



## *Flight*

### Part 2

by Tony Graham

The rich sensations of this new world, so long denied, threatened to overcome its reason. The temptation to seize the unsuspecting humans in this wooden home at once, to revel in the bounty of fear which would result, to feast upon their living flesh, was formidable. Such actions would damage its master's goals. The compulsion laid on the creature was powerful, too powerful to turn aside. For now.

Reaching around from behind the man, the creature wrapped its arms around his neck, a mockery of a lover's embrace. The three fingers of one hand gripped the man's shoulder while the three fingers of its other hand settled on the man's right temple. The creature deepened the trance laid upon the man. It wrapped its second pair of arms around the man's waist, firmly clasping him, and pulled itself up from the floor.

The creature rejoiced that it could abandon human speech, at least for the moment, and let its tongue split into the four narrow segments of its true form. It brought its face to the back of the man's neck, savored the scent, the warmth of skin and flow of blood beneath. Opening its mouth wide, its four tongues dug through the man's thick hair, tunneling, piercing the skin, thrusting beneath the skull for the area where spine met brain.

A feast. The man's Will and talent were deep wells of power. Power that could no longer be turned against the creature. The creature had been told this man was the danger, that he must be dealt with first. It had not understood until it had violated the man. The vibrant colors of the man's Sight revealed the truth of the master's words. The man would have soon discovered the creature for what it was. Because the creature had taken this man first, that danger was past. The man had not suspected the creature's existence, its true self. This man was now the creature's guardian.

A thin rivulet of blood trickled down the back of the man's neck from beneath his hair. The creature laid its mouth over the stream, suckling, savoring the treat. It promised itself more. Soon.



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Kytun Iye stood guard at the gangplank leading up to the decks of the *Lady Tross*. Black-washed mail hauberk, hilt of a war sword protruding over his right shoulder, heavy dagger at his belt; all proclaimed him to be an Imperial Guardsman. Save for the regular movements of his head and eyes, he could have been a statue.

A storm was gathering. There was no spindrift, no white crests. The waters of the Inner Sea were flat and dark. The steady winds of the Imperial harbor had died. Only the odd, occasional gust disturbed the oppressive, moisture-laden air. The typical smells of the docks - salt air, pitch and lumber - were accompanied by a hint of smoke. Usually a hive of activity and noise regardless of the time, the docks were quiet tonight. The few people moving about their business were subdued, almost furtive.

A half dozen ships were still at dock. Kytun, along with ten other Guardsmen, had been sent to secure these ships at mid-day. Fires had been breaking out across the Imperial City as violence and chaos spread throughout its walls. The Imperial Guard had been pulled back, again and again, over the last five days. By this day's dawning the Guard controlled only the Imperial Halls. An assassination attempt on the Childe of the Isle, the Emperor's heir, within the Emperor's chamber, proved they controlled nothing.

The Imperial Guard had not seen defeat on such a scale in living memory. More than half their number on the Imperial Isle had been slain in the last year. Most of the candidates in training, children and teenagers, were already dead. The impulse to respond to any hint of threat with overwhelming force had become a deadly temptation. Even the older Guardsmen, those with decades of experience, were struggling with self-control.

Kytun could hear the creak of the ropes anchoring the ship behind him to the dock. He was aware of the small splash of waves beneath the wooden timbers that formed the docks. Lanterns hung from posts unevenly spaced along the docks provided a dim light. He tried not to stare at the ghost fire playing along the ropes, masts and rails of the ships. He had seen it once before, at sea during a storm. Never at the dockside.

Kytun's task was vigilance. It tested him. He had seen little action; a skirmish here and there, protecting his charge, running from unseen foes. As the youngest amongst the Guardsmen, his task always involved waiting and watching. It offered no relief from the stress, the tension he knew was building within despite his training and determined effort. It offered



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no satisfaction. Vigilance offered no chance to test himself against a true opponent. To test himself against death. Eleven years of training, and he seemed destined to being a watchman.

“They are coming.”

Kytun looked up to the deck of the ship behind him. Gerric, one of the oldest Guardsmen, was looking at the gates that let into the harbor. In the night, it was difficult to see the people. Not one carried a lantern or torch to pierce the gloom. From his lower vantage point, Kytun could make out no details.

A group of old men carrying an odd collection of weapons came out of a tavern near the gates. Without speaking, they stumbled to a stack of abandoned cargo near the middle of the docks, some sitting on the crates while others stood. Kytun realized his mistake when they began to play. Not weapons but instruments; pipes, a lute, drums, fiddles and whistles of several sizes. After a few moments of random, mismatched notes, the men began playing a traditional lament. They played well together.

People from the gates began scattering across the docks, gathering in small groups, then splintering and moving towards different ships. No one was being allowed to board a ship without approval. Kytun watched as the Guardsmen posted at the other ships began turning folk away, steering them to the center of the docks where Lakaos was organizing groups of passengers. Kytun had his own instructions. There were five nobles already aboard the *Lady Tross*. He was to allow no one else aboard save those from the Imperial household.

Kytun watched a group of tired people, minor nobles and their servants, approach the gangplank he stood at. One man drew himself up to his full height as he stepped forward.

“We wish to board.” His tone was commanding, a man used to being obeyed. Beneath the authoritative posture, Kytun could hear the man's doubt, his fear.

“This is not your ship.” Kytun pointed across the docks to the growing crowd of people surrounding a single Guardsman. “Guardsman Lakaos will tell you which ship you may board. There is room for all here.”

The man looked relieved and gave Kytun a polite bow. Kytun returned it with a small bow. He did not lower his eyes. The man led his group away. More people spilled onto the docks, clutching bags and packages, children, pets and treasured items of many shapes and sizes. All of them looking for passage in the remaining ships.

Kytun spotted a contingent of Guardsmen over the heads of the crowd. It was the way



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they moved, strong, assured and deliberate, that made them distinctive from the other people. They seemed to be easing their way through the crowd towards Lakaos. A large man led them, his lion-like mane of gray hair leaving little doubt as to his identity. Telar Muhnrin, commander of the Imperial Guard.

Four men carrying two large, rolled carpets on their shoulders broke off from the crowd, making their way to where Kytun stood. All four looked to be merchants. Three of them seemed near exhaustion. Kytun tried to let go his irritation at their stupidity before it could build. *Could they not see how things were ordered?* He hoped they did not try to bribe him. It had become a common occurrence in recent months. Geric assured him it was not a reflection of Kytun personally, rather a sign of growing desperation that people would think it possible to bribe an Imperial Guardsman.

A break in the crowd beyond the four merchants revealed members of the Imperial household standing, bewildered, next to one of the lanterns. Kytun recognized Ruena, younger sister of the Consort. Unconsciously, his hand moved towards the hilt of his sword before he stopped the motion. Ruena's arm and clothing looked to be covered in dried blood beneath the cloak thrown back from her shoulders. She clutched a dirk in her hand. She appeared unharmed. There was no sign of Alkan, the Guardsman assigned to her safety.

The four merchants with their carpets stopped in front of Kytun. Beyond them, Kytun saw Ruena look his way. She acknowledged him with a tired smile. Then her eyes widened. Kytun saw rather than heard her shout of warning. His hand was on the hilt of his sword before he identified the danger.

The exhausted merchant before him shifted in an instant, energized, lunging with a short sword that appeared in his hand from nowhere.

Kytun sidestepped the lunge. The draw of his war sword from over his shoulder flowed into a cut, severing the veins and windpipe in the attacker's throat in a spray of blood.

The two carpets rolled off the merchants' shoulders, resolving themselves into two female assassins armed with knives. Each of the blades flared with a greenish-black glow.

The other three merchants shifted, weapons suddenly appearing in their hands.

Kytun dropped back a step into a water guard, both hands on the hilt, sword pointed towards the heavy wooden timbers of the dock as he surveyed his opponents.

A dagger, thrown from above and behind Kytun, sunk into one of the female assassins at



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the spot where neck becomes shoulder. Geric. The woman staggered, turned her eyes towards the deck of the ship. Geric's second thrown dagger took the woman in the chest. She fell onto her back.

Kytun stepped in to met the first two attacks, moving sideways to use one attacker as a shield, sliding his heavier sword along the attacker's, deflecting it to interfere with the second attacker's strike while bending his wrist to drive the point of the war sword into the first attacker's face. Blood flowed from the pierced cheek as Kytun's blade thrust into the roof of the attacker's mouth.

Kytun took one hand from the hilt of his sword to bat aside a weakly aimed cut from another of the attackers as he pulled his sword from the dead man's jaw. Kytun moved into the midst of his attackers. Alone, all things moving were his target while his attackers interfered with each other.

To those watching, the fight was an intricate dance, one in which only Kytun Iye was proficient as he moved through his opponents.

One of the glowing knives thrust towards him. Utilizing a draw-cut, Kytun pulled the cross-guard of war sword back from an opponent, blocking the thrust and trapping the assassin's hand against his black-washed mail. Kytun seized the assassin's wrist with one hand and spun, pulling the off-balance woman around with him. He saw the glowing knife in the woman's free hand mistakenly slice the face of another assassin, a shallow cut.

The assassin cut by the glowing blade howled. The greenish-black glow had left the knife, leaving it dull copper. The glow now lay on the wound. It rapidly spread across the cut assassin's face, consuming the flesh, leaving teeth and jawbone exposed.

Kytun broke the woman's wrist, her remaining glowing knife fell to his feet. He drove the pommel of his war sword into the top of the woman's head, felt the shattering of bone, and pushed her dying body into the last of her comrades. Kytun flowed into an air stance as he moved after her. His strike nearly cut the last assassin in half.

Kytun came to rest in a fire stance, blade of the war sword over his head, angled towards the storm overhead. His six attackers lay still.

The greenish-black glow consumed the last of the cut assassin's flesh, leaving bone and gear laying on the timbers of the dock.

The crowd close enough to witness the fight stayed well clear of the scene. Many



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Guardsmen, weapons drawn, stood amongst the crowd, alert and waiting. Geric stayed at his post on the deck of the ship, another throwing dagger in his hand.

Ruena and a Guardsman, Sudak, approached. Sudak nodded his approval to Kytun, gently toeing each of the corpses save the fleshless one.

“Kreal assassins.” Ruena left no doubt in her statement as she looked at the bodies. “Were you cut?”

Kytun shook his head in answer to her question, touched by her concern.

Ruena turned away from the bodies, looking out to sea, pulling her cloak tight about herself, struggling to steady her breathing.

Kytun was puzzled by her reaction. She was the only girl near his age who treated Guardsmen with honor, respect and affection. Most - male or female, young or old – feared Guardsmen in some fashion or other. Ruena had always been open and friendly with Kytun and the other Guardsmen. She had no favorites that he knew of. Save perhaps for Alkan, who most often accompanied her.

“You are sure?” Sudak questioned her back. “These were Kreal assassins?”

“They were wrapped in a glamour. An illusion requiring great skill.” She answered without turning to face them.

Sudak knelt by one of the three greenish-black glowing daggers that remained. He did not touch it. “And these blades?”

Ruena turned back to look at them. “I don't know. Some sort of curse. A potent one. I would guess a form of necromancy.”

Sudak examined Kytun. “You can take her?” Ruena turned back to face the water.

Kytun was puzzled by his question. “This is her ship. Imperial household and Guard. These are my orders.”

“I leave the Lady Ruena with you, then. I will report.” Sudak walked off across the docks.

Kytun's gaze swept the docks. No one approached. People gave a wide berth to the corpses.

A few drops of rain fell from the sky. They felt wonderful on Kytun's face. He realized he still had his sword in hand. He did not wish to sheath it bloody but hesitated to wipe the blade with any of the assassin's clothing. He looked about for something that would serve.

He paused when he realized Ruena was staring at him.





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“These assassins were your first kill.” It was not a question. The truth startled Kytun. It had not yet occurred to him. He felt no different. He felt neither pride nor shame. He survived. He had not embarrassed his fellow Guardsmen. He had performed the task for which he had so long trained.

“Yes.”

She looked away from him. He barely heard her whisper. “My house. Why must it be my house.”

Kytun watched as Ruena slowly climbed the gangplank to the deck of the *Lady Tross*. She passed Geric without meeting his eyes.



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