

## The Ghosts of Malibar

By  
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Matirsutrus shone full on the waters of Malibar, his face mournful and pockmarked as he crept along the canals. Arundel Visigotti, the Mouth of Malibar, watched from the palace's upper gallery as guests arrived aboard barges poled by their servants.

Several green-finned heads of mermen and merwomen bobbed in the silvery water beyond the line of barges. When a retainer walked in their direction, the mers darted under the water.

The courtiers sported every fashionable style: from jewel-encrusted gowns to silk shirts to the purple vests worn by the duke's immediate family. The Baroness of Coal Vein wore a headdress of wire and gold coins so heavy that one of her servants supported her while she walked. The Lord of Marmsby, a philosophic old gentleman, wore a plain tunic and hose, an outfit cheaper than the attending servants, showing the court he considered himself above their frivolity.

"What fools these people are," said a woman's voice from the darkness behind him.

He turned; no one was there.

The woman spoke again. "The whole court is blind, but not you."

At first, he could make only her bare outline, but she gradually grew more distinct like a painting after removing the grime from the glass. She was in her early 30s, with the Malibarian aristocracy's high cheekbones, long nose, coal black eyes, and lovely dark complexion. Her evening gown was designed in the previous century's style with tiny jewels glittering in the bone-colored moonlight.

Arundel had seen her face in one of the ancient oil portraits downstairs, but could not place her. "Who are you?"

"Nay, I always keep men guessing." She tried to touch his hand, but her fingers passed through him. "You don't know how unfortunate it is, not being able to touch or feel. Whenever I wake and remember the old pleasures, I long to feel again." She smiled at him and ran her hands over the curves of her insubstantial body.

"You could always journey to the other side, to your rest and reward."

"True, if a reward awaited me, but the crossing is uncertain and final."

"What has stirred the dead tonight?"

She faded out of existence. He could not help but wonder which of Malibar's past chamber of horrors the ghost derived from. Was she a murderess? A whore? An opium eater? He had spent hours talking to the ghosts of the duke's palace, many of

whom were so attached to the court and its politics that they still sought to influence human events.

When he turned back to the window, Lord Almore of the much declined Salazor family stepped out of his barge. As usual, he committed a blunder, wearing red hoses with a striped tunic, an outfit much appreciated two or three years ago. That impropriety was typical of the toadish Lord Almore, a squat broad-bodied man in his early 40s, his head sprinkled with moles on the cheek and neck.

Almore offered his arm and a compliment to the Countess Yolanda of Frithmore Manor, who was a great beauty much sought after by the courtiers. She had her pick among the upper crust and reacted to his interest by tossing her head. Lord Almore's face darkened.

*Ah, the petty cruelties and arrogance of the wealthy,* Arundel thought.

A servant entered the gallery. "The duke wishes to see you on an urgent matter."

"I will follow you then, my good man," said Arundel. As they walked to the duke's private chamber, the old dukes and duchesses, their retainers, and their murdered mistresses wandered the palace confessing their adulteries and crimes. Arundel had never witnessed the ghosts so stirred.

He halted at the hallway's royal portraits and stared at the painting of the ghost from upstairs. The century old depiction of Franchisse Marquise of Dalmort, daughter of the seventh duke of Malibar, portrayed a beautiful woman with her hair curled high upon her head and a silver gown adorning her shoulders. She was a notorious necromancer, her name invoked to frighten children. According to legend, she had obsessed over death and aging. Wishing to avoid humanity's normal fate, she had studied the black arts, prolonging her youth until her late 50s, supposedly by bathing in the blood of virgins. Although it was rare for an aristocrat to be executed, the state of Malibar deemed the depths of her depravity sufficient to publicly drown her for sorcery.

The servant politely coughed into his hand, drawing Arundel from his reverie. "My Lord, the duke is waiting. We must go to him."

"Very well," he answered, leaving the marquise's intense, sultry eyes behind.

In his study, the duke paced, his forehead creased with concern and his hands clasped behind his back. His only attendant was the captain of the guards, who sat bolt upright in a red upholstered chair, smoked one of the seigneur's cigars and drank port from a wide glass.

When he saw Arundel, the duke rushed to him and grasped his hands. "My excellent Lord Arundel, we are so pleased you are here. We will get our satisfaction now."

"I hope so, my lord." Arundel was taken aback by the duke's earnestness.

"You have done miraculous work in the past. We need someone with your sensitivity toward the royal family's concerns to discretely handle an important matter. We cannot stay away from our guests and attend to it ourselves. The captain will explain." He released Arundel's hand and refilled his glass from the decanter on a sideboard.

The captain had watched the proceedings with a close eye, no doubt fascinated by the duke's reliance on the Mouth. Arundel suspected the man fumed, but he showed no visible emotion.

"I have a barge waiting, my Lord," the captain said, setting his port aside.

The captain reminded Arundel of a predatory rat, the large Eastern kind that crept onto ships in foreign ports. He possessed the same funnel-like face with the glint of the torturer in his eyes. But the man was useful. On more than one occasion, the captain had extracted a confession from a prisoner.

“What’s this about?” Arundel asked the captain.

“We’ll talk outside, my lord. The duke wishes us to leave at once. With your permission, your highness?” he said to the duke, who nodded in response.

The captain led to a hidden canal under the palace. They stepped into a narrow gondola. When they were seated, a servant poled them into the canal.

Arundel saw the ghost of a dead duke, its mouth open in dementia, float to the canal’s surface. That was Duke Frederico, who ruled for several years after senility made his decisions dangerous to the realm. Eventually, the nobility drowned him in these waters.

“Is it true that you see visions, my lord?” the captain asked.

“What?” The ghosts were normally not this clear. He often went weeks without seeing one.

“You sometimes have your eye on something I can’t make out. There are rumors that you see visions.”

“What is this all about, Captain?”

“Wait a moment, my lord.” He made a circular motion with his hands, meaning the walls have ears.

The servant poled their gondola to a gate, and two guards raised the barrier. They floated into the palace’s rear canal, where they had the waters to themselves. Lamps hung from poles lit the way along the water.

The city exhibited little order, being a hodgepodge of elements from occupying forces and indigent trends. Malibar traded with the world, and its architecture imitated the world: the slanting roofs and statuettes of the Eastern baroque, the balconies of the Florescini, the frescos of the peninsula’s other city states, and the raised platforms in the native Malibarian style.

“How do you feel about the fishermen, sir?” the captain asked.

“I am in no mood for riddles,” Arundel responded sourly.

“No riddles, my lord. A watchman found a murdered mer.”

“Murdered by another mer?” Arundel asked.

“That would be convenient,” he said dryly. “We don’t know who murdered him, but probably not another mer. The killer cut up the body like a Cheapside butcher and painted the walls with magic signs--all with its blood, you see.”

Arundel let the implications sink in: the public controversy, the possible destruction of the delicate balance between the races. If the trade arrangements between the mers and the people of Malibar broke down, the city’s economy would collapse. No wonder the duke was disturbed and secretive.

“But not to worry, aye, my lord? I’ve seen you work on several cases and somehow you always solved them. Don’t know how. What do you call your method?”

“Inspired deduction. It’s a matter of holding the clues in your head until your mind hits upon a solution.”

“Incredible. Inspired deduction. I’m not an educated man, just a watchman who worked up the ranks. I started walking my beat along that street over yonder in fact,

cracking skulls with my sword and club. But after all my years of walking my beat, I can't do what you do. I hope to see you work miracles again. Let me warn you; the murder scene is not pretty."

The captain did not lie. The mer's body was gagged and strung up from the ceiling in an old storage area under a bridge, hidden from the causeway running past. A knife had sawed through the scales on his chest and through the breast bone, and the ground was strewn with blood. His heart was removed and partially burned in a ceramic bowl.

A scrap of cloth from an old fashioned woman's gown lay near the body while a mass of necromantic symbols were scrawled across the walls. Apparently, the symbols were written by someone who knew their import. They were correctly drawn, part of a spell to invoke or call forth the dead, which explained the palace ghosts' agitation. The sorcerer likely awakened a spirit for information. But what information? Was something buried nearby? Was something valuable hidden in the canal? Was a mer sacrificed because the secret lay under the waves? Guesswork, all guesswork.

*Who did this to you?* Arundel thought, gazing upon the tortured body, the webbed hands and feet tied to brackets in the wall, the green scales on the legs stained with blood.

Generally, after a violent death, the ghost remained near its body for a time. So Arundel patiently awaited its appearance. Over the past few months, he had handled several sensitive problems for the duke: managing to find killers and plots with little effort, developing a reputation for being a seer and a genius, keeping his ability to speak with the dead secret. He built a mystique for himself, and the duke paid him handsomely.

Near the body lay a piece of paper with a spike driven through it. The necromantic symbols silenced the ghost and closed its pathway back to this world. The murderer was prepared for him. Someone had laid Arundel's secrets bare. It would not be hard for the murderer to figure out that the duke would ask Arundel, the Mouth of Malibar, to handle this sensitive matter, but how had he known about Arundel's ability to speak with ghosts?

Silencing the ghost meant the murderer was a real wizard, not some neophyte playing brutal parlor tricks.

"Don't you want to investigate the crime scene, my lord?" the captain asked, watching him closely.

"Of course," Arundel responded and walked around the corpse, taking in the scattered blood, the hacked open chest, the bloody throat. He knelt next to the body. "The cause of death was a slashed throat, correct?"

"Is that inspired deduction, my lord? His throat was slashed, but he continued bleeding until the heart was removed. When the killer cut the throat he missed the arteries," the captain made a motion with his finger. "Perhaps he wanted to cut off his ability to speak."

Arundel felt the captain's contempt. He needed to rid himself of the man's poisonous presence. "I need a few minutes alone with the body. I can't concentrate."

"Very well, my lord." The captain left the room.

Arundel touched the body and tried to call the ghost back, but not even a thread connected the spirit and the body; not even a full séance would make it return. The

necromancer had known his business.

The captain knew more about detective work than Arundel, but he could not trust him. Although they were both self-made men in an aristocratic society, the shortage of positions for men such as them made them rivals instead of friends.

He called the captain back in and ordered him to have his guards question the locals to see if anyone witnessed anything unusual. "But not a word of this to anyone," he instructed. "We don't want this to become common gossip."

"Aye, we don't want to stir up the mers, right sir?"

The next morning, the ghosts were utterly quiet as Arundel strode down the palace hallway. Although they were always less active during the day, their quiet demonstrated how powerful the necromancer's spell had been. They rested now, waiting for another pathway back.

Arundel had time to muse on these matters, for the duke kept him waiting in the antechamber for over an hour. His Lordship must be displeased.

A servant ushered him into the duke's private chambers, where the duke sat behind a massive ebony desk wearing a purple silk dressing gown, drinking tea and examining papers. Servants removed the documents he signed and brought him a new stack while Arundel stood patiently before his desk.

After meticulously poring through and signing two stacks of documents, he glanced up as if surprised at the Mouth's presence and said: "Oh, good morning, Lord Arundel. I hope you slept well." Arundel started to reply, but the duke cut him off: "We spoke to the captain of the guard this morning. Shortly after he left, a delegation of mers, led by their lord mayor, arrived here, irate and up in arms. Your plan to keep this matter out of the public eye has not succeeded, and we are most displeased. The mers had the temerity to threaten me, announcing no interactions between the races until this murder is resolved. They think this murder is another example of our disregard for their race, the slimy fish."

Seeing the pained expression on Arundel's face, he commented: "We're sorry, Lord Arundel. We forgot that you're one of their sympathizers. If you like them, if you love *us*, find the killer. Or at least arrest someone that will satisfy them without angering the aristocracy. Too much gold is at stake for the mers to stay beneath the waves."

After leaving the audience chamber, Arundel noticed the mers were missing from the city market. Normally, several would set up stalls selling what they had salvaged from sunken ships or pearls or seafood delicacies.

For all the city people's contempt for the mers, they depended on them. The mers used the coins they obtained from selling their wares to array themselves with ornaments, lavishly decorating themselves with glittering necklaces, armbands of gold and diamonds and bracelets of silver. This tendency seemed senseless when they lived beneath the waves, but on land they made a striking sight, covered with tribal tattoos and scars, with glittering jewelry all over their nude bodies, even sporting rings on their privates.

How did the mers find out about the murder? Arundel had little doubt that the captain released the information to undermine him.

Since there was no other law force in the city, Arundel had no choice but to rely on the city guard and place a contingent near the murder site. The murder site needed

to be watched because if the necromancer's spell was not complete, a second ceremony would be held near the first before the full moon ended. Magic possessed its rules of symmetry; to violate them threatened the magician's life and soul.

Arundel stationed the guards in a circle, hidden in buildings near the murder site, each with a whistle in case he saw something suspicious.

Arundel waited on a rooftop ready to leap down at the sight of anything suspicious or at the sound of a whistle. An hour after the moon rose, a faint light emanated from an alcove facing the water. Arundel clambered down the roof, lowered himself into the water and swam to the other side. The light flickered against the alcove's inner wall only a short distance from the first murder scene.

Drawing his sword, he crept into the alcove. A short balding man draped in a necromancer's red robes chanted and raised his hands in supplication while clutching a bloody knife. Hieroglyphs painted in blood covered his robes and the wall. A dead man, his throat cut, lay on the ground before the necromancer, who chanted in ancient Malibarian. Arundel could not make out the words, something about the dead rising. Arundel's grasp of the older form of the language was imperfect, but he could tell the necromancer mangled the pronunciation and syntax.

*Wouldn't that destroy the efficacy of the spell?* he wondered.

The dead man's ghost hovered over the body, confused, still connected to this world. Soon, it would want revenge.

Arundel crept into the room. At the last moment, the necromancer jerked around and threatened Arundel with the bloody ritual knife.

The man's pudgy unshaven face was familiar to Arundel, but he could not place it. "It looks like you won't complete this ritual," he told him. "Drop the knife while you live."

Instead, the necromancer lunged at him. Arundel wounded him on the shoulder and retreated, not wanting to kill him unless he had to. If he captured the necromancer, the captain would elicit a public confession with his hooks and knives, and everyone would be satisfied with the course of justice. He blew the whistle.

The necromancer's eyes glared with fanaticism, and he moved in an odd jerky way.

*A sign of madness?* Arundel wondered.

He lunged at Arundel again with no regard for the sword's greater length, and Arundel ran the madman through, struggling against the strong man as he tried to drive the dagger into his chest. Finally, the necromancer gasped from the pain and fell to the ground, bleeding his life away. Arundel blew the whistle again.

Under the robes the man wore the uniform of a palace porter. That's why the face was familiar; he had seen the man waiting on guests at the palace. He recognized the victim also: a palace cook. Arundel would have the porter's room searched for evidence tonight.

The cook's ghost fled, satisfied that his murder had been revenged.

One of Malibar's traditions was the hanging and quartering of murderers, a punishment applied even if the murderer was already dead. The necromancer's execution occurred early evening the next day, a rapid ceremony the duke insisted upon

to put this situation behind them.

Restored to his master's good graces, Arundel stood next to the duke in a place of honor, while around them the ceremony drew out Malibar's finest, who dressed for the occasion just as they had for the duke's ball.

A delegation of mers approached the duke: the lord mayor and several followers.

The duke brightened when they approached, "My good Lord Mayor. As always, we are happy to see you and pleased that our loyal follower found the killer. We want nothing to interfere with the love between our races."

The lord mayor smiled ironically. "We are glad that our lord has taken the murder of a humble mers so seriously. How convenient that a servant was responsible for the murder rather than someone higher ranking, which would have embarrassed the palace."

The duke did not lose a step. "Madness in the lower classes is a dreadful thing, but those lower born tend towards mental deficiency. That's the essential justice of our system."

The lord mayor's double eyelids fluttered. "Quite so, I'm sure, and Lord Arundel, as usual, has served you well."

"We believe the evidence undeniable, Lord Mayor. Arundel, please explain."

"I had some questions at first as well, my Lord. But not only did I see the porter conducting a sacrifice last night, this morning I searched his chamber and found manuscripts and books indicating extensive knowledge of necromancy."

"Where did he gain the knowledge?"

"That's still under investigation. Perhaps he's an autodidact. When I came upon him in the alcove, he mispronounced many Old Malibarian words, which suggests someone who has read extensively but with an imperfect education."

"But if he mispronounced the words, wouldn't that cause his spell to fail?"

"Maybe, but we don't know that all his spells worked. We only know that he sacrificed someone and then attempted to complete the ceremony." Arundel couldn't mention the silencing spell, which worked, without giving away his ability to detect and speak with the dead.

The execution began with a drum roll and the crowd's murmuring died down.

As the hangman trundled the body out on a cart, the crowd strained to view it. He placed a noose around the corpse's neck and jerked it into the air. After a few moments he cut it down, sliced its guts open and yanked out intestines by the slimy handfuls.

Much to his surprise, Arundel saw Yolanda of Frithmore leaning on the arm of Lord Almore. Although he found it difficult to keep up with the nobility's love interests, he did not expect to see one of the most eligible women of the court with Almore. Didn't she despise the man? He remembered her snubbing him.

The man was just as grotesque as ever, wearing all black, which was inappropriate for an execution. Malibarian fashion dictated bright colored clothing, celebrating the execution's justice.

*Where is the captain?* Arundel wondered. Surely, the captain would not miss the City's staging of justice. He finally saw him in his long, decorated, frock coat weaving through the crowd, halting next to an attractive woman and slipping her a purse. The woman smiled at him and brushed his hand before fading into the crowd.

Interesting. If the captain had a fancy mistress, he might need Arundel out of the way to move up. That would explain him providing information to the mers to undermine him.

Grunting and sweating, the executioner hacked through the corpse's limbs with an ax, which made a loud shattering noise as marrow splattered against his smock. He quartered it, hacking off the legs and arms with ten or so strokes. The crowd drifted away. Executions were less fascinating when the victim was already dead.

Arundel was troubled the remainder of the day. He knew what he had seen, but it was too convenient. The mer lord made him doubt himself. It bothered him that the spell was written perfectly on the wall, but the bumbling servant could not pronounce the words correctly. Furthermore, the silencing spell had worked. The necromancer knew what he was doing.

His doubts were foolhardy. The mers had returned to the marketplace and his position was once more secure. The duke had even invited him to a royal ball in two weeks. But the mers believed the duke was a liar and had failed their countryman; that troubled Arundel. The murdered mer had died alone and unrevenged.

That night, the last night of the full moon, Arundel hid across the causeway from scene of the first ceremony. He was not particularly surprised when he saw two hooded figures enter the alcove. Waiting until a light flickered against the alcove's inner walls, he followed them with drawn sword. The figures kneeled with their backs to him and their hoods pulled down, drawing symbols on the floor.

"Whatever it is you are trying to accomplish," Arundel said, "you have to finish the ceremony tonight, don't you?"

Both turned rapidly. The Lord Almore was surprised then angry, and the woman Yolanda of Frithmore seemed amused. Almore wore necromancer's robes under his cloak.

"You impress me. Lord Almore," said Arundel. "I would never have thought your knowledge of the arts to be so advanced. Even a mind control spell on a servant."

To his surprise Yolanda, whom he had underestimated as a flighty court flirt, did the talking. "I knew you were too clever to be so easily fooled, Lord Arundel. Sadly, it will only result in your death. Such a waste; you are a man I could have used."

Everything about her was wrong. Could the coy court tease be so monstrous?

Yolanda's posture, voice, and facial expressions had changed from the night Arundel saw her at the palace. He remembered the intense sultry gaze. "Are you happy you have a body once again?"

Yolanda smiled, her eyes glittering.

"Who are you?" Almore asked Yolanda.

"Don't you know? I am the Marquise of Dalmort."

The famous necromancer had found a way to return from the dead by possessing the young woman. The murder, the ceremony, everything was her plan to drive out the girl's soul and possess the body for herself. The mer's murder was necessary because the marquise had drowned and resurrecting her was only possible with the sacrifice of an underwater creature.

"I know about you, the monster of Dalmort," said Arundel. "The court drowned you for blasphemy."



"I tend not to go by that epithet," she said dryly. "The court's superstitions stole my life. I experimented with lengthening life and resurrecting the dead, but my work was destroyed by ignorant fools. Now that I have escaped death I will not tolerate your interference. I bind you and I pin you, foot, head and spine to the ground; you are trapped against the ground like an insect."

Arundel tried to move but his limbs were stiff, his body pinned through the spine like a butterfly behind glass.

"Now kill him!" she ordered Almore.

"Do you really want to be seen with this fool?" Arundel asked her. "The woman whose body you stole would not have Almore, that's why he helped you return from the dead."

With a snarl Almore drew the ritual knife, a wicked curved elbow-length blade. "I'll enjoy skewering you. The duke will have to get a new shill."

The woman put her hand on his arm. "No, stay a moment. You intrigue me, Lord Arundel."

"Get rid of him," said Arundel. "He has no court status, and the duke will not speak with him. Marry me and we'll be the power behind the duke's throne. I can give you more influence in a week than he can in a lifetime."

"Intriguing. There are those that claim the Mouth is really the brain of Malibar."

She held Almore's arm, but he tried to push past her.

"You will stay and do as I say!" she snapped.

Almore blustered. "You are not listening to this are you?"

Laughing, enjoying her power over him, she said: "Why not, darling?" When she was alive, she was a legendary beauty, a woman men fought over, but she had been dead over a century and missed toying with men.

"You'll have to get rid of him eventually," said Arundel. "He's a joke in the court."

She smiled at her furious lover, enjoying her game.

"You traitorous bitch! You really will betray me," he snarled. "I brought you back from the dead."

"I taught you the spells. I'm not stupid enough to fall for his--" she began.

Almore raised the ritual knife and drove it toward her chest, but she stumbled backwards and hit his wrist, deflecting the blade so it grazed her shoulder.

Her spell faded with her concentration; Arundel could move. "Almore!" he shouted.

As the pathetic lord turned, Arundel ran him through, driving the sword until the hilt struck his gut.

Almore gasped, choked and clung to Arundel's forearm before sliding to his death down the wall.

The marquise was wounded: a trickle of blood ran down her shoulder. "I'm glad you killed him," she said. "He was easy to manipulate, but now I need a clever man." She grinned, showing her incisors. "Take me right here." She laid back, her legs spread like a harlot and her eyes bright. "It's been a hundred years since I've been with a real man."

She had indeed chosen a beautiful body: nineteen, voluptuous, raven black hair, creamy white skin and almond eyes, one of the most beautiful women in court. But evil and beauty made a dangerous combination. Arundel might be a mercenary, but he was

no one's fool.

Near Almore's body squatted a large clay jar covered with necromantic symbols.

"What are you thinking?" the woman asked, sitting up. "No you will not--"

He swung his sword and shattered the spirit jar, which had trapped the girl Yolanda's soul. They were to finish the ceremony tonight, trapping the girl in the jar permanently and giving the marquise control over the body for good.

"No!" the marquise screamed, kicking her legs frantically and groping at the broken pieces. Despair crossed her face as she ceased moving. Her head sank to the ground like a broken doll. The marquise's ghost would be back in the palace tomorrow, ready to work mischief, but Arundel would hire an exorcist to banish her to the afterworld.

Moments later, Lady Yolanda's eyes fluttered open, her face blank then clouding with confusion. "Where am I?" Touching her arm, she noticed the trickle of blood. "What happened?"

Arundel considered. She had no memory of her time in the jar. "You're fine now. You've been injured, but we'll dress the wound."

She glanced at the dead man next to her and her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, that horrible man. I remember him kidnapping me."

"I rescued you after he kidnapped you and brought you here. He was going to sacrifice you." Telling her that was easier than explaining ghostly possession and her unwitting part in the escapade. The finicky girl was going to have enough problems understanding how she lost her virginity.

Arundel turned at the sound of footsteps. Two mers grinned at him: the Count and a large-armed hulking companion.

The Lord Mayor told Arundel, "You have more integrity than I realized. You found the killer rather than merely blaming it on a servant. That is better than your lord and master would have done. I'm glad you don't find our lives useless."

Arundel was startled and for a moment uncharacteristically caught without words. "I don't find your lives worthless. Do you find human life worthless? Instead of observing, you could have stopped them from trying to kill me."

The Lord Mayor replied in an even tone: "We do not interfere with one another's cultures. We keep to ourselves, except to trade and profit, which is best, you know. Besides, you didn't need my help, did you?" He grinned. "Nonetheless we will inform the duke that we are satisfied with your human justice this time."

Arundel spent the rest of the evening escorting the girl back to her villa and explaining the night's events to the watch and a weary duke, whose final comment was: "Are we to understand that you are through unmasking murders for the evening, so we can sleep?"

Arundel was once again protected from the vicissitudes of fate. He had satisfied everyone but the captain, who did not even get credit for the confession this time.