens today, it will be six weeks or more before crops are high enough to make circles. Last year, the lights came to warn us. Maybe that’s why they’re back.”

“Warn us about what?”

“Have you been transporting to—” she waves a hand around “—I don’t know what it is. Another dimension?”

Rajendra’s hands pause. “No. No interdimensional travel.” He raises an eyebrow, and his signs become exaggeratedly calm. “Have you been travelling to other dimensions?”

“I’m not imagining it. And travelling isn’t the right word. It’s a place inside my mind.” She shakes her head. “Place isn’t the right word, either. I don’t know how to describe it.”

Rajendra’s hands lie still for a moment. “A grassy field with a lake?”

She sucks in a breath. “Yes, that’s it.”

“Nope. Never seen it before.”

“Not funny.”

“I thought it was a dream,” he says. “I see it sometimes when I’m drifting off to sleep. Sometimes when I wake up, I feel like I’ve been there.”

“Are there other enhanced carriers there?”

“I’ve never seen anyone. Not that I remember, anyway.”

“Have you received any messages while there?” She asks.

“The other day, I was woken up by the word ‘welcome.’ I didn’t see it; it wasn’t signed. It just sprang into my head.” He glances to the side before continuing. “It was probably just a dream, though.”

A chill settles in her belly. Rajendra has been there, too. “Not unless we’re having the same dream.”

“Have any of the others been there?” he asks.

“I don’t know, but we need to find out,” she says. “I’ll post something in our group chat.”