

# THE ARCAINE SOLUTION

M.K. TROTT



THE PYNK SPHYNX

*The Arcane Solution*

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# THE ARCAINE SOLUTION

I wake with a gasp, cold and painful. A hacking cough clears my lungs of whatever infested them... Soot, sickness, blood. An attempt to clench my right fist ends in a strange sensation throughout my whole body, along with failure. I don't have a right hand, or lower arm for that matter. Below the elbow, there is simply nothing. It's an old wound, but one I don't remember. Somehow, I have forgotten myself, my name, and this place.

With my remaining hand, I carefully search for other wounds, new or old. There are some lumps and bruises, and small bones crack a little, but they're injuries that don't deserve attention.

I look around. I am surrounded by mist so thick it almost conceals the nearby manor and the tall iron gate around it. The wind engulfs the building in a cloud of cool air from the coast, and suddenly I remember. I am in Somerset, and this is my

manor. Though, I cannot recall why I am outside in the cold and lying on the muddy ground.

As soon as I take a step toward the manor, the mist parts, as if intentionally, to reveal a large fountain that is dry and empty. A masonry masterpiece, the fountain's centre is a flower in bloom, its petals open to the sun, its stem curling around the fountain's circular base. What was once surely beautiful is now withered and dead. The stem has broken off, almost completely.

Inside, the manor is as worn and neglected as the fountain. Everything is well-made, but poorly cared for, if cared for at all; a small fortune of goods untouched for years and left to rot. A thick layer of dust covers the floor and walls, and spider webs connect each corner. Instinctively, I turn and walk up the wide staircase. The first three doors on the second floor are locked, but the fourth is only half closed. Candle flame lights the room.

I step inside slowly, wary of the silence and darkness that corrupts the rest of the manor. It's a bedroom. My bedroom. And I remember...

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That smell. It hushes my dreams and bids me to open my eyes. It beckons. Each morning it lures me from my sleep, and each morning I know I don't want to wake up any other way. I can almost 'see' her scent in the air, like a travelling mist, a rainbow of pleasantries.

A true beauty to behold sits at the vanity table, brushing her raven hair. I stand behind her and place my hands on her shoulders. I try to wake myself from what must surely be a dream. But no, it is real. A truth discovered every morning. This beauty does exist, she isn't just a dream; she is my wife.

“Osmund.”

\*\*\*

My name. I remember it now, and I remember my wife. But there are holes in my memory; there is more I need to remember.

In my memory, the vanity table, and the rest of the bedroom for that matter, was immaculate. However, in the present, the metal frame around the glass is beginning to rust, and my reflection is hidden under a layer of dust and grime. And then I see her scent again, pink and purple, wafting over the bed.

I turn up my palm and try to catch it, but it disappears despite how bright and real it is. I pull back the blanket and find a large iron key. Strange... It's too big for the other doors on this floor of the manor.

Heading back down the stairs, I spot more of my wife's scent floating in the corner of the room. I walk to it. The floral fragrance, somehow an image to my eyes, disappears at my touch. But the door in front of me is large and reinforced with iron bars. The key fits and unlocks it.

Darkness greets me, along with a chill that tumbles down the cold stone to crash into me. My whole body shivers. After dozens of steps, I finally come to the stone corridor's end.

A suit of brown plate armour, complete with sword and shield, stands erected under a beam of moonlight. It looks regal, almost like a relic, shining under the faint blue hue. Like most things in the manor, it's plain this armour has been crafted by a master and would have been expensive to purchase. But the detail that is most striking to me is the damaged right arm that is poorly held together with straps of leather and cloth. Staring at it triggers another memory...

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I charge through the first line of defence knocking those in my way to the ground and trampling two or three men. I spear a knight through the chest with my lance. It splinters on impact. I keep riding, draw my sword, and slash at the soldiers who charge at me from both sides of my horse. Two spearmen thrust their weapons towards my face, both missing their target by mere inches. Booming, I swing my sword upward by the belly of my horse, slashing through the neck and face of the one to my left. The second retracts his spear; readies it for a second thrust. This time I'm ready for the strike. I parry the blow then inch my destrier closer to him, slicing the edge of my sword first through his helmet, then through bone.



Now, at the western tower, I dismount at the stairs and ascend the battlements. Archers firing arrows are unaware of my presence until I slay two of their number. Others turn to face me, either drawing their swords or nocking another arrow. I raise my shield just in time to block a pair of arrows, and cut down another man. The remaining archers leap from the battlements to the main fight on the ground.

Or perhaps they were making way for the heavily armoured Frenchman. Clad in a vivid blue cape, the man wields a two-handed sword, which he raises up high before bringing it down upon me. I block the attack, but my legs buckle under the force.

I slash twice in opposite directions. The first swing misses; the second one barely scratches the surface of his armour. The Frenchman is quick with his next attack. I watch as my sword drops to the floor, slowly as if through water, with my hand still holding onto it.

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The memory releases its grip on me and the pain of old sorrow slowly dissipates. I remember that my squire found me bloody and broken on the battlefield and helped me to escape death at the knight's hands. It's a small comfort to remind myself that even though the Frenchman took my arm, I helped my King to take his city.

A gust of wind blows through the corridor and a small metal gate, located beyond the suit of armour, clangs against the brick wall. Behind this gate, narrow stairs lead further into darkness. The cold within this darkness is something new, something unholy. With my back against the wall, I slide my feet, one at a time, across each step and down to the next. My heart slowly becomes the only sound I can hear, the thumping quickening and threatening to bleed out of my skull.

Eventually, the blackness is disrupted by a faint glow. The chamber is lit by three torches. A fourth torch is lifeless. The flames reveal the chamber to be the crumbled remnants of a crypt. Broken stone is scattered across the floor as if a projectile had been catapulted into the room. Under each torch are finely crafted insignia, though the inscriptions have been intentionally scratched, defaced beyond legibility. I can't help but wonder what could have done this much damage, and in so small a space.

The sound of a chain sliding across the floor makes me jump, then makes my skin crawl. I stare into the black to try and spot it. "Who's there? Show yourself." Slowly, I take one of the torches and hold it in front of me. "Lord, protect me!"

A creature wrapped in chains, which hang freely from its arms to drag along the floor, steps forth. Its pale skin is marked with black circles and its eyes are devoid of any light. By all account, the creature is small, but incites an almost paralysing fear in me. It opens its mouth and emits a high-pitched and tormented scream. "Ah...da!" It screams again.

Even the torchlight recoils from the creature. I turn on my heel and run back up the stairs, knocking down the suit of armour on my way past, crashing it to the ground. Back on the ground floor, I slam the reinforced door shut and lock it, throwing the key to the floor.

I press my ear against the door and listen. Nothing—until the creature screams and starts slamming its chains against the door. My heart shakes the bones in my chest as I thank God the door was made thick and strong. Then I run.

I find myself in the dining hall, an old room made of old wood. A young man is also running, but towards me. He crashes into me and falls to the floor. He picks up his torch, dripping embers onto the floor. “Mi’lord!”

He is my squire, the one who saved my life from the French knight. He’ll be a man soon, and one I’ll be proud to call a knight once he is of age. I offer him my good hand and help him to his feet. “Friend, good friend, can you tell me what’s going on in this place? What is that thing dwelling in the crypt?”

My squire looks at me with a curious expression. “You don’t know, mi’lord? You truly don’t know?”

“I have no memory of many things. Tell me, are we in danger here?”

“I don’t know about you, but I am.”

“What are you saying? Wait. Did you hear that?”

Heavy feet shuffle in the darkness. My squire turns and holds his torch with both hands as if trying to keep the shuffling at bay. But the sound keeps coming; we cannot locate its source

in the darkness. The boy's shoulders rise and fall as his breaths become heavy. "It's found me. You have destroyed me!"

Another creature, also pale skinned and marked with blackened blots, leaps from the shadows with outstretched hands. It clutches onto my squire and drags him to the floor then bites into his neck and scratches at his eyes. The boy screams only once then is silent. Blood lands in my eyes and on my lips.

Finished with my squire, the creature slowly rises to its feet. Like the one in the crypt it is small, but no less unholy. It stares at me, holds out its hands, then screams a tormented wail. "Stay back! Keep to your shadows!" I swing the torch back and forth in wide arcs. The creature steps back, wraps its arms around its waist, and belts out broken gasps of a sound reminiscent of crying. The sight almost begs pity. I throw the torch at the creature's feet and flee.

I abandon the manor and only stop running when my foot hits the stone fountain. The pain quickly subsides, and I notice the mist outside has become thicker. For a moment, I am certain I will remain lost in my own courtyard. But then the pink and purple fragrance catches my eye. Its petals drip into nothingness, but they shine like fires in the dark.

In their strange light, a short walk from the manor, they show me a stable otherwise hidden in the mist. A large brazier burns inside, and I take a torch from a sconce and light it. The smell of death is strong, and the torch's light reveals a dead horse in each stall, maggots crawling in and out of every orifice.

At the end of the stable is a pile of rags, cloths, and linen, all stained with blood and black ooze. I smell my wife's fragrance again, only now it is corrupted. I turn to face the left side of the stable, and from the darkness emerges what was once a woman, and I remember...

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The hovel, crafted into the earth, curtained by tree roots stabbing through the ground above, is darker than the night outside. And though it's filled with holes, a straw-woven mat provides a floor for the cave. Insects crawl along the walls and squirm out of the earthen walls to fall to the floor. I would be holding a weapon as well as a torch had I two hands.

By torchlight, I continue my way under the hanging roots, deeper into the hovel. Suddenly, hidden amongst the tree roots, I spot a dirt-smeared curtain tied to a root blocking any progress. Slowly I reach for it and push it aside revealing a makeshift bed made of straw and grass and nothing else.

I turn around and am met by yellow eyes surrounded by a mud-smeared face. I almost fall backwards at the sight of the haggard woman now in front of me. She is young, filth covered, barely clothed, and with long hair as black as my wife's. Scars run from side-to-side along both arms and legs. I can see that some of the cuts are recently healed.

"I am searching for Aibhlinn," I say.

The woman twitches at the neck, but doesn't respond.

“I know you have power, witch. Help me, and I’ll do whatever you ask of me.”

She folds her arms across her chest. “I know what you want, but you cannot pay the price. Now leave.”

I drop to my knees at her feet. “I beg you. I’ll do what you ask. Please!”

The woman chuckles and squats down, her arms still crossed. I see her eyes clearly for the first time; they are big and yellow.

“The Abbot and his men hunt me. Kill the Abbot, stop the hunt.”

“It shall be done.”

\*\*\*

I remember now. I was away fighting when the great pestilence took my family’s lives. My son, my daughter, and my wife died unimaginable deaths. I wasn’t with them...

I told the witch I killed the Abbot, but I couldn’t do it even if I wanted to, not without my right hand. As punishment, she gave my family life again, but as monsters. I have forsaken God, disobeyed the laws of my king, and desecrated the bodies of my family.

I raise the torch and look at my wife’s pale face, and at the black spots covering half of her body. She opens her mouth and blood spills out.

“Os... mund.” Her once sweet voice makes my skin crawl. But she is still my wife.

“Rose.”

\*\*\*

The quiet monastery is simple yet immaculate. The small church hall glows in the candlelight, flames burning for victims of the great pestilence. The abbot sighs and shakes his head. His aging bones ache in the cold. The church doors burst open.

“Abbot! Abbot!” a young man yells as he stumbles into the church. His clothes are covered in filth and one sleeve has been ripped off. Blood drips onto the floor in his wake. He collapses at the abbot’s feet.

The abbot kneels and holds the young man’s head in the palm of his hand. “What happened? Tell me.”

“I serve... I served Osmund. The rumours are true. He has conspired with Lucifer.”

“Are you certain? Do you swear to these accusations?”

“I do.”

“Then Osmund has decided his fate. I’ll personally see to it he and his abominations are destroyed for their crimes against God.”

“Thank you, Abbot.”

“Rest now.”

\*\*\*

Morning finally arrives. The mist has dissipated somewhat, though the breeze from the sea is as cold as ever. I sit on the edge of the fountain's basin with my children sitting on either side of me. Wrapped in chains and bloody rags, they weep into my chest as I cradle their heads. Rose swings her hand back and forth in the fountain, perhaps remembering a time when she ran her fingers over the surface of the water.

The thunder of a hundred boots marching outside my gate disturbs the peace. Wrapped up nice and warm, a man I once called friend, the abbot, rides on horseback at the head of fifty men. All of them, are armed and armoured. They stop just outside the gate, but the abbot inches forward. "Osmund," he calls, "open the gates. You must answer for your crimes against God."

"Take your mercenaries and leave. No one is welcome here."

The abbot's voice booms through the gates. "These are men of God, as you once were. You were a good man, Osmund. You must see what you have become."

I stand up, sword in hand. My family stands behind me. The abbot shakes his head and turns his horse around. The leader of the mercenaries gives the order. They attack.

I open my eyes and roll to my side. My home burns in flames hotter than hellfire, as does a pile of dismembered bodies by the fountain. The bodies of my family. They are dead for a second time, and I will soon join them; I can feel my blood seeping from a dozen wounds. It's a small comfort, but at least I'm here now...



“May God show you mercy,” says the mercenary leader, as he kicks me onto my back. He raises his sword with both hands, blade pointing down.

And I whisper one last time, “Rose.”



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from Melbourne, M.K. Trott is a writer who has delved deep into the realms of literature and creative writing. With a profound love for the written word, he ventured into higher learning in order to improve his skills and ultimately earned a master's degree in creative writing. While horror remains his favourite genre, he plans to venture into the realm of fantasy.

In the company of his beloved calico cat, Tiger Lilly, M.K. enjoys writing about flawed and vulnerable characters whose sanity is always under threat. He takes great pleasure in bringing their inner-most fears and desires to the surface—then smothering them in gore.

# ALSO BY M.K. TROTT

The Stricken  
Autumn Tales II  
Village Views

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