

Barefeet

The princess sat in front of the machine. She had been trained since young to use them. She remembers her father explaining their use, and how they can make great things happen. At their most powerful they can turn day into night and manipulate dire defeats into great victories. Some say the machines are not merely machines at all, but devices for communicating with God. Her father had always seemed invigorated when talking about the machines. He wasn't a man with a mind for war, perhaps not even meant to be a leader, but rather a holy man or a philosopher. He sat her before her first instrument at the age of five, hoping inspiration would come to her as it did to him. He explained that her brothers never shared an affinity for the machines, and was disappointed that the boys only showed promise in sword fighting and battle strategy; skills required for military generals, but not compassionate leaders. He'd then added that perhaps it was to allow him to appreciate the arrival of the special one who would follow in his footsteps. Whilst he spoke of this, the young girl clicked the golden dials of the instrument. The cogs inside started to interlock and turn, then she brought over a lever and tapped its protruding needle in a seemingly practised motion. This was not rehearsed at all and she did not have the benefit of instructions. These instruments, or machines, were purely born from the trances of the holy inventors and could only be operated by those born with the ability to communicate with them. The plant connected to the machine through thin, hair-like wires sprouted small buds, which then slowly bloomed into soft and blushing flowers. Her father affectionately put a hand on her shoulder; she had succeeded in operating a beginner's instrument on pure instinct.

With her talent for machinery she became the favoured child from that day on. They would spend hours together creating ways to bring rainfall, sprouting early harvests and conducting music in the palace from unseen ghostly orchestras. Her brothers meanwhile succeeded in managing the affairs of the kingdom and merely regarded their father as an old fool. He walked about the castle barefoot; he told her this was done to keep him connected to the life force present in the machines, the palace and everything in the kingdom. She also attempted the same, closing her eyes and spiritually groping for that feeling of oneness he'd described to her many times. Feeling connected. She was too embarrassed to do this in front of her brothers and kept this within her quarters. The princess eventually graduated to more complex and somewhat dangerous machinery, as she excelled in lending her hands to the needs of the equipment. Now she could create thunderstorms at the small cost of a pinprick and a few drops of blood. However, he was quick to remind her that these abilities were not for her own amusement, but for the good of the people. She remembered that speech very clearly after he'd scolded her for creating storms whilst her brothers were out riding. She had tried to understand his disappointment, but after they'd ridiculed her for her use of machinery the misadventure had also left a deep feeling of satisfaction. They had called her weak, but they didn't understand the power she sensed whilst the instruments whirred and came to life at her touch. She then would spend hours purifying and praying in baths of holy water and salt, reaching out for that greater sense of being. She didn't know what it was, only that she was searching for it. Finding it meant greater affinity with the machines and the inspiration that helped create and operate them. In her failure to do so she eventually complained to her father. He had said that she would one day reach an understanding, but that she thought too much of herself, that she was too selfish. She then turned to praying and the baths with even more fervour, walking through the palace barefoot whilst enraged

with the futility of it all. One of her brothers saw her bare feet and laughed. She was becoming just like the old fool.

She closed herself off that day. Whilst she indulged in her emotional distress in her quarters, her brothers planned their next military move. Enemies were on the horizon, yet the threat seemed to be minor. Confident in their military might they pushed forward, dreaming of the new territories and other spoils of victory they might gain. Their father had stood back and observed them, and tried to sagely add that they must consider their actions further, beyond lure of material gain and victory. The second brother dismissed him, saying that a man of the machines was too weak for the matters of war. The old man said nothing and merely looked at him with a strange fatherly gaze. He had also noticed his daughter had been absent and upset; yet there was no time to console her. The time had come to lead her to the room of expert instruments, hidden deep in the bowels of the palace. She kicked, screamed and tore at the furniture, declaring she was done with the machinery that had wasted her life. And that was when he raised his voice at her for the first time. He told her that the use of the machinery was beyond both of their desires. He had sighed wearily, saying he had foreseen his death through the instruments; he would not be alive for much longer. It was all beyond her humiliation and his mortality, as many would perish due to the decisions of her brothers. She allowed him to lead her deep into the palace, far beyond the walls she recognised with cream and crimson marble, deep down to where the stone foundations became earth.

He coaxed her through an old wooden doorway. The room on the other side was pure white and buzzed with a strange energy. Machinery dominated the space inside; there was a large chair made of dark wood covered in varying restraints and wires, with a larger metal bowl at the top. Next to it there was a small desk covered in copper coils, wires, and discs stacked on top of each other. Needles, shiny and efficient looking, protruded from the centre of two of the discs. He said in a grave voice that they would have to use this instrument to save their kingdom. The invading enemy that her brothers had invited with their own swords decided to return with a tenfold larger army than before, and equally more eager for bloodshed. This machine would beg the higher powers for help, plead for their mercy. He then sat himself in the large chair. At his request she helped him tie the restraints of this would be throne, and then pulled the metal bowl down to place it on his head. He explained that in order to operate the instrument, she would sit at the desk and keep her wrists suspended above the needles, then reach out for the spirit of the machine as she had always done. However this machine would need sacrifice if the user's spirit wasn't strong enough. It tempted evil and would absorb the user's mind, resulting in the piercing of wrists and the sacrifice of the one in the chair as soon as blood was shed. That would be its payment. He urged her to sit at the desk and begin to reach out and pray. He told her he felt assured that her spirituality was strong enough to succeed. He had smiled, but it did not reach his eyes. She sat at the desk with determination, desperate to prove his faith in her. She began setting the dials and raised her hands, calling forth that unknown feeling she was searching for.

The first thing she felt leave was her concentration. Her eyes fluttered open, breaking her trance. Her breathing quickened, heart pounding in her chest to be released. As she stared at the symbols on the instrument, coherent thoughts escaped her, her eyes darting about as the overwhelming desire to stab her wrists through the needles began to eat at her mind. She cried out and frightened herself with the shriek she had produced. Tears ran down her face as she backed away from the instrument desk, and she hurriedly turned to untie her father from the chair. She knew she could

not overcome this instrument as she was, and she was terrified she would kill him. He held his daughter close. He said he knew it wasn't her intention to do so, but she shouldn't hesitate with the task at hand. He asked her once again if she was sure she could not go through with it, and she tearfully implored him to find another way. She begged him, and knew she'd broken his heart by doing so. Fatherly affection had prevented him from expressing his true feelings.

That night the enemy's armies marched close to the border, ready to strike. They were already confident of taking over this new kingdom run by arrogant princes. An army led by the second prince had already been annihilated, the decapitated body and homeless head of the prince being paraded around in all of its bloody glory. The princess and her eldest brother had only a brief moment to mourn his loss, the latter swearing to take revenge on any ensuing armies. The eldest and now only prince berated his father for being a peaceful idiot. He was useless to their upbringing and was only able to lead them all to their deaths. The father, with his watery eyes, had tried to console him. He had seen their conversation coming and was dearly sorry that he was unable to be the courageous war hero they had so dearly wanted. He had devoted his life to attaining wisdom and had ultimately neglected them in his pursuit. He tried to explain that the machines could still yet save them, and it would not matter if it risked his life to do so. However, without the consent of the beloved daughter the machine could not be set into motion, and she would not consent to his death. This was the one machine he had been unable to master on his own. Likewise, he would not consent to the daughter's inevitable death through operating the machine alone. The machine needed sacrifice, and it would take it regardless of who was offered. The prince's jaw twitched with filial jealousy and anger. He did not wait for the old man to finish talking. He drew the blade from his side and drove it deep into his father's heart. The prince's tense, murderous anger found satisfaction, and he whispered to the dying old man that he had finally made himself useful. Unknown to him, his sister had witnessed this crime of filial bloodshed. Her fleeing figure caught his eye and he chased her, following her into the depths of the palace as their father had previously taken her. She ran to the room of expert instruments and locked herself inside.

The white walls were almost a blinding white in her panic. The prince called her hideous names and swore that she would meet her death if she tried to escape without operating the machinery. Rage and grief welled inside of her, and they quickly manifested as tears. Regardless of her brother's coercion, she found herself staring through tears at the chair and remembering their father's willingness to end his life there. He had taught her that the people of the kingdom came first. She felt drawn to the desk, and started to pick at the dials. Her hands seemed to raise themselves, and as the instrument slowly ticked the discs began to spin. She could feel herself breathing in staccato rhythm and the desire for the needles began. Strange images wormed their way into her skull. The sickening thud of a decapitated head. A dagger sliding between ribs to pierce a tender heart. Swathes of white. Something within her broke the confines of her body and reached out in all directions. She felt it carry away to the mountains. Her hands dove deep into snow. She envisions it becoming an avalanche to crush the oncoming army. Her eyes flicked open and she saw her wrists pressing desperately into the needles, yet they did not pierce the soft flesh. Raising her wrists again, she tried to concentrate. She sees the snow, but lacks the strength to move it. She can hear the thud and scrape of the invading army's weapons at their sides, the impatient whinnying of their horses to charge into battle. Their leader spies the nearest village and she feels his horrible desire to maim and murder his foes, their women, and their children. She hears the heartbeats of the people in the village, the

pulsing of the blood soon to be spilt. The desire to spill blood overwhelms her and she screams. Opening her eyes she finds the needles have extended, driven through her wrists. Blood trickles down the needles and circulates in the grooves on the spinning discs, curling through the mechanism and painting the copper coils red. Her consciousness wanders its way out of her body, and the last thing she sees is bare feet in snow. On the other side of the door, the prince shivers from the energy in the room and feels the beginning of distant tremors.