

THE INDOMITABLE  
A DAUGHTER'S  
BURDEN

A SHORT STORY IN THE ANCIENT  
VESTIGES SERIES

BY  
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# SYNOPSIS

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Justine spars with Ser Marcus in front of a crowd of warrior priests – the defenders of the newly raised city of Dale. There are troubles that Justine must see to, but it is not until the arrival of a guest that she plunges towards a darkened future.



# A DAUGHTER'S BURDEN

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*August 15, 14511*

Justine parried Ser Marcus' overbearing blow, smiling all the while.

Sliding to her knees, the lanky knight stumbled, sprawling face first into the mud. The warrior priests gathered in the training yard chuckled and pointed at the knight, but Justine kept her eyes on Marcus. She knew that the fight was not done.

The knight surged to his feet, swinging viciously. Justine kept her feet square, held up her round shield, and though the reverberations shook her arm, she held firm. Marcus began to tire, and she swung her practice sword to the far left and right of the knight, forcing him to labour hard with every parry and block.

Justine relented and took a few steps back; she saw Marcus' face tense, disbelief marring it. *Desperation will rule his next act*, she thought whilst pacing about the pit, shield upright, sword loose in her right hand.

The knight lunged to Justine's right; she parried the blow, countered, and met the heart of Marcus' shield. He grinned and pushed her back with shield held out. *Heh, he is using his reach, but that will leave him exposed*, she thought before ducking down, taking his feet from underneath, and holding her sword at his throat.

Cheers and applause followed. Sheathing her practice sword, Justine gave her hand to Marcus, helping him up and embracing him. "You did well, Marcus."

“I will see the yard more, until I can best you, Justine.”

She smiled at him. Marcus was not the strongest knight she trained—he depended far too much on his lanky frame—but when he tightened his stance, there would be few more formidable. “Not long now.”

The assembly of warrior priests—mostly men, but some women stood amongst the number—still looked on eagerly, eyes wide. It was if they doubted that a much larger foe could be bested. *Every foe is larger and stronger than you. I learned that long ago.*

Justine smiled before addressing them. “Know your foe. The men and women you encounter in the field cannot be felled with the same approach. Ser Marcus is tall and lanky; few men, if any, I have seen with a longer reach and with such strength. If you cannot match his frame, then you must rely on your speed and agility.”

The number muttered fervently, and a few of the taller men stretched out their arms.

“Yet, do not depend upon that: the same stratagem would leave you a bloody mess if their speed equals yours. Your technique, your sword forms, and in some cases your strength, shall win you the day, and perhaps all who dwell in Dale.

“More than that—and do mark this, my friends—your minds must be sharper than your steel, and quicker than your feet.”

The warrior priests bobbed their heads and whispered furtively to one another. Yet Justine’s eye wavered to the distance, where a tall woman sauntered forth: her short blonde hair reflected with the sun, though her pressed doublet of white and gold seemed at odds with the sheathed longsword at her waist.

*Lady Amerie*, Justine thought, but addressed the attendant warrior priests. “No more gawking. Ser Marcus will see to the sparring for the afternoon. Be about it.”

Marcus shouted commands at the gathering until they dispersed. Amerie brushed through the crowd and leaned forward on the wooden fence, offering a slight smile, almost forced.

"The news is not good?" Justine asked as she stepped over the fence. "Lord Theodore has returned to this land?"

"No, Justine, but not that much more comforting," Amerie said, shrugging her shoulders. "The priesthood complains endlessly, decrying us and the masons for their unfinished cathedral." She paused a moment, her voice tense. "They are convinced their faith will keep us safe — not the walls that are not near tall enough. I fear they will wield more than words, soon."

Justine looked about her. The clangor of dulled steel against wood and iron echoed endlessly, but not loud enough for her comfort. The less who knew of these matters, the better. "And what has Father Curtis to say?" she asked quietly, leading Amerie through the training yard, towards the clump of stone homes beyond. "He will temper their fervor, lest he has foresworn his oath."

"If you demand it, but no other," Amerie said harshly but quietly. "'All is lies in accordance with the Mother's wishes,' or so he tells me. Justine, I know you must see to our defenses, but if these priests are not leashed, we will dwell in a ruin, whether Lord Theodore returns or no."

Listlessly, Justine gazed towards the training pits. The warrior priests laboured heavily, sweat dripping down their foreheads. Most had stood their ground, but a handful were covered in mud; howsoever they fared, they each stood, their eyes glimmering with resolve. *No, Amerie has read it wrong. They will not forget what Lord Theodore did to them, and the risk I took. It is subjugation they fear, and that I shall never inflict on them.*

"Justine?" Amerie asked suddenly, holding the gate open to Dale proper. "The priests —"

"Will stay true, my friend. If it puts your mind at ease, I shall speak to Father Curtis at the banquet tonight."

Amerie inclined her head slightly, but Justine knew her friend was not satisfied. O'er the long years, the knight had doubted much, even when ordered to keep silent. *There is something else, too, but she will not share it under the sun.*

Eastward rows of small stone houses sprawled in the distance, dirt roads weaving in between. The yards were small, no more than the a few strides, but clothes lines hung between the fences and the homes, tunics and breeches drying under the warm day.

The sun had passed its midday height. Much of the priesthood and the wayward travelers who made their way south were northward, moving marble to their cathedral, or south, beneath the cliffs, working away at the harbour. Yet a few still walked the dirt streets, their heads held high, smiling, affording slight bows to Justine. She smiled in turn and placed her hand on their shoulders as she passed.

"This banquet," Amerie said after a time, "you know what is truly is, Justine?"

"Of course I do," Justine replied simply, smiling at middle-aged priest who clasped a black leather book firmly to his chest. "Father Curtis wants the men and women who he trusts to meet with me, to become familiar. They are another foe, just not one we will meet with sword and shield."

"Do not give into them, Justine, we are hard pressed as it is, and if—"

"Not here, Amerie," Justine said curtly with a smile. She suspected what her friend wanted to say, dreaded it. "In private."

"As you say, Justine."

The dirt road stretched on, and Justine saw an old woman leaning out a first-floor window, gazing suspiciously at a young boy and girl, who giggled as they ran.

"See those pair of younglings, Amerie?" Justine asked, pointing to the boy and a girl, who she saw were racing towards a discarded hoop. "These priests insist upon their faith, but that innocence, that is what they covet. So long as children run free without a care, the pact will hold." She paused and sighed. "They recall the fear of Lord Theodore and do not wish a return to the gaols and servitude; and they know apart, that is what awaits

them."

Amerie shook her head. "They have faith, Justine, until belief in our steel and iron fades." The knight paused, looking to and fro, then began whispering softly. "The priests are sheep, whimsically obeying the will of their shepherd. But what will pass when the wolves encroach upon the green, and they feel the need to defend themselves? They will flee, trusting to the Mother's judgment, and where will that lead us?"

Justine passed by the boy and girl, smiling at them, though they simply ran away with the hoop. "I am their shepherd, and I will not fail them. Not again." The guilt of the past kept her up on so many sleepless nights. Lord Theodore subjugated so many because she decided to flee, escaping the politics and in-fighting. It was cowardice, and she would not waver again. "And they know that to be true, Amerie."

"I trust to your judgment, as I always have."

Justine turned north, down a narrow street much like the rest, though at its end stood a home slightly taller than the rest with a walled in garden and a sapling to the east. She did not want a grand home, but Father Curtis had insisted on it. "We shall need wine for the rest," she said opening the door.

The ground floor had no rooms or antechambers, and Justine had adorned the walls with long swords, great swords, claymores, halberds, and two-handed axes. A wide hearth stood upon the eastern wall, with couches and chairs gathering around it. Justine leaned her scabbarded longsword, *Resolution*, against a tall backed chair. "Sit, Amerie."

Striding across the floor, she retrieved pewter goblets from a cupboard and poured two glasses of white wine. "From the vineyards, out to the east. Brennon swears by it," she said whilst handing Amerie a goblet.

The knight took in the aroma, smiled slightly, and took a long sip. "If I had known Brennon had any taste for wine, I would have accepted his courtships years ago."

"Brennon?" Justine asked coyly, slumping down in a chair. "You have not shared this with me before."

Amerie went beet red. "I, er, he tried to woo me when we were squires. He had a charm about him, and ..."

"He brandished his sword and you thought it uncouth?"

"H-his swordsmanship is, uh, it fared, Justine, do we not have other matters to attend, besides Brennon's, um, prowess?"

Justine smiled; it had been too long since she thought of any man that way. She suspected it of Brennon, but duty did call and decided not to press her friend on the matter. *Not yet, anyway.* "The northern fortifications?"

"It meets our eastern and western walls, but that is all that can be said for it," Amerie began, her smile slowly fading while staring into the hearth. "It is no more than waist high. Marcus has worked the masons hard, and he dare not relent. The autumn storms will not be kind to us, so close to the sea."

Justine took a sip of the white wine. She did not look forward to the conversation with Father Curtis, the northern wall low as it was. "You do me no favours tonight. The cathedral will not stand until next Spring, if that."

"There is no helping that." Amerie placed her goblet on the floor, and turned to Justine. Her deep blue eyes glimmered, but her brow creased with worry. "And it is not the end of our difficulties."

"Lord Theodore," Justine mused. All the months since the early Spring had been quiet, but for what the lord lost, his wounded pride, he would not stay away for long.

"The settlement is deserted," Amerie said solemnly. "No nobles. No traders. They are all gone."

"East. They have gone east."

"Where else could they go, Justine? That is not what worries me."

*Nor I.* "The lords that assisted Lord Theodore. They took them east. The king must know by now that we are here. That may embolden more of Lord Theodore's allies."

We have a foe upon either side.”

“And,” Amerie began sullenly, “a priesthood who thinks a cathedral will shield them. Strong arms will shield them. We will shield them. Father Curtis must see that, but it will not be enough.”

Justine swallowed the last of her white wine. “You want to look for Irwin Kole?”

“If Father Curtis is to be believed, the trader did flee without Lord Theodore’s knowledge. If we had any allies in Trecht, they will not reach us any longer. Irwin Kole, the men and women who love him, they would fight for us, for you, if Lord Theodore holds a sword ‘gainst our throats.”

“I do not doubt that he does.” Justine said, and her eyes drifted to an iron banded chest to the left of the hearth. A heavy iron padlock locked it, but she knew the crystallized stone stirred within. It lay dormant and still, but it never left her mind. Reluctantly, she drew her gaze from it; buried as it was, she did not want to hear its call. “Take only who you can trust. Leave at night fall.”

“By your leave,” Amerie intoned and she left.

Justine rose when Amerie took her leave, walking to a low table near the front-facing window. She unrolled a worn parchment, revealing a map of Dale, or what it would look like when the masons had finished their work. She stabbed the corners with slender, ornate daggers.

Looking to the west, where the training yard lay, armories, forges, and barracks were marked behind it, though unfinished. She traced her finger eastward, where lanes of homes criss-crossed, but far fewer than stood at present, reaching towards open swaths of land nestled against the eastern fortifications. *There shall be no lords or noble get, but magistrates must hear cases of law and justice. I still do not know who should head such a charge, but there we will build their halls, blessed by steel and faith.*

Her finger drifted southward, towards the end of the cliff, and the natural harbour beneath. Three months past, the workers completed docks and landings, and a

handful of priests whose families had been shipwrights constructed long boats and small galleys. *Our strength at sea – frail as it is – remains just as strong as arms with steel. More, we have learned much more about Lord Theodore, and when he returns, the ships will provide warning. It must be stronger, even if the priests do not understand it.*

Then her eye drifted to the northern gate, and just towards the right, a crude, stunted building with the words *Cathedral of Light* was writ across it. By night a score of the masons slowly built it, but it remained little more than a foundation. *The Light is their shield, but they must wait. The Mother forgive me.*

Suddenly the front door swung open. An older man with greying hair stood in the doorway, leaning heavily on a cane—or staff— Justine was not certain. Instinctively, she withdrew a dagger from the table.

The man sauntered in, met her eyes, and said, “I am unarmed and alone. You will have no use for that.” He pointed dismissively at her raised dagger.

“I warned you that the blood debt was not paid, Lord Arthur.” She did not lower the steel.

“The girl I raised would not slay an unarmed man.”

Justine stiffened. “That was long ago. You are a butcher, no less than the king. None of my knights would mutter injustice if I cut your throat.”

“They might,” Lord Arthur protested, walking towards the hearth. “Do put a fire in the hearth, for an old man.”

Justine gripped the hilt of the dagger hard, her knuckles whitening. Rivers of blood flowed in the streets of Trank on account of the lord and the wretched king he served. Yet Lord Arthur had sat where Amerie did, resting his cane against the chair.

She wanted to cut his throat.

“I am not your father, but I raised you better than this,” Lord Arthur said flatly. “Even in the late summer, these old bones need warmth.”

*It is only for what you were, my lord.* Justine sheathed the dagger at her waist, tossed logs into the hearth, and

struck flint and tinder until it blazed.

"A warmth I have missed," the lord mused, a smile skirting across his face. "I am not a man of the sea."

"Why are you here?" Justine demanded, uncaring for whatever discomforts the lord had suffered. The lord simply stretched his bony hands out, and she slammed into her seat, grasped *Resolution's* scabbard, baring an inch of steel.

Lord Arthur turned suddenly, glancing at the steel before meeting her eyes. "Jonas never raised steel to me, but you are so much like him. He did not understand the politics of the court, and he is dead. Lord Theodore, hmm, he did, and remains alive, but mayhap not for long."

"If you have come here to taunt, my lord —"

"I have not," he snapped. "I came to your city disguised as a hopeless traveler, as so many have done before. I am unarmed, my escort is leagues away, and I have much to say. I know better than to taunt."

Slowly, Justine slid her steel back into the scabbard and leaned it against the chair once more. "Why have you come, *my lord*?"

Lord Arthur shifted in his seat, but his cold eyes never left her. "The king has learned what passed in the Spring."

Justine's eyes shot to the chest, and she cursed herself for it. When she turned back to the lord, he smirked. "And you confirmed it for me."

"It is my father's burden," she professed. "It is no concern of yours."

Lord Arthur rapped his cane upon the floor. "Then you understand less. Your father did not act alone. 'Tis all our burden: yours, your father's, mine, and Lord Theodore's."

Justine laughed. "Lord Theodore, all he sees is power and subjugation. He is no more than a thief whose recklessness ambitions breeds death."

"While not entirely untrue," Lord Arthur said solemnly, "your father and I were not the only ones who knew of the crystalline stone that you now possess. Lord

Theodore was a trusted advisor to the king, far before that curse was ever found. Yet when it came to the king, we were all there. We saw it. We heard the whispered name—God Stone—and we watched as King Adrian changed.”

“Changed?” Justine asked. The crystalline stone spoke to her, but she pushed it out. It was the words of Gabriel, and she did not trust it. *But did the king ...*

“Yes, changed,” the lord replied. “The king was not always cruel and hard. He was kind, caring, almost like the priests you protect. He sat in judgment of knights, peasants, and nobles. More than once the commons called him King Adrian the Just, but that was so long ago.

“Whence the king grasped the God Stone, he seldom took advice or counsel. Petitions came as they once did, begging for judgment; the king took the life’s blood of the accused and the accuser for the simplest matters. It was not long before the lesser lords quavered at summons, and even I walked the castle with trepidation.

“Before long your father cracked. He summoned Lord Theodore and myself in secret, laying out his intentions to take the God Stone from the king, but he needed our help to see it away. I urged him not to give into such foolishness, that our duty was to our king, but Lord Theodore, he did not agree: he pushed your father, even hired mercenaries to aid him in the theft.

“I warned, I warned him what would come of this. I warned him that your life would be forfeit, but he insisted on it. The fool pressed on. I distanced myself from the pair of them, but did not speak a word. I did not know what his plots entailed, only that they faltered, and that Lord Theodore was guiltless.”

“Guiltless?” Justine exclaimed, unable to contain her anger. Not at the claim, but that Lord Theodore professed months back that he did not act when her father did. She did not want to share that with Lord Arthur. “The mercenaries, and, he had the stone when we fled!”

“I could never convince Lord Theodore to share what went wrong, and Jonas would only say that his death

would bring the change we always wanted, but he made me promise to shield you from all this. I did."

*Father, why did you not ...* she thought solemnly, letting the words trail off. Lord Arthur still stared at her. "You want the God Stone?"

"I would not have that trinket near the king," he replied, shaking his head. "You must keep it hidden, keep it secret, but that is where your peril lies."

"Speak plainly," Justine demanded.

Lord Arthur sighed, staring into the hearth as the words spilled out. "Undoubtedly you are aware that Lord Theodore sailed east, lest your scouts mire you in ignorance."

"I took your lessons to heart, my lord."

"That is well," he said. "Not all the lords who flocked to Lord Theodore's banner are as loyal as he may think. There are a few who listen intently, then send birds to Trank. The land to the east is flat with green plains stretching through the Summer, but at its heart is a sea of mountains, and within its depth, is a treasury of ore and metal. Lord Theodore mines those mountains, crafting weapons, armour, and engines of war, all whilst huddling in caves. He will return, and it shall not be long in coming."

Justine leaned forward in disbelief. Lord Theodore's return was inevitable, but Lord Arthur's words made it so real. *Our defenses are not ready. Will he risk the Autumn storms?* "Last winter Ser Brennon trained a guard for the lord. Not for war, but they shall be more than nobles with expensive steel."

"More than you can surmise," the lord intoned solemnly. "That guard is more than just the sons of nobles that Ser Brennon trained. The eastward ships brought mercenaries and bandits. Lord Theodore commands an army, steeled to the teeth."

"How soon?" Justine asked, trying to push away her fears. The warrior priests were far from ready—unprepared to battle legions of mercenaries. "How soon will they be on my shores?"

"I do not know," Lord Arthur replied, his eyes transfixed on the roaring flames. "None of the whisperers are within his inner council, but he will not wait long."

Moments passed in silence. Justine looked to the bent lord. He looked so tired, a shell of what he was, but she would not let his sins be washed away. "The blood debt is not paid, for this warning."

Lord Arthur shrugged his shoulders. "I am not your enemy, Justine, whatsoever you may think."

"Whatsoever I may think, Lord Arthur?!" she shouted. "I shall not forget that you shielded me for my father's crimes, raised me, set me upon the path of knighthood. Yet under your orders, Ser Gerold was sent to that gathering, where I was sent, and I—"

"Did you ever stop to consider why I sent you there?"

The only reason Justine could recollect was the order: to ascertain the names of all who planned to act against the king and bring them before the crown for judgment. *Is that what he meant, or ...* "What did you scheme? And why could you not tell me?"

"I have always trusted you, Justine," the lord said, and his cold eyes seemed to lessen. Warmth suffused those eyes—the warmth that she took comfort in for so many long years. "Yet if word reached the wrong ears, then my shield would crumble and you with it. I nearly lost my head for permitting you to leave the kingdom. It was a risk worth taking. King Adrian must never have the God Stone."

"Lord Theodore," she began quietly, "professed the very same words to me."

"For all that he has done, he has not lost his wits. Small mercies."

Justine shifted in her seat, though never averted her eyes from the lord, the man who raised her. But that's not who she saw: only the catspaw of a mad king, willing to swim in a sea of blood. "You told me all this, so that I could slay Lord Theodore?"

"Send his head in a crate across the ocean, and the king shall not chase you."

Longingly, her eyes drifted towards the chest containing the crystalline stone. Sighing, she said, "the king will forget about what was stolen?"

"That—I have taken care of."

"Lord Arthur."

"If you do not trust me, Justine, trust to the oath that I swore your father."

It was not enough. The man who raised her was dead. "Return to the king, Lord Arthur."

"Will you—"

"Return to the king!"

The lord slowly rose, his cane pounding the floor like some deafening echoes of a giant that long since faded. He opened the door halfway, turned a moment, and said, "I am not your enemy, Justine." Then he left.

Darkness seemed to swell. Justine glanced to the back facing window: the sun fell to a dull inflection on the horizon. "The banquet, not long now" she said softly, rising to light the candles around the chamber.

The dull glow of the candles seemed to push away at the encroaching dark. Kneeling before the hearth, she threw logs on it, and the fire sizzled and cracked. Gazing into the flames, she wondered where this would end. *The only words I truly believed flittered from both their lips: the crystalline stone must be kept from the king. And from Lord Theodore. What strength do we have to preserve that end? We are not strong enough. I am not strong enough. I must be ... I must ...*

"Always like your father," a voice rasped.

"Who is there?! Lord Arthur?!" she called out, withdrawing *Resolution* from its scabbard, pacing around, but only darkness lay in the shadows.

"Lord Arthur? A man who plays a game with sovereigns, the wealthy, even those he confesses to love. No, I am not Lord Arthur."

"Show yourself!"

"So that you can shove that steel into my flesh? I think not."

Frustrated, Justine held *Resolution* aloft. "No more

games!”

“As you wish.”

The steel of *Resolution* looked as if it was on fire, and the searing heat cascaded down the blade. Justine shrieked as pain laced through her hand, as if a hot pincer seared it. She dropped her sword, and it turned to ashes upon striking the floor.

“That, that was —”

“An heirloom,” the harrowing voice responded. “It is of no use in what is to come.”

From the corner of her eye a light seemed to grow, and a cacophony of cascading voices filled her ears. There were so many, she could not make heads or tails of their words, but her gaze was drawn to the iron banded chest. The light came from within it. The padlock fell off, and as she opened it, the crystalline stone shone with a blinding illumination.

“Shall you lay eyes upon me once more?” the voice asked, taunting. “You shan’t forget it, not this time.”

Justine wanted to ignore the voice, reject the command, but she grasped the crystalline stone and the light threaded across her flesh. It seemed to cut and tear, but soothed every hurt and cut. Then the illumination grew, until it filled her sight.

“There, you see it, do you not?” the voice asked. “The Mother’s Light cascading, but that is not all, is it? Darkness dwells even in Her heart.”

The Light never dulled, but in the distance stood a man in robes, his back turned. Not in Dale, no Justine was sure of that, but in a darkened place lit by failing torches; she thought it a memory of what was, but so strikingly familiar.

The man took steps in the distance towards a stunted pedestal, reached out, before plunging a gloved hand through the dark, grasping at nothingness.

Justine knew what it was. Where it was. She closed her eyes, refusing it.

“If you shall not help me,” the voice declared, “perhaps *he* will.”

A barren plain unravelled in front of her, a towering black mountain soared above. The dead littered the field, all save for a man in a sewn doublet, clasping an unseen object, laughing and smirking.

“Lord Theodore!”

The Light dissipated. The crystalline stone rested in her palm, dull and dormant.

“Gabriel!” Justine shouted, convinced he was no longer satisfied with waiting. “Is this what you want? Is that what that vision was? Will it come sooner if I reject you? Is my penance all that death? Tell me!”

Silence hung in the air.

She fingered the crystalline stone, nearly pricking herself on its jagged edges. *So much trouble for so little a thing*, she thought and gripped it hard, her blood flowing over it. *Lord Theodore would slay every man and woman for it. Lord Arthur would pretend it does not exist. And Gabriel. Gabriel. You would ...* she let the words trail off, and thrust the crystalline stone into a satchel at her waist.

Striding across the chamber, she opened a tall cabinet and slung a long bow and quiver over her shoulder, and cinched a sword belt to her waist, a sword breaker and a short sword hung from the leather. Then she strode to the wall and took a scabbarded claymore, strapping it down her back. *It is not Resolution, but it will suffice.*

She stormed out her door, and ran towards the stables near the western gate. Voices, faint and trailing, called after her, but she did not care. Not until she roused the stable boys to saddle Red. They obeyed without a word.

Leaning against the barn door, she patted the crystalline stone through the satchel at her waist, cursing it, cursing the boys who took so long.

“Lady Justine, your horse, my lady.”

She snatched the reins from the lad, and he sprinted back into the stable, muttering inaudibly. Mounting Red in one smooth step, she kicked the horse into a canter, leaving the city behind.

*Whoever you are, Gabriel, your plots and schemes shall come to an end. I am not yours – nor any man’s – catspaw.*

*You shall swim in the sea of blood that you so crave.*