

THE INDOMITABLE  
**THE WARRIOR VOICE**  
A SHORT STORY IN THE ANCIENT  
VESTIGES SERIES

BY  
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# SYNOPSIS

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Justine—accompanied still by Lady Amerie and Ser Marcus—return to the northern settlement after months away in the south of the new land. There they discover several sites to which the insurgents could build cities, erect fortifications, and raise fleets against King Adrian's wrath. Yet not is all as Justine left it, and she must make the most difficult choice in her young life.



# THE WARRIOR VOICE

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Justine cleared the forest under the mid-afternoon sun.

The flat plains of the north stretched to the horizon, green upon green, blossoming with the new growth of Spring.

Reaching forward, she patted her horse's neck. She never gave the horse a name, believing that he would never survive the winter. As the months dragged on, the beast grew stronger, never tiring. She never had a more faithful companion. *He deserves a name, though. Red, perhaps? I was never good with names.*

Ser Marcus and Lady Amerie rode beside her. Their eyes brightened at the plain, and the fresh Spring air. "It is good to be free of the forests," Amerie remarked. "If I never sleep on another root, it shall be too soon."

*In more ways than you know,* Justine thought sullenly. On the journey northward, she avoided the western reaches of the forest, and the old castle where Gabriel had waited for her. The stranger had not crossed her path since, and for that she was unduly grateful.

"You will long for those cold nights when we return," Marcus said absently. "Lest Ser Brennon could do what fear of death could not. I doubt Lord Theodore will listen to much we have to say."

Justine shook her head solemnly. The bickering, in-fighting, and politics lay just before the coast. It was not something she looked forward to. "He will listen."

"He never took no well for an answer," Amerie said, frowning. "Given how we left, I do not think he will be more receptive."

"You once told me waiting would do him good,"

Justine said, remembering the last night on the *Gold Counter*. "I took my time that morning."

Amerie giggled. "You made both of us wait. It did him little good."

"We will brave it," Marcus said. Justine and Amerie looked at him, but that did not slow his speech. "We must. The southern lands hold too much promise. They must see that."

Far south of the forests the land sloped down, criss-crossed by flowing streams, and cradled by slight mountain ranges to the west. Justine thought cities could grow from there, stretching across the land; the fortified walls a barrier against the beasts and the long reach of the king. If nothing else, Justine thought that Lord Theodore would see the sense in that.

Yet there was another site that filled her with more optimism.

Further south, the land ended atop a tall cliff, though the water pooled below, deep and still. It would serve as a natural harbour, and sloping paths could be cut, leading to the green. *Ships to protect us from the south, and a walled city pointing north. It is what we will need, when King Adrian sails east.*

The sun began to slowly set, and the smell of sea and salt began to fill her nostrils. Fanning a hand above her eyes, she saw short grey walls rise in the distance, stretching for a pace 'til they turned northward. In its midst stood two large doors, though the right remained opened. Further north she espied sloping, blackened roofs, a large granary to the east, open fields to the west, and a burgeoning stone lodge erected at the rear.

"Lord Theodore has been hard at work," Justine remarked, and put both hands on the reins before encouraging Red to a hard canter. "Yet he does not heed Ser Brennon's councils. Those walls should be taller, and archers upon the crenellations."

"I did say that he does not take no well for an answer," Amerie said, though it seemed she was forcing a half smile. "From you or Ser Brennon, seemingly."

"Be on your guard," Marcus said brusquely, frowning as he kept an eye upon the walls. "Men like him do not change."

Justine passed through the settlements gates without so much of a hail. She saw stone houses arrayed in lined streets, though the roads were more mud than dirt. Men and women trudged through the streets carrying burdens or chasing after wayward children, dirt and soot smearing their faces. She did not recognize one of them, and their eyes barely looked to her.

The northern road forked to three paths. Justine looked east: a tall cylinder building stood, its top conical and black. She thought it was the granary, but not a man or woman stood outside it. Westward lay open fields, and men in browns and greys planted seeds. Then, further north, the mud street ended before a short wooden stair, leading to the main gate of the lodge; there men and women in mail stood guard, hands on the hilts of their swords.

She slowed Red, and Amerie and Marcus rode close. "Where are the men and women of cloth?"

"There are no churches, no places of worship," Marcus said quietly, though his eyes never left the guard at the door. "The lord has much to answer for."

"And Ser Brennon," Amerie said softly.

*Ser Brennon will answer for much*, Justine thought and dismounted before the stair, tying Red's reins to a fence post.

Only one of the guard strode forward, hand still clasped to the hilt of his sword, eyes hidden beneath an iron helm. "Lady Justine Deuvers," he intoned. "Lady Amerie Akellin, and Ser Marcus Rennet. Lord Theodore Rusels awaits within."

Justine locked her gaze to the implacable iron face of the guard. "It is a sign of respect to remove one's helm."

The guard simply stood aside, pointing towards the lodge. "Our lord awaits, Lady Justine Deuvers."

"P'rhaps you did not hear when I—"

Her eyes shot to the doors of the lodge. A stout man

stood in gilded plate, the clamour behind him lost in a moment. His helm was in the crook of his arm, and the brown curls atop his head was matted. She knew it was Ser Brennon, but he seemed to age ten years since the eve of Winter.

“I shall see to Lady Justine and her knights,” he pronounced, though sadly. “Return to your post.” The guard did so without a word.

Justine embraced Ser Brennon. “It is good to see you, Brennon, but these months have weighed on you. What has happened?”

“We have survived Winter,” the knight replied, “as you have, but our choices are rife with consequences that yours had not. I will tell you what I can, but Lord Theodore will come himself if you do not heed his invitation.”

Justine looked to the settlement once more, took in the dirt and the mud, the gloomy streets, and the downtrodden men and women. She had many questions, and did not think the answers would satisfy her much. Solemnly, she nodded to Amerie and Marcus, before walking with Brennon.

Inside the lodge stood tall and wide, with candles burning atop wooden chandeliers and torches flaring along the walls. The front hall was lined with long wooden tables about the sides and rear, with the middle bare, but for the dancing of men and women in finely sewn doublets and flowing dresses. At the tables none were garbed in but the finest of cloth, drinking ale and wine from ornate goblets and tearing into meat. None that Justine could see wore the silver and white of the Faith.

Ser Brennon walked to the east, passing behind tables, speaking quietly to her. “Not long after you departed, the arguments between Lord Theodore and Irwin Kole became much worse. The men were heated, each telling the other that they would doom us all. Some days after, traders wound up dead inside their tents, then some lesser lords followed. I spent more of my time preventing

bloodshed than much else, and neither trader nor noble stepped down from their stance.

"Demetri, Tricia, and myself saw the need for a guard, at least until affairs settled. We went among the nobles, traders, and faithful looking for strong arms. There were only a few willing, but enough to deter more death. Yet as the weeks wore on, the foragers returned with less and less. I took charge of the food stuffs myself, much to the dismay of the lords and traders, but by then the guard had enough steel to settle matters. Once the cold set in, more and more men and women joined the guard, though for want of food, do not doubt.

"The people suffered, Justine. Yet there was little we could do. Father Curtis prayed. Irwin shouted and screamed. Lord Theodore held his own councils. Then, when the cold snapped, ships arrived with food, clothes, and tools, all friends of the lords. Lord Theodore did not fail to grasp that opportunity."

Brennon turned north, prodding behind the tables. Justine could see Lord Theodore in the distance, drinking and bandying words at the high table. "The lord did more than argue," she admitted, softly. "Walls rose, seeds were planted, and food was aplenty. No dissenting voice was heard."

"So it was," Brennon said, shrugging. "Yet as you saw outside, little of it went beyond the nobles and the guard. Justine, I fear that the guard will not heed my words, ne'er mind yours. They are loyal to Lord Theodore, yet what he has done—"

"Lady Justine!" Lord Theodore shouted out, waving a goblet in the air, the wine spilling upon the floor. "Sit and eat and drink with me. There are many matters to discuss."

"What has he —" she cut herself off, feeling many eyes upon her, not just Lord Theodore's. Countless nobles lined the high table, some drunk, though others stared contemptuously. She sat down beside the lord, signalling Amerie and Marcus to stand near. Brennon stood off to the side.

"A drink for Lady Justine Deuvers!" Lord Theodore cried out. A serving maid in a simple grey blouse hurriedly poured red wine into her goblet, and another shouted for half a chicken off the roast.

"You have done well, my lord," Justine said after taking a sip of the red wine. It was a good vintage, strong and smooth, but she did not dare drink much. "Though I saw no guard upon the walls. Are they all looking northward?"

"The north?" the lord chuckled, slopping red wine on his pristine black doublet. "King Adrian shall not bestir himself. Indeed, many of my friends in the kingdom defy the king, bringing much and more that was sorely needed. Another ship will arrive soon; I would have you meet with these lords. They will join with us, soon as matters settle in the kingdom." He paused and bellowed out a rumbling laugh. "They say that the king has been in a fury, but our dear friend Lord Arthur still advises. King Adrian is a fool who cannot see treachery, or simply cannot believe it."

Justine swirled the wine, staring at the ornate goblet with its jewels and gems encrusted near the lip. She was convinced that there were lies in every word Lord Theodore spoke, and more would hurdle forth. "And our other friends? Irwin Kole and Father Curtis Lakin? I did not see them on my return. I would have words with them before long."

"That would be taxing," Lord Theodore replied, frowning. "Irwin Kole gave not a fig for the people, only filling his own coffer. We are much better without his counsel."

A plate was put in front of her: half a chicken seasoned with herbs foreign to her. She stared at it in wonderment, remembering the people walking dejectedly, so bedraggled and dirty. "You have impoverished them."

"Every man and woman must earn their keep. I shall feed none who does not advance our cause."

The men and women in the hall ate plate after plate, and more seemed drunk than sober. Their doublets and

dresses were fine and adorned, hemmed with the finest of silk. Justine did not think their hands ever bored callouses, nor earned a copper to their name; they were simply favoured, and all those who served Irwin Kole were punished. "Where is Irwin Kole now?"

"Must we dwell on that malcontent?" Lord Theodore declared, waving a dismissive hand that was beringed now, Justine noticed. "Likely scampering in our town, bemoaning his failed plots and schemes. Depravity will humble him, see that it not so!" the lord bellowed a booming laugh, and the high table erupted. "He is of no consequence."

Justine did not think the lord would reveal any more of the trader. After eating a few choice slices, she asked, "And Father Curtis Lakin?"

"You do grate me, Justine," Lord Theodore said, his eyes on the dance floor. "Will you not just enjoy the symphony of silk, the pleasure of drink, the delicacies we have been denied? I would think after months of camping on the barren ground you would be more grateful."

She pushed her plate away and knocked over her goblet. The lord ignored it; he sat forward, eyes locked on the swaying of silk to and fro.

*Is this what we fled for? Is the king's justice much worse than a lord's justice? This is wrong, all of it, it ...* her eye caught a faint glimmer from a small satchel hanging from the lord's left shoulder. She looked closer, the lord still distracted, and jagged cuts of crystal thrust up from the dirty leather.

*It is but the remnants of Mother's Light,* Gabriel's voice echoed in her mind. *Someone has taken it.* Justine shook her head, disbelieving that it was Gabriel's treasure. He had spoken nonsense, and how could Lord Theodore possess it?

The crystalline rock glimmered, and she could not pull her eye away from it. A compulsion inside her moved her hand towards it. She knew that so many men and women would see her, but she did not care.

Lord Theodore should not possess it.

“Justine, what are you –”

She backhanded Lord Theodore, sending him stumbling behind. Men and women shrieked as she stood and picked him up by the throat, pushing him against the wall behind. Tightening her grip, the veins in the lord’s throat popped. “Why did you take it?!”

“Justine ... let me ...”

“Why did you take it?!”

The lord’s face turned red, muttering breathless words.

“If you will not speak,” she said softly, whispering into his ear. “Shall the others who sit at your high table? Will they tell me what you have closeted in secret councils?”

“Justine!” Amerie shouted. “What are you ...”

Justine swiveled her head to and fro: Marcus and Amerie held back the guard. Brennon shouted endlessly, but his words were lost in the cacophony.

All that mattered was what Lord Theodore possessed.

Using her free hand, Justine reached into the lord’s satchel, withdrawing the crystallized rock, white and clear. Light seemed to weave up and down her arms, filling her senses with clarity. *It is the same as ...*

Lord Theodore, the nobles, the guard, her knights, they were all gone. She no longer stood in the lodge, but hid behind the stairs of her father’s manse. Her father paced, agitated, and Lord Arthur sat at a table, frowning.

“Only if you are so foolish,” Lord Arthur said, his brow furrowed. “Would you endanger your daughter, Jonas?”

“I do what I must,” her father replied strongly “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.”

“Conspire, then!” Lord Arthur shouted suddenly, rising from his seat and walking away. “Meet the grave!”

Then they were gone again as if they never were. Justine held the crystallized stone, and it shone, threads of silver emanating out. She did not remember the conversation, but she dreamed it once before, whence she met Gabriel.

*Is this what Gabriel spoke of? I do not believe him, but there is ...*

Lord Theodore beat down on her wrist, eyes bulging. She let him fall to the floor, and he held both his hands close to his throat. The guards pressed inward; her knights so close, but the lord rose to a knee, waving them off.

“Where did you find this?” Justine asked, holding the crystallized rock in the palm of her hand. Lord Theodore did not try to take it, but she would not let him if he did.

“Did your father not tell you?”

She withdrew *Resolution* and rested the tip on his throat. “Mind your words,” she said. The guard pushed inward once more, but the lord waved them to stillness.

“I met in secret with your father and Lord Arthur. We all saw a change in the king. He greedily held that stone you now hold, among others. It changed him. Your father acted, whilst Lord Arthur and I did not.” He paused, and Justine saw no lie in his eye. “I could stay silent no longer.”

“Ser Gerold ...” she muttered, tightening her grip on *Resolution*. The pieces all fell together. She wanted to weep, but she would not in front of Lord Theodore. “He came for this. They were all butchered for this.” She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. “Lord Arthur did not trust me to retrieve it, perhaps thinking that I thought as my father did. He did not doubt that when he let us go, and if I knew you had this ...”

“You were better off not knowing.”

It would have been all too easy to spill Lord

Theodore's blood. She knew if she did that, rivers of blood would waft through the settlement, hers not least of all. "Lord Arthur let us flee, not for mercy or vengeance, but that he knew that you possessed it. You and him both are fools if you think King Adrian will not stir."

"Justine, he must never find it. You and I can keep it out of his reach. You can be by sword and shield; I will do what your father could never do."

Instinctively, Justine placed the crystallized rock into a satchel on her hip. Rage seared across Lord Theodore's face. "I am not your puppet, my lord. This is my father's burden. I will see it through." She sheathed *Resolution*.

"You do not understand it!" Lord Theodore shouted. "Will you throw away what your father died for?!"

Justine backhanded the lord, bloodying his face. "I warned you to watch your words. I shall not do so again." She turned her back to him.

The hall tensed; none danced, and the nobles stood with mouths agape, though some of the women huddled together. The guard stood with swords drawn, and Amerie and Marcus looked to her hopefully, and Brennon stood further beyond, brow creased. "Command them to stand down, Ser Brennon," Justine said flatly.

The silence was palpable. She did not loose her gaze from Ser Brennon. The knight was loyal, faithful, but she saw a doubt boiling.

"Justine," Brennon said loudly and sternly. "I vowed to serve a kingdom blessed by the Mother. If the Mother ever blessed Trecht, She no longer does. I swore my sword and shield to you, and no tyrant will ever change that.

"Guard," Brennon commanded, "stand down."

No one moved. It seemed like no one barely breathed.

"Living or dead, she dooms us," Lord Theodore said hoarsely. "Stand down." Slowly the guard backed to the walls, still and silent.

"You shall answer to one more matter, Lord Theodore," Justine said without turning to him. She did

not want to see his face again. "Father Curtis Lakin."

"Flee before I reconsider," the lord replied harshly.

Grasping *Resolution* once more, she suddenly noticed a robed man being pushed through a side door. If the fabric was white once, it long faded to grey; there was no warmth to the man's face, traded for soot. "Mercy!" he shouted. "Mother's mercy! Mother's mercy!"

"Father Curtis," Justine said, running to him. A noble dressed in a red and gold doublet pushed him one more time, but she caught him before he fell. "What have they done to you?"

"Little that shall not heal, Lady Justine. There are others."

"Take them all," Lord Theodore commanded from behind. "Ser Brennon knows where they are held. Take your knights. Take your father's obsession. Take the priests. The next I see you, Justine Deuvers, I shall not be merciful."

Justine threw the priest's right arm over her shoulder, turning briefly to the lord. "When next I see you, you and Lord Arthur both shall pay a blood price." Lord Theodore screamed at her, but she ignored him, trudging out of the lodge.

Justine did not halt until the boughs of the northern forest covered the sky.

Dismounting Red, she helped Father Curtis out of the litter, resting him against the bole of a tree. She placed blankets over him and dug out a fire pit. It blazed soon, and many others of the Faith huddled together.

"We will not go unnoticed for long," Amerie said to Justine. "If they pursue us, they will know where we are from a mile off."

"They will not give chase," Justine said, drifting her fingers over the crystallized rock in her satchel. "If Lord Theodore wanted to, he could have slain us in the lodge. He let us live."

"Do not play his game Justine, whatever it is."

*I have no inkling of what he wants. "A knight at every*

gathering, Amerie. See that no one hungers. We will ride at first light. The forest must divide us before long." Amerie nodded and bounded away.

"You still defend us," Father Curtis said unsteadily; he reached his hands out to feel the breath of the flames. "Once more you are our voice when we cannot speak. The Mother sent you to lead us, guide us. I know it is so."

Justine simply stared into the flames. She would not deny it openly; the father needed hope and trust more than aught else. Her purpose in this land was at the mercy of schemes and plots of men like Lord Theodore and Gabriel.

After a time, Father Curtis asked, "Where will you lead us?"

"South," she said suddenly, seeing no reason to hide it. "Past a great stretch of forest is an endless grassland, cradled by mountains to the west, with rivers and life criss-crossing. There we can build. There we can begin anew."

"If no one comes for us, child."

"If someone comes," she said frowning, "they will regret it."

The priest shuffled, seemingly agitated. "In all my years, child, I thought that devotion to the Mother would be all that I needed. Her succor would shield the faithful 'gainst all injustices." He sighed. "The king and his lords, and now Lord Theodore, who I thought was a friend first, and a faithful comrade second. These men, they have made a ruin of that trust."

"I have learned that I do not know anyone," Justine offered. "I did not know the king, but my father loved and trusted him, vain as that proved to be. Lord Arthur was always a dear friend to me, until he sent Ser Gerold to slay all of you. So much has come to pass, I do not know myself any longer."

"I do," the priest said strongly. A smile spread across his face. "You may have left us before Winter, but you came back. Faith, mayhap, but you came back; and when you saw what Lord Theodore had wrought, you could

not stand by it. You showed your heart, then. You showed it to all of us."

*Is that my oath, my vows, or because I need them?*

"The white and silver shall not ward us any longer," Father Curtis said suddenly. "Some of us, I see now, must take up steel. Will you teach them, child?"

The question sloughed off her as water to a stone.

"Or are you undecided, still?"

The priest's shoulders sagged, dejected. Justine shook her head. "I know what I must do. I did not think my path would weave this way."

The priest pointed a finger to the others of the Faith, huddled close, shivering, still stinking of shite and urine. "We are all no different, child. We pray more fervently to the Mother than you, and that is all that separates us. We had imagined a much different fate, but we must band together, or meet the Lord of Death."

The moniker echoed in her mind. Gabriel had spoken of the Dark God so easily, as if it was such a simple matter, as if Sariel awaited in the shadows. *No, his words are lies. All of them. I will not be his puppet.* "I will train as many as I can with the sword, but only those who are willing. We will settle all matters."

Father Curtis offered a brief smile, before rubbing his arms once more. "You have not asked after Irwin Kole."

"He is with the other traders, impoverished, in the settlement. I wish we had time to root them all out."

"Another lie."

Justine tensed. "Lord Theodore spoke many lies, but I doubt he lied about that."

The priest shrugged. "He did, though it is true enough, yet false under the Mother's gaze. Not long after the first ships arrived, Lord Theodore acted against the Faith, but even in the gaols we heard whispers from the guards. Irwin Kole had fled the settlement, with a score of men and women who laboured in the granaries. The guard did not give chase."

*Brennon, she thought, looking into the night. We will have words. Why did you hide that from me? "Where did he*

flee?"

"A gaol has no windows, and its door is guarded tightly."

The priest fell to silence, and Justine brushed the jagged edges of the crystallized rock inside her satchel. It was dull and silent; its tingle that once was so strong, drifted to endless distance. She wanted to withdraw it, and ask Father Curtis about it, but she thought too much had come to pass.

Yet she knew a day would dawn when she could trust him with the knowledge of it, and she hoped he would provide answers.

Reaching to her left, she tossed a couple logs on the fire; the embers hissed and blazed, the light brightening. Half of the faithful around the fire were lying down sleeping, the others struggled to stay awake, taking in the warmth and the heat.

Father Curtis' eyes were shutting, and Justine pushed him to the ground, re-arranging his blankets. He shut his eyes before long.

Justine stood and walked a few paces north, escaping the bough roofs, gazing at the stars above. The Faith had always claimed that the wayward souls of the dead drifted to the Unseen Realm, above, invisible to mortal eyes. She thought that perhaps the twinkling of stars were the unseeing gazes of that realm, and that her father was looking down at her.

*Father, she thought solemnly, hands clenched. If I have not been lied to, I hold the treasure that cost you your life. Your friends, the men you trusted, they are both cruel and careless. Lord Theodore brought so much death with the very act that you did. Whilst Lord Arthur must have known Lord Theodore possessed it, and let us leave with it; and the path that set me upon, that may lead to a fate I never imagined.*

*As a knight, Father, I must protect the Faith, but there is so much I do not know. How am I to choose?*

If the Unseen Realm lingered above, it gave no answer.

Instinctively, Justine looked to the west. Naught stood but endless forest, though she knew Gabriel would still

be there, plotting and scheming.

*They are all liars and schemers,* she thought sullenly before returning to camp. She buried herself in blankets and went to sleep.

