



BLIGHT OF THE ARACHNA

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Sample

Toriath was, in a word, drab. The village consisted only of grey stone and brown dirt, and anything that was once colourful had either been destroyed or repurposed. That was half the reason Castor didn't mind delivering food to the watchers atop the wall, even though his legs burned with each treacherous step he climbed.

His job would have been much easier if the stairs had been made properly. Instead, each one varied in height and width, and many slanted downward. There was no rail or balustrade; he had to dig his fingers into crumbling, mortar-filled divots that held together chunks of stone to keep some semblance of balance. And, to make things worse, he had to climb with a sack of food hoisted over his shoulder. It wasn't heavy, per se, but it swung with each step he took and threatened to topple him backwards.

If I fell from this height, I would probably die, he thought morbidly, as he often did while climbing. The idea didn't fill him with as much dread as it probably should have. Of all the likely causes of death he now faced, this would probably be the

most pleasant. Alas, like every morning, he made his way to the top unharmed.

“Castor! Oi, Castor’s here!” The watchers on top of the wall rushed towards him, or, more specifically, the sack he carried. With a pained grin, Castor set it on the stone as gently as he could, released the drawstring and began distributing lunches to the starving men and women who had been sitting in the merciless sun since dawn.

His warm reception was the other half of the reason Castor didn’t mind this chore. It felt good to be someone that people looked forward to seeing every day. It alleviated some of his guilt and shame.

Castor couldn’t perform the same important, manual labour that many of his peers were tasked with. He had tried of course, but both the overseer in the tunnels and the farmhouse manager told him, in the most diplomatic way they could, that Castor was just too weak.

He protested these claims as strongly as he could without sounding like a brat. “If I swing a pick or a hoe long enough, I’ll grow stronger eventually, right?”

Apparently, that wasn’t good enough. The overseers were quick to shove other, more *suitable* chores onto him. If he wanted to help so much, he could fetch some buckets for water, right? Or rub pitch into fraying ropes? Or pick weeds?

Dohn, who was a village official and one of the most educated people in the village, gave a more coherent reply. “Hard work doesn’t make you stronger. Proper nutrition after hard work is what actually helps you gain muscle. Without that, you’ll only become weaker.”

And that was the crux of the matter. Everything came back to that one issue; the villagers had no food, which was immediately apparent when examining the meals Castor just distributed.

“Oho, dried fish! And tubers? A feast! Lord Tolam is generous today,” a portly man laughed. It was sarcasm, but good-natured. In a famine, there was no room for real animosity between villagers unless someone wasn’t doing their share of work. The leader of the village, Lord Tolam, tried to emphasize unity as a solution to the ever-present terror and uncertainty that gripped each of his subjects.

“A thousand blessings on him! And Castor too, who flew up

to the wall to deliver this meal with all haste. Truly magnificent, clearly a herald of the gods himself!"

Castor chuckled sheepishly at the praise, exhaustedly dropping onto the rough stone a bit harder than he intended, judging from the ache in his tailbone. "Hello, Bil," he panted, brushing away a strand of thick hair that clung to the side of his face with sweat.

Bil was once a cobbler, although the boisterous man rarely had the chance to practice his trade anymore. Looking around, Castor noticed that nearly all the watch was comprised of ordinary townsfolk. "Where are the other guards?"

"Preparing for a sea hunt," said Marian, the only member of the Noble Guard present. Castor's eyes lit up. A sea hunt was the most exciting thing that could happen in Toriath nowadays.

"When's it going to happen?" he asked eagerly.

Marian rolled her eyes. "Boys, I swear," she muttered to no one in particular. "Don't get too excited. It's not until tomorrow."

Castor wasn't too let down. It wasn't like he'd be any busier tomorrow than he was today. Marian still watched him with an eyebrow raised.

"You know, you really shouldn't watch those."

"It's okay, really!" Castor said hastily, trying to placate her. "I watch them from the roof of an old building near enough to the beach. But not too near." He corrected himself hastily, realizing that his words might have the opposite effect. "I'm not in any danger and I won't distract the hunting party, is what I'm trying to say."

She sighed. "Yeah, well, that's good. But still, I don't think that's something a kid should watch. It's really dangerous, and if it goes wrong... you shouldn't have to see that."

Castor clipped his budding frustration with a deep breath. His sister said the same thing often, and he knew that it was because she cared for him. Marian did too, in the same way any decent person cared for someone they suffered alongside for years.

"I get it. Thank you for your concern." He tried to mask his annoyance. "I'm seventeen years old though. I've watched you all hunt a million times now, and its been months since anyone's gotten even a scratch! Besides, I want to be a Noble

Guard too someday. Shouldn't I watch the Order in action?"

Though his ambition had faded in the face of reality, he still dreamed of joining the prestigious Order of the Noble Guard. Castor used to idolize the wandering Heroes that occasionally passed through the village many years ago, and after they disappeared, his admiration had transferred to the members of the Noble Guard who protected his people from monsters daily.

Marian chuckled. "I bet you think you sounded real mature just now. Only a teenager would think that being seventeen makes you an adult." Despite her levity, there was a sadness in her eyes that Castor couldn't quite place. Maybe it was because she regretted how quickly Castor was forced to grow up. Or maybe it was a fear that he, along with the rest of the village, wouldn't survive long enough for him to realize his dream.

"Oi, herald!" called out Bil. "Why don't you take a little bit of my food? I'm sure you've been running around town all day."

Castor hastily declined the offer. "Oh, no thank you, sir, I just ate." He always made sure to have lunch before this daily task, just so he wasn't tempted to steal from the watchmen on his way to the wall. He wasn't a thief by nature, but starvation did strange things to the mind.

However, even directly after lunch, he still wasn't satisfied. There wasn't enough food to go around for more than two meals a day, and even those were rather meagre. He lived in a constant state of hunger, as did everyone else.

"Sir he calls me!" Bil said raucously. "No need for that, boy. I'm not a guildmaster no more. Not with no guild to master!" Even as the portly man cackled at his joke, many others averted their gaze in discomfort. Most Torians had lost their livelihoods when the village was forced to close its gates, and few were able to laugh about it like Bil could.

"Anyway, take the food!" he continued. "You're a growing boy. You definitely need it more than I!" He laughed again and slapped his rotund belly, which was a shrinking remnant of prosperous days gone by.

Castor still declined but thanked the man profusely. Marian nodded at Bil, who must have heard the boy's optimistic words.

The cobbler was hyperaware of the state of his village. Bil knew his usefulness was dwindling. The population of the

town decreased by the month, and new shoes rarely needed to be made. There was no leather and very little wood to make them out of anyway. Additionally, a lessening population left a surplus of goods, including shoes. His people had much more of a need for a young, fit body.

Castor wasn't aware of the byplay between the two adults; he was too busy catching his breath and appreciating the view from atop the wall. It overlooked a large green field that lay just outside the village, and then further behind that, a wide expanse of forest. In the very far distance, he could just make out the form of Mount Kol and, behind it, faint outlines of the other peaks of Kalival, the great mountain range that split Alaya nearly in half. Though sweltering, the day was beautiful, with just a few puffy clouds in the sky. However, he had no excuse to dawdle further, so the boy excused himself and made the much easier climb back down to the ground level.

In the past, only members of the Noble Guard took up watch duty. Now, the Order just didn't have the manpower, so they had to rely on a rotation of civilian volunteers. They still tried to keep as many members of the guard on the wall as possible, and never less than one. If there was imminent danger, someone who knew protocol and could keep a clear head needed to be there to take charge. This time, it seemed that Marian had drawn the short straw.

Toriath was located on the northern coast of Alaya, the southern continent. Its circular wall, while an eyesore, was a rather impressive construct. It was built as quickly as possible, and its architects were much more concerned with function than form, so they neglected to put any thought into aesthetics or extra features like stairs.

The stone used in its construction was rather special. It formed over the course of centuries when bits of shell calcified and merged together to create a porous rock, which, instead of breaking when struck with enough force, compacted. The stone had been mined off the coast, from large quarries still visible right outside the western side of the wall. When it came to defensible materials, shellstone was one of the most resilient, and it had been the village's saving grace against several opposing armies equipped with siege weapons in the distant past. Now, it protected them from a different form of enemy.

Empty sack in hand, Castor climbed back down the staircase, which led to the main gate, and made his way down the deserted main road. This stretch used to be known as the marketplace, where vendors would sell their merchandise to neighbours and foreigners visiting the village. The market was the first thing a person would see as they walked through the gates, and it was once characterized by its vibrant atmosphere and colourful tent awnings, neither of which were present anymore.

Truthfully, the entire concept of “selling things” and even money in general had fallen to the wayside. Gold was worthless if you couldn’t eat it, and everyone in the village played a vital role in each other’s survival. Besides, there were very few villagers alive still anyway, and those that survived either became very close friends or bitter enemies.

Castor walked down the marketplace until he reached the Keep, which was a massive rectangular building made out of grey shellstone that sat at the dead centre of the village. Instead of entering the building, he circled partially around it and took a right down another street that ran perpendicular to the marketplace. While not as wide, this was another main street that separated two of the four village quadrants.

Toriath was divided into four quadrants based on cardinal directions: southwest, southeast, northwest and northeast. The gate faced true south, so now Castor made his way east to complete his next errand. Soon, he had reached his destination, the Park, which was just before the eastern stretch of the village wall.

As far as parks went, this one was rather disappointing. It was basically just a slightly raised mound, not even ten square meters in diameter. However, the grass was a vibrant, deep green, and the single tree that grew in the centre—the only tree that still existed within the village walls—was large and healthy. It had to be, to support the multiple, heavy bulbs that hung down from its sturdy branches. The largest one was just bigger than his torso and would probably drop soon.

Crouched on the lawn was a woman who seemed to be playing in the grass. Truthfully, she was hard at work, and Castor sat down in the shadow of a building so as not to distract her. She was sprinkling white crystals, which Castor knew to be salt, onto the grass in certain patterns. There was a

triangle around the tree, surrounded by a hexagon. Three more triangles pointed into every other side of the hexagon, the inner tips meeting with each point of the inner triangle. The woman was putting in the finishing touches by using a stencil to place angular runes that filled two gaps left inside the border of the hexagon. Castor couldn't see most of the design from his vantage point, but he was intimately familiar with it.

When the woman completed the matrix, she laid an object at each of the three outermost points of the triangles. Then, she knelt by the tree and withdrew a slip of paper and a flint and iron fire starter from a pouch she wore around her waist. She lit the slip in her right hand on fire, and hastily placed her left on the nearest side of the hexagon, in between two triangles. When the fire had nearly consumed the paper, she dropped it on the line next to her hand.

The paper seemed to explode as the fire consumed it, but in an odd way. The glowing red ember turned a metallic silver and let out a soft pop, almost like when lighting a stream of gas on fire. The woman, expecting it, didn't flinch. In a flash, the same shade of silver rushed out from the point the paper touched, along the lines and to the objects in each triangle. It was difficult to see in the noon sun, but the entire matrix glowed for a moment.

When it stopped, nothing seemed to have changed, but as he looked closely, Castor thought that the blades of grass and the leaves on the tree had become an even deeper green. That was likely confirmation bias though, as the change should be too slight to discern.

The woman seemed to shudder from her kneeling position, and Castor ran over to support her before she could fall face-first into the bark of the tree. Her hair, which was drawn together into six tight buns, roughly dug into his bicep as he tried to hold her steady.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she said to Castor. Her words slurred a bit. "Jus' gimme a sec." The woman was named Jayna, and she was the closest thing the village had to a ritual master. As such, she was considered one of the most important people in the village. She was also Castor's sister.

Jayna had taught her brother a fair bit about her craft. She utilized a type of energy called *ambiance* to grant certain effects or alter the state of her surroundings. *Ambiance* was

named so simply because it was everywhere, freely flowing through all types of matter. At least, it normally did. Centuries ago, humans learned to use rituals, like the one that Jayna just performed, to subjugate ambiance and use it for their own purposes.

The ritual that Jayna conducted was very basic. It drew ambiance from their surroundings into the matrix. Life fed off ambiance, so the trees and grass would grow faster and healthier. However, performing that ritual shouldn't have taken such a heavy toll on Jayna. Castor had assisted her in performing this same ritual every day for almost a year now, but within the last month or so, he noticed that it was affecting her a lot more than it used to. Whenever he tried to ask her about it, she had always played it off as something inconsequential, but today was by far the worst he had ever seen her react to the process.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

His sister gasped against his shoulder, trying to regain her breath, and took several large gulps of water from a skin she had attached to her belt. She seemed to be mulling over how to answer his question.

"Ambiance moves like heat," she finally began. "It drifts slowly from areas of high concentration to areas of low concentration. Each day I drag the ambiance back into this Park, but more and more of it escapes deep underground, out of my reach. A small portion is replenished from the ocean and the forest, but not at the same rate. The amount that the land can no longer supply is taken out of my own body's ambiance stores." She chuckled. "Since I've been doing this every day, I haven't had time to fully recover."

"You need a break!"

"I do," she conceded. She stood up, and Castor rose hastily as well when she swayed a bit. "I'm good, you don't need to hold me up. I've talked to Lord Tolam about it. I was gonna wait for that one to split." She gestured at the largest bulb, which, due to its weight, had pulled the branch close to the ground. Its outer membrane had turned slightly translucent, which was another sign that it was close, and Castor could see something moving inside it. "But I'll still have to conduct these rituals maybe once every other day. I don't know how that will affect the tree's growth though."

Castor took a deep breath and prepared to restart an old argument. “Let me help.”

“No way.”

Realizing no explanation was forthcoming, he set his shoulders and stood as tall as he could. She was the same height, but at least he could meet her in the eyes. “Look, the tree is important. I know that! It’s one of the only reasons we’re able to still feed ourselves! But you can’t do this on your own anymore. Please, let me help!”

“No, you can’t help. This ritual is too difficult for you!” This wasn’t meant as a slight against Castor. Difficulty was one of two metrics used to judge the requirements of rituals. It described the amount of internal ambiance required from the activator to carry out a ritual. The other metric was cost, which referred to the physical items that were needed. While Jayna claimed that the difficulty of this ritual was high, the cost was rather low: three bones from a sea monster killed last month and the salt used to create the matrix.

“No, it’s not, this isn’t a difficult ritual at all!” Castor persisted.

“It is now, moron! Since there’s not enough ambiance in the land, I have to supply the rest of what the tree needs. You can’t hold enough ambiance to do what I need to.”

Since living creatures grew to depend on ambiance, their bodies adapted to hoard the energy within them. So while it flowed into them as easily as it did through anything inorganic or dead, it was a lot slower to leave their bodies. Up to a point, at least. A being could only keep a certain amount of ambiance within themselves, and the size of any individual’s reserves depended on a multitude of factors.

Castor shook his head in disbelief. “You’re only seven years older than me. There’s no way you have that much more ambiance than I do.”

“Yes, I *do*. A person’s capacity doesn’t just depend on age, body type or other physical attributes. It’s something you can train like a muscle. I’ve been doing rituals for so long, my capacity has grown a lot larger. The amount of ambiance that ritual took out of me would have drained you dry, plus some.”

This too was news to Castor. “Why the *hell* didn’t you tell me?” he shouted. “I could have been training earlier! I could have made my reserves big enough to help you!”

“Why the hell do you think I made you practice those channelling rituals?”

That brought him up short. Jayna used to have him perform rituals to seal away some of his body’s ambiance into stones. However, “You made me stop doing that half a year ago! You said I mastered it.”

She sighed wearily. “There’s no such thing as mastering a ritual, it’s just a matter of replication. I wanted you to deplete your reserves, so they could grow back larger. I had you stop when the problems with my rituals began. Even though you were sealing away your own body’s ambiance, it still took some out of our surroundings. I couldn’t afford any waste.”

He didn’t have anything to say to that. Still, it hurt to see his sister, who had raised him since their father died, struggling so much. There had to be something he could do. At the very least, he could start by helping with cleanup.

He went down to the side of the park and picked up a bucket where Jayna had left it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his sister relax, having taken this to mean that their argument was over.

“Why didn’t you bring the other bucket for me?” she asked him.

“Sit down. Please, at least let me do this.” It was fair, so she nodded.

Castor went around the matrix and, to the best of his ability, scooped the salt up as delicately as he could manage. Objects used in rituals became brittle, so the white flakes crumbled under his lightest touch.

Jayna used salt because it was one of the precious few resources they had that was not in short supply. Since the village was situated right next to the ocean, they could evaporate off the water and use the salt for many things, including their rituals. Any powdery material was good for making ritual matrices because it could be shaped and connected easily. Unfortunately, salt was bad for plants, so they tried to clean up as much as possible. Luckily, they had a bit of help.

After resting for a bit, Jayna left and returned with the village’s only livestock, three cows that lived in a pen near the park. They were let out to feed on the verdant pasture, but, as luck would have it, they also loved to lick up salt. Between the

four of them, they were done in under an hour.

As they were about to leave, Castor tried one last time. “Isn’t there some way we could split the cost of the ritual?”

“No, kid. If another person is included in a ritual, the cost is split evenly. You might be able to make it through one, but at that point, why bother? Plus, I just don’t want to take the risk of something happening to you.”

Then, Castor made one last, terrible connection. “Jayna? What happens if you use up too much of your own ambience in a ritual?”

She didn’t answer. He felt like an idiot for never thinking about it before.

He thought of their father, who was the last ritual master. He taught Jayna everything she knew, but he died before he could pass on most of his skills. Castor was eleven at the time and was told that their father had succumbed to a deadly illness. He had never questioned it.

Castor looked at his sister, who took care of him, taught him, and provided for him all his life at the expense of her own well-being. She wouldn’t meet his gaze. He knew then that she was planning to sacrifice her life for the village—for *him*—and there wasn’t anything he could do about it.