

THE INDOMITABLE
MOTHER'S LIGHT
A SHORT STORY IN THE ANCIENT
VESTIGES SERIES

BY
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SYNOPSIS

Justine makes camp in the dead of winter, deep within a dark forest. Lady Amerie and Ser Marcus joined with her as she searches for settlement sites. Doubts have rifled through her mind ever since she set out, but what awaits to the west may be the most jarring of all.

MOTHER'S LIGHT

Justine pulled back into the hollow of the tree when the tinder took the flame.

Lady Amerie and Ser Marcus huddled near in thick, fur-lined cloaks, fanning their bare hands over the low embers. The canopy above shielded them from the falling snow, but the wind surged hard, relentless.

As Justine put her own hands out towards the burgeoning embers, she did not regret the expedition. The cold and discomfort was preferable to the politics of the nobles, traders, and priests.

Lord Theodore Rusels had become intolerable; he chose to spurn counsels, lest it came from others of high birth. *He thinks himself more than a lord, higher than a counsellor, yet not a king. Or perhaps he does, and will not admit it himself.* Whatsoever the case, he was stubborn as old roots.

Irwin Kole was little better: he insisted on cutting down swaths of forests and building ports, strengthening their strength at sea, despite the onset of winter.

Justine thought that Father Curtis Lakin was the worst of the three: he seldom left the presence of his brothers and sisters, but when he did, his words only concerned sanctuaries to the Mother, to ward them all against the onset of a deepening shadow.

All the while the men and women they supposedly protected sipped on roots and dew. Justine could not forget their hungry, worn faces as they lived their days in tents, fearful that it would worsen with the turning of the season.

This expedition felt like cowardice, but she knew that

every breath would be vain and futile. So she chose to flee from the bickering, the in-fighting, the politics. Even if it meant the dreaded cold.

"This forest is endless," Marcus said quietly, his cheeks a bright red. "Simple enough to traverse, but there are no sites to settle, even if this snow recedes."

"Endless as it is, I do not think I gave Demetri, Brennon, and Tricia a more welcome task," Justine said sullenly. "I would beg for the cold before I traded in this mail and leather and fur-trimmed cloak for the ceremonial plate they wear."

Marcus flashed a brief grin. "You cannot explore for the rest of your days."

"Oh?" Justine could not help but smile. "Irwin did say there are two more continents: one to the north, the other east. They will have to be explored."

The knight moved to speak, but Amerie cut in before he could say a word. "You know our captain's resolve, ser, I would not challenge her on that."

"None of that, now, Amerie." Justine left the knight-captain rank behind in Trecht; she wanted no part of it. "We still keep to our vows, but there are no captains anymore."

"You are our leader, there is no changing that." Amerie said flatly. "Perhaps there is another title you would take?"

"When we settle, and our numbers grow." Justine insisted, but still held fast to a smile. "There will be time for that. Yet I do not know if it will be here. I do not think Marcus is wrong in that."

"There are still the western reaches," Amerie pointed out.

"And they will change much from the north, east, and south?" Marcus asked with a hint of challenge in his voice. "The foliage is too dense, and the trees are too old and thick. No, what we need are flat plains, inward, not as far out of land as Irwin Kole prattles on about. Southward, it will be southward past the forest."

Justine did not think Marcus was far wrong, but every

delay meant one less day in the company of Lord Theodore, Irwin, and Father Curtis. "South, once we explore the western reaches." She reached into her pack, and passed out hard bread and cheese to her companions. "Eat, then sleep. I will take first watch."

Amerie and Marcus ate silently, and Justine said not a word. Not long after the knights licked the last crumbs off their fingers, they pulled blankets over them and curled up by the fire.

Justine fingered a log from the pile and tossed it onto the fire, before rising and looking through the endless trees. Scarcely a sound came to her ears, save for the rustling of birds, rabbits, and squirrels. A few days past they had espied larger beasts in deep sleep—fangs six inches long, fur glistening as dark as night—but none of them seemed to come this far west.

Sighing, she pulled her fur-lined cloak tighter, wondering—not for the first time—what was truly different in this new land. Lord Theodore, Irwin, and Father Curtis rallied behind the king's injustice, and she slew sworn knights behind that very call, but if affairs did not change, would one of them be like the king?

No, she thought, dismissing the notion. In Trecht, knights betrayed the crown, becoming no more than executioners for the crown. Amerie, Marcus, Tricia, Demetri, and Brennon are not like that. I will not let them be like that. Nor will any of the young men and women I train be like that. Perhaps there will be no king.

There were so many unanswered questions, and she sighed once more, realizing that the answers were far away, at least this deep in the wilderness. When she returned to the settlement, much would change, and hopefully for the better.

Hours faded into one another. The wind did not relent, and the snow seemed to slip through the canopy. Her mind shifted to Lord Arthur, the man who her father trusted explicitly, who she gave trust to, the man who was no better than the jackals she betrayed.

This corruption reached even you. If it were not these insurgents, some other cause would have torn a rift between us.

Is it worth it, Arthur? Are you content standing beside the Lion Throne, serving a man so drunk on power? Is it?

Justine could no longer stop her teeth from chattering. It must have been three, perhaps four hours since her watch began. Hurriedly, she kicked Amerie awake. "It is your watch. Keep your cloak close."

The knight simply nodded her head and rose. Justine curled up by the edge of the fire. Dreams did not come.

Justine awoke to Marcus' large hand on her shoulder. She turned aside and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. Amerie sat before the low embers of the fire, and tossed Justine a skin full of water. She gladly uncorked it and drank. "Amerie, Marcus, any stirrings in the night?"

"None Justine," Amerie answered without taking her eyes from the embers. "The wind relented a little when I had Marcus relieve me, but there were hardly the stirrings of squirrels."

"My watch was no different," Marcus said as he packed the bags. "The wind died down when I awoke, but it hardly felt warmer than it is now."

Justine put the skin aside, staring upward at the canopy. The wind did die down, but it was still bitterly cold. "See to the horses, Amerie."

When Amerie was out of ear shot, Justine looked towards Marcus. He seemed strong as he ever was, his long arms working methodically at packing the blankets, food stuffs, and water skins. The humiliation at the hands of Lord Arthur seemed so long ago. "What would you if you saw him in the woods now?"

Marcus stopped his packing and looked towards her. He seemed to know who she referred to. "I do not know."

"I know what I would do, Marcus," she said firmly. "I need to know if you will do the same."

The knight tied the sack of the bag, tossing it beside the two others, then turned to face Justine. A slight sadness seemed to seep into his eyes, though his brow furrowed. "I thought to slay him for what he did, but was it not justice to his eyes?"

The words echoed what she had felt before. "There was no justice that night, Marcus." She shook her head. "You were taken into the holds, and did not hear what I said to Lord Arthur. He told me that the blood debt was paid. I told him it was not; and that I prayed I would not have to spill his blood to see it through. Now I am not so sure."

"Lord Arthur made his decision, Justine. Just as we made ours."

She offered him a brief smile before staring at the embers, more black than red. *It is not so simple. It never is.*

Amerie came through the trees, horses in tow. Justine smiled and laid a hand on Marcus' shoulder before scooping up her bag. She walked towards the lead horse, a red mare with a glistening blonde mane; the horse never seemed to tire, however much he was pushed. She tied the bag behind the saddle before mounting and kicking him forward. The others did much the same.

Justine kept the pace slow and steady. The horses found the paths easy enough, sloping downhill slightly before leveling off for a stretch. The forest did not thin, and every so often a smattering of snow fell in front of the path, which the horses largely ignored. Once, it fell atop Marcus' head; Justine laughed along with Amerie, and after a moment the stone-faced knight did as well.

Such fleeting moments of joy seldom came, and Justine missed them all the more for it.

"It is as I said," Marcus said from behind after a couple hours, "it is much like the north, south, and east. Endless forest. There is naught to find but trees and snow."

"There may be more," Justine said. "I will leave no stone unturned."

"What I have learned, Marcus," Amerie began slyly, "is that you must convince our friend wholeheartedly. Justine is stubborn as a stone when she sets her mind."

Smiling, Justine said, "You do not whisper quietly enough, Amerie."

"I do not want to."

The pair of knights laughed, and Justine kept smiling.

Nearly four hours passed. Justine called for a halt and dismounted. In the distance she saw an interweave of white and grey, rising above the treelines. "Tie the horses to the tree. We have found something."

Not waiting for her companions, she pushed through the trees and felt a wall. Brushing against it, snow fell off, and vines seemed to thread through the stone. She pushed against it, but it was solid. Looking up, it thrust past the treetops to the grey sky above.

"A castle?" Amerie asked as she and Marcus stared upwards. "It stretches far."

"High—and wide," Justine said, looking to her left and right. The snow made it look endless. "Come, let us see how far it goes."

She walked with her hand against the wall, brushing against it. The vines seemed to suffocate the wall, and though the stone was old and weathered, it had not fallen to disrepair or ruin.

"It is older than the kingdom," Marcus said.

Justine could not be certain of that, but found no cause to doubt it either. "We are not alone in this land."

"Or whoever dwelled here, fled," Amerie said quietly. "One is likely as the other."

We shall find out soon enough, Justine thought but did not share it with Amerie or Marcus. Instead she trudged on until—

She took a step back, balancing herself, then extended a warding hand to her companions. Kneeling, she brushed away the snow, revealing stone steps leading beneath the wall, deep into a muddied darkness. "Marcus, return to the horses and bring flint, tinder, and the torches. I do not mean to leave this alone." The knight hurried back the way they came.

"Justine," Amerie said, kneeling herself and looking down the darkened steps. "What castle leads down underneath it, outside its outer wall?"

"You assume this is the outer wall, Amerie."

The knight narrowed her eyes. "Why would it not be?"

"The outer wall could have been taken down long ago. Left to the mercy of the weather and the beasts. We simply do not know."

"All the more reason we should not brave its depths so willingly," Amerie insisted. "Perhaps if we searched more ..."

Justine shook her head; she had not let Amerie deter her before, and she would not begin now. "It will be the same at every wall. We descend when the torches are lit."

Amerie stared into the darkness momentarily, before leaning against a nearby tree, looking to and fro, her eyes casting shadows of doubt. "Would we settle here?"

"We will not know until we see what is in the depths."

Marcus returned with bags over his right shoulder and tinder under his left arm. He made a circle, and struck the flint until it blazed. Justine retrieved torches from the bags, and lit each in turn before handing them to the knights. Shouldering her own bag over a shoulder she said, "We descend."

The stone steps cut steeply downwards, and did not end until the overhang was well above her head. Thrusting a torch forward, she stood before a pair of stone doors, but the right side was smashed nearly to pieces; the left had a faded design of twinkling stars above war hammers, spiked axes, and what else was guesswork that she did not have time for.

Stepping through the debris, the air felt thick and muggy, as if the weather outside had no bearing upon it. Raising her torch high in the air, the stone ceiling was covered in cobwebs, the darkness masking any design on it. Waving the torch at her feet, the ground was mortared stone, unadorned, and the hall stretched wide.

"Whoever was here, abandoned it long ago," Amerie mused.

"Here," Marcus said, taking a few steps forward. Against the wall, he pointed out the remains of a wooden table and a dais near it that may have held standing armour. "Perhaps not that long ago."

"Keep a hand on the hilt of your sword," Justine said,

and as the words tumbled forth, she caressed the hilt of *Resolution* with her left hand. "We do not know who may be left."

Rotating the torch to the left and right, Justine saw chambers and adjoining halls; some had the remnants of broken furniture, others lay bare as if centuries had come and gone without the tread of feet. She led through halls veering west, never north or south.

The halls seemed to stretch on, however much ground she seemed to cover. Instinctively, she looked about for stairwells, but none seemed to come. Stubbornly, she peeked her head into a wide chamber, its size befitting that of a noble lord, but there were only scattered remnants of pottery and broken-down oak that may have been bed posts, chairs, or a table. It was hard to tell.

On and on the halls stretched.

Justine stopped suddenly, peering into a larger chamber. It lay wide and long, with broken pieces of wood in several spaced-out piles. Yet high upon the walls, near the ceiling, caught her eye: tall slits of windows let the snowfall drift in; an endless grey in winter, but faint rays of yellow pierced the exterior.

"A library once," Marcus mused.

"The castle library," Justine remarked, pointing towards the window slits above. "A ruined castle, a week's ride from the northern coast, settled on the western edge of a sprawling forest. It is what we need."

"If you can but convince *them*," Marcus said brusquely; Justine was glad her knights thought as little of their leaders as she did.

"We will, in time," Amerie remarked, smiling. "But we still do not know what befell those who built this castle. We must find that out, Justine."

Nodding her head, Justine said, "Come, let us see what we can find."

She led them further down a westward hall that seemed much like the others, but she decided to push northward on a whim. Looking to the sides, picture frames hung askew, steel blades sat in pieces, and what

looked like plate helms lay flattened.

"What do you make of that, Amerie?" Justine asked, pointing towards the remnants of weapon and armour.

"A foe," she replied timidly. "A foe who easily turned aside steel and plate."

"Time," Marcus intoned, "and disregard. Ignore steel and plate and it will rust and weaken. A servant could have broken swords apart with enough time."

There is no rust upon the steel, Justine thought but dared not share the thought with the others. *Who would break steel and crush plate? Who?*

She called for a stop before a turret stair. Waving her torch to and fro, the steps climbed up and descended. "What befell them will not touch the sky, is that not so, Amerie?"

The knight nodded her head, frowning. "Down."

The steps were long but thin, twisting down endlessly. Above Justine's head to the left were sconces, but the torches that once occupied them faded to dust. Upon the right were shallow, hollowed out crevices, but they were bare and empty.

On and on it twisted down. Darkness seemed to gather; the torches penetrated little more than inches. Justine slowed, keeping her hand on the left wall, plodding downwards.

"How far does it go?" Amerie asked sullenly.

"As far as they dug it," Justine replied brusquely. She did not mean to be so dismissive, but there was something in the depths, something that these people wanted to hide.

And she feared it waited for her.

The stair ended. Justine turned and waited; when her knights came into view, she could see their creased, worried faces. They had felt it too, whatever it was.

Pushing forward, she crossed a tall, thin door. Her footsteps echoed, and as she waved the torch, the floor was more marble than mortared stone, but it did not reflect as the marble did in the holy houses of the Mother. Dismissing the thought, she turned to the right: the wall

was close, and from top to bottom hung a mural, stretching further down the hall, undisturbed from the passage of time.

Justine thought the depiction looked familiar, but so very stark: there stood an enormous pillared temple, and a sphere of light emanating, bathing men and women in it who knelt, though they were nearly bent over double. Opposite the temple shadows seem to stretch, encroaching on the followers, but the light seemed to divide it, pushing them away.

"The Mother," Justine mused "Or an extension of Her divine will. The Dark God stands opposite, corrupting the hearts of wayward souls. King Adrian was not the first."

"These are no such temples to the Mother," Marcus said, pointing to the pillars. "The churches were never fronted by rows of pillars, nor do the people kneel in fear."

Head cocked, she looked closer at the people. "There are tears running down their faces." She pointed, and the knights leaned in. "They cry out for succor against the that great shadow."

"There is more," Amerie said, waving her torch further down the hall.

Another length of the mural revealed: two suns scorched the sky, opposite each other; upon the left it looked like rays of light, but the right seemed more like tendrils. Upon the ground lay mounds, warriors on the left mounting the precipice, and distorted foes on the right, breaking against the oncoming tide.

Where have I seen that ...

The dream returned to her again, and the searing visions that the robed man revealed: *naught but an ocean of bodies in its wake, and her atop it, proud and mighty.*

"The shadow," Marcus began. "Defeated by warriors blessed by the light. It is not dissimilar to what ..."

Marcus' words were like whispers far away, faint and unheard. Justine gazed down the hall; naught but darkness to her eye, but she thought there was a glimmer, faint and indistinct, as if consumed. "Down the hall." She

did not wait.

Plodding forward with torch out, the dark seemed to gather, impassive. Marcus and Amerie called out behind her, but Justine did not hear the words.

All that remained was the darkness.

She emerged into a domed antechamber. Darkness wreathed it, but for a faint glimmer at the far end. Switching the torch to her left hand, she withdrew *Resolution*; the steel glistened even in the oppressive dark. Pressing onward, the glimmer ceased to fade in and out; it began to resonate until it shone bright as a star.

Then it moved.

Justine stopped before it, sword held upright. The glimmer gave way to a robed man with a long face and clear blue eyes. She did not need the light of the torch to know his robes were brown.

It was the same man from her dreams.

"I did not expect to see you so soon, Justine," the robed man intoned, a slight smile spreading across his face. "The Great Fate churns endlessly."

Footfalls echoed behind. Marcus and Amerie had withdrawn their steel, but Justine waved them away. They backed apace, poised to strike.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, disbelieving that this man stood in front of her. "How are you here?"

"I am Mother's vestige, Justine," he said nonchalantly, as if it were a simple matter. "Wherever Her Light does touch, I will go. Alas, Her Light is all but faded here. Someone took it." He pointed to the far wall.

Shouldering past the robed man, she thrust her torch towards the wall. It was hollowed out, and an ornate pedestal not more than a few feet tall stood within it. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"Put your hands upon it, Justine."

She did not want to; she would rather do aught but the command, but a light pooled in the distance, calling her to it.

The pedestal was of simple craftsmanship without notable design: wide at the bottom and top, the neck long,

skinny, and fluid. Her eye caught an ovular incision upon the top, as if the robed man's crystallized stone would rest upon it. Sheathing her sword, she placed a hand atop it, and a creeping sensation pricked her skin, swimming over her arm. She jerked her hand away, staring daggers at the stranger.

"It is but the remnants of Mother's Light. Someone has taken it."

"I do not have time for this," Justine declared, shouldering past the man. "Marcus, Amerie, there is more of the castle to—"

"Why do you run, Justine?"

She stopped instantly, turning to the robed man, rage coursing through her veins. "I have never run."

"What else do you call your flight from Trank upon the *Gold Counter*? Lord Arthur posed no threat to you, him so old, so broken, so alone. Even this expedition of yours. You cannot bear to face Lord Theodore Rusels, Irwin Kole, and Father Curtis Lakin. So you run and run. I do not know why."

Whoever this man was, he could not have known any of that. Justine turned and looked at him. He stood expressionless, his lips a straight line. There was no passion in his words; he was like a scholar braying out histories.

Her history.

"Take those words back!" Rage was all she felt; all that she could fathom.

"They are but simple truths. There is worse yet to come. Far worse. The Great Fate is not done with you yet."

"I am a *knight*. I swore my sword and shield to the people, all of whom I still protect."

"You swore it to your king."

"Who betrayed everything that he stood for! You know naught of it."

"I am not ignorant of pain and sorrow and of loss. Nor is Mother. Endless is our struggle, entwined in all that you have done and will do, echoing across Time. I have

seen more dead than I care to, and yet more will come, if we do not act."

The mural flashed in front of her eyes: the mounds of dead, a warrior blessed by the light, sword upraised, casting down the shadow. "That was you then," she said softly, half afraid. "Who stood atop them all, cleaving the followers of the shadow?"

"I had a hand in it," the robed man said simply with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "That was a long time ago. The shadow was cast back, but as the Great Fate churns endlessly, and so He returns once more."

"He? The shadow?"

"The Dark God, Sariel."

The name hung in the air and she gaped. Deep in the pages of the Faith was writ mention of a twisted deity in opposition to the Mother. He had taken on different guises and names across Time, but the priesthood always whispered the name Sariel.

Justine did not know if the Dark God ever lived. The Mother kept Him at bay. *Yet there is still the king's justice.* Shaking her head, she grimaced at the robed man. "So you have read the pages of the Faith."

"Child, I helped write them."

Justine heard enough. "Who are you, truly?"

"Mother called me Gabriel."

"You could not have told me this before? It is a simple enough name."

"Names do not matter. I wished for you to seize your fate before you came to this land. You spurned me. You spurned Mother. Every day He grows stronger."

"If the shadow e'er comes," Justine insisted stubbornly, "I would know of it."

"Then you have met him."

"Who ..." she let her words trail off.

"I do not know the who, child," Gabriel explained. "Mother struggles against Sariel, and I fear She fares far worse than He. Yet I know his vestige walks this realm, but where, and whom, I do not yet know. Mayhap the elders will know."

"The elders?"

"Those hidden, unseen, servants of the Great Fate," he replied whilst shaking his head. "They do your part, so you must do yours."

Justine moved to shove Gabriel away, but her arm was caught inches before his face; yet the stranger had not raised a hand. "How ... is it?"

Suddenly she was thrust against the far wall; it felt like her bones were cracking in half. Stumbling to a knee, she meant to charge at Gabriel, despite the pain. But suddenly, Marcus and Amerie shouted out, straining against some restraint unseen. "The Great Fate will not have me fall in this place," Gabriel said. "Nor will It allow you do play more the fool than you already have."

"Steel will cut through you," Justine grunted, rising to her feet. She put both hands on *Resolution*. "If you are no spectre, you will die like any man."

"Child, do not wander so aimlessly."

She threw herself at Gabriel, but a wall of light held her blade fast, and from the robed man's chest a sphere emanated. "You have not made yourself ready for this, and I forgive you."

"Release me!" Justine screamed, writhing against Gabriel, but she could not move. "Release me Gabriel!"

"Once you have seen ..."

"Gabriel!"

The domed antechamber, her knights, and the darkness dissipated. She found herself on barren, dead ground. An enormous black mountain filled her sight: its jagged peaks piercing grey clouds above. A city stood upon its lower slopes, empty and drear.

"Gabriel," she muttered. "Gabriel!"

No answer came.

Sheathing *Resolution*, she moved her feet, but tripped headlong atop a pile of corpses. Scrambling to her feet, she saw that they were everywhere. The whole field was dead; their faces contorted in terror. The smell of fetid rot filled her nostrils.

Then Gabriel's voice echoed in her mind. *At the dawn*

of Time, Xavier took from the clay and crafted men and women; but they were featureless, without thought or motive. Mother blessed them with wisdom, with kindness, with faith. But it was Sariel who twisted them to perversion, to lust, to greed. Shorn of Mother's Light, this is all they will be.

"Gabriel! Where are you?"

Silence.

Frustrated, she pushed through the sea of corpses, towards the city with its high walls. It was large to her eyes, backed by an immense keep with sprawling towers that looked as if it were broken from crystal.

So many dead, she thought, but for what?

The gate, though tall, lay opened on one side, and she pushed through, revealing a cobbled road that wound northwards, towards the lower slope of the mountains. Yet to her left and right corpses piled up; some vainly clasped weapons, others reaching out towards the mountain, the keep, or both.

All bore terror in their eyes.

Gabriel's voice returned. *Here they put faith in a man who did what he thought was right. Hurt by wrongs of other powers, this man could feel naught but pain and sorrow, mistaking vengeance for justice. One day, he would invite a daemon to his counsels who tore away his flesh, leaving naught but a broken husk in its place. Such is the fate bestowed by Sariel's Faceless Shadow.*

As Gabriel's voice faded away, she balled her fist and screamed, "I am not your puppet! This means naught to me. Show yourself!"

Silence once more.

Sighing, she pressed on down the road, averting her eyes from the dead, and the road turned east.

The keep rose taller and taller, until it seemed like an overbearing shadow, blotting out all light. Then she heard the clangor of steel on steel, and quickly drew *Resolution*. She thought it came from further north, within a courtyard just south of the keep.

Two foes were locked in battle, oblivious to all but themselves. They wore armour and cloaks, but their faces seemed to fade in and out, their features indistinct.

Gabriel's voice returned once more. *The battle that rages is older than Time, fought by vestiges tempted by Mother's love, or Sariel's hate. They think themselves right, but they are both wrong; the storm rages and they are but victims to it. Yet, this battle is different – it is the end, the last battle ever fought, and Mother is at her weakest.*

One foe batted away the other's sword, throwing the hapless body against a low wall. Springing at the enemy, and as the steel pierced the armour, the foe wailed, and all the light seemed to dissipate.

The Darkness is coming.

"Justine!"

Amerie stood beside her. Faithful Amerie, and Marcus, who held his sword fast, pointing towards Gabriel.

Justine nodded slightly, and turned to face Gabriel. He stood smiling his flat, expressionless smile, and as she trudged towards him, a light slowly swallowed him. "What was that?" Justine asked.

"The reign of Darkness, should you fail Mother."

"Why me!" she shouted, standing in front of Marcus.

"Why does it fall to me?"

"Your father, he –"

"Do not speak of my father –"

"King Adrian harbours Sariel's ancient gifts, awaiting the return of the vestige. Your father learned of it and died for it."

Justine collapsed to her knees, and bowed her head. She would not raise her eyes; Gabriel would not see her cry. "And Lord Arthur?"

"Did I not reveal that in your dreams?"

"He ... tried to talk my father down."

"And yet still sits by the king's side. Sariel must not hold victory, child."

"Justine." Amerie's soft voice filled Justine's mind. She let her friend lift her up.

"My thanks, Amerie," Justine said solemnly.

"Time calls to us all," Gabriel said suddenly, the glimmer of light flickering fast. "Come to where Mother's

Light is strongest, and bring the gift."

Amerie reached out and clasped a torch. The orange glower lit Justine's face, but she thought it so terribly dark. "Let us leave this place."

Justine let Marcus lead. She trudged slowly along, Amerie's arm around her hip.

Father ... what is it that you found?