

THE INDOMITABLE
THE MOTHER

A SHORT STORY IN THE ANCIENT
VESTIGES SERIES

BY
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SYNOPSIS

Justine brings hot stew and hard bread to Father Curtis Lakin, who has secluded himself in his cabin, refusing all visitors save for the former knight-captain. The priest has seemingly lost all but his faith, and when talks drifts to the Mother's hand in the fate of her children, Justine becomes disgusted and leaves. Yet as Justine soon learns, fate is not a fickle mistress who can be so easily fled.

THE MOTHER

Justine shouldered through the private cabin door, bearing a tray of hot stew and hard bread.

Father Curtis Lakin had still not tended to his living quarters: the sleeping pallet was yet unmade, his spare robes and undergarments draped over a knee-high dresser, and the remains of his lunch lay scattered on the table. Justine pushed all the dishes aside and put the tray down. The priest did not stir as he knelt before an ornate sculpture of the Mother, her wings spread protectively: a symbol of the unerring Light and grace of the divine.

"Father Curtis," she said, unlatching her sword belt and leaning it against a wooden chair. He did not reply, and that did not surprise her. Every visit for the past week was much the same. "*Father Curtis*," she said much more sternly.

"Is it that time again, child?" he asked without turning, hands still held together. "Has it come so soon?"

Weeks at sea had come and gone, and Father Curtis remained secluded in his cabin, barring all visitors.

Save for Justine.

"We must eat," she said, removing the wooden bowls from the tray. "Or all that we have sacrificed would have been for naught."

Father Curtis finally rose from his knees and walked laggardly to the table. His face was drawn and worn, as if a mountain of sorrows rested on his shoulders. "Stew once more?" he asked sitting down. "Seems like the only meal the cooks prepare for us."

"It is all that Irwin kept in the stores," Justine said, taking her place across from the priest. "I am grateful for

that.”

The priest sat in silence, dipping the heel of his bread into the stew, before slowly chewing and swallowing. Satisfied that he would eat another meal, Justine hollowed out her share, pondering just how long Father Curtis would hold his tongue. Every day his moods darkened more and more, but she hoped that his dour countenance would fade one day, and when it did, she wanted to be there for him.

“Did you think him capable of such an act?”

That was it. Justine put the little of her bread aside, and placed her elbows on the table. She looked long at Father Curtis, but his downturned eyes revealed naught. “You would speak of it?”

The priest ate the last of his bread, took a deep breath, and faced her briefly: she saw a man torn, weary, and guilt ridden. He shrugged, staring lastly into his wooden bowl, and finally spoke. “I have replayed it in my mind countlessly. The journey was without event for much of it. The night was dead and still. We were wary, yes, but we had believed that we would be on deck of the *Gold Counter* before long. Lord Terrence even rapped my shoulder, smiled, and told me, ‘Fear not, Father, for our exodus is near at hand.’

“I smiled at the lord. So much had gone wrong for our cause, but you, Justine, you were the good; and at long last we would be free of the tyrant on the Lion Throne. Then a thought occurred to me: that I was going to tell the lord that our exodus was providence, and that it was the Mother’s making, all of it. I turned to the lord, and though he smiled, his lips ran red with blood.”

The priest looked down again and gripped the table hard. “They were on us: knights in plate, the city guard in mail. I cried, I screamed at them to stop, but they did not heed me. Lady Tricia and Ser Marcus were valiant, but it was not enough. There were too many.

“I dropped to my knees. The dead faces looked at me in horror, in despair. In that moment I failed them, Justine. I failed them. Then, I heard a click-clack sound,

and Lord Arthur stood above me, and I knew by the smile on his face that he thought justice done."

Father Curtis fell silent. Justine shook her head: so much had changed in the royal city, and so much for the worse. "He is not the man I once knew. The man that was there for me ever since I was a child."

The priest shook his head and scooped up a spoonful of stew. "Did you know him well?"

Justine did not rightly know how to answer that—how much dare she tell the priest? In his state, did it truly matter? "I believed in him, and he believed in me," she answered, satisfied with her choice. "He was not simply a lord to me, but a friend. I saw what that was worth."

"So we all have seen what friends are worth," Father Curtis declared. "Now I fear that we run from one darkness unto another. Perhaps the true Darkness."

"Is that why you seclude yourself in this cabin? Why refuse all but me?"

The priest shook his head once more and shoveled more of the stew into his mouth. Justine did the same, wondering if Father Curtis had put the pieces of his dour visage back together, prepared to bottle up for weeks more. She wanted him to come out of this. The priests and priestesses needed him. She needed him. She needed him to trust her.

Trust. That word hung with her. Trust—she trusted Lord Arthur, and he turned on her and the subjects of the king, all at the behest of madness and chaos. *It is power that does that to us all. I have to temper it, I must. We cannot live like this.*

Father Curtis spoke suddenly. "Do you believe in the Mother?"

The question was so sudden, unexpected, and she dropped her spoon. "What does it matter?"

"Faith, child, matters more than anything."

I wish I could tell you the truth, Father, but alas, you are not the only one who must keep secrets. "I do. Always have."

"Yet not fervently," Father Curtis said solemnly, and Justine suspected he did not believe a word of it. "I find

the Mother's embrace to be the only comfort in these dark days; She is the only source of strength amid these storms and doubts. My faith teeters upon the edge, child, and so I must find it, unguided by those without, be they sworn to the cloth, to house, or to coin."

"And by sword?" Justine asked. The father had omitted her allegiance from his list and she wanted to know why.

The priest pushed his bowl aside, staring back at her. "I do not believe it mere accident that you were in that hall with us. I believe the Mother willed it. I simply must understand it."

"I was there upon Lord Arthur's orders," Justine recoiled. "If I had known more, mayhap it would be different, but it was not the Mother's doing."

"Was it truly not?"

Maddening. Simply maddening. Justine thought the priest was so lost in despair of the dreaded Darkness, that he would cling to faith so desperately, and worse, extend it to her.

To explain the folly of it all to the father would be a waste of breath. "You are done and I must be going," she declared and latched sword belt to her waist. "I shall return on the morrow."

"The Mother wills it, so it must be so," Father Curtis said, inclining his head before returning to the sculpture, hands together in prayer.

Justine snorted derisively as she exited, uncaring if the priest heard her and embraced the storm.

The wind pummelled rain at her as she stood outside the cabin door. It seemed that the weather was worsening. The autumn storms would not relent. *Is that the Mother's wish too?* She pulled her cloak tightly, walking down the deck.

Few remained above decks. The sails pulled wildly as the deckhands pulled down the rigging, screaming at each other. She left them to their work, hastily descending a set of stairs to the cabins on the lower deck.

Lantern lights swayed wildly atop the long hall. Many

of the cabin doors were open, revealing the men and women of cloth, nobles, and traders enjoying glasses of wine and mugs of beer and ale, seemingly oblivious to all that raged around them. Bits and pieces of their conversation drifted through—hope for a green land, new trade routes, and a bastion of divinity—but Justine did not heed any of it. She did not know how long she meant to stay on the new land, if they ever encountered it.

Regardless of whether this lot shared Father Curtis' hope and divinity.

She entered her own cabin and smiled. It was much smaller than the priest's, with but a slim pallet on the right-hand wall and an oval window opposite, just slightly above a small dresser.

It was all she needed.

She unlatched her sword belt, light mail, and cloak, setting it beside the far wall. The pallet was far too alluring to care much for drying of fabric or proper care of mail and steel. Collapsing upon it, she draped her left arm over the side, and let sleep overtake her.

Justine opened her eyes, discovering a crowd of towering men and women in coarse linens and dirt-streaked hair. They shouted and jeered, calling for the head of the traitor lord. She jumped up and down, thinking it would reveal more, but there were too many huddled together.

"Child, you do not want to see this," a strong, but calm voice said from behind her. "By command of the king you must be here, but you must not look upon it."

Justine turned and saw a man dressed in a fine doublet of black and green. *I know him*, she thought as she gazed into his grey eyes. The man looked down warmly, his smile, little more than a frown, put her at ease. She knew him to be her father's close friend, Lord Arthur.

But how? I... she stopped and looked at her hands. They were a child's hands. Her nearest memory was sitting in Lord Arthur's manse, eating from a fruit platter

and drinking hot earl grey tea. *Why was I there? Where is...*

Then it struck her. She hugged Lord Arthur's leg and he held her close.

She did not want to watch her father's life end.

"The kingdom has been taken by treachery!" King Adrian's voice boomed out. "It is this fiend that once brought counsel to my ears who bestows such sedition. As with all the others who sought ruin to our homes, he shall meet death!"

The crowd cheered louder at the words and some men out, "Deny him the rites of the Mother!"

"The Mother shall not protect him!" the king called out as if in answer. "The traitor is cursed in the eye of Her divine will and mine own judgment! No, he goes instead to his ill-gotten master – to the Dark God!"

"No," she whispered into Lord Arthur's trousers. She did not hear her own words as the crowd grew louder. "No, not to Him. No. He must not meet with Mother. My mother. Mother..."

"Be strong little one." Lord Arthur's voice sounded like steel, cutting through the cacophony. "You must be strong. We spoke of it last eve."

Her strength was fleeting; she did not want to be strong; she wanted her Father – not so far away, but close. "Do something, Lord Arthur!"

"I cannot," he said, his voice cold as ice. "'Tis the king's will, you know that."

"Let it be done!" King Adrian proclaimed, shouting above the crowd.

"Stay with me child, and do not look," Lord Arthur said to Justine, and he pressed his big hands against her head.

She wanted to turn so desperately – to plunge through the masses and plead for the king for mercy. Yet she did not think she could will her legs to move, even if the lord had not held her close. "No, let it not be. Let it not be!"

The crowd roared uproariously. Lord Arthur held her tighter, and Justine felt the tears roll down her cheeks. "Father... Mother is gone, you were the only one left..."

no Father you must protect me... Father..."

Lord Arthur kneeled, wiping away her tears. His brow furrowed, those strong grey eyes seemed less, as if dulled. "Obsession wrought this, but duty is what matters."

Obsession? She knew naught of that; it seemed like she should, but it was so far away. "I do not understand."

The kind lord held her chin with thumb and forefinger and smiled. "In time, dear Justine, you will learn of obsession that wrought this end, that I promise you."

She nodded her head and he went on. "I have found that adherence to duty aids us more than any words. Duty to the king. Duty to Trecht. Duty to the Mother."

"D-Did," Justine stammered, "Did my father not adhere to duty? What did he do?"

"Child, do not –"

"What did he do?!" she screamed, pushing Lord Arthur away. The lord rose to his feet, wounded.

"Should I not shield you, child?" he asked, frowning. "Would you abandon your duty?"

The lord suddenly vanished and a silence hung in the air. Justine looked around through teary eyes: the crowd was gone, too, though the stage still stood in the distance. Atop it, she saw the executioner's block with a massive two-handed axe lodged within it, and her father's headless neck gushing blood.

She wiped the tears from her eyes, walking towards it, shivering with every step. Her legs felt like lead, but she pushed forth, even though she wanted to run.

Mounting the steep wooden steps, she looked to the left. Her father's deathly gaze looked back at her, teetering on the edge. Afraid, she held her father with both hands, resting him against her forehead – refusing to look at what become of her father, instead remembering what he was.

Her father had always been stern and hard, though there was a kindness behind every word. He taught her to read letters shortly after she could speak, and learned to respect the worth of steel before five seasons had come and gone.

"You must be strong and learned, Justine," he said to her, his voice as real as it was in life. "There is much that changes in the wide realm—you must be prepared for that."

"I do not want it to change," she heard herself reply, not quite sure how or why.

"Nor do I, sweet one, but oftentimes change is thrust upon us. Such a time nears."

"Only if you are so foolish," Lord Arthur's voice suddenly said, and he appeared at the foot of the steps, brow furrowed. "Would you endanger your daughter, Jonas?"

"I do what I must," her father's voice replied strongly, stronger than she ever heard it before. "I did not ask for your aid Arthur, and I do not ask for it now."

"Yet when you falter before the king, the care of your daughter will fall to me. Would you leave her fatherless?"

"And if I do not act, how many sons and daughters would be left without a mother and father? Too many. King Adrian must be stopped."

"There are many affairs in play, more than you understand. And what if *he* turns his gaze to Justine? I did warn you of that."

"I will not have you speak of him, not here."

Justine wanted to scream out. They kept arguing as if she were not there. Yet she was, or at least the words were. The words felt near, not distant, like a memory freshly writ.

What, then, was all this?

"Conspire, then!" Lord Arthur shouted suddenly, before turning and walking away. "Meet the grave!"

"You must be strong," her father's voice said once Lord Arthur was lost to sight. "Obsession must end. Be strong Justine. Be strong."

"My strength..." she began to say, holding her father's severed head in front of her. He was unsmiling, his brown eyes closed, and somehow not as stern as she remembered. "My strength, Father, it is not enough."

Tears kept pouring down her cheeks. "What is the

obsession, Father? Why did it take you from me? Why must I see to duty for a king and kingdom that leaves me without you?"

Her father's expression did not change, nor did he answer.

"What duty remains?!"

"Only one duty remains."

Whiteness surrounded her. The stage and her father's head dissipated, as if they never were. She looked at her hands: they were larger now and covered by plate gauntlets. She withdrew the sword sheathed at her side, and read the engraving on the steel: *Duty-sworn, duty-bound*. It was *Resolution*.

"Who goes there?!" she called out, extending her sword into the distance. No answer came. She walked forward, not knowing which direction she wandered.

The whiteness seemed endless, yet it felt hard as cobbled roads. Reflectively, memories came back to her: Lord Arthur's guidance in her continued learning, squiring for the lord's eldest son, Ser Eovald, the day of her knighthood, and befriending Ladies Amerie and Tricia.

Then, the freshly writ memories hung in her mind, new and raw. They seemed to fit, somehow, but a wrongness permeated them.

None of it makes sense! Justine thought, but she prodded on through the sea of white.

Hours seemed to fade into hours, and she felt her legs ache. She sat for a moment.

"Is duty so hard for you?"

Startled, she stood, and somehow knew it was the voice from before. "Who are you?"

"A friend," the voice replied.

"A friend does not hide."

A tall man broke through the whiteness. His hair was short and sandy, framing a long face with clear blue eyes. Justine thought he wore long robes, but a shining orb lay in his left hand, its luminescence obscured the hue. "Is this more to your liking, Justine?"

She pointed the tip of *Resolution* towards the man. "How do you know my name?"

"The Mother blessed me with much before I came unto this realm."

"The Mother?" she asked, recoiling, not believing a word of it. "The Mother spoke to you?"

"I am her child," the man said resolutely. "Her voice is clear to me."

"I do not believe you."

"Nor do I expect you too, not here, not yet. Instead I simply wish to give an answer that you have long sought: the truth of obsession."

Justine sheathed *Resolution*. She did not believe a word this man had said—and certainly not that he was a friend—but her eyes and memories did not lie: she saw Lord Arthur, the crowds, and her father's stoic face. This stranger wanted her to feel that again; and whatever else was beyond her power to stop.

"Is that consent, child?"

"I do not understand."

The man chuckled. "You have not been given answers, but you have and did not heed them. Father Curtis had given you the answer, feigned you were to hear it."

"Fate does not rule my choices, and —"

"Do you truly understand?" he asked, cutting her off, but did not wait for an answer. "The Great Fate ebbs and flows as It desires, and you and I are as powerless as the trout swimming desperately upstream. Instead you must let it wash over you, and from the tides it brings, wield what it lays before you."

The Great Fate. Fish. Streams. It made no sense to her. "Speak plainly."

"Your father was fated to lose his head, Justine, as you were meant to fall into the welcoming embrace of Lord Arthur, who would succumb to the same temptations that befell your father, admittedly with a different outcome."

"What do you mean?"

"You did not fail to note the change in Lord Arthur? That he was not the man who protected you?"

Justine could not deny that. Lord Arthur was never cold, hard, or even cruel. He was always kind, caring, and noble, noble most of all. Not a willing servant to madness.

But how did this man know that?

“How do I know what passes through your mind.”

Justine drew *Resolution*. “Out of my head.”

“You could not harm me here, even if you tried.”

“Do not push me.”

“I say only the truth.”

“Truth?” she could not help laughing. “I do not know who betrayed me, who amongst—”

The orb was no longer in the man’s left hand: it hovered above his head and travelled towards her. It shone so brightly, and she could not will herself to look away from it. Yet as it crept closer, it emanated a soothing warmth that cascaded from the tips of her fingers to the end of her toes. As it neared, it seemed more like a crystallized rock than an orb.

“Mother had a hand in its making, and by right it is yours, if you but heed the fate given to you.”

Justine reached out and clasped the crystallized rock in her hand. The serenity it wrought was so terribly seductive. Yet it seemed to churn and change—the calm turned to chaos, and from her hand wrought a fierce light that burned and seared, leaving naught but an ocean of bodies in its wake, and her atop it, proud and mighty. Then it ended suddenly, and she felt a numbness, as if there was naught there at all. She opened her hand and pushed it all away. “I am bound to no one.”

The crystallized rock floated back towards the man, and it seemed to dull and fade, until upon reaching the man’s hands, it darkened. She saw at last the long brown robes of the man and thought him a priest, but that seemed wrong.

“It believes you,” he said sullenly.

“I do not know what my father did to push the king’s hand so, nor would I believe any tale you might spin,” she said insistent, sheathing *Resolution* once more and crossing her arms. “I slew my sworn brothers and sisters

because it is what honour compelled me to do, not some fate. I will carve my own path, not what you deem I should do."

"Then you doom the realm."

"You are a desperate man," she scoffed.

"I am. I must be." He shrugged his shoulders. "Yet if you do find your faith, know that I await you where Mother's Light shines brightest."

"Do not count upon it."

The man turned, and walking into the distance he said, "Waver not whence he comes."

"If you—"

"If I what, Justine?" Lady Amerie called out, her voice close.

Justine opened her eyes and saw the smiling face of Lady Amerie, the full light illuminating her graceful features. "Did I sleep overlong?"

"No, but you tossed and turned," Lady Amerie chuckled. "Talked to yourself a bit, but I will not hold it against you."

Justine sat up and smiled. "The storm is at an end."

"So is our voyage. Lord Theodore awaits without. He desires your counsel, though he still is not in the habit of asking."

"Tell him I will be out when I have a moment to dress."

"Do take more than a moment, for his own good, as well as ours."

Justine nodded and smiled, and as Lady Amerie shuffled out the door, she noted that Lord Theodore did stand without, speaking to a handful of nobles and Irwin Kole. *Not much longer now.*

She crossed the room and picked out some boiled leathers. Something lighter, more agile, seemed appropriate. Scooping up her scabbard, she withdrew *Resolution* from its sheath and read the engraving: *Duty-sworn, duty-bound.*

Is there really only one more duty remaining? she thought. *The stranger offered naught but lies, forcing me to revisit the*

pain of the past. Yet, was he right about duty to the Mother? I will not serve King Adrian again, nor would I be welcomed in the kingdom again.

She decided such thoughts were for another day. Slamming the blade back into the scabbard, she cinched the sword belt to her waist.

Lord Theodore Rusels — and a new land — awaited.

