



Flight

Part 1

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?”



*Flight: Part 1*

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

“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.



*Flight: Part 1*

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



*Flight: Part 1*

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



*Flight: Part 1*

seemed to emanate from the girl's face and breast. Light that was swallowed by the shadow 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



*Flight: Part 1*

mail armor and pulled himself deeper up the blade. Alkan attempted to twist the blade while 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.



*Flight: Part 1*

The concussion took Ruena's senses from her.

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.





Flight: Part 1



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