



## *Flight*

### Part 6

by Tony Graham

The night had grown darker when Ruena came on deck. The lanterns hung about the ship provided only a dim glow.

At first, Ruena thought the thick night air was laden with smoke from the distant fires burning the Imperial City. But it was mist. A mist rising off an unnaturally still sea. Looking up and out, she could see the masts of the other ships piercing the heavy fog. Murmurs of voices and the melodic notes of pipes, lutes, fiddles and tin whistles danced with the steady beat of a hand drum from the docks. A single voice rose through the mist, singing of an endless sea and distant horizon.

Imperial Guardsmen were coming aboard the *Lady Tross*. They carried rolled sheets of canvas, casks of water and food, provisions for a larger number of passengers than the ship normally took on. Several of the Guardsmen had set about erecting a canvas roofed shelter amidships. The ship's crew watched the activity, lending aid when they saw an opportunity, otherwise staying clear of the armed warriors.

Ruena located Kytun Iye through the mist, stationed at the top of the gangplank, and began to make her way across the deck towards the young Guardsman in his black-washed hauberk.

Kytun was staring at the line of covered corpses laid upon the dock below. The assassins he had defeated. His attention shifted as Ruena approached him, the lines on his brow clearing.

She smiled at him. Despite the assurances of Weores and Geric, she worried Kytun might be suspicious of her after the attack by the Kreal assassins. His small smile was the equal of a wide, friendly grin from most men. Guardsmen were not adept at displaying emotion. It quieted her fear.

Two burly Guardsmen brought a large chest draped with canvas up the gangplank. The wooden boards groaned beneath the weight.

Ruena caught Captain Parmaran's frown as he joined them at the rail. Heavy cargo was typically lifted aboard with block and tackle. Parmaran was no doubt worried more about a mishap and delay than a broken plank of wood. Ruena backed away, giving the Guardsmen plenty of room to maneuver once they reached the ship's deck.

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A board cracked beneath the foot of the trailing Guardsman carrying the chest. As he stumbled onto the deck, their burden tipped, and the canvas draping the chest slipped from one edge.

Ruena recognized the rune-engraved brass banding protecting the corner edge of the oak chest: Gallidon's Charge. The barrel-stave chest always accompanied the Emperor on his travels. It contained his war panoply and the powerful treasures entrusted to his line down through the centuries. The Emperor himself half-jokingly referred to it as his 'burden.'

The Guardsmen casually adjusted the canvas, concealing the chest once again, and carried it down into the ship's hold.

Ruena found Kytun Iye regarding her. His steady look stilled any question she might have voiced.

"We've missed another tide," Captain Parmaran said. His tone bespoke anxiety and frustration.

Kytun made no reply.

Parmaran turned to look at the activity on his deck, craned his head to study the tops of his masts. "Damn fog." He crossed his arms across his chest. "Damned odd night and no mistake. I don't care for it one bit."

Still Kytun made no reply.

Captain Parmaran moved away.

Ruena leaned against the rail, listening to the music and staring into the gathering fog. Gallidon's Charge was on the *Lady Tross*. It always accompanied the Emperor. Did it mean the Emperor would join them? Would her sister and nephew be with him? Were they alive?

Kytun was studying her with a slightly puzzled look.

"Alkan's dirk?" Kytun asked.

Ruena cocked her head, momentarily puzzled by the question.

Kytun held out a sheath. It was not ornate, but would fit the dirk nicely. "You are carrying it?" It was not quite a question. Ruena wondered if he could see through the illusion. Some of the Guardsmen were reputed to see through even complex glamours.

Ruena drew the dirk from her belt, the hilt and bare blade becoming visible as her hand passed over it.

A smile flashed across Kytun's face at her revelation. He handed her the sheath. Straps



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on the sheath would allow it to be hung from most any belt or baldric. Ruena attached it to her belt and sheathed the dirk. Its weight pulled her belt slightly lower over her left hip, the tip of the sheath almost reaching her knee.

“The glamour is a good way of hiding the blade,” Kytun said in a low voice. “It could gain you an instant of surprise.”

Ruena glanced around. No one paid them any attention. She gathered her Will, then wrapped the hilt and sheath of the dirk in illusion. Only the uneven set of her belt gave a indication that she was armed.

Kytun nodded his approval. He regarded her for a moment. His face gave no clue of his thoughts. Ruena knew better than to attempt to touch even the surface of his mind.

The Emperor's runes shielded his Guardsmen in a way few others could master. To reach for a Guardsman's thoughts or emotions was to find a void. A blank nothingness. The ward or rune that shielded their minds left no trace of itself or the man who bore it. It was yet another reason why so much of the nobility feared the Guardsmen. They were nearly impossible to track with scrying. Even abandoning mental shields and extending one's senses gave little warning of a Guardsman's presence.

“I do not understand much of what has happened around us these last few months,” Kytun said. “But I do understand that nothing is safe. Power can sometimes be found in secrets. But only while they remain secret.”

Ruena knew Kytun was trying to tell her things he was not allowed to speak of. Trying to advise her. Of all the surviving Guardsman, he was the youngest, but not judged the least. It occurred to her to wonder if Kytun was aware he had been the subject of more than one discussion between Gallidon and Telar Muhnrin. Ruena thought of the chest brought aboard; Gallidon's Charge. She met Kytun's gaze.

“I understand the use of secrets.”

Kytun gave her the smallest of nods before turning to look out over the fog-shrouded docks.

The ringing of a ship's bell was answered by two others, their pure notes breaking the somber, oppressive feel of the night.

Ruena could feel a shift in the air. Even through her tightly woven shields, she could sense the use of Power. The daughters and sons of Nuada on the other ships were calling on the





elements.

The fog began to swirl, torn by the assault of gathering winds.

The musicians on the docks changed their tune. A quick, steady drumbeat, boisterous skirling, rapid strumming of strings, and the distinct plucking of single deep notes. It was a traditional mariner's farewell, one to raise spirits, one to send a ship to sea with light and eager hearts.

A fourth ship's bell rang out. This time, Ruena could hear the order to cast off. She could see the sails being raised through the breaking fog.

“The commander comes.”

Ruena followed Kytun's gaze down to the small group of figures moving toward her ship's gangplank. She picked out the burly form of Weores. Beside the Lord of House Nuada strode a figure no less impressive. Telar Muhnrun. Commander of Gallidon's Imperial Guard. Believed by many to be the Emperor's closest confidant. Others referred to the man as Gallidon's hound. But not within the hearing of either man, nor the Imperial Guard.

Telar led the others up the plank to the ship's deck, his hawk-like gaze passing over her, acknowledging her without pausing as he walked to meet Captain Parmaran on the quarterdeck.

Ruena was once again struck by the resemblance between Emperor and Commander. Some at court whispered Gallidon aged faster than his forefathers to maintain the resemblance to Telar out of some twisted humor. As a member of the Imperial Household, Ruena knew there was more to it than humor or whim.

“You may cast off, Captain.” Telar's voice was clearly heard across the deck.

Captain Parmaran hesitated, looking toward the docks.

“There will be no one else coming.” Telar's tone brooked no dispute.

Captain Parmaran rang his ship's bell, two hard notes splitting the night, and began to shout orders to his crew, preparing to get underway.

Ruena turned to look out across the docks. Through the tattered fog, she could easily make out the last of the ships beside her own as it left the dock behind, sails full-bellied with the magical winds of the Nuada. The steady light of the sea castle's tower light illuminated the path out to sea.

Gerric joined them at the rail. “Kytun, escort Lady Ruena to her cabin. Lady, you are to



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remain there until a Guardsman comes for you.”

“What about the murdered men on board this ship?” Ruena challenged the older Guardsman.

“The Commander says we will deal with this unknown foe at sea. We are already late. We must go.” Ruena was surprised Geric answered her objection.

The musicians on the dock, alone now, continued to play. One old man, a singer, waved farewell as Ruena felt the ship come alive beneath her feet. She returned the wave.

“We are abandoning them.” Ruena tried, but failed to keep bitterness out of her voice.

“We are honoring their choice.” Geric's reply was quiet.

Lord Weores stood beside the main mast, raised sails above him fluttering in the stray breeze. Arms outflung, Weores raised his bare left foot nearly to his waist, paused, and then stomped down with a force Ruena could feel both through the deck and her mental shields. His first stomp was followed by another. And another. And another. It became a steady beat. He began to sing in a low voice, the words indistinguishable.

The air stilled, as if focusing on Weores' measured cadence.

The sails above the deck suddenly billowed.

Kytun led Ruena to the companionway below deck to her cabin.

Ruena could hear the sailors on deck as they joined Weores, their own stomping matching his cadence, their voices raising in a sea chantey.



The ship was alive beneath his feet. Kytun had sailed before, but it was a rare enough occurrence to gain his attention as he moved quietly below deck. A single, low-flamed lantern cast a dim light in the passageway. Above his head, he could hear the wind straining against the sails, footsteps as the crew moved about deck, and the occasional shouted orders of the Captain. Here below deck, he could hear the waters of the sea moving down the sides of the ship, cut by the bow and keel.

Kytun knocked at the door before him.

Three Guardsmen were stationed in the ship's main hold, two others in the small aft



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hold. The rest of his company were on deck with the Commander. Kytun had been sent below to check on the Guardsmen and passengers in the rear section of the ship. Other than a quick meeting of the eyes, Kytun Iye had exchanged no greetings with the Guardsmen in the aft hold. These were both seasoned warriors of the Imperial Guard. Had they need or question, they would have spoken to him.

Kytun pressed the latch on the door and gently pushed it open. It was dark within, full of the smell and sounds of the sea. The windows on the rear bulkhead of the cabin swung open to reveal the ship's wake, white foam glittering beneath the night sky. Across the small cabin, he could barely make out the large form of a man sitting upright on the bunk. Next to the door hung a lantern, the wick trimmed down to the smallest guttering flame. Kytun turned the key, extending the wick, feeding the flame. Light spilled across the cabin.

The giant form of Lord Torkel of the Vakur slouched on the bunk, wide blue eyes fixed unseeing at something beyond Kytun's vision, beyond the walls of the cabin. Colored sands and black pebbles were scattered across the top of a table and the floor. Of Lady Tine, the Lord's young wife from his homeland far North, there was no sign.

Kytun crossed the cabin to the man. "Lord Torkel?" The old man gave no response. Kytun fought to control a mounting tension within. There was no evidence of anything wrong. Torkel was known for his increasingly strange behavior in equal measure to his loyalty. But Kytun was alarmed. He took the man's head in his hands, brushing aside the white mane, turning Torkel's face to him.

"Milord, where is your wife?" Kytun's demand was out of place. He knew it was wrong to use such a tone. This was a lord of the Empire. "Torkel!"

The man's eyes momentarily turned to study Kytun. They were full of confusion, their focus fading in an instant.

Kytun gently shook the man's head. "Lord Torkel, where is your wife?"

"My wife?" Torkel's eyes anchored on Kytun, struggling to answer. "My wife is lost. Dead."

His answer made no sense to Kytun. Torkel was old. He may have had other wives.

Kytun released the man and stood surveying the cabin. The small collection of belongings matched what he remembered when Torkel and his wife boarded earlier in the day. Lady Tine's chest of clothing was open, its contents neatly arrayed.



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Kytun crouched down to meet the old lord's gaze. "Lady Tine. Where is Tine?"

"My beautiful Tine is dead." Torkel's eyes looked beyond Kytun. "She is dead. And I cannot leave her."



Ruena refilled Tine's cup from the bottle of wine. The delicate blond girl smiled shyly in thanks.

*Girl?* The Lady Tine was her own age. Ruena no longer thought of herself as a girl. Why did she think Tine one? What was the difference? Perhaps it was the fragile feel to Tine, the sense that she should be sheltered. Weakness?

Ruena picked up her own cup, remembering the question put to her. "I'm sorry. I don't know where this ship is bound. I'm as much in the dark as yourself."

"But you could ask the Captain," Tine said.

Ruena turned away from the girl and walked to look out the rear window at the wine dark sea. "I could ask, but I'm not sure the Captain knows."

Ruena's head was smashed into the bulkhead next to the window. Dazed, she sought to push herself away from the wall. A fearsome strength held her fast against the polished timbers. She cried out. Her head was again banged into the bulkhead.

Ruena heard the door of her cabin be smashed open. Released, she fell to her knees, trying desperately to clear her head.

"Help us!" Tine's cry gave Ruena the strength she needed to look up.

Kytun Iye stood in the middle of the cabin, hand on sword hilt.

The petite blond girl rushed to him, throwing herself into the safety of his arms.

*Stupid girl is tying up his sword arm.* Ruena glanced dazedly around the room, searching for her attacker, trying to make sense of things.

Kytun was looking only at Tine.

Without warning, Tine seized Kytun, hurling him across the cabin into the bulkhead with stunning force. The girl betrayed no sign of effort despite the display of unnatural strength. She quickly closed on Kytun where he lay on the floor.

Gerric appeared in the cabin doorway, a throwing knife raised in his hand.



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Tine wheeled to face Geric, her face contorted by a demonic rage.

Geric's hand flew forward. The knife flashed across the small space. It bounced from Tine's belly as if from an iron plate.

Tine bared her fine teeth at Geric.

The Guardsman drew a long knife from his belt, holding it easily before him in a ready stance.

Tine's smile faded. "Help me, husband!"

Geric turned in time to avoid the first hammer blow from Lord Torkel's clenched fists. The giant nobleman fell upon Geric, wrestling him to the floor. Lord Torkel raised himself above Geric, both massive hands locked about the Guardsman's throat.

Tine turned back to face Ruena, a hellish hunger in her eyes.

Kytun flew in from the side, smashing the blond girl before him to the wall. Tine bounced off the wall and seized Kytun with both small fists, effortlessly lifting him. Kytun ducked his head, taking the numbing blow on his shoulder as he was slammed into a beam of the ceiling.



The Guardsmen were not so dangerous as the creature had feared. The stupid one in its hands would die quickly, then it would feed upon the girl, consuming her Will, absorbing her memories. The creature's guardian seemed to be dealing with the other Guardsman well enough. It must move quickly. Finish this target and take the last, the powerful man, by surprise.

Through the line of compulsion, the creature was aware as its master's sense of triumph and exaltation shifted to puzzlement. Then dread. Then ash.

The creature threw the stupid Guardsman from it, staggered. The force of compulsion was broken, the tenuous line severed in an instant.

The creature was bereft of purpose. There was no compulsion. It could kill as and when it wished. It could feed.

The creature was free.



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Ruena felt warmth on her hip. She could see nothing there. Her hand closed on the hilt of Alkan's dirk. It was warm to her touch, the runes of power inscribed on its blade alive with mystical energy. Ruena drew the dirk as she rose to her feet.

Tine, or that which appeared to be Tine, spun to face Ruena.

As she had been taught, as she had practiced countless times with the Imperial Guard, Ruena drove Alkan's dirk forward with all the strength of her arm, shoulder, hips and legs.

The blade punched through Tine's chest, its thrust stopped only by the cross-guard.

Tine froze, staring in fury at the hilt between her breasts.

Tine's body began to alter.

Ruena savagely pulled the dirk from Tine's shifting form as she stepped back.

An unseen force buffeted Ruena's mind, assaulting her Will, her balance, her sense of place and time. Ruena slid to the floor.

Gerric pried Lord Torkel's massive hands from his throat, then froze in amazement as the old man cried out and went into a seizure. The giant son of Vakur collapsed, body sprawled across the floor.

Kytun stood ready in a warrior's crouch, heavy dagger in hand as Tine's corpse transformed into a thing. A leathery, four-armed creature with no resemblance to a woman. Or anything human. Kytun drove his dagger into the thing's misshapen skull. Just to be sure. He placed a boot on the creature's oddly formed jaw and wrenched his dagger free.

The ship rolled as if the sails had been cast loose. The wind fled, leaving the *Lady Tross* to wallow in the rough sea.

"He's dead," Gerric said. The older Guardsman rose from Lord Torkel's corpse.

Kytun knelt next to Ruena, gently turning her, raising her head. Ruena's eyes were open, alive, but glazed as if she had taken a blow to the head.

"What is that?"

Gerric's tone brought Kytun to his feet.

Out of the cabin window the two Guardsmen could see an enormous wall of unearthly black clouds charging out across the sea from the Imperial Isle. Savage lightning flared in the

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darkness. They felt the thunder in their bones as the otherworldly storm bore down on their ship.



The *Lady Tross* broke free of the storm on the fourth day. The ship survived only by the courage, determination, and skill of her captain and crew.

Lord Weores, master of the elements, true son of Nuada the mariner, lay strapped in a bunk throughout. Trapped in a nightmare, unable to wake, his mindless shouts and ceaseless struggles had driven Ruena from the cabin. He had awoken a few hours after they escaped the storm, confused and weak as a child.

Ruena had probed Weores' mind. His thoughts were muddled, unshielded. There was no sign of the vast reservoir of power the man had commanded. His will was there, but his power had vanished. Or been destroyed.

Something had happened. Some mystical wave of destruction traveling before the unnatural storm. It had killed Lord Torkel. Weores had been on deck, calling on the elements, fully exerting his Will. The wave of sorcerous energy had stripped his power from him, casting him into some mad darkness, deep within his mind. She was not sure he would fully recover.

When the wave of destruction hit, Ruena had her mental shields tightly drawn, heeding Lord Torkel's prophesy. She had been psychically battered, but other than a severe headache, the effects had faded after the second day. The Guardsmen had been aware that some form of magical event was taking place, but had experienced no ill effects. The ship's crew and captain had felt nothing.

Whatever effect the wave of destruction might have had on Lady and Lord Honen remained unknown. Geric had found them murdered within their own cabin. The discovery had sent him racing to join Ruena and Kytun in time to battle the creature that had taken Lady Tine's form. The Guardsmen had pitched the creature's corpse overboard.

Ruena and Kytun Iye stood in the ship's bow. They kept their backs to the dark storm that shrouded the Imperial Isle, instead facing the sunset in the west. The exhausted crew moved quietly about the deck, slowly bringing order to the tattered chaos of sheets and sails.

"I asked that you be my bodyguard," Ruena said.

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Kytun hid a pleased smile before it could surface.

“Telar assigned Geric to me,” Ruena continued.

“Geric is a good man. An experienced Guardsman. I am not yet officially of the Guard.”

Ruena turned to face him. “You are a Guardsman, Kytun Iye.”

Kytun had no answer for her. He had no wish to argue.

Ruena turned back to the sunset. “Geric is old.”

Kytun chuckled. Ruena failed to maintain a petulant expression.

“No one will tell me where we are bound.”

“You have a great many complaints this evening, Ruena Kreal.”

“Yes, I do, Kytun Iye.”

Kytun turned to look at the crew and lowered his voice. “At dawn, Telar will order the captain to make way for Eastlight to refit. From there, on to Mogadur.”

Ruena turned to look at their wake. Kytun followed her gaze. Together they studied the impenetrable stormfront. The dark clouds roiled, but did not change position, ignoring the winds that could still be felt even at this great distance.

“What of the Imperial City?” Ruena asked. “The storm?”

“We have been told the Imperial Isle is closed to us. We are not to attempt a return.”

“And Gallidon? My sister? The Childe?”

“I fear the Emperor is lost,” Kytun said.

“Then the empire is lost.”

Kytun made no reply. He turned his back on the distant storm and faced the sunset.

Ruena could not turn away so easily. She remained focused on the storm long after the fall of night.



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