



## *Flight*

### Part 5

by Tony Graham

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 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.

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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, 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



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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 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



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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 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



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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.



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



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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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First Published September, 2009.