



Flight

Part 4

by Tony Graham

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 nearly 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

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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 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.

“Guardsman, 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



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red dots, tiny scabs like pimples.

“A bodkin?” Weores ventured.

“Too small.”

“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



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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 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.



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The man stepped back, eyes widening in alarm.

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

“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.



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“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 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.



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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 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



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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 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.



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