

The Maelstrom

by Tony Graham

“You should rejoice that I am not one of the greater noble houses. People who travel with them in ventures such as this often pay for the experience with their lives.”

Captain Parmaran turned to look directly at his aristocratic companion. “I thought you of House Nuada. It is said they alone have the secret of the passage.”

Raurk looked out over the ship’s wake from their perch on the Captain’s gallery. The first light of dawn was spreading across the water. “House Nuada does possess a chart for the passage and the secret. You need both to survive.” Raurk gently knocked on the rail with his knuckles. “This ship was made to run it. With you at the helm, Captain, I have no fear of failure or disaster.”

Captain Parmaran looked at the stern lines of the ship. His new ship, Lady of the Tides. His first ship had been taken two years ago. It had been among the first vessels captured by pirates out of Mulcar.

Piracy was new to the Inner Sea. It had been virtually unknown in the days of the Empire. Now Mulcar was rapidly becoming known as the pirate port and a city of slavers. Slavery had also been unknown in the Empire. No one was sure what to do about it. Vanth and her ships of the Middle Kingdom tried to blockade the city, but the bay was too large, the number of ships assigned to the duty too small.

Parmaran had been struggling to get his new ship out of the dry docks of Gull Port when he had first met Raurk. The nobleman, greater house or not - Raurk was definitely of noble blood - had been looking for a man of the sea. One who was knowledgeable, skilled and desperate. Parmaran had fit his bill.

Raurk paid off the shipwrights, paid for the outfitting and the crew. All he asked in return was this one journey. A venture that would probably result in the loss of Parmaran’s new Lady.

Captain Parmaran turned his head to stare at the dark, forbidding storm in the distance off the port side. The Maelstrom. An ever-present, violent storm that straddled the Eastern straits. Death to all ships that tried to pass through it to the great Sea beyond.

“You don’t trust me.”

Captain Parmaran was startled out of his thoughts. “No. I mean...”



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Raurk laughed and waved him to silence. “You’re right to fear the Maelstrom and anyone who wishes to run it. Even at this distance, I can feel it; the vast energy, nature’s fury, and resentment. I suspect the storm that lies over the Imperial Isle is its brother. They have the same feel.”

Captain Parmaran looked back to the Maelstrom. “It looks like the same storm the closer we get.”

Raurk looked at his hired Captain in surprise. “You’ve been in close to the Imperial Isle since the Destruction?”

Captain Parmaran shrugged.

Raurk waited. He knew the man wished to speak of his experience but would not be rushed. This Captain would not be rushed by another unless the need was great. Already, in the few months they had been acquainted, Raurk had come to have a deep respect for this commoner.

“I was there with the Lady Tross, my first ship, when the Imperial Guard came out with the last folk to escape the Destruction.”

Raurk quietly moved to refill both their glasses from the bottle on the table behind them.

“I’d made a regular run from Vaneth, to the Imperial Isle, to Tar Mira and back for years. My trade run. Carried a lot of passengers in those days. I was docked at the Imperial Harbor that night.”

Captain Parmaran nodded his thanks for the glass. “Three score Guardsmen shepherding women, children, and a few old men. No sign of the Emperor. They were lead by old Telar...”

“Telar Muhnrun? The Commander of the Imperial Guard?”

The Captain nodded.

Raurk leaned closer to watch the other’s face. “And the Heir? The Consort?”

Captain Parmaran shook his head. “I couldn’t say. Telar had no boy with him. Never laid eyes on the Heir before so if they were hiding him amongst the other children, I’d no way of knowing. But I’ve seen the Consort. I’d seen her many times. Her, I would have recognized.”

Raurk turned to look out over the sea in disappointment.

“There were half a dozen ships at the docks that night. All the ship’s rails, the yards,





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lines and sheets were alight with ghost fire.”

Captain Parmaran paused to sip his wine, his eyes still unfocused, his thoughts on the past.

Raurk gently extended his senses, reading the truth of the Captain’s memory with the lightest of touches.

“Ruena, the Consort’s younger sister came aboard my ship.”

“You’re sure it was her?”

“I’ve seen her before. Carried her twice to Tar Mira and back aboard the Lady Tross. She wears the runes of Gallidon and House Kreal.”

“She was alone?”

“Old Telar escorted her aboard with a score of his Guardsmen, all bristling with weapons and armor. Made my crew damn nervous what with the strange lights and the fierce sounds coming down from the city. ‘Cast off’, he orders me. ‘There will be no one else coming.’ I knew for fact there were thousands of folk in the Imperial City. Tens of thousands. ‘No one else coming,’ he says. Certain as death.”

Captain Parmaran shook himself, escaping the memory. “I’ve sailed close in to the Imperial Isle twice since that night. Once out of curiosity. Damn bit of foolishness I vowed not to repeat.”

“And the second?”

“Ran in close to escape a Mulcar pirate. They sheered off long before the force of the storm was even dangerous.”

Raurk laughed, “Dangerous to you, perhaps. I’ve no doubt it was dangerous to them long before the physical storm was felt.”

“I don’t understand.”

Raurk slowly poured the dregs of his wine into the sea. “The leaders of the Mulcar pirates are of noble blood; one hopes of lower houses only. Gallidon forbid one of the greater houses lead them.”

Captain Parmaran nodded his head in agreement. “The pirates and slavers are known to use sorcery.”

“And that is a real danger that surrounds the Imperial Isle and the Maelstrom. That is why they turned aside when you fled there.”





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“I don’t follow.”

Raurk gently took the glass from Captain Parmaran and set both glasses down on the table before turning back. “Now comes the time for understanding. Time to reveal secrets.”

“I just need the chart. I don’t need to know secrets. Something tells me the knowledge is dangerous.”

“All knowledge can be dangerous, ignorance more so. I trust you, Captain, and I hope you trust me.”

Raurk waited, looking the Captain straight in the eyes. Parmaran slowly nodded.

Raurk reached out both hands, placing his fingertips on the sides of Captain Parmaran’s head and slowly closed his eyes. In moments, Captain Parmaran’s eyes closed.

Minutes later Raurk opened his eyes. He dropped his hands and stepped away.

Captain Parmaran’s eyes opened as if from a dream. A slow smile spread across his face. “The chart.”

Raurk nodded. “It should not be put onto paper. You and your crew can manage it?”

“Yes. I think so. If the chart is accurate and the tide holds true, it is a matter of wind and wave. That, I can master. We should be through by sunset.”

Raurk turned to take a last look at the sunrise across the Inner Sea.

“This other part? The secret.” It clearly made Captain Parmaran uncomfortable. Perhaps more uncomfortable than Raurk.

Raurk sighed, turned away and went back through the gallery doors into his cabin. Captain Parmaran followed him.

Captain Parmaran watched as Raurk began his preparations. “You must trust me.”

“It was the hardest part of finding the right man, Captain. I met many capable seamen. But one capable, honest and worthy of my trust? Gull Port was the third city I looked. You were the only man that satisfied all my requirements.”

One end of the chain was already fastened to an eyebolt in the bulkhead. Raurk fastened the manacles at the other end of the chain around his ankles. He looked up at the Captain. “Any last questions?”

Parmaran shook his head.

Raurk took a small roll of leather and fit it into his mouth. It was now impossible for him to speak. He held out his hands. Captain Parmaran locked a second pair of manacles





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around Raurk's wrists. They stared at each other for a moment. Raurk nodded.

Captain Parmaran slid the slaver's hood over his passenger's head, tightening the cord beneath his chin. Shackled, gagged and hooded: Raurk was completely helpless. And based on the knowledge Raurk had placed in the Captain's mind, the ship was safe from Raurk's madness.

Captain Parmaran left his passenger's cabin for the deck. He had a ship to sail through the Maelstrom by sunset.



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