

The Wars of Light and Shadow

I

Curse of the Mistwraith



Janny Wurts

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Prologue

The Wars of Light and Shadow were fought during the third age of Athera, the most troubled and strife-filled era recorded in all of history. At that time Arithon, called Master of Shadow, battled the Lord of Light through five centuries of bloody and bitter conflict. If the canons of the religion founded during that period are reliable, the Lord of Light was divinity incarnate, and the Master of Shadow a servant of evil, spinner of dark powers. Temple archives attest with grandiloquent force to be the sole arbiters of truth.

Yet contrary evidence supports a claim that the Master was unjustly aligned with evil. Fragments of manuscript survive which expose the entire religion of Light as fraud, and award Arithon the attributes of saint and mystic instead.

Because the factual account lay hopelessly entangled between legend and theology, sages in the seventh age meditated upon the ancient past, and recalled through visions the events as they happened. Contrary to all expectation, the conflict did not begin on the council stair of Etarra, nor even on the soil of Athera itself; instead the visions started upon the wide oceans of the splinter world, Dascen Elur.

This is the chronicle the sages recovered. Let each who reads determine the good and the evil for himself.

I. CAPTIVE

*All for the waste of Karthan's lands the Leopard sailed the main. s'Ilessid King then
cursed s'Ffalenn, who robbed him, gold and grain.*

stanza from a ballad of Dascen Elur

The longboat cleaved waters stained blood-red by sunset, far beyond sight of any shore. A league distant from her parent ship, at the limit of her designated patrol, she rose on the crest of a swell. The bosun in command shouted hoarsely from the stern. 'Hold stroke!'

Beaten with exhaustion and the aftermath of battle, his crewmen responded. Four sets of oars lifted, dripping above waters fouled by oil and the steaming timbers of burned warships.

'Survivors to starboard.' The bosun pointed toward two figures who clung to a snarl of drifting spars. 'Quick, take a bearing.'

A man shipped his looms to grab a hand compass. As the longboat dipped into the following trough, the remaining sailors bent to resume stroke. Oar shafts bit raggedly into the sea as they swung the heavy bow against the wind.

The bosun drew breath to reprimand their sloppy timing, then held his tongue. The men were tired as he was; though well seasoned to war through the feud which ran deadly and deep between Amroth and Karthan's pirates, this had been no ordinary skirmish. Seven full-rigged warships in a fleet of seventeen had fallen before a single brigantine under the hated leopard banner. The bosun swore. He resisted a morbid urge to brood over losses; lucky, they were, to have the victory at all. The defeated brigantine's captain had been none other than Arithon s'Ffalenn, called sorcerer and Master of Shadow.

The next swell rolled beneath the keel. Heaved and lifted on its crest, the longboat's peaked prow momentarily eclipsed the castaways who struggled in the water. Afraid to lose sight of them, the bosun set the compassman as observer in the bow. Then he called encouragement while his oarsmen picked an erratic course through the splintered clots of planking and cordage which wallowed, treacherous as reefs upon the sea. The crew laboured in dead-faced silence. Not even the scraping bump of the corpse which passed beneath the keel caused them to alter their stroke. Horror had numbed every man left alive after the nightmare of fire, sorcery and darkness that Arithon had unleashed before the end.

The boat drew abreast of the survivors. Overtaken by a drift of wind-borne smoke, the bosun squinted through burning eyes. Only one victim looked to be conscious. He clung with whitened fingers to the nearer end of the spar, while at his back, another sailor lay lashed against the heaving pull of the waves. The knots at this one's waist were half loosened, as if, seeing help on the way, his companion had clumsily tried to free him.

'Ship oars!' Gruffly, the bosun addressed the man in the water. 'Is your friend

wounded?’

The wreck victim raised listless, glassy eyes, but said nothing. Quite likely cold water had dulled the fellow’s wits. Weary of senseless ruin and the rescue of ravaged men, the bosun snapped impatiently, ‘Bring him in. We’ll get the other second, if he still breathes.’

A crewman hooked the spar with his oar shaft to steady the boat. Others leaned over the thwart to lift the half-drowned sailhand aboard.

The victim reacted with vengeful speed and doused his rescuers with seawater.

Stung nearly blind by the salt, the nearer oarsman yelled and lunged. His hand closed over a drenched mat of hair. The man in the water twisted against the restraint. He kicked clear of the spar, ducked and resurfaced, a flash of bare steel in one fist. The oarsman recoiled from him with a scream of pain and surprise, his wrist opened stark to the bone.

‘Ath, he’s Karthan’s!’ someone shouted.

The longboat’s crew erupted in confusion. Portside, those seamen within reach raised oars like clubs and retaliated. One blow, then another struck the enemy sailor’s head. Blood spilled from his nose and mouth. Chopped viciously on the shoulder, he floundered. His grasp loosened and the dagger dropped winking into the depths. Without even a curse of malediction, the Karthish sailor thrashed under, battered and finally drowned by the murderous hatred of enemies.

‘Man the oars!’ The bosun’s bellow restored order to the wildly rocking longboat. Men sank down at their benches, muttering, while seawater lapped tendrils of scarlet from the blades of the portside looms. Too tired even to curse, the officer tossed a scarf to his wounded oarsman. Then he pointed at the unconscious survivor who drifted still lashed to the spar. By now the smoke had cleared enough to see that the Karthish dog still breathed. ‘Fetch that one aboard. The king will want him for questioning, so mind you handle him wisely.’

Sailors sworn to the pirate king’s service seldom permitted themselves to be taken alive. With one casualty wrapping his wrist in the stern, no man rushed the task. Amroth’s seamen recovered the last crewman of Karthan’s brigantine from the sea with wary caution and dumped him face-down on the floorboards. The bosun regarded his prize with distaste. Barefoot, slightly built and clad in a sailhand’s patched tunic, the man seemed no one important. Only the silver ring on his left hand occasioned any notice at all; and after hours of thankless labour, the oarsmen deserved reward for their efforts.

‘Beer-booty,’ invited the bosun. He bent, caught the captive’s wrist, and tugged to pry the ring from a finger still swollen from the sea.

‘Cut ‘er free,’ suggested the crewman who nursed his slashed forearm.

Feud left no space for niceties. The bosun drew his rigging knife. He braced the captive’s hand palm upward against the stern seat, and lifted his blade to cut. That moment the longboat rocked. Dying sunlight caught and splintered in the depths of an emerald setting.

The bosun gasped. He snatched back his knife as if burned, for the ring he would steal was not silver, but white gold. The gem was carved with a leopard device, hatefully familiar.

‘Fate witness, he’s s’Ffalenn!’ Shocked and uncertain, the bosun straightened up.

He had watched the enemy brigantine burn, her captain sprawled dead on her quarterdeck; but a glance at the black hair which dripped ignominiously in the bilge now belied that observation. Suddenly hand and ring were tugged from his grasp as an oarsman reached out and jerked the captive onto his back.

Bared to the fading light, the steeply-angled features and upswept browline of s'Ffalenn stood clear as struck bronze. There could be no mistake. Amroth's seamen had taken, alive, the Master of Shadow himself.

The sailors fell back in fear. Several made signs against evil, and someone near the fore drew a dagger.

'Hold!' The bosun turned to logic to ease his own frayed nerves. 'The sorcerer's harmless, just now, or we'd already be dead. Alive, don't forget, he'll bring a bounty.'

The men made no response. Tense, uneasy, they shifted their feet. Someone uttered a charm against demons, and a second knife sang from its sheath.

The bosun grabbed an oar and slammed it across the thwarts between sailors and captive. 'Fools! Would you spit on good fortune? Kill him, and our liege won't give us a copper.'

That reached them. Arithon s'Ffalenn was the illegitimate son of Amroth's own queen, who in years past had spurned the kingdom's honour for adultery with her husband's most infamous enemy. The pirate-king's bastard carried a price on his head that would ransom an earl, and a dukedom awaited the man who could deliver him to Port Royal in chains. Won over by greed, the sailors put up their knives.

The bosun stepped back and rapped orders, and men jumped to obey. Before the s'Ffalenn bastard regained his wits, his captors bound his wrists and legs with cord cut from the painter. Then, trussed like a calf for slaughter, Arithon, Master of Shadow and heir-apparent of Karthan, was rowed back to the warship *Briane*. Hauled aboard by the boisterous crew of the longboat, he was dumped in a dripping sprawl on the quarterdeck, at the feet of the officer in command.

A man barely past his teens, the first officer had come to his post through wealth and royal connections rather than merit or experience. But with the captain unconscious from an arrow wound, and the ranking brass of *Briane's* fighting company dead, none remained to dispute the chain of command. The first officer coped, though shouldered with responsibility for three hundred and forty two men left living, and a warship too crippled to carry sail. The bosun's agitated words took a moment to pierce through tired and overburdened thoughts.

The name finally mustered attention.

'Arithon s'Ffalenn!' Shocked to disbelief, the first officer stared at the parcel of flesh on his deck. This man was small, sea-tanned and dark; nothing like the half-brother in line for Amroth's crown. A drenched spill of hair plastered an angular forehead. Spare, unremarkable limbs were clothed in rough, much-mended linen that was belted with a plain twist of rope. But his sailhand's appearance was deceptive. The jewel in the signet bore the leopard of s'Ffalenn, undeniable symbol of royal heirship.

'It's him, I say,' said the bosun excitedly.

The crew from the longboat and every deckhand within earshot edged closer.

Jostled by raffish, excitable men, the first officer recalled his position. 'Back to your duties,' he snapped. 'And have that longboat winched back on board. Lively!'

'Aye sir.' The bosun departed, contrite. The sailhands disbursed more slowly,

clearing the quarterdeck with many a backward glance.

Left alone to determine the fate of Amroth's bitterest enemy, the first officer shifted his weight in distress. How should he confine a man who could bind illusion of shadow with the ease of thought, and whose capture had been achieved at a cost of seven ships? In Amroth, the king would certainly hold Arithon's imprisonment worth such devastating losses. But aboard the warship *Briane*, upon decks still laced with dead and debris, men wanted vengeance for murdered crewmen. The sailhands would never forget: Arithon was a sorcerer, and safest of all as a corpse.

The solution seemed simple as a sword-thrust, but the first officer knew differently. He repressed his first, wild impulse to kill, and instead prodded the captive's shoulder with his boot. Black hair spilled away from a profile as keen as a knife. A tracery of scarlet flowed across temple and cheek from a hidden scalp wound; bruises mottled the skin of throat and chin. Sorcerer though he was, Arithon was human enough to require the services of a healer. The first officer cursed misfortune, that this bastard had not also been mortal enough to die. The king of Amroth knew neither temperance nor reason on the subject of his wife's betrayal. No matter that men might get killed or maimed in the course of the long passage home; on pain of court martial, *Briane's* crewmen must deliver the Master of Shadow alive.

'What's to be done with him, sir?' The man promoted to fill the dead mate's berth stopped at his senior's side, his uniform almost unrecognizable beneath the soot and stains of battle.

The first officer swallowed, his throat dry with nerves. 'Lock him up in the chartroom.'

The mate narrowed faded eyes and spat. 'That's a damned fool place to stow such a dangerous prisoner! D'ye want us all broken? He's clever enough to escape.'

'Silence!' The first officer clenched his teeth, sensitive to the eyes that watched from every quarter of the ship. The mate's complaint was just; but no officer could long maintain command if he backed down before the entire crew. The order would have to stand.

'The prisoner needs a healer,' the first officer justified firmly. 'I'll have him moved and set in irons at the earliest opportunity.'

The mate grunted, bent and easily lifted the Shadow Master from the deck. 'What a slight little dog, for all his killer's reputation,' he commented. Then, cocky to conceal his apprehension, he sauntered the length of the quarterdeck with the captive slung like a duffel across his shoulder.

The pair vanished down the companionway, Arithon's knuckles haplessly banging each rung of the ladder-steep stair. The first officer shut his eyes. The harbour at Port Royal lay over twenty days' sail on the best winds and fair weather. Every jack tar of *Briane's* company would be a rich man, if any of them survived to make port. Impatient, inexperienced and sorely worried, the first officer shouted to the carpenter to hurry his work on the mainmast.

Night fell before *Briane* was repaired enough to carry canvas. Clouds had obscured the stars by the time the first officer ordered the ship under way. The bosun relayed his commands, since the mate was too hoarse to make himself heard over the pound of hammers under the forecastle. Bone-weary, the crew swung themselves aloft with appalling lack of agility. Unbrailed canvas billowed from the yards; on deck,

sailhands stumbled to man the braces. Sail slammed taut with a crash and a rattle of blocks, and the bow shouldered east through the swell. Staid as a weathered carving, the quartermaster laid *Briane* on course for Amroth. If the wind held, the ship would reach home only slightly behind the main fleet.

Relieved to be back under sail, the first officer excused all but six hands under the bosun on watch. Then he called for running lamps to be lit. The cabin boy made rounds with flint and striker. *Briane*'s routine passed uninterrupted until the flame in the aft lantern flicked out, soundlessly, as if touched by the breath of Dharkaron. Inside the space of a heartbeat the entire ship became locked in darkness as bleak as the void before creation. The rhythm of the joiners' hammers wavered and died, replaced abruptly by shouting.

The first officer leaped for the companionway. His boots barely grazed the steps. Half-sliding down the rail, he heard the shrill crash of glass as the panes in the stern window burst. The instant his feet slapped deck, he rammed shoulder-first into the chartroom door. Teak panels exploded into slivers. The first officer carried on into blackness dense as calligrapher's ink. Sounds of furious struggle issued from the direction of the broken window.

'Stop him!' The first officer's shout became a grunt as his ribs bashed the edge of the chart table. He blundered past. A body tripped him. He stumbled, slammed painfully against someone's elbow, then shoved forward into a battering press of bodies. The hiss of the wake beneath the counter sounded near enough to touch. Spattered by needle-fine droplets of spray, the first officer realized in distress that Arithon might already be half over the sill. Once overboard, the sorcerer could bind illusion, shape shadow and blend invisibly with the waves. No search would find him.

The first officer dived to intervene, hit a locked mass of men and felt himself dashed brutally aside. Someone cursed. A whirl of unseen motion cut through the drafts from the window. Struck across the chest by a hard, contorted body, the first officer groped blind and two-handedly hooked cloth still damp from the sea. Aware of whom he held, he locked his arms and clung obstinately. His prisoner twisted, wrenching every tendon in his wrists. Flung sideways into a bulkhead, the first officer gasped. He felt as if he handled a careening maelstrom of fury. A thigh sledge-hammered one wrist, breaking his grasp. Then someone crashed like an axed oak across his chest. Torn loose from the captive, the first officer went down, flattened under a mass of sweaty flesh.

The battle raged on over his head, marked in darkness by the grunt of drawn breaths and the smack of knuckles, elbows and knees battering into muscle. Nearby, a seaman retched, felled by a kick in the belly. The first officer struggled against the crush to rise. Any blow that connected in that ensorcelled dark had to be ruled by luck. If Arithon's hands remained bound, force and numbers must ultimately prevail as his guardsmen found grips he could not break.

'Bastard!' somebody said. Boots scuffled and a fist smacked flesh. Arithon's resistance abated slightly.

The first officer regained his feet, when a low, clear voice cut through the strife.

'Let go. Or your fingers will burn to the bone.'

'Don't listen!' The first officer pushed forward. 'The threat's an illusion.'

A man screamed in agony, counterpointed by splintering wood. Desperate, the

first officer shot a blow in the approximate direction of the speaker. His knuckles cracked into bone. As if cued by the impact, the sorcerer's web of darkness wavered and lifted.

Light from the aft-running lamp spilled through the ruptured stern window, touching gilt edges to a litter of glass and smashed furnishings. Arithon hung limp in the arms of three deckhands. Their faces were white and their chests heaved like runners just finished with a marathon. Another man groaned by the chart-locker, hands clenched around a dripping shin; while against the starboard bulkhead the mate stood scowling, his colour high and the pulsebeat angry and fast behind his ripped collar. The first officer avoided the accusation in the older seaman's eyes. If it was unnatural that a prisoner so recently injured and unconscious should prove capable of such fight, to make an issue of the fact invited trouble.

Anxious to take charge before the crew recovered enough to talk, the first officer snapped to the moaning crewman, 'Fetch a light.'

The man quieted, scuffled to his feet and hastily limped off to find a lantern. As a rustle of returned movement stirred through the beleaguered crew in the chartroom, the first officer pointed to a clear space between the glitter of slivered glass. 'Set the s'Ffalenn there. And you, find a set of shackles to bind his feet.'

Seamen jumped to comply. The man returned with the lantern as they lowered Arithon to the deck. Flamelight shot copper reflections across the blood which streaked his cheek and shoulder; dark patches had already soaked into the torn shirt beneath.

'Sir, I warned you. Chartroom's not secure,' the mate insisted, low-voiced. 'Have the sorcerer moved to a safer place.'

The first officer bristled. 'When I wish your advice, I'll ask. You'll stand guard here until the healer comes. That should not be much longer.'

But the ship's healer was yet engaged with the task of removing the broadhead of an enemy arrow from the captain's lower abdomen. Since he was bound to be occupied for some time yet to come, the mate clamped his jaw and did not belabour the obvious: that Arithon's presence endangered the ship in far more ways than one. Fear of his sorceries could drive even the staunchest crew to mutiny.

That moment one of the seamen exclaimed and flung back. The first officer swung in time to see the captive stir and awaken. Eyes the colour of new spring grass opened and fixed on the men who crowded the chartroom. The steep s'Ffalenn features showed no expression, though surely pain alone prevented a second assault with shadow. *Briane's* first officer searched his enemy's face for a sign of human emotion and found no trace.

'You were unwise to try that,' he said, at a loss for other opening. That the same mother had borne this creature and Amroth's well-beloved crown prince defied all reasonable credibility.

Where his Grace, Lysaer, might have won his captors' sympathy with glib and entertaining satire, Arithon of Karthan refused answer. His gaze never wavered and his manner stayed stark as a carving. The creak of timber and rigging filled an unpleasant silence. Crewmen shifted uneasily until a clink of steel beyond the companionway heralded the entrance of the crewman sent to bring shackles.

'Secure his ankles.' The first officer turned toward the door. 'And by Dharkaron's

vengeance, stay on guard. The king wants this captive kept alive.'

He departed after that, shouting for the carpenter to send hands to repair the stern window. Barely had the workmen gathered their tools when *Briane* plunged again into unnatural and featureless dark. A thudding crash astern set the first officer running once more for the chartroom.

This time the shadow disintegrated like spark-singed silk before he collided with the chart table. He reached the stern cabin to find Arithon pinned beneath the breathless bulk of his guards. Gradually the men sorted themselves out, eyes darting nervously. Though standing in the presence of a senior officer, they showed no proper deference. More than a few whispered sullenly behind their hands.

'Silence!' Crisply, the first officer inclined his head to hear the report.

'Glass,' explained the mate. 'Tried to slash his wrists, Dharkaron break his bastard skin.'

Blood smeared the deck beneath the Master. His fine fingers glistened red, and closer examination revealed that the cord which lashed his hands was nearly severed.

'Bind his fingers with wire, then.' Provoked beyond pity, the first officer detailed a man to fetch a spool from the hold.

Arithon recovered awareness shortly afterward. Dragged upright between the stout arms of his captors, he took a minute longer to orient himself. As green eyes lifted in recognition, the first officer fought a sharp urge to step back. Only once had he seen such a look on a man's face, and that was the time he had witnessed a felon hanged for the rape of his own daughter.

'You should have died in battle,' he said softly.

Arithon gave no answer. Flamelight glistened across features implacably barred against reason, and his hands dripped blood on the deck. The first officer looked away, cold with nerves and uneasiness. He had little experience with captives, and no knowledge whatever of sorcery. The Master of Shadow himself offered no inspiration, his manner icy and unfathomable as the sea itself.

'Show him the king's justice,' the first officer commanded, in the hope a turn at violence might ease the strain on his crew.

The seamen wrestled Arithon off his feet and pinioned him across the chart table. His body handled like a toy in their broad hands. Still the Master fought them. In anger and dread the seamen returned the bruises lately inflicted upon their own skins. They stripped the cord from the captive's wrists and followed with all clothing that might conceal slivers of glass. But for his grunts of resistance, Arithon endured their abuse in silence.

The first officer hid his distaste. The Master's defiance served no gain, but only provoked the men to greater cruelty. Had the bastard cried out, even once reacted to pain as an ordinary mortal, the deckhands would have been satisfied. Yet the struggle continued until the victim was stripped of tunic and shirt and the sailhands backed off to study their prize. Arithon's chest heaved with fast, shallow breaths. Stomach muscles quivered beneath skin that wept sweat, proof enough that his body at least had not been impervious to rough handling.

'Bastard's runt-sized, for a sorcerer.' The most daring of the crewmen raised a fist over the splayed arch of Arithon's ribcage. 'A thump in the slats might slow him down some.'

‘That’s enough!’ snapped the first officer. Immediately sure the sailhand would ignore his command, he moved to intervene. But a newcomer in a stained white smock entered from behind and jostled him briskly aside.

Fresh from the captain’s sickbed, the ship’s healer pushed on between sailor and pinioned prisoner. ‘Leave be, lad! Today I’ve set and splinted altogether too many bones. The thought of another could drive me to drink before sunrise.’

The crewman subsided, muttering. As the healer set gently to work with salve and bandages, the s’Ffalenn sorcerer drew breath and finally spoke.

‘I curse your hands. May the next wound you treat turn putrid with maggots. Any child you deliver will sicken and die in your arms, and the mother will bleed beyond remedy. Meddle further with me and I’ll show you horrors.’

The healer made a gesture against evil. He had heard hurt men rave, but never like this. Shaking, he resumed his work, while under his fingers, the muscles of his patient flinched taut in protest.

‘Have you ever known despair?’ Arithon said. ‘I’ll teach you. The eyes of your firstborn son will rot and flies suck at the sockets.’

The seamen tightened their restraint, starting and cursing among themselves.

‘Hold steady!’ snapped the healer. He continued binding Arithon’s cuts with stiff-lipped determination. Such a threat might make him quail, but he had only daughters. Otherwise he might have broken his oath and caused an injured man needless pain.

‘By your leave,’ he said to the first officer when he finished. ‘I’ve done all I can.’

Excused, the healer departed, and the deckhands set to work with the wire. As the first loop creased the prisoner’s flesh, Arithon turned his invective against the first officer. After the healer’s exemplary conduct, the young man dared not break. He endured with his hands locked behind his back while mother, wife and mistress were separately profaned. The insults after that turned personal. In time the first officer could not contain the anger which arose in response to the vicious phrases.

‘You waste yourself!’ After the cold calm of the Master’s words, the ugliness in his own voice jarred like a woman’s hysteria. He curbed his temper. ‘Cursing me and my relations will hardly change your lot. Why make things difficult? Your behaviour makes civilized treatment impossible.’

‘Go force your little sister,’ Arithon said.

The first officer flushed scarlet. Not trusting himself to answer, he called orders to his seamen. ‘Bind the bastard’s mouth with a rag. When you have him well secured, lock him under guard in the sail-hold.’

The seamen saw the order through with a roughness born of desperation. Watching, the first officer worried. He was a tired man with a terrified crew, balanced squarely on the prongs of dilemma. The least provocation would land him with a mutiny, and a sorcerer who could also bind shadow threatened trouble tantamount to ruin. No measure of prevention could be too drastic to justify. The first officer rubbed bloodshot, stinging eyes. A final review of resources left him hopeless and without alternative except to turn the problem of Arithon s’Ffalenn back to *Briane*’s healer.

The first officer burst into the surgery without troubling to knock. ‘Can you mix a posset that will render a man senseless?’

Interrupted while tending yet another wound, the healer answered with irritable reluctance. ‘I have only the herb I brew to ease pain. A heavy dose will dull the mind,

but not with safety. The drug has addictive side-effects.'

The first officer never hesitated. 'Use it on the prisoner, and swiftly.'

The healer straightened, shadows from the gimballled lantern sharp on his distressed face.

The officer permitted no protest. 'Never mind your oath of compassion. Call the blame mine, if you must, but I'll not sail into a mutiny for the skin of any s'Ffalenn bastard. Deliver Arithon alive to the king's dungeons, and no man can dispute we've done our duty.'

Daunted by the raw look of fright on the first officer's face, the healer called his assistant to finish bandaging his patient. Then, too wise to be hurried, he rummaged among his shelf of remedies. 'Who will answer if the young man's mind is damaged?'

The first officer drew a ragged breath. 'Dharkaron, angel of vengeance! We'll all be executed, even to the cabin steward, if our sailors get panicked and slit the bastard's throat. He's crazed enough to provoke them.'

How in the name of the king can I be on hand every minute to stop disaster?'

Jars rattled under the older man's hand. He selected one, adjusted his spectacles to read the label, then said, 'We're twenty days' sail from Port Royal, given weather and luck. No man can be drugged into a coma that long without serious risk of insanity. I've read texts which claim that mages possess training to transmute certain poisons. To make sure of your Shadow Master would call for a dose of dangerous potency.'

'We'll land at South Island harbour, then.' Saved by sudden inspiration, the first officer blotted his flushed and sweating brow. 'The crown prince is there for the summer, to court the earl's daughter. That's only five days' sail, given just middling wind. Drug Arithon only until then, and let his Grace shoulder the task of getting his mother's bastard presented to the king.'

The healer sighed and reached for his satchel, forced to accede to the plan. Five days of strong possets would cause discomfort, but no permanent harm; and Prince Lysaer's custody was perhaps the wisest alternative for the pirate heir of Karthan. His Grace's inborn gift of light was a match for sorcery and shadows, and his judgement, even in matters of blood-feud, was dependably, exactly fair.

Crown Prince

The tap and clang of swordplay rang from the sun-washed sand of the earl's practice yard. The courier sent up from the harbour heard the sound and slowed his pace to a walk. Lysaer, crown prince of Amroth, had guested at South Isle often enough that even the servants knew: a man did not interrupt his Grace at sparring if the weapon of choice was steel. Accordingly, the messenger paused in the shaded archway of the portico. He waited, though the news he carried was urgent enough that delay might earn him ill-favour.

The prince noticed the man's arrival immediately. Sword engaged in a parry, he flung back coin-bright hair, then winked in friendly acknowledgement. He did not seem distracted. Yet on the next lunge his opponent executed an entirely predictable disengage that somehow managed to disarm him. The royal sword drove a glittering arc in the sunlight and landed, scattering sand.

Laughing, generous, handsome enough to make maidens weep, the prince flung up his hands. He turned the dagger he yet held *en gauche* and flung it, point first, into the soil beside the sword. 'There's silver won for your lady, my lord, Ath bless the heir she carries.'

Unexpectedly presented the victory, the dark-haired nobleman straightened on the field in astonishment. 'Highness, the Fatemaster himself doesn't know so much of my affairs. Who told you?'

The prince laughed again. 'About which, the bet or the baby?' He reached up to tidy his shirt laces, then started for the courier in the portico.

The nobleman suspiciously regarded the sword and the still quivering dagger. 'You cheated to give me the honour, curse me if you didn't.'

Lysaer, first son of the king of Amroth, stopped dead between strides. He widened surprised blue eyes. 'Did I? Well then, I'll buy your lady a pearl and we'll fight on the morrow to decide who pays for the setting.' Then, the smile still on his face, the prince acknowledged the courier. 'You bring news?'

The runner in the earl's livery bowed and pointedly glanced at the servant who attended the prince from the sidelines. 'For your ears, only, your Grace.'

The prince sent the servant to retrieve his discarded weapons, then stepped into the shadow of the arch, his manner immediately sober. 'My pathetic cripple of an auntie hasn't fallen from her bed and died, now has she?'

The jest was too graceless to amuse, but the prince had gauged the effect to a nicety. The courier visibly relaxed. 'That Lady is well, your Grace. The first officer of his majesty's warship *Briane* sends compliments instead. I'm advised to tell you that he has in his custody the pirate-king's bastard, Arithon s'Ffalenn.'

Lysaer stopped as if struck. The flush of recent exertion drained from his face and his hands clenched white at his sides. 'Alive,' he said softly.

Seven generations of bloodshed between Amroth and Karthan's pirates had never seen a moment to match this. Lysaer suppressed a primal surge of triumph. The vendetta had threaded discord and grief through his earliest memories; an altercation before his birth had killed the realm's first queen and a daughter no one near the king dared to mention. All Lysaer's life the court had lived in dread of his father's rages, and always they were caused by s'Ffalenn. Still, the prince fought the irrational hatred the name reflexively inspired. The prisoner in *Briane's* hold was his half-brother. Whether he was also a criminal deserving of the cruelty and death that the royal obsession for vengeance would demand was a distinction no man of honour dared ignore.

Trapped in an awkward silence, the courier held his breath; as if his discomfort were a catalyst, the prince tossed off dark thoughts. He touched the fellow's shoulder to reassure. 'You need not worry. The fate of my mother's bastard is a problem too weighty for any but the king's justice. The commander of *Briane's* company was quite right to entrust his custody to me.'

The courier bowed with evident relief.

'The kitchen staff will give you refreshment,' the prince insisted. 'A page from my retinue can run down to *Briane* to inform that I wish to see the prisoner.'

Excused with more grace than a man with difficult news might expect, the courier bowed again and departed. The prince lingered briefly in the corridor. His blue eyes

stayed deep and intense, even as his sparring partner stepped to his side in curiosity. 'Your Grace? What has passed?'

The crown prince of Amroth started as if from a trance. 'Trouble,' he said briefly. His frown changed to chagrin as he recalled his dusty, sweat-damp clothes.

Anxious to please, the nobleman snapped his fingers at the servant who waited with the swords. 'Send for the prince's valet.'

'And the captain of the earl's guard,' Lysaer added quickly. 'Admit him to my private chambers. If he curses the rush, tell him directly that I'll pour him another beer.' The key turned stiffly in the lock. Greeted from within by the acid-sharp consonants of a curse, the first officer pushed wide the wooden door. He hung his lantern from a spike in the beam overhead, then gestured for his prince to pass ahead of him.

Briane's sail-hold was stifling in the noon heat. The air reeked of mildew and damp; though the ship rode at anchor, the hatch overhead was battened down as if for a gale. The lantern threw long, starred shadows which swung with each roll of the swell.

Nervous to the point of jumpiness, the first officer pointed to the darkest corner of the room. 'There, your Grace. And be careful, he's roused from the drug, and dangerous.'

Resplendent in gold silk and brocade, glittering with the sapphires of royal rank, Lysaer of Amroth stepped forward. 'Leave us,' he said gently to the officer. Then, as the door creaked shut at his heels, he forced back a tangle of emotional turmoil and waited for his eyes to adjust.

Dead still in the uncertain light, Arithon's *Ffalenn* sat propped against a towering pile of spare sail. Biscuit and water lay untouched by his elbow. A livid swelling on the side of his jaw accentuated rather than blurred the angled arrogance of features which decidedly favoured his father. His eyes were open, focused and bright with malice.

The look chilled Lysaer to the heart. Hampered and unsettled by the dimness, he lifted the lantern down. The light shifted, mercilessly exposed details that up until now had stayed hidden. The queen's bastard was small, the prince saw with a shock of surprise. But that slight stature was muscled like a cat, and endowed with a temper to match; the flesh at wrists and ankles had been repeatedly torn on the fetters, leaving bruises congested with scabs. The hands were wrapped with wire and crusted with blood. The prince felt a surge of pity. He had heard the first officer's report; the fright of the sailors was understandable, yet after fetters and chain the added restraint of the wire seemed a needless cruelty.

Embarrassed, Lysaer replaced the lantern on its hook. He drew breath to call for the bosun, a sailhand, any ship's officer who could bring cutters and ease the prisoner's discomfort.

But Arithon spoke first. 'We are well met, *brother*.'

The crown prince ignored the sarcasm. A blood-feud could continue only as long as both sides were sworn to antipathy. 'Kinship cannot pardon the charges against you, if it's true that you summoned shadow and sorcery, then blinded and attacked and murdered the companies of seven vessels. No rational purpose can justify the slaughter of hapless sailors.'

‘They happened to be crewing royal warships.’ Arithon straightened with a jangle of chain. His clear, expressive voice lifted above the echoes. ‘Show me a man who’s harmless, and I’ll show you one stone dead.’

Lysaer stepped back, set his shoulders against the closed door to mask a shiver of dismay. The first officer had not exaggerated to justify the severity of his actions. In silence, the crown prince regarded a face whose humanity lay sealed behind unguarded viciousness.

“*Kill thou me, and I shall helpless be.*” Arithon capped his quote with a taunting smile. ‘Or perhaps you’re too squeamish to try?’

The crown prince clamped his jaw, unsettled by the depths of antagonism such simple words could provoke.

Arithon pressured like gall on a sore spot, his accent a flawless rendition of high court style. ‘By the rotted bones of our mother, what a dazzle of jewels and lace. Impressive, surely. And the sword. Do you wear that for vanity also?’

‘You’ll gain nothing by baiting me.’ Determined to learn what inspired the prisoner’s unprincipled attacks, Lysaer held his temper. ‘Except, perhaps, a wretched death I’d be ashamed to give a dog.’

‘But you offer a dog’s life,’ Arithon shot back. He twisted suddenly, and wire-bound fingers knocked over the water bowl. Cheap crockery rattled across the boards and a trail of puddles spilled and widened with the motion of the ship. ‘I chose not to lap like an animal from a dish. And bait you? Innocent, I haven’t begun.’

Arithon’s eyes sharpened. A sudden sting of sorcery pierced the prince’s awareness. Too late, he recoiled. In one unguarded instant the Master of Shadow smashed through his defences. A probe like hot wire flashed through the prince’s mind, sorting, gathering, discarding in an instant all the fine intentions that acted for fairness and compassion. The s’Ffalenn bastard repudiated honour. He ransacked his brother’s past to barb his insatiable malice, and into his grasp like a weapon fell the recall of a childhood memory far better left forgotten...

The young prince was much too lively to sleep. Overindulged with sweets, and stirred to nervous excitement by the festivities in celebration of his birthday, he ran on short legs and tumbled, laughing, on the carpet. ‘Want to see mama!’ he shouted to the chamberlain, who looked steadily more rumped and weary. A day spent managing an over-exuberant three-year-old had taxed his dignity sorely.

The royal nursemaid lifted the child from the floor. Deft as she was with the little ones, still the boy managed to twist in her arms and tangle his nightshirt around his neck. ‘Here,’ she scolded. ‘Want to choke yourself to death?’

The prince crowed with laughter. ‘Want to see mama.’

Exasperated, the nursemaid set his mussed clothing to rights. ‘If I say yes and you stay only long enough for a kiss, will you close your eyes and lie still until you fall asleep?’

The boy smiled in the way that never failed to melt the hearts of his attendants. ‘I promise.’

‘Now, a prince never breaks his word,’ warned the nurse.

Young Lysaer returned a solemn nod.

‘Well, see that you don’t, young man.’ The nurse ruffled his gold hair, then

returned him to the long-suffering arms of the chamberlain. ‘Take him down, sir. He’s a good boy, usually, and on his birthday the queen won’t mind.’

The prince chattered all the way down three flights of stairs. Though an elderly man, the chamberlain’s hearing was excellent. His ears rang by the time he reached the royal apartments, and with the prince squirming in energetic anticipation against his neck, he missed the warning gesture of the guard.

Beyond the embroidered hanging, the Lady Talera’s anteroom lay ominously deserted; chests and jewelled tapestries glittered in candlelight abnormally dim for the hour. The chamberlain hesitated. Warned of something amiss, he set the prince down; but the child, too young to notice nuance, tugged his hand free and ran ahead.

The moment Lysaer crossed the threshold to his mother’s chambers, he sensed something wrong. His father sat with the queen, and both of them were angry.

‘You’ll use no child of mine as an axe in your feud with s’Ffalenn,’ said his mother in a tone Lysaer had never heard before. His bare feet made no sound as he shrank in the shadows, uncertain. Trapped helplessly in the foyer, the chamberlain dared not risk the king’s temper. He knotted his hands in white hair, and prayed the young prince had sense enough to withdraw.

But Lysaer was frightened, and too small to understand arguments. He stayed still as a rabbit in the corner, while the queen spoke again. The lilt of her Rauven dialect lent her words raw force. ‘*Our son’s gift is no weapon.* Dare you abuse him? By Ath, I swear if you try, you’ll get no second child from me.’

Lysaer frowned, tried to sort meaning from the adult words. He knew they spoke of him and the sparkling lights he could make in the air whenever he wished, or dreamed of the sun.

The king rose abruptly from his chair. His shadow swooped in the candlelight as he bent and seized the queen’s wrists. ‘Woman, defy me, and I’ll make you wretched with childbearing. Blame your father. He should have made your dowry more accessible. Sorcery and babies made a misfortunate mix.’

Bracelets clashed as the queen wrenched free. Her elbow struck a side table and a crystal bowl toppled, scattering the carpet with glass and sugared nuts. Lysaer whimpered, unnoticed by the doorway. He wanted to run, but the chamberlain was nowhere in sight.

The king jerked the queen to her feet. ‘You’ve been indisposed long enough, you royal witch. I’ll bed you now, and every night afterward until you conceive the Master of Shadow I was promised.’

Gems sparkled on the king’s sleeves as he locked his arms around his consort. She fought him. He crushed her roughly against his doublet. Silk tore like the scream of a small animal between his hands, baring her slim back in the firelight.

The king laughed. ‘The s’Ffalenn will curse your lovely, gifted children from the bottom of the sea.’

The queen struggled. Blonde hair tumbled from diamond pins and snagged on the man’s rough fingers. From the doorway, Lysaer saw tears in his mother’s eyes, but her voice stayed ringingly steady. ‘Force me, and by the stones of Rauven Tower, I’ll even the stakes. The s’Ffalenn pirates will share my bride gift to s’llessid, and grief and sorrow will come of it.’

‘Curse me, will you? Dharkaron witness, you’ll regret this.’ The king struck her.

Flung off balance, the queen crashed backwards across a table. Linen rumpled under her weight and a carafe toppled, flooding wine like blood across the cloth.

Traumatized by the violence, Lysaer at last cried out. 'Father! Don't hurt her any more!'

The king started, spun, and saw his son in the entry. His face contorted like a stranger's. '*Get out of here!*'

'No!' The queen pushed herself erect and extended a trembling hand. 'Lysaer?'

The frightened, hysterical child ran to his mother and buried his face in her warmth. He felt her shaking as she held him. Muffled by the cloth of her gown, the prince heard the king say something. Then the door slammed. The queen lifted Lysaer and stroked hair as bright and fair as her own.

She kissed his cheek. 'It's all over, little one.'

But Lysaer knew she lied. That very night she left Amroth, never again to return...

With a crack like a split in crystal the sail-hold spun back into focus. Lysaer shuddered in shock at the change. Tears wet his face. Whipped into fury by the pain of childhood betrayal, he forgot two decades of maturity. Into that breach, that long-forgotten maelstrom of suffering, Arithon's Ffalenn cast shadow.

An image pooled on the deck before the prince. Sanded wood transformed to a drift of silken sheets, upon which two figures twined, naked. Lysaer felt the breath tear like fire in his throat. The man was dark-haired and sword-scarred, unmistakably Avar's Ffalenn; beneath him, couched in a glory of gold hair, lay Talera, Queen of Amroth. Her face was radiant with joy.

Abruptly, Arithon withdrew from the prince's mind. He smirked toward the couple on the floor. 'Shall I show you the rest of the collection?'

Lysaer's hand closed hard on his sword. His mother and her illicit lover blinked out like blown candles and left, like an after-image, the face of the bastard's shameless scorn. Seared by rage like white fire, Lysaer saw nothing in the son but the fornicating features of the father. The lantern swung, echoed his motion in a frenzy of shadows as he drew and struck a blow to the side of the prisoner's head.

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The impact slammed Arithon over backwards. Wired wrists screeched across sail hanks as he toppled and crashed to the deck. Loose as an unstrung puppet, he lay on his side, while blood twined in ribbons across his jaw.

'What a superb effort, for the flat of the blade,' he managed between whistling breaths. 'Why not try the edge?' But Arithon's voice missed his usual vicious note.

Jarred back to reason, and burned by a shame that left him soiled, Lysaer strove for control. In all of his life he had never struck a helpless man; the novelty left him aching. Breathing hard, the lifted edge of the sword poised over his enemy, he said, 'You *want* me to kill you!' Sickened to discover his hand shaking, he flung away his weapon. 'By Ath, I deny you that satisfaction. Your father's lust for vengeance will fall on some other head than mine.'

The blade struck crosswise against the door. As the clamour of echoes dwindled, Arithon stirred and shut his eyes. A shudder swept him. That brief instant his control slipped, to reveal tearing grief and shocking desperation. Then, his mask of

indifference restored, he said, 'I sailed as first officer on board the *Saeriat*. The brigantine was my father's command.'

The crown prince of Amroth drew breath, wrung by terrible understanding. *Briane's* original log entry had been correct: *Saeriat's* captain had burned with his brigantine. The pirate king of Karthan was dead. Here, helplessly fettered and pleading to die, was his sole heir, the last s'Ffalenn left living.

Arithon did not miss the change in his half-brother's manner. He raised himself on one elbow, head flung back. 'Loan me your knife. As one prince to another, I promise, the feud between s'Ffalenn and s'llessid will end here without any more cause for bloodshed.'

'I cannot.' Lysaer stared down at the mauled face of the captive and qualified with sympathy that cut. 'Your death would ruin every man on this vessel, by my father's decree.'

Arithon responded with damning sarcasm. 'How admirable. Don't neglect to mention the gold which rewards the virtue of such loyalty.' Green eyes flicked up, pinned by lamplit highlights. 'You preserve me solely for the king of Amroth. In his hands, I become a puppet for him to torment, a target for the hatred inspired by our mother, my father, and seven generations of captains who practised piracy before me.' Arithon lowered his gaze. 'I beg not to be forced to that role. Let me take my life. That will spare me and your family further shame.'

The bare simplicity of the appeal caught the crown prince like a blow. Left no breath to speak, he avoided answer by retrieving his fallen sword. He rammed the blade into the scabbard with a violence born of raw nerves. The original purpose of his visit seemed tawdry, a meaningless, arrogant charade that unmasked a hypocrite player. Unable to trust his reactions, he backed out of his half-brother's presence and shot the bolt on the door. A few short minutes of madness had nearly brought him to murder, to sacrifice the lives of loyal sailors to end the misery of a criminal. Shaking, the crown prince of Amroth gripped the companionway rail. 'Fatemaster's judgement, you deserve what you get,' he murmured to the closed door behind him.

'Your Grace? Are you all right?' *Briane's* first officer had remained on guard in the passage, but with the lantern left in the sail-hold, darkness had hidden his presence.

Lysaer started in surprise. He had thought he was alone, and the sudden discovery of company embarrassed him. 'I'm all right,' he said quickly.

The first officer was too much a courtier to offer comment. Instead he fetched the light from the sail-hold, then reset both bar and lock with studied concentration.

Lysaer pushed away from the bulkhead, self-conscious in his sweat-damp silk. The sting of s'Ffalenn manipulation seemed still to pry at his thoughts. Uncertainty weakened the tenets of honour. Worse yet, he still felt pity. Arithon's plight at the hands of the king would be unpleasant and prolonged. For the first time in his life, Lysaer fully understood his father's deranged hatred of s'Ffalenn: to the last son left living, they were a breed of fiends.

Aware of the first officer quietly awaiting instruction, the prince raked a hand through his hair. 'I'm all right,' he repeated. At least his voice had stopped shaking. 'Send down the healer, and be sharp about it. I want the prisoner drugged unconscious and this ship under sail for Port Royal before the turn of the tide.'

The first officer raised frightened eyes to his prince. 'Your Grace, that's not wise.'

Prolonged overdose of the herb is sure to cause madness.'

Lysaer raised eyes gone hard as the cut sapphires at his collar. 'Ath's grief, man, I know that! But insanity will surely be a mercy beside the judgement and sentence our prisoner will receive as s'Ffalenn. Let this pass beneath the Wheel be an easy one for him, for in truth, he is the last.'

The first officer looked up in surprise. 'The pirate-king died also?'

Lysaer nodded. 'That should please my father well enough. If the healer fears royal retribution, tell him and every man of *Briane's* crew that I'll sail along with them to intercede.'

Tracer

Daybreak glimmered through the arches of Rauven Tower and outlined the concerned face of the high mage in silver and deepest shadows. He had stopped pacing the floor. His tired eyes studied the listener who sat at his feet, but the tranced man's form showed no stir of returning consciousness. The farseer's features remained remote; fragile hands stayed folded and limp in the lap of his bordered robe as they had since sundown the day before.

The high mage wrestled extreme impatience. No sign hinted whether the images gathered by the listener's delicate talent were terrible or benign.

'What has happened to my grandson?' The words escaped before the high mage realized he had spoken aloud; but worry allowed no chink for regret. The gaunt old sorcerer waited in stillness with the breath stopped in his throat.

The listener opened distant eyes. By the outburst and the expression on his master's face, he became one of the few to discover how deeply the high mage loved his daughter's s'Ffalenn bastard. He phrased his answer with extreme tact.

'I see a place in constant motion, but lightless. It smells of canvas, mould and damp.' But the listener mentioned nothing of the pain, hunger and thirst also encountered in that place. Why grieve a lonely man's heart when for hours Arithon's condition had not altered, except for a brief visit by a prince who wore the gold on blue of Amroth?

The listener closed his eyes once more. *What words could tell an ageing man that his beloved grandson had tried to provoke his own death? Did phrases exist that could soften the despair behind such an act; that a king's blind hatred for a wife's transgressions might fall upon the hapless flesh of her son?*

The listener disliked delivering ill news without a promise of hope. He slipped back into trance, braced to endure Arithon's misery until he gleaned some small fact to lighten the grandfather's distress. Far off, beyond the shudder of ship's planking and the foaming splash of seawater, the high mage's restless steps resumed.

Sunrise shone livid red through the tower windows. Gaunt as a crow in his dark robe, the high mage stopped with his heart chilled by foreboding.

The listener stiffened. Brown eyes sprang open in a face blanched like fine linen. 'Dharkaron have mercy.'

'The news is bad,' said the high mage. 'Tell me quickly.'

The listener drew a shaking breath and looked up. His hands knotted helplessly.