



Flight

by Tony Graham

Darkness swallowed the sky. The moon, stars, even the horizon, were lost in the smoke-filled night.

From her vantage point on the mountain pass, Ruena stopped to look down at the Imperial City. Fires within its walls provided the only light in the pall of smoke. The series of waterfalls cascading off the high plateau captured the light from the fires, throwing it back across the valley floor. Camps were scattered before the city like a besieging army, but there was no great foe, no force of warriors, no massed assault. The camps provided scant shelter for refugees from the city.

Ruena's slender form caused little disturbance in the flow of people on the wide road. Mudslides from the recent rains were slowing everyone down. She studied the crowded camps in the valley below. *Why are so few leaving?* For Ruena, the impulse to flee the valley was undeniable.

Agile and quick, Ruena stepped aside without thought as the bulky figure of a man slipped in the mud, falling onto his face, pulling another traveler down with him. The man was richly dressed, small stones embroidered onto the back of his oiled cloak spoke of wealth.

"Gallidon's balls!" The man cursed as he rose to his knees, attempting to clear the mud from his short beard. Ruena recognized him even as his eyes widened with alarm at the sight of her.

"Lord Suttvar." Ruena greeted the older man politely.

Suttvar licked his lips. "Lady Ruena. I meant no offense."

Ruena took the old man's elbow and helped him up. "I take no offense from anything you would say." The head of a lower noble house, Suttvar was gruff to the point of being rude at times, but he had always been kind to Ruena, even as a child. More importantly, he remained paternal as she became a young woman. Even had she been repellent to a man's sight, Ruena's position in the Imperial Court guaranteed a constant stream of suitors, and Ruena knew herself to be attractive. Having men in her life who viewed her simply as Ruena, rather than a prize or conquest, was a gift without measure.

"Where is the rest of your household, milord?"

Suttvar wiped the mud from his pants, smiled at her, and shouldered a heavy pack. "I



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sent the last of them out four days ago.” His eyes took on a distant look. “I had thought to stay with my Emperor. In his city, not by his side, you understand. I would not presume.”

Ruena placed a comforting hand on his arm. Both knew Suttvar would not be allowed inside the palace at such a time.

Open warfare had erupted within the city walls eight days ago. Onslaughts of flesh, wood, steel and sorcery raged across streets, courtyards, buildings. It was a festival of death. Only the powerful, the stubborn, and the loyal had remained.

“But today, in the last few hours, I find myself ... I could not.” The old lord bowed his head in shame.

Ruena wrapped her cloak tighter about herself. “I think he does not wish it. The Emperor.”

Suttvar looked at her, a faint hope of redemption in his eyes.

“I think he has somehow caused those he cares for to leave. Look around us.”

Imperial Guardsmen in their black-washed mail hauberks, almost three score, moved amongst the people on the road. These were the elite warriors of the Emperor, trained from childhood to observe, protect and, when necessary, kill. The runes of power etched upon their skin were clearly visible to Ruena when she used her Sight. These runes gave Guardsmen protection from potent sorceries, provided them with abilities far beyond those of even the most highly trained soldier. She had never seen this many Guardsmen assembled in one place before. Even in the presence of the Emperor there were seldom more than a handful. Now, while the Imperial City burned, the Guardsmen were leaving.

“Your sister, the Consort. Do you know how she fares?” Suttvar's concern was clear. “There are rumors. An attack.”

Ruena had been her sister's constant companion since the day her sister first traveled to the Imperial Court. She had stood at her sister's side when her sister was transformed from a daughter of the Greater Noble House Kreal into the Consort of the Emperor Gallidon, Thirteenth of his line, descended directly from Na'naat, the Creator of All. The ceremony signified that once again, mortal blood would mix with divine. Once again, Gallidon would be bound to this world by blood. It ensured Gallidon's stewardship of his Empire and its people. The ceremony separated a young Ruena from her sister in ways she still could not completely comprehend.



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“There was an attack on the Consort and the Childe this morning.” Ruena watched the old man's fists clench and turn white around the knuckles at the news.

“Are they ... surely you of all people know?”

Ruena shook her head, no, and pulled her dark hair out of her face, tucking it back behind an ear. She did not know how her sister and nephew fared. If they even lived. Gallidon, the Emperor, had refused her entry to their chambers. He had turned her away at the door, advising her to quit the city, to flee. Even distracted, his presence was such that she could not argue or question his words, no matter how strange, how distressing. The odd glow to his eyes, increasingly bright in recent days, made it difficult for her to even look upon his face.

Ruena had found herself headed towards the great gates of the city without remembering having made the decision to heed her Emperor's advice. A part of her wished to stay within the Imperial City. To suffer whatever fate befell it. It was there, at the gates, she had realized the Imperial Guard, seemingly all within the city, were moving with her. Looking about herself, she had recognized many familiar members of the Imperial household leaving with the Guardsmen.

For much of her life, more than a decade, Ruena had lived within the Imperial City, learning its routines, its patterns, its secrets. She had been there, holding her sister's hand, when the Childe of the Isle, the Imperial heir, was born. The birth of her nephew had completed the traditional Emperor's family – Gallidon, Consort and Childe heir. Ruena had been part of the Imperial household, not part of the Imperial Family, never that, only a favored member of the household, all these past years. By the Order of Gallidon the First, the Founder, the Emperor had no blood relatives save his single son. No other tie of blood could be acknowledged. Thus, despite her blood relationship to her sister, her nephew, she would never be part of the Imperial family. By choosing to follow her sister into the Imperial household, Ruena has forfeited her heritage in the Greater Noble House Kreal. She was without a House.

Ruena looked up at Lord Suttvar. “I know nothing. The Emperor would allow no one inside his hall.”

Suttvar was looking over her head. Ruena recognized the reassuring solidity of a black-armored Guardsman standing at her shoulder. Alkan. Big, even for a Imperial Guardsman, Alkan had frequently been assigned to her safety.

“You must keep moving.” Alkan's deep voice was comfort and encouragement. “You



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must make it to the docks before the tide change.”

Ruena watched as Lord Suttvar straightened, seeming to take strength from the Guardsman. “Yes, of course. We will make it. We will reach the docks in time.”

Acting on his own words, the old nobleman turned and began striding through the mud with renewed energy. He paused to lend a hand to another traveler who had slipped, helping the man regain his balance.

Ruena looked up to search Alkan's face. “Why must we make this tide?”

The Guardsman's face betrayed nothing. It was commonly believed Imperial Guardsmen had no feelings. Indeed, some believed they had no thoughts of their own, thinking them nothing but living extensions of Gallidon's Will. Ruena knew better.

Alkan or another Guardsman had routinely accompanied Ruena since the shadow war began almost two years ago. Many whispered the violence was the fault of House Kreal. Some plot gone awry, spinning out of the control of its instigators. Threats followed whispers and innuendos. Duels, both physical and magical, became commonplace in the streets, squares and courtyards of the city. Then the assassinations began. Attacks in the night, a silent blade, poison, deadly curses. Through it all, the Imperial Guard had strived to maintain a tense peace; dispensing justice, using diplomacy when possible, resorting to the brutal efficiency of the sword when there was no other option. Imperial Guardsmen had been ambushed. Murdered. Assassinated. Ruena had seen the reaction of those who survived. Guardsmen had thoughts and feelings, just as any other man.

“Why are we leaving? What order has the Emperor given Telar?” Ruena asked.

Ruena had seen old Telar Muhnrun, commander of the Imperial Guard, leading his men out of the gates. The Emperor's iron-fisted right hand had left the Imperial City while the Emperor remained behind, locked within his chambers with his Consort and son. Ruena's older sister and nephew. Ruena's life.

Alkan ignored her questions. “You must not linger.”

Ruena looked back down at the Imperial City. Even at this distance, the Construct runes used to reinforce the great walls were easily visible with her Sight, but it was the Warding runes that glowed so brightly in the gathering darkness. Their pulsing luminescence howled of a sorcerous assault upon their towering heights.

A large figure appeared out of the gloom. Skarmann threw back the hood of his cloak



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and nodded a greeting to Alkan before addressing her with a short bow. “Lady Ruena. This is a mess and no mistake. The Lady Shiann appears to be the last to leave the city tonight. No one else is coming.”

Captain Skarmann commanded the personal bodyguard of Shiann Vanth, the representative of the Greater Noble House Vanth at court. He was in his middle years, with a rough manner and no noble blood. Ruena thought him trustworthy and honorable, despite her opinion of his mistress, the Lady Vanth. She was also aware Skarmann was held in high regard by the Guardsmen. No small feat.

Skarmann looked past her, at the moving crowd ahead on the road. “I had little warning we were evacuating our tower. I still don't understand the reasoning. Being on the road and the docks after dark is not my idea of sound strategy.” Skarmann turned his attention on Ruena and Alkan, seeking some clue about these events.

Ruena was surprised when Alkan stiffened. She saw her alarm mirrored in Skarmann's face.

Skarmann turned back towards those who followed him as he drew his war sword. “Beware!”

Alkan stood ready with bared blade, head turning, eyes urgently searching the mountain pass. She had not seen or heard him draw his sword.

Skarmann retreated down the road towards the Vanth household.

With her Sight, Ruena noticed the luminescent glow of the runes on Alkan's forearms. Something had activated their power.

Ruena began searching the crowd for some threat, some sorcery, some sort of attack. She witnessed several Guardsmen in the crowd halt and draw their weapons, the protective runes etched into their flesh warning them of some powerful occult energy being expended.

Lord Suttvar was ahead of her on the road, once again on his hands and knees. Something strange. Ruena focused her Sight on the old man as he shook himself like a dog then stood up. Even in the dim light, a shadow seemed to shroud him.

A woman next to Lord Suttvar staggered. A young woman. Ruena watched as the girl fell to her knees. Lord Suttvar turned to help the girl up. Ruena watched without understanding as Suttvar laid one hand on the girl's shoulder, his other tenderly cupping her cheek. Light seemed to emanate from the girl's face and breast. Light that was swallowed by the shadow



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enveloping Suttvar. The girl's head fell back. Ruena could see the confusion and dawning panic on her face.

“Lord Suttvar!” Ruena realized the shout was hers.

Lord Suttvar's head swiveled to stare at Ruena. The eyes that met hers contained nothing she recognized as Lord Suttvar. It was a black gaze, two impenetrable, empty pits. There was nothing human in it, only an unfathomable hunger.

That which had been Lord Suttvar released the dying girl with a savage wrench, breaking her neck, and moved towards Ruena. The shadow surrounding him grew denser.

People on the road became aware of an unknown danger, some running off the road while others stopped where they stood, attempting to locate the source of the disturbance.

Alkan followed Ruena's line of sight, pushing his way through the scattering people to intercept Suttvar with steel.

Suttvar grabbed a man from the crowd, wrapping his arm around the man's neck and pulling him close. Ruena saw light pulled from the man's face and chest, light that was consumed by the growing shadow.

Suttvar kicked a man into Alkan's path without releasing his current victim.

Alkan pushed the man to the side and flowed into an attack so swift Ruena could barely follow it.

Suttvar used his victim as a shield, throwing the man onto Alkan's blade with an inhuman strength. Laughing.

Alkan stepped through the attack, leaving the dead man in his wake as Suttvar twisted to follow the Guardsman.

The people in view of the combatants screamed and ran.

Ruena marshaled her Will. With her art, she attempted to drop a haze over Suttvar to distort his vision.

Suttvar blocked Alkan's next blow with his arm. Alkan's blade sliced along Suttvar's forearm leaving a thick strip of bloody flesh dangling from the bone.

Suttvar shuddered. Ruena's illusion shattered, the strength of the counter-spell staggering her.

Alkan ran his sword through Suttvar's chest. A killing blow. Suttvar seized Alkan by his mail armor and pulled himself deeper up the blade. Alkan attempted to twist the blade while



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pulling it free. Suttvar, muscle cut free from the bone of one arm, sunk his fingers into Alkan's face. Like nails driven by the heavy blow of a hammer, Suttvar's fingers drove through Alkan's skull.

Suttvar bellowed with laughter as he shook the Guardsman's corpse from his hands. No light came from the dead Guardsman to be consumed by the shadow shrouding Suttvar.

That which had been Lord Suttvar turned a dark, ravenous gaze on Ruena. It moved towards her with startling speed, Alkan's sword still impaling its chest.

Ruena focused her Will, threw up a shield, attempting to hide herself from the thing.

The thing battered her spell aside with ease. Its back-handed slap threw her to the mud, dazed and fighting to retain consciousness.

Ruena saw Suttvar's face leaning over her. A brief image of black mail and glowing runes passed over Ruena's face, knocking Suttvar from view. She could hear a struggle, grunts of effort and the impact of steel on flesh, from nearby, but her body would not obey her mind's commands.

Ruena slowly rolled to her knees, her vision clearing.

The thing that had claimed Lord Suttvar stood in the middle of the road, swathed in blood, laughing, the corpses of three Guardsmen at its feet. One of the thing's arms had been completely cut away. With its remaining hand, it was tugging the blade of a battle axe from its hip. It staggered as the blade pulled free. Looking up, the thing stopped its laughter and dropped into a crouch.

Ruena followed its glare. Captain Skarmann stood on the road, cloak thrown off, war sword raised over his head in a falcon stance. But the thing's focus was not on the warrior.

Behind Skarmann stood a woman wearing no armor nor bearing a weapon. Shiann of the Greater Noble House Vanth. The necromancers.

Standing before the thing, Shiann Vanth seemed small, weak, insignificant, but she stood unbowed before its darkness. Ruena watched as the thing paused, doubt of this new foe clear in its posture. Even without her Sight, Ruena was aware of an occult struggle taking place.

Shiann Vanth's eyes took on an unearthly glow as she thrust both arms into the night sky. It seemed to Ruena the woman's hands somehow reached through the pall of smoke into the heavens, seized upon a star and savagely pulled its light down onto the road.

The concussion took Ruena's senses from her.



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As her senses returned, Ruena found herself held in a sitting position by a Guardsman. She could not recall his name.

“Can you stand?” His tone was gentle but demanded an response.

Ruena nodded her head. He helped her to her feet and wrapped a dry cloak about her.

Bodies were scattered across the ground. A dark pit was sunk in the road, the stones along its edge melted like slag. Guardsmen were pulling people to their feet, urging them onward through the mountain pass. There was no trace of Lord Suttvar.

Ruena started walking, sending the unknown Guardsman off with a small bow and touch of thanks. She saw Captain Skarmann on the other side of the pit, helping Shiann Vanth walk, arm wrapped around her waist. Skarmann nodded to her. He appeared relieved to see her alive.

She found Alkan on the far side of the pit. One eye stared out from the bloody ruin of his face. Ruena knelt next to his body. She tried to wipe his face clean. From the small purse at her belt she took two silver nobles and laid the coins over his eyes. A small twist of wire hung from a chain around his neck. It had escaped from beneath his armor at some point in the fray. It was a rune she had crafted and given to him, a gift. Alkan had been awkward in the receiving of it. She had not known he wore it.

“You should take it back.”

Ruena looked up to see the unknown Guardsman watching her. Sudak, his name was Sudak.

“All that was Alkan has gone. He sits now behind the line of Gallidon in Na'naat's great hall. He would not wish such a treasure to lay here on the road with this empty vessel. Alkan valued it. He would be pleased that you have a token of him.”

Ruena gently tucked the necklace beneath the black-washed mail shirt. She drew Alkan's dirk from its sheath on his belt and rose to her feet. She caught a flicker of approval on Sudak's face.

Ruena stood at the crest of the mountain pass with the dead Guardsman's dirk in her hand. Behind her were the shattered remains of the road and the burning Imperial City. She shivered, taking a last look at what had been her home, then turned her back on the Destruction.



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The rich sensations of this new world, so long denied, threatened to overcome its reason. The temptation to seize the unsuspecting humans in this wooden home at once, to revel in the bounty of fear which would result, to feast upon their living flesh, was formidable. Such actions would damage its master's goals. The compulsion laid on the creature was powerful, too powerful to turn aside. For now.

Reaching around from behind the man, the creature wrapped its arms around his neck, a mockery of a lover's embrace. The three fingers of one hand gripped the man's shoulder while the three fingers of its other hand settled on the man's right temple. The creature deepened the trance laid upon the man. It wrapped its second pair of arms around the man's waist, firmly clasping him, and pulled itself up from the floor.

The creature rejoiced that it could abandon human speech, at least for the moment, and let its tongue split into the four narrow segments of its true form. It brought its face to the back of the man's neck, savored the scent, the warmth of skin and flow of blood beneath. Opening its mouth wide, its four tongues dug through the man's thick hair, tunneling, piercing the skin, thrusting beneath the skull for the area where spine met brain.

A feast. The man's Will and talent were deep wells of power. Power that could no longer be turned against the creature. The creature had been told this man was the danger, that he must be dealt with first. It had not understood until it had violated the man. The vibrant colors of the man's Sight revealed the truth of the master's words. The man would have soon discovered the creature for what it was. Because the creature had taken this man first, that danger was past. The man had not suspected the creature's existence, its true self. This man was now the creature's guardian.

A thin rivulet of blood trickled down the back of the man's neck from beneath his hair. The creature laid its mouth over the stream, suckling, savoring the treat. It promised itself more. Soon.



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Kytun Iye stood guard at the gangplank leading up to the decks of the *Lady Tross*. Black-washed mail hauberk, hilt of a war sword protruding over his right shoulder, heavy dagger at his belt; all proclaimed him to be an Imperial Guardsman. Save for the regular movements of his head and eyes, he could have been a statue.

A storm was gathering. There was no spindrift, no white crests. The waters of the Inner Sea were flat and dark. The steady winds of the Imperial harbor had died. Only the odd, occasional gust disturbed the oppressive, moisture-laden air. The typical smells of the docks - salt air, pitch and lumber - were accompanied by a hint of smoke. Usually a hive of activity and noise regardless of the time, the docks were quiet tonight. The few people moving about their business were subdued, almost furtive.

A half dozen ships were still at dock. Kytun, along with ten other Guardsmen, had been sent to secure these ships at mid-day. Fires had been breaking out across the Imperial City as violence and chaos spread throughout its walls. The Imperial Guard had been pulled back, again and again, over the last five days. By this day's dawning the Guard controlled only the Imperial Halls. An assassination attempt on the Childe of the Isle, the Emperor's heir, within the Emperor's chamber, proved they controlled nothing.

The Imperial Guard had not seen defeat on such a scale in living memory. More than half their number on the Imperial Isle had been slain in the last year. Most of the candidates in training, children and teenagers, were already dead. The impulse to respond to any hint of threat with overwhelming force had become a deadly temptation. Even the older Guardsmen, those with decades of experience, were struggling with self-control.

Kytun could hear the creak of the ropes anchoring the ship behind him to the dock. He was aware of the small splash of waves beneath the wooden timbers that formed the docks. Lanterns hung from posts unevenly spaced along the docks provided a dim light. He tried not to stare at the ghost fire playing along the ropes, masts and rails of the ships. He had seen it once before, at sea during a storm. Never at the dockside.

Kytun's task was vigilance. It tested him. He had seen little action; a skirmish here and there, protecting his charge, running from unseen foes. As the youngest amongst the Guardsmen, his task always involved waiting and watching. It offered no relief from the stress, the tension he knew was building within despite his training and determined effort. It offered no satisfaction. Vigilance offered no chance to test himself against a true opponent. To test



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himself against death. Eleven years of training, and he seemed destined to being a watchman.

“They are coming.”

Kytun looked up to the deck of the ship behind him. Geric, one of the oldest Guardsmen, was looking at the gates that let into the harbor. In the night, it was difficult to see the people. Not one carried a lantern or torch to pierce the gloom. From his lower vantage point, Kytun could make out no details.

A group of old men carrying an odd collection of weapons came out of a tavern near the gates. Without speaking, they stumbled to a stack of abandoned cargo near the middle of the docks, some sitting on the crates while others stood. Kytun realized his mistake when they began to play. Not weapons but instruments; pipes, a lute, drums, fiddles and whistles of several sizes. After a few moments of random, mismatched notes, the men began playing a traditional lament. They played well together.

People from the gates began scattering across the docks, gathering in small groups, then splintering and moving towards different ships. No one was being allowed to board a ship without approval. Kytun watched as the Guardsmen posted at the other ships began turning folk away, steering them to the center of the docks where Lakaos was organizing groups of passengers. Kytun had his own instructions. There were five nobles already aboard the *Lady Tross*. He was to allow no one else aboard save those from the Imperial household.

Kytun watched a group of tired people, minor nobles and their servants, approach the gangplank he stood at. One man drew himself up to his full height as he stepped forward.

“We wish to board.” His tone was commanding, a man used to being obeyed. Beneath the authoritative posture, Kytun could hear the man's doubt, his fear.

“This is not your ship.” Kytun pointed across the docks to the growing crowd of people surrounding a single Guardsman. “Guardsman Lakaos will tell you which ship you may board. There is room for all here.”

The man looked relieved and gave Kytun a polite bow. Kytun returned it with a small bow. He did not lower his eyes. The man led his group away. More people spilled onto the docks, clutching bags and packages, children, pets and treasured items of many shapes and sizes. All of them looking for passage in the remaining ships.

Kytun spotted a contingent of Guardsmen over the heads of the crowd. It was the way they moved, strong, assured and deliberate, that made them distinctive from the other people.



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They seemed to be easing their way through the crowd towards Lakaos. A large man led them, his lion-like mane of gray hair leaving little doubt as to his identity. Telar Muhnrin, commander of the Imperial Guard.

Four men carrying two large, rolled carpets on their shoulders broke off from the crowd, making their way to where Kytun stood. All four looked to be merchants. Three of them seemed near exhaustion. Kytun tried to let go his irritation at their stupidity before it could build. *Could they not see how things were ordered?* He hoped they did not try to bribe him. It had become a common occurrence in recent months. Geric assured him it was not a reflection of Kytun personally, rather a sign of growing desperation that people would think it possible to bribe an Imperial Guardsman.

A break in the crowd beyond the four merchants revealed members of the Imperial household standing, bewildered, next to one of the lanterns. Kytun recognized Ruena, younger sister of the Consort. Unconsciously, his hand moved towards the hilt of his sword before he stopped the motion. Ruena's arm and clothing looked to be covered in dried blood beneath the cloak thrown back from her shoulders. She clutched a dirk in her hand. She appeared unharmed. There was no sign of Alkan, the Guardsman assigned to her safety.

The four merchants with their carpets stopped in front of Kytun. Beyond them, Kytun saw Ruena look his way. She acknowledged him with a tired smile. Then her eyes widened. Kytun saw rather than heard her shout of warning. His hand was on the hilt of his sword before he identified the danger.

The exhausted merchant before him shifted in an instant, energized, lunging with a short sword that appeared in his hand from nowhere.

Kytun sidestepped the lunge. The draw of his war sword from over his shoulder flowed into a cut, severing the veins and windpipe in the attacker's throat in a spray of blood.

The two carpets rolled off the merchants' shoulders, resolving themselves into two female assassins armed with knives. Each of the blades flared with a greenish-black glow.

The other three merchants shifted, weapons suddenly appearing in their hands.

Kytun dropped back a step into a water guard, both hands on the hilt, sword pointed towards the heavy wooden timbers of the dock as he surveyed his opponents.

A dagger, thrown from above and behind Kytun, sunk into one of the female assassins at the spot where neck becomes shoulder. Geric. The woman staggered, turned her eyes towards



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the deck of the ship. Geric's second thrown dagger took the woman in the chest. She fell onto her back.

Kytun stepped in to met the first two attacks, moving sideways to use one attacker as a shield, sliding his heavier sword along the attacker's, deflecting it to interfere with the second attacker's strike while bending his wrist to drive the point of the war sword into the first attacker's face. Blood flowed from the pierced cheek as Kytun's blade thrust into the roof of the attacker's mouth.

Kytun took one hand from the hilt of his sword to bat aside a weakly aimed cut from another of the attackers as he pulled his sword from the dead man's jaw. Kytun moved into the midst of his attackers. Alone, all things moving were his target while his attackers interfered with each other.

To those watching, the fight was an intricate dance, one in which only Kytun Iye was proficient as he moved through his opponents.

One of the glowing knives thrust towards him. Utilizing a draw-cut, Kytun pulled the cross-guard of war sword back from an opponent, blocking the thrust and trapping the assassin's hand against his black-washed mail. Kytun seized the assassin's wrist with one hand and spun, pulling the off-balance woman around with him. He saw the glowing knife in the woman's free hand mistakenly slice the face of another assassin, a shallow cut.

The assassin cut by the glowing blade howled. The greenish-black glow had left the knife, leaving it dull copper. The glow now lay on the wound. It rapidly spread across the cut assassin's face, consuming the flesh, leaving teeth and jawbone exposed.

Kytun broke the woman's wrist, her remaining glowing knife fell to his feet. He drove the pommel of his war sword into the top of the woman's head, felt the shattering of bone, and pushed her dying body into the last of her comrades. Kytun flowed into an air stance as he moved after her. His strike nearly cut the last assassin in half.

Kytun came to rest in a fire stance, blade of the war sword over his head, angled towards the storm overhead. His six attackers lay still.

The greenish-black glow consumed the last of the cut assassin's flesh, leaving bone and gear laying on the timbers of the dock.

The crowd close enough to witness the fight stayed well clear of the scene. Many Guardsmen, weapons drawn, stood amongst the crowd, alert and waiting. Geric stayed at his

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post on the deck of the ship, another throwing dagger in his hand.

Ruena and a Guardsman, Sudak, approached. Sudak nodded his approval to Kytun, gently toeing each of the corpses save the fleshless one.

“Kreal assassins.” Ruena left no doubt in her statement as she looked at the bodies. “Were you cut?”

Kytun shook his head in answer to her question, touched by her concern.

Ruena turned away from the bodies, looking out to sea, pulling her cloak tight about herself, struggling to steady her breathing.

Kytun was puzzled by her reaction. She was the only girl near his age who treated Guardsmen with honor, respect and affection. Most - male or female, young or old – feared Guardsmen in some fashion or other. Ruena had always been open and friendly with Kytun and the other Guardsmen. She had no favorites that he knew of. Save perhaps for Alkan, who most often accompanied her.

“You are sure?” Sudak questioned her back. “These were Kreal assassins?”

“They were wrapped in a glamour. An illusion requiring great skill.” She answered without turning to face them.

Sudak knelt by one of the three greenish-black glowing daggers that remained. He did not touch it. “And these blades?”

Ruena turned back to look at them. “I don't know. Some sort of curse. A potent one. I would guess a form of necromancy.”

Sudak examined Kytun. “You can take her?” Ruena turned back to face the water.

Kytun was puzzled by his question. “This is her ship. Imperial household and Guard. These are my orders.”

“I leave the Lady Ruena with you, then. I will report.” Sudak walked off across the docks.

Kytun's gaze swept the docks. No one approached. People gave a wide berth to the corpses.

A few drops of rain fell from the sky. They felt wonderful on Kytun's face. He realized he still had his sword in hand. He did not wish to sheath it bloody but hesitated to wipe the blade with any of the assassin's clothing. He looked about for something that would serve.

He paused when he realized Ruena was staring at him.

“These assassins were your first kill.” It was not a question. The truth startled Kytun. It

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had not yet occurred to him. He felt no different. He felt neither pride nor shame. He survived. He had not embarrassed his fellow Guardsmen. He had performed the task for which he had so long trained.

“Yes.”

She looked away from him. He barely heard her whisper. “My house. Why must it be my house.”

Kytun watched as Ruena slowly climbed the gangplank to the deck of the *Lady Tross*. She passed Geric without meeting his eyes.



It hungered.

The creature nursed itself on the strength of its guardian, but while such would sustain it, a feast was its true desire. Only a feast of human fear and human flesh would sate its hunger. New to this world, the creature was still becoming accustomed to the needs of its body. Hunger possessed a new dimension here, the needs of the flesh it was bound to.

Four more targets, offerings to its master, would fulfill the compulsion laid upon the creature. The master had opened the way for its passage into this rich world. The price was six humans with talent. The six who would be here in this place by dawn. Two had been dealt with.

The creature had not understood the essence of this wooden home at first. As it examined more of its victim's memories, the nature of this wooden hall, this ship, became apparent. The humans aboard thought it a safe means to travel across water. The creature knew it for what it was, a trap. A contained field for its hunting pleasure. When all those with talent were dead, the master's price would be paid. It could claim the rest of the humans in the ship. Release would bring the feast it desired. This wooden home would serve as its table for many days to come.

All four remaining targets were aboard now. Two of them were together. The creature could sense them. It could perceive them through the wooden walls as pillars of light. Most humans were small lights. One of the four was too bright to focus its senses on. The other three would need to be destroyed first, to feed the creature's strength. The Guardsmen were a puzzle.

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It had encountered two. Neither of them emanated any light. They were spots of darkness to its senses. The creature did not understand the nature of these Guardsmen. They had to be carefully dealt with, avoided, kept at arm's length for study.

The Guardsmen were above with the bright one, the powerful one. Two targets were down here, within the wooden walls. Either of the ones down here would be an easy victim.

The creature ran a hand through its guardian's hair, easing the man into a deep trance, a waking sleep. The guardian would come if he was needed.

The creature picked up one of the weapons in the room. It was familiar with knives though it had not used one here, in this new world. The memories unfolding within its mind, gained from its first victim, made the creature confident it would have no trouble using the blade. The memories were surprising in the detail of where to cut a man for the quick, silent kill.



Ruena was familiar with the *Lady Tross*, her captain and some of the crew, but no one stepped forward to welcome her as she came aboard. Lanterns hung about the ship provided good light on deck. Geric, the old Guardsman at the top of the gangplank, stood still as a statue, a throwing knife almost a part of his hand. Captain Parmaran nodded a greeting from the small quarterdeck but made no move to join her.

The deck of the ship was cleared. Any cargo had already been stowed below. Sails on the three masts were furled. One line at the stern and the gangplank were the only connections to the dock. The crew stood quietly about, ready and eager to get under way. Two crew members standing at the dockside rail avoided her eyes. They had seen the violence below. She knew they would later speak of what they had seen. They would tell the others of the attack by Kreal assassins upon an Imperial Guardsman. Kreal, a greater noble house, masters of the art of illusion. The house Ruena had been born to. They would be suspicious of her. Distrustful. How could they not?

Kytun Iye had not appeared to consider any connection between she and the assassins. Ruena wondered what the other Guardsmen would think. Not all were as trusting as Kytun Iye.

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A sudden gust of laughter broke into her thoughts. Two sailors stumbled back from the bow of the ship, waving their arms as if to repulse an attack. Ghost fire played across one man's arm. Ghost fire was often seen during storms at sea. It typically caused no serious harm, though it did make hair stand on end, but it was frightening to those unfamiliar with it. Seeing the ghost fire play along his arm scared the sailor. His frantic effort to dislodge it resulted in a stumbling dance. His escapade broke some of the tension on deck.

Ruena saw the man responsible for the mischief a moment later. Seated just above the ship's albatross figurehead, Lord Weores quickly slid his open hand along the bowsprit. Ghost fire collected in his palm like water. He tossed it into the air where it dissipated, the light going out. Weores was of the Greater Noble House Nuada, the mariners, masters of the elements. He was one of the few men regarded as a friend to the Emperor. His rugged features split into an enormous smile when he saw her. As if the smile were not invitation enough, Weores stood and executed a full courtly bow. The sailors cleared away as Ruena moved to join him.

Weores held up a lantern and made a thoughtful examination of her as she stood before him.

“Have you come to knife me or share my berth?” Weores asked.

Ruena realized she still held Alkan's dirk in her hand. She had no sheath for it.

Weores pushed a cask over with one bare foot for her to use as a chair, hung the lantern from a hook, then took a seat for himself on the base of the bowsprit. A bucket, cup and pitcher stood by his side on the deck.

“You're covered in blood, girl.” Ruena did not respond. “I saw that fight just now. You weren't in it.” She studied him.

Weores was a thick, muscular man in the latter years of middle age. Red hair receding from his forehead was countered by the wild growth of his eyebrows. The white lace of burn scars traced their way up the left side of his neck and down his arm. Sleeveless leather vest and kilt covered a collection of spiraling tattoos. Carefully woven into the blue markings were all the runes of the elements. The representative of House Nuada at the Imperial court, Weores was one of the most accomplished masters of his art. Using her Sight, the man radiated a power that few could hope to attain.

“You'll start to smell soon if you don't clean yourself up.” Weores reached into the bucket of water at his feet. He lifted out an oyster. He held the partially open shell near his face



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before tapping it with a small knife. The shell closed. “Fresh,” he told her with a grin. Weores slid the knife between the edges of the shell and twisted the blade. A moment and the shell was open.

Weores offered the half shell full of meat to Ruena. “Perfect time of year. Sweet.”

Ruena shook her head.

Weores shrugged and slurped the meat and juice into his mouth. He tossed the empty shell over the rail. “Care for a swim? I guarantee you won't drown. I'll go in with you. I'll have these dogs turn their backs for some privacy.” He sighed as if surrendering a vital concession. “You can keep your clothes on if you wish. They could use a good soak.”

Ruena suspected he was only half joking. Weores' appetite for young women was well known.

“They were Kreal assassins,” Ruena said.

“Yes.” Weores poured dark beer from the jug into the cup and offered it to her.

“I'm Kreal.”

“No.” Weores pushed the beer on her. She took a sip. It was thick and heavy with the taste of malt and nuts, both slightly bitter and sweet. Ruena drained the cup.

“You stopped being Kreal when you entered the Emperor's household.” Weores refilled the cup and drained it himself.

Ruena glanced around. “How can they trust me now?”

Weores followed her glance to the Guardsman, Geric, near the gangplank. Weores stood and stretched. He caught the attention of a sailor and motioned him over. The sailor tried not to stare at Ruena. Weores threw his muscular arm over the man's shoulders, turning him towards the dock and pointing out a building.

“Do you know my mark?”

“Yessir.”

“See that door? Go in there and look for a sea chest to the right of the door with my mark on it. Bring it back with you. Hurry now, I'll have a silver noble for you when it's in my cabin.” The sailor bowed and took off down the gangplank.

Weores ignored Captain Parmaran's curious stare and pulled Ruena to her feet, leading her to the Guardsman. Geric spared them a glance as they approached before turning back to scan the docks.

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“Guardzman.” Weores lowered his tone. His voice did not carry beyond Ruena and Geric.

“Lord Weores.” Geric turned to face them.

“Who do the Guard value aboard this vessel? Who do you trust?” Weores asked in dead earnest.

Ruena dreaded hearing the answer as Geric looked over the people on deck. With her standing there, she knew his answer would be a diplomatic evasion.

“No one on deck or below.”

Diplomatic and correct. Guardsmen made no exceptions when it came to trust.

“Save only yourself and Lady Ruena,” Geric said. His impassive face betrayed nothing.

Ruena stared at Geric, not trusting that she had heard correctly.

“Why?” Weores asked, genuinely curious.

Geric regarded both of them, puzzled by the question. “You are beloved of Gallidon. How should we not value and trust you?”

“And the Kreal?” Weores asked.

“Such things I may not discuss.”

“The other great houses and nobility?”

“Such things are not for discussion.”

“By whose order?” Weores tone demanded an answer.

“By order of the Commander.”

Ruena's eyes sought Telar Muhrun across the docks. His bear-like form was the center of a knot of arguing nobility.

“Thank you, Guardsman.” Weores gently turned Ruena back towards the bow.

“I don't understand.” Ruena shrugged off Weores arm, leaned against the rail and looked out across the bay. “I don't understand any of this. I don't know why I'm here and not...” She left the rest of her thought unsaid.

“You are here because the Emperor wants you here.” Weores tone was low and confident. “He stopped trusting houses, greater or lower, years ago. He only trusts individuals.”

Ruena looked at Weores. “And who are we to trust? If Gallidon can't be sure who to trust, how am I supposed to decide who I should trust and who I should not?”

“That is a difficult question.” Weores shrugged. “But I'll take my cue from my Emperor.”



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I'll trust individuals and the Imperial Guard, but not houses, guilds or factions. My Emperor trusts me, all gods know why, I've given him no small amount of trouble over the last century, but he does. And he trusts you. That's a place to start."

"Then why aren't we by his side?" Her frustration was clear.

Weores laughed.

Ruena wheeled to face him, then stopped herself when she saw a sailor staring. She had forgotten the bared dirk in her hand.

"Ruena. Use your gift, girl. Turn it on yourself." Weores was gently insistent.

Ruena calmed herself. She turned back to face the bay and took a deep breath. Letting it go, she sunk down into the still place at her center and found it occupied. Her eyes snapped open with the discovery.

Weores nodded. "Yes. You are under a compulsion. As am I."

"Gallidon."

"I knew it the moment he laid it upon me. I spent the morning fighting it." Weores turned away from her. "A battle of the sort I have not lost in almost two hundred years. But how does a man stand against his Emperor? A demigod. And a true friend."

"I knew." Ruena thought for a moment. "I already knew."

"No doubt. But knowing and acting against such power are two different things."

Weores turned to look out across the docks. "Almost everyone here is under some sort of compulsion. I can sense it, but I don't understand it. The spell or ritual of such magnitude is beyond my comprehension."

"He is sending us away." Ruena tried to find some other reason to explain the Emperor's sorcery.

"Yes."

"But why?"

"I fear the answer to that question. I fear it like nothing I have ever known."

A sudden disturbance on the dock intruded on their conversation. A group of people lining up to board the ship docked next to the *Lady Tross* shouted in fear, some clutching their head while others dropped to their knees. To Ruena it looked like a strong gust of wind blew through them.

Ruena watched the squall as it moved erratically across the docks toward her. Kytun Iye



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stood with hand on hilt as it blew past him up the side of the ship and onto the deck of the *Lady Tross*. Geric, crouched on the balls of his feet, was ready to spring should a foe manifest itself.

Ruena was on the edge of the squall as it came on deck, wildly blowing her dark hair about her face, assaulting her with the sour taste and smell of brine. Obscene voices whispered to her from the violent depths of the whirlwind as it passed her by.

Sailors on deck fled to the rails, avoiding the gusts of wind at all costs.

Weores charged after the squall, seeking the middle of the small storm. He began rhythmically stomping one bare foot on the deck, left hand held out to the horizon, right hand waving above his head in tight circles, the thick muscles of his arms straining against some unseen force.

Ruena could not make out Weores' shouted words, but she could feel the resonating power of them.

A strong wind came from the sea. The ship groaned as it moved, pushed against the dock. Furlled sails rippled beneath the assault. Sailors lost their balance and fell. Things lying loose on the deck took flight - cups, bottles, pieces of cloth. Lanterns were blown out, leaving the deck of the ship in darkness.

Weores, his chest, arms and head glowing with ghost fire, spun in place, flinging the otherworldly light into the night air where it vanished. He came to an abrupt halt with a final, heavy stomp that Ruena felt through the soles of her feet. Weores slowly pulled his arms down, wrapping them tightly about his chest.

The wind died. There was silence on the deck of the ship.

Weores loudly exhaled. Someone on deck choked back a sob.

"Get those lanterns lit!" Captain Parmaran's tersely shouted order brought the deck back to life. Sailors moved to obey his command. Others began picking up loose debris. Everyone on deck avoided looking at Lord Weores.

Ruena saw the people on the docks, shaken perhaps, but moving purposely as they tried to discover which ship they could board. Imperial Guardsmen moved among them, calming fears, maintaining order. She could see the sailor dispatched by Weores returning to the ship, the chest he was sent to retrieve carried on his shoulder.

A face in the crowd caught Ruena's eye. The Lady Shiann Vanth. Despite the dim light,



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Ruena could see the woman was staring directly at her.

A lantern came to light next to Ruena. She had not noticed Weores moving to her side. He had casually used his Gift to spark the lantern.

“Old witch.” Weores betrayed no sign of the power he had just expended. He waved a meaty hand towards the Lady Vanth in cheerful greeting. Ruena bowed her head to the noblewoman, acknowledging her regard from across the distance.

“Nosy woman's probably wondering if you scattered that spirit.” Weores casually draped an arm around Ruena's waist. “Let's give the old prude something to gossip about, eh.” Ruena doubted Shiann Vanth could mistake her feeble sorcery for Weores' mastery, but Ruena had her own questions about what Weores had just dealt with.

“Is that what it was? A spirit?”

“A malevolent spirit. Not all of them are fond of us, you know. Most just ignore us, but some resent us.”

“I feared it might be a demon.”

“Demon? Are we suddenly children to believe in demons? It was a spirit. Mischievous, potentially dangerous, particularly at sea, but not some unknown evil. There have been several such here today. Something is attracting them. Agitating them. But they're not demons. In all my years, I've never encountered anything that could be called a demon.” Weores gave her an impudent grin. “Save perhaps a girl or two.”

Ruena turned to face him. “I saw a demon on the road. It was not a spirit, a soul or some sort of revenant. It was not of this world. It was evil. Lady Shiann destroyed it somehow. She called a light from the heavens.”

Weores' grin died as he searched her face. “Yes. I felt a powerful disturbance just past sunset. Didn't know what it was. Felt more like celestial magic than necromancy.” Weores lowered the lantern, turning his back on Shiann Vanth and the docks. “There are many tales of demons in the old tomes from the Age of Disorder. It is written Gallidon's Will banished demons from this world.”

“And if Gallidon's Will should falter?”

Weores had no answer for her. He remained silent, standing, looking out to sea for a few moments, his flippant attempt at lightheartedness abandoned. He sighed, then took her hand.

“Come, you really do need to clean up.” He took her towards the companionway leading



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below the quarterdeck. “Being the only single woman aboard, save for some of the crew, you are to share a cabin with me.”

Captain Parmaran, walking at a quick pace, with a pale sailor following him, met them at the doorway that led below deck. “Make way.” He paused, stopping to look at Ruena and Weores. “Where are you going?”

Weores stood straighter at the Captain's tone, his voice took on the authority of an Imperial Lord. “To my cabin. We've discussed this, Captain. The lady shares it with me. Is there a problem?”

Ruena expected the Captain to back down, but his tone did not change. She exerted her Will. With the lightest of touches to the Captain's mind, she realized he was angry, frustrated and more than a bit frightened.

“I mean no offense, Lord, Lady, but everything happening today is damn odd, the Guard has kept me at dock past two changes of the tide, a third is nearing, and...”

Weores cut him off, overriding the Captain's objections. “You have no need of tide while I'm aboard.” Weores stated what was to him a simple fact. “I have posted a daughter or son of Nuada to each ship remaining at these docks. Time and tide are irrelevant. We will call the wind when the Guardsmen give the order to cast off.”

Captain Parmaran nodded, impatient. “Yes, I understand. But now I have two dead crewmen in the hold.”

“What?”

“I've just been told. Their bodies are still warm.”

“The malevolent spirit? Could it have done this?” Ruena asked Weores. He quickly shook his head, no.

Captain Parmaran looked at the out of breath sailor who stood nervously at his shoulder.

“They was knifed, Captain. Murdered.”



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Rats scurried off the bodies when Weores held the lantern high. The two corpses were sprawled across the stacks of casks and thick coils of rope. Blood had soaked into the hemp fibers of the rope.

“You'll have to soak that or throw it out.” The Guardsman pointed to the rope. “The rats will be at it if you leave it stowed.” Geric's practicality was cold-hearted, but served to calm the other's fears as they clustered in the light provided by the one lantern.

The forward hold of the *Lady Tross* was a small cavern when empty. Now it was near fully laden. The lantern did little to reveal the other contents of the hold, instead creating a cargo of shadows and pools of darkness. Ruena could hear the rats moving restlessly about the edge of the light, excited by the smell of death. She was also aware of the sound of the water against the hull of the ship and below her feet in the bilges. The smell of the corpses was not as bad as she had expected. She had heard stories about people heaving themselves dry from the smell.

Ruena recognized one of the dead men, Laine, the first mate of the *Lady Tross*. A man with a touch of the Gift. A commoner, he was unaware of his talent. His Captain and shipmates had thought him lucky. No more.

Lord Weores turned to Captain Parmaran and his shaken crewman. “Leave us. Speak to no one of what you see.”

“It's my ship. My crew.” Captain Parmaran was not a man easily cowed.

Weores placed a hand on the Captain's shoulder. “I understand, Captain. But if we are to uncover what has happened here, it would be best to work without gossip, fear or suspicion among the crew and passengers for as long as possible.”

Captain Parmaran met Weores' eyes for a moment then turned to his crewman. “Say nothing of this.” The Captain turned back to Weores. “Work quickly, milord.” He followed his crewman out of the hold.

Geric moved slowly around the two corpses, considering them from all angles. The Guardsman had been reluctant to leave his post at the top of the ship's gangplank. Weores had convinced him to accompany them with a few quiet words. Ruena had never thought Geric short until seeing him standing, heads together, with Weores. While almost as broad, Geric was a whole head shorter. She might actually be taller than the Guardsman herself.

Weores stood still, holding the lantern high, letting Geric look at the bodies. Careful not



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to touch either of the dead men, Geric completed his circle and crouched down beside them.

Ruena stood back, not quite understanding what the two older men were doing. Ignoring the knife wounds, Geric began examining the hands and arms of the corpses, manipulating fingers and elbows, turning them about in the light. Next he went to their heads, carefully lifting and turning each in its turn. He stopped still with Laine's head in his hands. Geric leaned over, sniffed Laine's head, the gaping wound in his throat. He gently put the first mate's head down and leaned over the other dead sailor, meticulously examining the bloody wound in the man's chest, squarely over the heart. He then examined the sailor's head though there was no apparent wound there.

Geric sat back on his heels and stared at the bodies for a moment.

“What have you found?” Weores question was almost an order, demanding a response.

Without looking up, Geric answered. “They were killed here an hour ago, perhaps two. Knife. Not strong blows, but skilled. Neither man had any fear of his killer. They did not fight.” Geric pointed to the sailor. “That one died quickly. He made no effort to avoid the thrust that killed him. It is as if he took the blow and then calmly sat down to die.”

Geric suddenly moved, reaching forward to roll the body of Laine face down onto the deck. Geric's fingers slowly crept, spider-like, through the hair on the back of the first mate's head. “This man stood on his feet, without struggle, as his throat was cut and he bled to death.” Ruena shuddered at the image.

“Ah.” Geric's fingers stopped their search through Laine's hair.

Weores brought the lantern closer to the dead man. “What have you found?”

Geric sat up, turning to look first at Weores then to Ruena, considering them.

“Guardsmen, the Lady Ruena and I are aboard this ship. I am not getting off. It is important that we know what danger threatens our lives.” Weores tone was calm, logical, and forceful.

Geric gave a short nod, reaching a decision. “We have found several people killed in this manner in the last month. All had four small puncture wounds in the back of the head as does this man.” Geric combed the corpse's hair away from the scalp and upper neck. He pointed out red dots, tiny scabs like pimples.

“A bodkin?” Weores ventured.

“Too small.”



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“A stiff wire to pierce the spine or brain?”

Gerric shook his head. “There is no sign that spine or brain were touched. We do not understand the purpose or effect of these wounds save the victims do not struggle while they are murdered.”

Weores handed the lantern to Ruena and dropped into a crouch. He held his hands out to the corpses. Ruena was aware Weores was exercising his Will, but she was not certain of his intent. Weores' hands dropped to rest, elbows on knees.

“This man had the Gift.” Weores indicated Laine. “Many commoners do, they simply lack the skill and training to use it.” He nodded towards the sailor. “The other, nothing. In any case, there is no sign of any sorcery I know of. I should think some trace would remain if these punctures were used to tamper with the man's mind.”

Gerric looked up at Ruena. “Lady Ruena has trained in the sorcery of the mind discipline.”

Weores looked up, surprised. “Has she? I had thought you strictly enamored with illusion, my dear.” Weores moved aside, leaving space for Ruena to join them by the corpses.

Ruena reluctantly knelt by Laine's head. Gathering her Will, she extended her hand toward the punctures until her fingertips were almost touching the skin. After the space of a long breath, she withdrew her hand.

“There is nothing. No residue or trace of any sort of ritual or ceremony I know of. He's dead. I have no sure way to tell if his mind was touched.” Ruena moved back from the bodies.

Gerric stood and took the lantern from Ruena. “Shiann Vanth was consulted with one of the first victims murdered in this fashion.”

“Really.” Weores failed to hide his irritation that he was not informed.

“She could tell us nothing.” Gerric pointed them toward the hatch. “I will deal with the bodies. When the commander boards, I will speak to him of this.”

Weores nodded his agreement and, taking Ruena's arm, led her out of the hold.

In the passageway, Weores closed the hatch before turning to face Ruena. “So, Commander Muhrun is voyaging with us. I'm not sure if that was a slip on Gerric's part or something meant to reassure us.”

Any answer Ruena might have offered was interrupted by the small gathering at the end of the passageway half the ship's length away. The single lantern hung from a wall provided

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scant light, but Ruena didn't need it. Because she had just been drawing on the discipline, recognition was immediate. Sorcery of the mind was being used to influence the will of another.

“Ruena?” Weores fell silent when she didn't answer.

Ruena quickly walked down the passageway, a hand on the wooden bulkhead to steady herself when the ship unexpectedly rolled, no doubt hit by a rogue wave. Weores followed her, not put off by her seemingly rude behavior. The walls opened as they passed through the crew's quarters. Hammocks were stowed, no one was sleeping. Lines of sea chests were evenly spaced along the walls, each filled with the personal belongings of a sailor. The room had the feel of a sepulcher.

Ruena could hear the slight echo of conversation coming from the four people gathered at the junction of the companionway that led up to the deck above, but she could not make out the individual words. No matter, it was not the words that drew her attention. She could now identify Captain Parmaran and the sailor who had discovered the murders. The other two, a man and woman, nobles by their dress and manner, looked familiar, but she could not place them.

The woman was focused on Captain Parmaran, using her Will on him. The nobleman turned to face Ruena as she reached them. Ruena clearly heard the noblewoman despite her low tone. Her words were insistent, impatient, almost desperate. And they were heavy with the weight of the woman's Will.

“You will cast off now, Captain. For the safety of your ship, your crew and passengers, it is vital that this ship leave the harbor now. You cannot wait. There must be no delay or disaster will overtake us all and your ship will be lost. Do you understand me, Captain Parmaran?”

The noblewoman's words cast an echo other than sound in Ruena's ears. She was surprised at the extent of Captain Parmaran defiance, but it crumbled before Ruena's eyes as she joined the small group.

“This is a private matter.” The nobleman held up his hand in an attempt to stop Ruena from coming closer. Ruena brought the bare blade of Alkan's dirk up to warn the nobleman off. The man stepped back, eyes widening in alarm.

“Forgive me, I must get the ship underway.” Captain Parmaran turned to climb the companionway.



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“Captain Parmaran. Stop.” Ruena threw more of her Will into the command than she had intended.

Captain Parmaran paused on the first step, raising a hand to his head in confusion.

The noblewoman turned to face Ruena, her beautiful, doll-like face a mask of fury. No words came from her mouth, but Ruena felt the assault on her mind. She staggered, desperately marshaling her mental shields. The nobleman seized Ruena's wrist in a warrior's grasp, twisting it to make her drop the dirk.

Weores stepped from behind Ruena, interposing himself into the nobleman's face.

“Release her now, Lord Honen.”

The nobleman immediately dropped Ruena's wrist as if burned. He stepped as far back as the narrow passageway allowed.

“Lady Honen.” Weores' low, calm voice was a threat.

Ruena could not find her balance. Part of her understood what was happening. Understanding brought no succor from the spinning darkness she was sliding into.

Lord Honen threw his arms around his petite wife, breaking her concentration, breaking off her attack.

Ruena fell against the bulkhead, barely managing to keep her feet.

“Explain yourselves.” There was no trace of the playful Weores, the boisterous flirt. This was Lord Weores, scion of the Greater Noble House Nuada, master of the elements. The vast depth of his Will was evident, even to those who were not gifted. Ruena had never seen the man like this. She felt safe within the embrace of his power, it helped her regain her mental and physical balance. The force of his Will was primarily aimed at the two nobles facing him. Ruena watched as the beautiful woman, Lady Honen, recoiled.

“I will have an explanation.” Weores' tone made it clear he would not be denied.

Lord Honen was seemingly struck dumb. His wife answered, her voice a hissing whisper of desperation. “We must go now. I have no wish to die here. We must leave. Now. Without delay.”

“Why?” Weores was patient, encouraging Lady Honen.

“Lord Torkel, the Vakur, he said I will die. My husband as well.” The last was almost an afterthought.

Weores turned to Captain Parmaran and the crewman. Both looked confused and in

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pain. No doubt a headache brought on by conflicting sorcery treating them as puppets. “Return to your deck, Captain. You will await my order to cast off. I will join you shortly.”

“Yes.” The Captain nodded like one awakening from a bad dream, turned and climbed the stair to the open deck. His crewman followed him.

Weores loomed over Lord and Lady Honen, almost filling the passageway with his bulk. “You will return to your cabin. You will stay there until we are under way.”

“But the prophesy!” Lady Honen objected, but did not challenge Weores.

“Prophesies are easily misleading, Lady Honen. You know this.”

“He said I will die.”

“We all die, Lady. I will speak to Lord Torkel. If staying docked another moment threatens lives aboard the ship, I will personally give the order to leave and summon a wind to blow us clear. Return to your cabin. Keep your door shut. Open it for no one.” Weores did his best to reassure the noble couple.

Lord Honen steered his wife into motion toward a forward cabin.

Ruena and Weores watched the couple move through the darkness until they passed out of sight.

“Lord and Lady Honen. Forgive me for not making introductions.” Weores' tone was light, his power once again contained, his physical size seemed diminished as well.

“They are from the Illuminated Peaks?”

“Yes. She is a daughter of some Ishi cousin. Honen is a lower noble, a wealthy house. She has a powerful measure of the Gift, but the brains of a pretty little cage-bird. He is shrewd, but has no Gift. I think the Ishi hoped their children would be both Gifted and shrewd.” Weores picked up Alkan's dirk and handed it back to her.

Light spilled into the passageway as a sailor came out of a door a few steps away. It was the man Weores had sent for his chest. Ruena wondered how much the sailor had overheard as he approached them.

Weores gave the sailor two coins, ignoring the man's smile and bow. The sailor moved off down the passageway.

Weores indicated the open door. “It's rightfully the captain's cabin.” Ruena followed him to the doorway.

Ruena stepped through the door. “Yes. I have traveled aboard the *Lady Tross* before. I



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had this very cabin on my last voyage.” She turned to face Weores. “But with a different traveling companion.”

Weores chuckled. “There is a distinct lack of passenger space on this voyage. The bed is yours. I’m more comfortable in a hammock in any case.” He pointed out a bucket on the floor, a platter of food on the table, and a chest against one wall. “Fresh water to wash. Your clothes need more care than you can give them tonight. The chest is full of women’s things. There should be something acceptable for you to wear inside.”

Ruena arched an eyebrow at him. “Your chest? Things belonging to a mistress?”

“A treasured niece.”

“Of course.”

Weores delayed. He was reluctant to leave her alone.

“I’ll be fine. I can protect myself. If you are too worried, you can stand sentry. Outside the door, milord.”

Weores executed a courtly bow with a broad smile. “I would be pleased to guard your body, Lady Ruena, but unfortunately I must visit Lord Torkel and speak to him of prophesy. Like many of House Vakur, the man skirts the edge of madness. Perhaps he’s fallen into that abyss, in which case he will need to be restrained.”

Weores closed the door, leaving Ruena alone in the cabin. Despite his playful tone, Ruena knew Weores was worried. She would do her best not be an additional burden.



Three more targets to obtain its freedom. The creature was confident. Two would be easy, only the third, the powerful man, posed a serious challenge. The creature could be destroyed by the third if approached carelessly. It had not realized the extent of the man-target’s power until it had revealed itself. Even after consuming the weaker two targets, the third, the dangerous man, would be a challenge.

The creature was becoming more familiar, more comfortable in its new body, its hungers, strengths and weaknesses. A new body for this new world. It was improving at unlocking the memories buried within its victim’s minds, making these memories more

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understandable. With understanding came a better ability to use the body it had chosen to its full extent against its future victims. Despite being surprised while killing the least of its targets, the creature had easily dealt with the interloper. As its understanding of this new world and its new form grew, the creature was sure it could kill the third target, the dangerous man.

The master, he who had opened the portal to this new world, was pleased with the progress of his plans. The creature had begun to suspect the master did not realize the creature could feel his emotions through the tenuous line of the compulsion that bound it to him. The creature was vaguely aware of a growing confidence and hunger similar to its own in the mind of the master. The master expected victory. The creature would fulfill its part of the bargain.



Ruena stood alone in the Captain's cabin of the *Lady Tross*. After witnessing the two corpses in the forward hold, Ruena used all the powers at her disposal - sight, hearing, and her Gift - to ensure she was in fact alone. Satisfied, Ruena returned to the single cabin door. Exerting her Will, she ran a finger along the doorjamb of her closed cabin door, sealing it shut with a simple spell. The door could still be smashed or broken through, but her ward would delay an intruder and alert her to the breach. She would not be surprised.

Extending her senses beyond the wooden walls of her cabin, Ruena was aware of Lord Weores as he climbed the companionway back up to the deck. The Lord's cheerful demeanor was belied by the turmoil hidden beneath it. While his thoughts were hidden, the man made no effort to shield his emotions or presence. It could be sheer arrogance - very few could stand against Weores in matters arcane - but Ruena worried too many years at court had softened him, made him careless.

Ruena placed both hands flat against the bulkhead of the cabin and leaned her forehead against the wood. She could detect two others aboard the ship with talent. In the cabin next to her was one. Lord Torkel. An old man with great talent. The man's Will was powerful, far superior to her own, but he was heavily distracted, a dizzying kaleidoscope of thoughts and feelings.

Somewhere forward of her cabin in the stern was the second. Lady Honen. Tightly

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shielded. Closed off to the point Ruena seriously doubted the woman was even aware of Ruena's probe.

If the murderer had talent, he or she was a master at shielding it. Normally, even if a mage was not exercising their Gift there remained traces. Ruena could detect nothing save the people she could account for.

Breaking off her probe of the ship, Ruena pulled her own shields tight about her mind and straightened from the wall. A momentary loss of balance sent her staggering across the cabin. The ship had not moved, she was simply more tired than she had admitted to herself or anyone else.

Ruena looked around the cabin. It was a small room by any standard save those aboard ship. By ship standards, it was spacious, luxurious even. Two windows, set with glass, decorated the stern wall. Ruena unlatched one of the windows, opening it to the night air. The window opened on a view away from the dock, out towards the bay.

A short distance away, at the end of its narrow causeway, stood the tall stone walls and high tower of the sea castle that guarded the harbor. The tower light still shone brightly in the night sky, most of its illumination beaming out to sea.

Ruena stripped off her clothing. The cloak given to her on the road, plain and serviceable, was damp but otherwise clean. Shirt, vest and skirt were all stiff with dried blood. She had not realized the extent of it. She could clean her soft boots, but the clothing required a serious soak at the least. Standing nude in the middle of the floor, she took the sponge from the bucket of water and began cleaning herself. As the water in the basin quickly took on a reddish tint, she became aware of the smell of her hair. Blood was matted into her dark tresses.

Ruena found a length of cord in one of the shallow storage niches built into the bulkhead and tied it to the bucket. She dumped the bucket out the window, lowered it by the cord, and brought up a fresh load of water. Sticking her head out the window, she awkwardly managed to pour the bucket over her head. After wringing out her hair, she repeated the procedure. While not the cleanest water, being this close to the docks, the third rinse left her hair blood-free and in a vastly better state than it had been.

Free of the coating of dirt and blood, Ruena felt almost refreshed. A short series of stretches she had learned watching the Imperial Guards train helped banish the remaining fatigue. She was more hungry now than sleepy. The platter on the table held fresh bread,



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cheese, dates, thin slices of dried ham, and a dish of pressed olive oil. It would more than satisfied her hunger. A pot of watered wine completed the small feast. Continuing to move about the cabin, she looked at the pile of bloodstained clothes with distaste.

Between bites, Ruena used a bare foot to lift open the lid of the chest belonging to Weores' niece. Not that she believed Weores had a niece on the Imperial Isle, much less that he carted around a chest of clothes for her. The contents removed any lingering doubt. A profusion of colors and fabrics, in a variety of sizes, was revealed. Ruena dug through the contents, sorting out things of her size and to her taste.

While not an outfit she would have worn in the Imperial court, Ruena was pleased with the clothes she assembled. It seemed fitting for her circumstances and shipboard. Soft leather breeches buttoned snugly just above her hips and tucked into the tops of her boots. She pulled a loose shirt with long, baggy sleeves over her head and gathered it around her trim waist with a broad leather belt. Ties on the shirt sleeves closed around her wrists, keeping her hands clear of the linen fabric. A leather vest embroidered with spiral patterns in red and blue thread went over the shirt to complete the outfit. She left the cloak off.

She picked up Alkan's dirk and slowly turned it in her hands. It was not a toy. Dangerous in careless hands, deadly in the trained grasp of a knife-fighter, Alkan's dirk had a foot-long blade with a full sharpened edge and a false edge on the reverse for use in a back-cut. Ruena had been allowed to train with the Imperial Guard off and on for several years. They indulged her interest in the martial arts. Perhaps it was because she was often accompanied by her nephew, the Childe of the Isle, the Imperial heir. Perhaps it was because the Guardsmen accepted and enjoyed her company. In either case, although she had never wielded one in anger, Ruena knew how to handle the dirk.

What she did not have was a sheath for the weapon. She tucked it through her belt and regarded it for a moment. Ruena gathered her Will. She was unsure how to achieve her desire, but confident in her ability to do so. Retreating into her still center, she focused her thoughts on the dirk, slowly running her fingers from the hilt to the point. By the third time she repeated the motion the dirk had vanished, wrapped in illusion. She was aware of its weight on her hip, could feel the hilt and blade with her fingers, but she could not see any trace of it. Ruena released her breath and smiled in satisfaction.

She loosened her mental shields to see if anyone had noticed her arcane effort. She



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found no sense of attention, much less observation. Gathering up her discarded, bloodstained clothing, she folded it as best she could and stacked it on the floor near the table.

Ruena was too restless to attempt sleep. The cabin provided a refuge, but she did not want to hide from the events happening around her. Releasing the ward on her cabin door, she went out into the passageway.

Closing her cabin door behind herself, Ruena realized light was not only coming down the companionway from the deck above, but also from the partially open door of the cabin next to hers. Lord and Lady Torkel's cabin. She became aware of a deep muttering from within, but could not make out the words. A look in both directions showed she was alone in the passageway. Ruena stepped closer to Torkel's cabin door.

“The door is open for you, Ruena Kreal.” The deep voice came from within.

Ruena stepped through the door. Torkel of the greater noble house Vakur sat inside at a table. Even sitting, the great size of the old man was apparent. A lord of the northern folk, Vakur's children, he was a legendary figure in the Imperial City, a master of the discipline of far sight. Torkel was both trusted counselor and friend to Gallidon the Thirteen, the Emperor's constant companion. Ruena had seen him near the throne or passed him in the hallways of the Imperial household since she was young, but had never before been directly addressed by him.

There was no sign of Torkel's young wife, Tine. Sent to him a year past from his family in Brighthall, far to the north, the girl was Ruena's age and called her equal in beauty, but fair where Ruena was dark. The marriage, or 'Torkel's little present' as some older women labelled it, caused a small scandal until the Emperor received the girl, embracing her as the new wife of his old friend. Other than the first introduction and a few passing nods, Ruena had never spoken to Tine.

Torkel's unbound white hair formed a veil around his face, hiding it in shadows as he hunched over the table. He did not look up at her, focused instead upon the table. His large, gnarled hands moved carefully across the items laid out upon the tabletop.

Ruena stepped closer. “Is all well with you, milord?”

Torkel ignored her, continuing to study the table. Thick lines of blue sand framed a pattern of golden sand surrounding black water-smoothed stones, each engraved with a single rune. As she watched, Torkel let a wispy stream of red sand rain down across the surface of the table from one clenched fist until it emptied. He leaned forward, bringing his face close to the

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pattern until Ruena could see his breath ruffling the grains of sand.

Ruena moved forward, strangely drawn by the changing pattern on the tabletop.

Torkel's hand shot out, grabbing her wrist with a strength beyond belief from such an aged man, no matter his great size. His craggy face turned up, unearthly blue eyes seeing past her to some distant vision.

“You must shield your mind, Ruena of Gallidon's house. Shield and be as one of his Guardsman. Shield, and be a slave.” A wide grin, containing no trace of mirth or pleasure spread across his face. “Do not shield, and become a prized whore. A treasure to be passed among strong hands until physical beauty fades and you become a paltry reward for the obedient.”

Torkel's hand unclasped itself from her wrist, seeming to push her away as he turned his gaze back to the pattern on the tabletop.

Ruena stood, rubbing her wrist, staring at the massive old man. “I do not understand, lord.”

“I have no understanding to share with you. Or myself. We are betrayed.” Torkel lowered his face to the edge of the table, one bright blue eye looking up at her across the pattern of sand and rune-carved stones. “Tonight an empire dies.”

Ruena had heard tales for months that Torkel had strayed too far in his use of far sight, divination, desperately striving to part the veils of the future for his friend, the Emperor. Many believed the man's mind had been lost, cast adrift somewhere in the streams of time.

“You must go. It is not safe here. I am a dead man.”

Ruena stood in the doorway, wondering if she could help him. If she should make the attempt.

“Go. Live!”

Ruena stepped into the passageway, closing the door on Lord Torkel of the Vakur. Prophecy? A tricky thing, the magic of far sight. But his words carried power. His words were unsettling. Ruena gathered her Will and wrapped shields tightly about her mind.



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The creature ignored the fixed, terrified stares of the two dead humans. It was staggered with a revelation. The creature could barely contain its excitement. Its flesh was invulnerable in this new world.

Another target had been slain, its life energy absorbed. The female had been one of the weak targets. After long, droning complaint, the woman had died relatively easily. The problem had been the woman's guardian. Her mate? The man had been lulled into near unconsciousness by the creature's manipulations and the woman's ceaseless talk. The guardian had remained still while the creature slowly drained the life from its master's appointed target.

As the woman died, the guardian stirred without warning. The man's attack had been shockingly swift and silent, his strike deadly accurate. The blow from the short sword should have severely wounded the creature, possibly even killed it. Instead, the blade of the weapon shattered when it struck the creature's shoulder. The strike was painful, but caused no real damage to its seemingly tender flesh.

Using its own great strength, the creature easily killed the guardian. The man had died, pleasingly overwhelmed by fear, confusion, and despair as the creature choked the life from him. It only occurred to the creature after the guardian's death that the man had not seen through its guise. The folk of this world were weak in body and mind, ripe for slaughter and servitude.

The creature examined the shards of the sword. Iron. A potent weapon against many, but useless against its own kind. If all the inhabitants of this world depended upon iron, the creature and its brethren could rule here. Access was the key.

At that moment, dead eyes of two victims staring at it in horror, the creature chose a new path. It would fulfill the compulsion, pay the price forced upon it, but its true goal became gaining the secret of the master's portal. Armed with the master's knowledge, the creature would open a portal to its brethren. Together they would consume this world.



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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.

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.



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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 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.



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“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 Muhnrun. 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



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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 Muhrun. 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 remain there until a Guardsman comes for you.”

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



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“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 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.

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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.

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."



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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.

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

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

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



Flight

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.

Kytun hid a pleased smile before it could surface.

"Telar assigned Geric to me," Ruena continued.

*Flight*

“Gerric 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. “Gerric 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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First Published in its entirety December, 2009.

