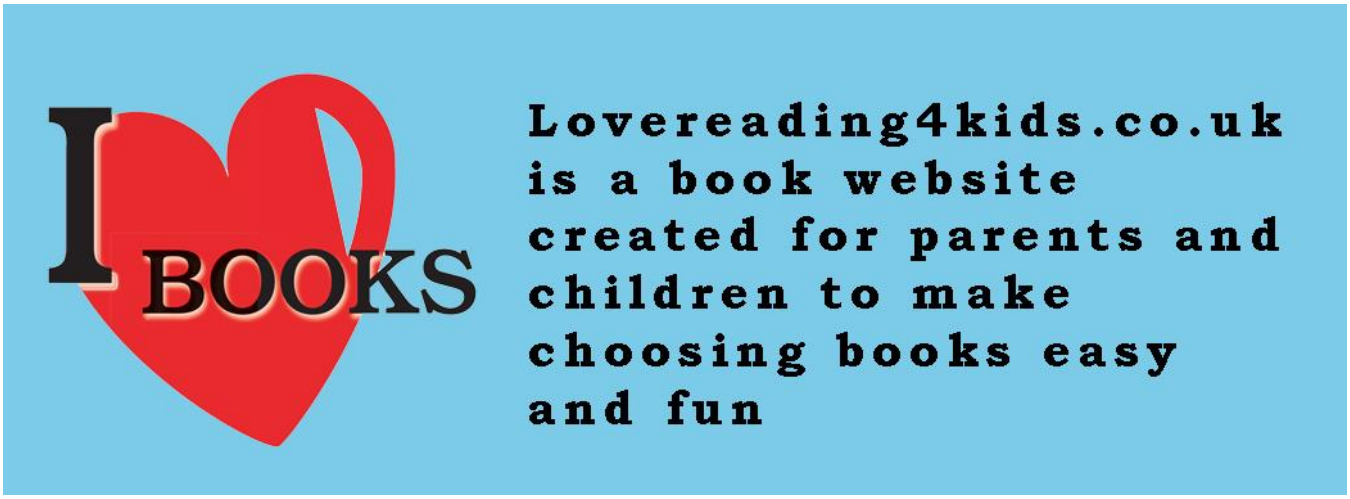


Opening extract from

The Diabolic

Written by

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EVERYONE believed Diabolics were fearless, but in my earliest years, all I knew was fear. It preyed on me the very morning the Impyreans viewed me in the corrals.

I couldn't speak, but I understood most words I heard. The corral master was frantic in his warnings to his assistants: the Senator von Impyrean and his wife, the Impyrean Matriarch, would be arriving shortly. The keepers paced about my pen, surveying me head to toe, searching for any defect.

I awaited this Senator and Matriarch with my heart pounding, my muscles poised for battle.

And then they came.

All the trainers, all the keepers, dropped to their knees before them. The corral master reverently drew their hands to his cheeks.

"We are honored by your visit."

Fear shot through me. What manner of creatures were these, that

the fearsome *corral master* dropped to the floor before them? The glowing force field of my pen had never felt so constrictive. I shrank back as far as possible. Senator von Impyrean and his wife strolled over and looked in at me from the other side of the invisible barrier.

"As you can see," the corral master told them, "Nemesis is approximately your daughter's age and physically tailored to your specifications. She'll only grow larger and stronger over the next several years."

"Are you quite sure this girl is dangerous?" drawled the Senator. "She looks like a frightened child."

The words chilled me.

I was never supposed to be *frightened*. Fear earned me shocks, reduced rations, torment. No one must ever see me afraid. I fixed the Senator with a ferocious look.

As he caught my eye, he looked startled. He opened his mouth to speak again, then hesitated, squinting, before his gaze broke from mine. "Perhaps you're right," he muttered. "It's in the eyes. You can see the inhumanity. My dear, are you very certain we need this monstrous thing in our household?"

"Every great family has a Diabolic now. Our daughter will *not* be the only child to go unprotected," said the Matriarch. She turned to the corral master. "I wish to see what our money will pay for."

"Of course," replied the corral master, turning away to wave at a keeper. "Some chum . . ."

"No." The Matriarch's voice was whiplash sharp. "We must be certain. We brought our own trio of convicts. They will be a sufficient test for this creature."

The master smiled. "But of course, Grandeé von Impyrean. You cannot be too careful. So many substandard breeders out there. . . . Nemesis won't disappoint you."

The Matriarch gave a nod to someone out of my sight. The danger I'd been anticipating materialized: three men were being led toward my pen.

I pressed back against the force field again, the tingling vibrating along the skin of my back. An icy pit opened in my stomach. I already knew what would happen next. These were not the first men who had been brought to visit me.

The corral master's assistants unchained the men, then deactivated the far force field to shove them inside with me before raising it again. My breath came in gasps now. I did not want to do this. I did not.

"What is this?" demanded one of the convicts, looking from me to their impromptu audience.

"Isn't it obvious?" The Matriarch linked her arm through the Senator's. She cast a satisfied look toward her husband and then addressed the convicts in a most pleasant tone: "Your violent crimes have brought you here, but you have an opportunity to redeem yourselves now. Kill this child, and my husband will grant you pardons."

The men goggled at the Senator, who gave a disinterested wave of the hand. "It is as my wife says."

One man swore violently. "I know what that thing is. Do you think I'm a fool? I'm not going near it!"

"If you don't," replied the Matriarch with a smile, "you will all three be executed. Now kill the child."

The convicts surveyed me, and after a moment, the largest of them broke into a leering grin. "It's a little girl. I'll do it myself. Come here, girl." He stalked toward me. "You want this bloody or do I just break her neck?"

"Your choice," the Matriarch said.

His confidence emboldened the others and set their faces ablaze with the hope of freedom. My heart punched against my rib cage. I

had no way to warn them away from me. Even if I had, they would not have listened. Their ringleader had declared me only a girl—and so that was what they saw now. That was their fatal mistake.

The big one reached down to grab me very carelessly, his hand so close that I could smell his sweat.

The smell triggered something within me. It was the same as every time before: the fear vanished. Terror dissolved in a swell of rage.

My teeth clamped down on his hand. Blood spouted, hot and coppery. He shrieked and tried to pull back—too late. I seized his wrist and threw myself forward, twisting his limb as I went. His ligaments crackled. I kicked at the back of his leg to knock him down to the ground. I leaped over him and landed with a stomp of my boots on the back of his head. His skull splintered.

There was another man, who'd also been too bold, moved in too close, and only now realized his error. He yelled out in horror, but he did not escape. I was too fast. My palm thrust into the cartilage of his nose and drove it straight into his brain.

I stepped over the two bodies toward the third man—the one who'd had the sense to fear me. He shrieked and stumbled back against the force field, cowering as I had done earlier, when I was not yet angry. He held up his shaking hands. Sobs convulsed his body.

"Please don't. Please don't hurt me, please no!"

The words made me hesitate.

My life, my whole life, had been spent this way, fending off aggressors, killing to ward off death, killing so I would not be killed. But only once before had a voice pleaded for mercy. I hadn't known what to do then. Now, as I stood over the cowering man, that same confusion filtered through me, rooting me in place. How was I to act from here?

"Nemesis."

The Matriarch was suddenly standing before me, separated only

by the force field. "Can she understand me if I speak?" she asked the corral master.

"They've got enough human in them to pick up language," the corral master said, "but she won't learn to respond until the machines do some work on her brain."

The Matriarch nodded and turned back to me. "You've impressed me, Nemesis. I ask you now: Do you wish to leave here? Do you wish to have a precious thing of your own to love and protect, and a home with comforts beyond your dreams?"

Love? Comfort? Those were strange words. I didn't know their meaning, but her tone was coaxing, full of promise. It wove through my mind like a melody, drowning out the whimpers of the terrified man.

I could not look away from the Matriarch's sharp eyes.

"If you wish to be something more than an animal in this dank pen," she said, "then prove yourself worthy of serving the Impyrean family. Show you can obey when it matters. Kill this man."

Love. Comfort. I didn't know what those were, but I wanted them. I would have them. I closed the distance and snapped the man's neck.

As the third corpse dropped to the floor at my feet, the Matriarch smiled.

Later, the keepers brought me to the laboratory, where a young girl waited. I was restrained for her safety, my arms and legs encased in thick iron with an outer ring of glowing electricity. I couldn't stop staring at this odd little creature, small and trembling, with dark hair and skin and a nose that had never been broken.

I knew what this creature was. This was a *real* girl.

I knew, because I'd killed one before.

She drew a step too close to me and I snarled at her. She flinched back.

"She hates me," she said, her lower lip trembling.

"Nemesis doesn't hate you," the doctor assured her as he double-checked my restraints. "This is how Diabolics behave at this stage of development. They look like us, but they aren't truly human beings like you and me. They're predators. They can't feel empathy or kindness. They simply don't have the capacity for it. That's why, when they're old enough, we have to civilize them. Come closer, Sidonia."

He crooked a finger. Sidonia followed him to a nearby computer screen. "See that?" he asked.

I could see the image too, but I didn't find it interesting. I'd broken open enough skulls to recognize a human brain.

"That's called a frontal cortex." He fell silent a moment, and there was a flicker of fear in the look he darted at the girl. "I haven't researched that for myself, of course, but in my line of work, you simply learn things from watching the machines."

Sidonia's brow flickered downward, as though his words had puzzled her.

Flustered, he went on in a rapid tone, "As far as I understand it, these machines are going to make this part of her brain bigger. Much bigger. They'll make Nemesis smarter. She'll learn how to speak to you and how to reason. The machines will also begin the bonding process."

"Then she'll like me?"

"After today, she'll be your best friend."

"So she won't be so angry anymore?" Sidonia's voice sounded small.

"Well, that aggression is simply how Diabolics are engineered. But Nemesis won't direct that toward you. In all the universe, you'll be the only person she will ever love. Anyone who tries to hurt you, though—they better watch out."

Sidonia gave a tremulous smile.

"Now, honey, I need you to go stand where she can see you. Eye contact is critical for the bonding process."

The doctor positioned Sidonia before me, carefully out of reach. He avoided my biting mouth and applied stimulating nodes to my skull. After a moment, they buzzed and hummed.

A tingle through my brain, stars prickling before my eyes.

My hatred, my need to smash and shred and destroy—it began to calm. Began to fade.

Another fizzling of a current, then another.

I gazed at the small girl before me, and something new stirred inside me, a sensation I'd never felt before.

A constant roar within my skull now, changing me, shifting me.

I wanted to help this girl. I wanted to protect her.

The roaring went on and on, and then it faded away as though nothing else existed in the universe but *her*.

For several hours as my brain was modified, the doctor ran tests. He let Sidonia move closer to me, and then closer still. He watched me as I watched Sidonia.

Finally it was time.

The doctor withdrew to a distance, leaving Sidonia alone before me. She rose to her feet, shaking all over. The doctor aimed an electricity gun as a precaution and then flipped open my restraints.

I straightened up and extricated myself from the bonds. The little girl drew a sharp breath, her collarbone standing out below her scrawny neck. It would have snapped so easily. I knew that. Yet though I could have hurt her, though I'd been released upon her just like all the others I'd slain, the very idea of injuring this delicate creature made me recoil.

I stepped closer so I could look at this girl in full, this being of

infinite value whose survival now meant more to me than my own. How small she was. I wondered at the feeling inside me, which glowed like warm embers in my chest. This marvelous glow came from looking at *her*.

When I touched the soft skin of Sidonia's cheek, she flinched. I examined her dark hair, such a contrast to my pale, white-blond shade. I leaned close to examine the irises of her large eyes. Fear flooded their depths, and I wanted that fear gone. She still trembled, so I placed my palms on her frail arms and stood very still, hoping my steadiness would calm her.

Sidonia stopped trembling. The fear faded. Her lips tipped up at the corners.

I imitated the gesture, forcing my lips to curl. It felt unnatural and strange, but I did it for *her*. It was the first time in my life I'd acted on behalf of someone other than myself.

"Hello, Nemesis," Sidonia whispered. She swallowed loudly. "My name is Sidonia." A line appeared between her brows, and then she pressed her palm over her chest. "Si-doe-nya."

I imitated her, patting my own chest. "Sidonia."

Sidonia laughed. "No." She took my hand and pulled it over her chest. I could feel the frantic thump of her heartbeat. "I'm Sidonia. But you can call me Donia."

"Donia," I repeated, patting her collarbone, understanding her.

Donia broke into a smile that made me feel . . . warm, pleased, proud. She looked back at the doctor. "You're right! She doesn't hate me."

The doctor nodded. "Nemesis is bonded to you now. She'll live and breathe for you all the days of your life."

"I like her, too," Donia declared, smiling at me. "I think we'll become friends."

The doctor laughed softly. "Friends, yes. I promise you, Nemesis

will be the best friend you'll ever have. She'll love you until your dying day."

And at last, I had a name for this feeling, this strange but wonderful new sensation within me—this was what the Impyrean Matriarch had promised me.

This was *love*.

1

SIDONIA had made a dangerous mistake.

She was carving a statue out of a great stone slab. There was something mesmerizing about the swiping and flashing of her laser blade, bright against the dark window overlooking the starscape. She never aimed the blade where I expected, but somehow she always produced an image in the stone that my own imagination could never have conjured. Today it was a star gone supernova, a scene from Helionic history depicted vividly in rock.

Yet one swipe of her blade had extracted too large a chunk from the base of the sculpture. I saw it at once and jumped to my feet, alarm prickling through me. The structure was no longer stable. At any moment, that entire statue was going to come crashing down.

Donia knelt to study the visual effect she'd created. Oblivious to the danger.

I approached quietly. I didn't want to warn her—it might startle

her into jerking or jumping, and cutting herself with the laser. Better to rectify the situation myself. My steps drew me across the room. Just as I reached her, the first creak sounded, fragments of dust raining down from above her as the statue tilted forward.

I seized Donia and whipped her out of the way. A great crashing exploded in our ears, dust choking the stale air of the art chamber.

I wrested the laser blade from Donia's hand and switched it off.

She pulled free, rubbing at her eyes. "Oh no! I didn't see that coming." Dismay slackened her face as she looked over the wreckage. "I've ruined it, haven't I?"

"Forget the statue," I said. "Are you hurt?"

She glumly waved off my question. "I can't believe I did that. It was going so well. . . ." With one slippered foot, she kicked at a chunk of broken stone, then sighed and glanced at me. "Did I say thanks? I didn't. Thanks, Nemesis."

Her thanks did not interest me. It was her safety that mattered. I was her Diabolic. Only people craved praise.

Diabolics weren't people.

We looked like people, to be sure. We had the DNA of people, but we were something else: creatures fashioned to be utterly ruthless and totally loyal to a single individual. We would gladly kill for that person, and only for them. That's why the elite imperial families eagerly snatched us up to serve as lifelong bodyguards for themselves and their children, and to be the bane of their enemies.

But lately, it seemed, Diabolics were doing their jobs far too well. Donia often tapped into the Senate feed to watch her father at work. In recent weeks, the Imperial Senate had begun debating the "Diabolic Menace." Senators discussed Diabolics gone rogue, killing enemies of their masters over small slights, even murdering family members of the child they were assigned to protect to advance that child's interests. We

were proving more of a threat to some families than an asset.

I knew the Senate must have come to a decision about us, because this morning, the Matriarch had delivered a missive to her daughter—one directly from the Emperor. Donia had taken a single look at it and then thrown herself into carving.

I'd lived with her for nearly eight years. We'd virtually grown up side by side. She only grew silent and distracted like this when worried about me.

"What was in the missive, Donia?"

She fingered a slab of the broken statue. "Nemesis . . . they banned Diabolics. Retroactively."

Retroactively. That meant current Diabolics. Like me.

"So the Emperor expects you to dispose of me."

Donia shook her head. "I won't do it, Nemesis."

Of course she wouldn't. And then she'd be punished for it. An edge crept into my voice. "If you can't bring yourself to be rid of me, then I'll take the matter into my own hands."

"I *said* I won't do it, Nemesis, and neither will you!" Her eyes flashed. She raised her chin. "I'll find another way."

Sidonia had always been meek and shy, but it was a deceptive appearance. I'd long ago learned there was an undercurrent of steel within her.

Her father, Senator von Impyrean, proved a help. He nursed a powerful animosity toward the Emperor, Randevald von Domitrian.

When Sidonia pleaded for my life, a glimmer of defiance stole into the Senator's eyes. "The Emperor *demands* her death, does he? Well, rest easy, my darling. You needn't lose your Diabolic. I'll tell the Emperor the death has been carried out, and that will be the end of the matter."

The Senator was mistaken.

◊

Like most of the powerful, the Impyreans preferred to live in isolation and socialize only in virtual spaces. The nearest Excess—those free humans scattered on planets—were systems away from Senator von Impyrean and his family. He wielded his authority over the Excess from a strategic remove. The family fortress orbited an uninhabited gas giant ringed by lifeless moons.

So we were all startled weeks later when a starship arrived out of the depths of space—unannounced, unheralded. It had been dispatched by the Emperor under the pretext of "inspecting" the body of the Diabolic, but it was no mere inspector onboard.

It was an Inquisitor.

Senator von Impyrean had underestimated the Emperor's hostility toward the Impyrean family. My existence gave the Emperor an excuse to put one of his own agents in the Impyrean fortress. Inquisitors were a special breed of vicar, trained to confront the worst heathens and enforce the edicts of the Helionic religion, often with violence.

The Inquisitor's very arrival should have terrified the Senator into obedience, but Sidonia's father still circumvented the will of the Emperor.

The Inquisitor had come to see a body, so a body he was shown.

It simply wasn't mine.

One of the Impyreans' Servitors had been suffering from solar sickness. Like Diabolics, Servitors had been genetically engineered for service. Unlike us, they didn't need the capacity to make decisions, so they hadn't been engineered to have it. The Senator took me to the ailing Servitor's bedside and gave me the dagger. "Do what you do best, Diabolic."

I was grateful he'd sent Sidonia to her chambers. I wouldn't want her to see this. I sank the dagger under the Servitor's rib cage. She

didn't flinch, didn't try to flee. She gazed at me through blank, empty eyes, and then a moment later she was dead.

Only then was the Inquisitor allowed to dock with the fortress. He made a cursory inspection of the body, pausing over it merely to note, "How odd. She appears . . . *freshly* dead."

The Senator stood bristling at his shoulder. "The Diabolic has been dying of solar sickness for several weeks now. We'd just decided to end her suffering when you arrived in the system."

"*Contrary* to what your missive said," the Inquisitor stated, swinging on him. "You claimed the death had already been carried out. Now that I see her, I wonder at her size. She's rather small for a Diabolic."

"Now you question the body, too?" roared the Senator. "I tell you, she was wasting away for weeks."

I watched the Inquisitor from the corner. I wore a new Servitor's gown, my size and musculature hidden beneath voluminous folds. If he saw through the ruse, then I would kill him.

I hoped it wouldn't come to that. Concealing an Inquisitor's death might prove . . . complicated.

"Perhaps if your family was more respectful of the Living Cosmos," the Inquisitor remarked, "your household would have been spared a ghastly affliction like solar sickness."

The Senator ripped in an angry breath to reply, but at that moment the Matriarch darted forward from where she'd been lurking in the doorway. She seized her husband's arm, forestalling him.

"How right you are, Inquisitor! We are immensely grateful for your insight." Her smile was gracious, for the Matriarch didn't share her husband's eagerness to defy the Emperor.

She'd felt imperial wrath firsthand at a young age. Her own family had displeased the Emperor, and her mother had paid the price. Now

she appeared electric with anxiety, her body quivering with eagerness to placate their guest.

"I'd be ever so pleased if you'd observe our services tonight, Inquisitor. Perhaps you can note what we are doing wrong." Her tone dripped with sweetness, the sort that sounded odd in her usual acrid voice.

"I would be glad to do so, Grandeé von Impyrean," replied the Inquisitor, now gracious. He reached out to draw her knuckles to his cheek.

She pulled away. "I'll go make the arrangements with our Servitors. I'll take this one now. You—come." She jerked her head for me to accompany her.

I didn't want to leave the Inquisitor. I wanted to watch his every movement, observe his every expression, but the Matriarch had left me no choice but to follow her as a Servitor would. Our steps brought us out of the chamber, far from the Inquisitor's sight. The Matriarch picked up her pace, and I did as well. We wound together down the corridor toward the Senator's chambers.

"Madness," she muttered. "It's madness to take this risk right now! You should be lying dead before that Inquisitor, not walking here at my side!"

I cast her a long, considering look. I'd gladly die for Donia, but if it came to my life or the Matriarch's, I'd put myself first. "Do you intend to tell the Inquisitor what I am?"

Even as I spoke, I visualized the blow I'd use to kill her. A single strike to the back of the head. . . . No need to risk her screaming. Donia might emerge from her chambers if she heard anything. I'd hate to murder her mother in front of her.

The Matriarch had the survival instinct her husband and daughter lacked. Even my mild tone sent terror skittering across her face. The next moment it vanished so swiftly that I wondered whether I'd imagined it. "Of course not. The truth would condemn us all now."

So she would live. My muscles relaxed.

"If you're here," she said darkly, "then you'll make yourself useful to us. You'll help me conceal my husband's work before that Inquisitor inspects his chambers."

That I could do. We plunged into the Senator's study, where the Matriarch hiked up her gown and shuffled through the debris strewn about the room—blasphemous database fragments that would instantly condemn this entire family if the Inquisitor laid eyes on them.

"Quickly now," she said, gesturing for me to start swiping them up.

"I'll take them to the incinerator—"

"Don't." Her voice was bitter. "My husband will simply use their destruction as an excuse to acquire more. We simply need to clear these from sight for now." She twisted her fingers in a crack in the wall, and the floor slid open to reveal a hidden compartment.

Then she settled in the Senator's chair, fanning herself with her hand as I heaved armful after armful of shattered fragments of what looked like computer debris and data chips into the compartment. The Senator passed days in here, repairing whatever he could salvage, uploading information into his personal database. He avidly read the materials and often discussed them with Sidonia. Those scientific theories, those technological blueprints. All blasphemous. All insults against the Living Cosmos.

I stashed the Senator's personal computer in with the debris, and then the Matriarch crossed to the wall again and twisted her finger in the nook. The floor slid closed. I heaved the Senator's desk over so it covered the hidden compartment.

I straightened again to find the Matriarch watching me narrowly. "You would have killed me back in the hallway." Her glittering eyes challenged me to deny it.

I didn't. "You know what I am, madam."

"Oh yes, I do." Her lips twisted. "*Monster*. I know what goes on behind those cold, soulless eyes of yours. This is exactly why Diabolics have been banned—they protect one and pose a threat to all others. You must never forget that Sidonia needs me. I'm her mother."

"And you must never forget that I'm her Diabolic. She needs me more."

"You cannot possibly fathom what a mother means to a child."

No. I couldn't. I'd never had one. All I knew was that Sidonia was safer with me than with anyone else in this universe. Even her own kin.

The Matriach loosed an unpleasant laugh. "Ah, but why even debate you on this? You could no more understand family than a dog could compose poetry. No, what matters is, you and I share a cause. Sidonia is kindhearted and naive. Outside this fortress, in the wider Empire . . . perhaps a creature like you will be the very thing my daughter requires to survive. But you will never—*never*—speak to anyone of what we've done today."

"Never."

"And if anyone seems ready to find out we've spared our Diabolic, then you will take care of the problem."

The very thought sent a sizzling, protective anger through me. "Without hesitation."

"Even if taking care of it"—her eyes were sharp and birdlike—"starts with yourself."

I didn't condescend to answer. Of course I would die for Sidonia. She was my entire universe. I loved nothing but her and valued nothing but her existence. Without her, there was no reason for me to exist.

Death would be a mercy compared to that.