



## *Flight*

### Part 3

by Tony Graham

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. 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,



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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.

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

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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 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.”



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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.

“Guardsman.” 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.



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“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 Muhnrun 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. 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



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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 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



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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, 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



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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 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 a 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





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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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