

Death in Tar Mira

Chapter 2

by Tony Graham

Vahan stood on the balcony in the false light of dawn. It was a long drop to the street below. He looked up at the roofline, leaning back against the rail and whispered, “Dax.” Listening carefully for a response, he heard snoring from above. Vahan whispered louder, “Dax.” The snores remained even. Vahan jumped up and called his friend's name at the peak of his leap. The snores did not change.

Vahan did not dare be louder. He considered going back into Ornella's room. The parting had been almost as sweet as the stay. Too sweet to ruin it with a premature return. He climbed up onto the balcony rail, used the wall sconce as a second step, leaned out and jumped to grab the edge of the overhanging roof. He hung for a moment by both hands before pulling himself up, hooking his elbows over the edge of the roof.

Hanging by his elbows, Vahan raised his eyes to look for his snoring friend on the rooftop. He found Dax sitting up, eating a small loaf of bread and grinning at him. Dax began loudly snoring, fighting to contain his mirth.

“Villain,” Vahan gasped at him as he struggled to hook one heel over the rooftop. Dax reached forward and hauled Vahan up the rest of the way.

“Was the girl worth it?” Dax settled back down, legs crossed, tore off a hunk of bread and handed it to Vahan.

Vahan stared across the dim rooftops of the city, then smiled and nodded.

“Good.” Dax nodded his satisfaction. “I feared I had slept on this roof, denying some needy girl of my company, so you could be disappointed by another romance.”

“What?” Vahan looked offended.

Dax gestured with the bread, “You are in love with romance.”

“I am not.”

“I blame the words tutor your mother makes you visit.”

“There was nothing romantic in this.”

Dax raised an eyebrow.

“It was lust. Nothing else. I saw her, I wanted her,” Vahan defended himself.

Dax sighed, “You saw a pillar of robes and veil with a stray bit of gold hair and instantly fell in lust. Yes, I understand now. All the girls of your mother's house make a mistake. To



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inspire lust, they should hide themselves beneath layers of blankets.”

Vahan refused to respond, concentrating instead on his small amount of bread. He discovered he was ravenous. “I'm hungry.”

Dax nodded agreement.

“Should we travel by rooftop?” Vahan asked.

“This time of morning? Everyone who would trouble us is asleep.”

“True.” Vahan looked for the easiest way off the rooftop.

“Besides, I'm tired.” Dax rose to his feet and stretched.

“Then we had best find an easy way down for the mighty tribesman.”

“I could push you off the roof.”



The streets of Tar Mira were coming to life as Vahan and Dax reached Blue House. Located just off the Plaza of the Blue Fountain, Blue House was a famous, infamous to some, establishment of expensive, quality entertainment. In some estimations, it housed the greatest collection of accomplished courtesans in the whole of the City-State. Catering to both men and women, one could listen to music or poetry, eat a fine meal, sample rare wines and liquors, sit in comfortable silence or visit the pillows with a variety of enthusiastic and highly skilled partners.

At this hour of the morning, the small army of servants and the various vendors who catered to Blue House were typically swarming around the back and side entrances. Instead, the house staff were quietly gathered at the back corner where Aldo, the butcher, was fending away inquiries from the near neighbors.

One of the kitchen boys noticed Vahan and Dax standing at the corner of the plaza. The boy nudged an older woman. The woman turned a hard stare their way. For a brief moment, Vahan thought he saw relief in her face. That turned his unease to fright. Known to most of the house as 'Cook,' Dax called her mother. A woman of the tribes, Cook had begun working for Vahan's mother six years ago. She had come from the Sea of Grass with little save her teenage son, Dax. Nothing disturbed Cook, not even the worst of her son's misadventures.



Vahan and Dax made their way into the crowd of servants. Aldo nodded to them as Cook went to the garden gate and waited. Without speaking, Cook led Vahan and Dax into the gardens. Contained by a high wall, the private garden was a quiet refuge of lush plants and flowing water. The tranquility was undone by the two bodies laid upon the small, black-pebbled path. The corpses were covered with fine red sheets from the upstairs bedrooms. A man's hand had escaped from beneath one of the sheets. It was a rough, calloused hand, the hand of a working man, not that of some gentlemen customer.



Two men emerged from the house carrying another corpse, this one smaller, between them. One of the men was Severo, the upstairs butler. The entire left side of his face was bruised, the eye swollen nearly shut. Vahan recognized the second man as Morys, one of Magistrate Fontan's watchmen. One of the dangerous ones.

“What has happened?” Vahan turned to Cook, his voice taking on an unconscious authority.

Dax's face betrayed no emotion as he knelt next to the bodies, lifting a corner of each sheet to identify the two bodies as guards of Blue House. One of them a man Vahan and Dax had grown up with. Dax stayed kneeling as the third corpse was added to the row.

“Daga.” Severo identified the third body. His voice was slightly distorted by the damage to his face.

Vahan registered the name. Daga, a blonde girl, very popular. Vahan hardly knew her.

Vahan noticed the watchman's fists clench. “She were a polite little thing. Very pretty, too,” Morys eulogized her.

Vahan was taken aback by the raw emotion in Morys' voice. To Vahan's knowledge, the watchman had never patronized Blue House. It would take more than a month's wages for

Morys to do so.

Watchman Morys stood staring at the three corpses, rubbing his bald head, his face expressionless.

“Where is Skarmann? And the Blue Lady?” Vahan asked. He controlled his confusion and growing distress, letting no trace of it spill into his voice.

Cook laid a light hand on his arm, “Your mother is fine. She is upstairs with the Captain.”

Vahan and Dax exchanged a silent look. Dax stayed in the garden as Vahan went into the house. The first floor of Blue House consisted of the kitchens, various parlors, music rooms, three dining rooms of varied sizes, and the foyer to greet guests. All the furnishings were elegant, the colors tasteful and relaxing. There were no guests there at this time of the morning. Nothing unusual in that. But almost all of the house's girls were in attendance on the first floor. That was unusual. By this hour, they were usually eating or asleep. The girls were also quiet, whispering among themselves, many holding drinks. Very unusual. Blue House was typically a noisy place in the morning. The girls and all the house servants were a cheerful group. Vahan's mother encouraged an open, familiar, family atmosphere. Unhappy people rarely stayed long at Blue House, no matter their role in its business.

All the house girls turned to look at Vahan as he headed to the main stair. Some of them smiled, some just nodded. Vahan was puzzled at the realization that many of the girls seemed reassured by his arrival.

Vahan found his mother and Skarmann at the second floor landing. His mother, the Blue Lady, knelt next to Captain Skarmann who sat, back against the wall, with his legs splayed out before him.

Vahan had no idea as to his mother's age. He did know that most of the folk of the Blue Fountain district regarded her as the most beautiful woman in the district. It was difficult for him to judge, she was his mother. For much of his youth, his mother had made it a policy that the world beyond the walls of Blue House not know of his parentage. In the last few years, the attitude of the household toward Vahan had made the secret virtually impossible to keep. His mother had stopped trying. Instead, she had done everything in her power to mold him into some mockery of nobility, thrusting a small horde of tutors upon him. Vahan had no idea who his true blood-father was, his mother refused to speak of the subject. If any of the long-time

servants knew, they kept the secret to themselves.

Skarmann, Captain Skarmann, was the closest thing Vahan's mother had to a partner. A professional soldier, he had long been a favored client. Eight years ago, Skarmann had become a member of the household. It had been a gradual thing, his visits growing longer, his stays becoming free of charge. Eventually, he had taken charge of Blue House's security. He had replaced Vahan's previous sword-master personally, and also brought in old comrades skilled in various combat arts to instruct Vahan. Dax typically joined in the lessons at Vahan's behest. Grey haired, but not feeble, Captain Skarmann had always seemed a man of iron. He had also become the closest thing Vahan had to a father.

Now, Skarmann looked like a broken, dying man. His eyes were glazed, his face pale. Something was very wrong in the way he sat. Vahan had seen men with broken legs, Skarmann's legs looked straight and unharmed. His arms also seemed to be working, he was holding a bottle with one hand and gently patting the Blue Lady's leg with the other. But his body language screamed of pain.

The Blue Lady, Vahan's mother, gave her son a look containing mingled emotions: relief, anger, worry, and perhaps most frightening, calculation. It alarmed Vahan to see his mother displaying obviously genuine emotions. The Blue Lady did not have emotions, she had facades. All knew this. She turned her eyes back to Skarmann. Vahan was startled to realize his mother's level of distress as she unstopped a small bottle and urged Skarmann to sip from it. Vahan recognized it as essence of poppies, a powerful narcotic. Skarmann did not enjoy the effects of the pain-killer by habit. Mother urged the Captain to drink more brandy from his bottle to wash the poppy-juice down.

“Vahan,” Skarmann's voice was clear, surprisingly so considering the poppy and brandy mixture. “For once, I think your mother is happy you were out all night.” Skarmann's chuckle obviously caused him pain. “You are well?”

Vahan nodded cautiously. “I am well, Captain. But you? What...who?”

Vahan's mother, the Blue Lady persona rising into place, looked beyond Vahan to the man climbing the stairs. “Magistrate.” The Blue Lady's greeting was a pleasure to hear despite the formal, business-like tone. “Forgive me that I do not stand.”

Vahan turned to see Ifor Fontan wave her plea aside. An imposing figure, the Magistrate for the Blue Fountain District of the City-State of Tar Mira exuded command no matter his

surroundings. In recent years, the people of the district had begun to refer to the Magistrate as their ultimate figure of authority. He was renowned as hard, but fair. People held that justice was Fontan's master and mistress, his food and drink. To Vahan's knowledge, this Magistrate had never before been inside Blue House. Vahan was shocked to see this adjudicator of the Orders set foot inside, what beyond all pretense, was simply a brothel.

“Lady,” Fontan greeted her, “I came as soon as the report was made to me. There is no confusion as to who did this?”

The Blue Lady shook her head, challenge plain to see in her level stare. “Luc Santee and his bodyguard.” His mother's words set a fire in Vahan's heart, gave him a sudden focus for the rage building from the distress.

“Doctor Awen?” the Magistrate inquired.

“He is in the second door down the hall, seeing to Cerise.” The Magistrate nodded in response and started down the hall. “Go with him,” the Blue Lady commanded her son.

Vahan followed Fontan into the second room, one of the ornate bedchambers. Cerise's nude form lay across the bed on her back. Vahan was not shocked by her nudity, he had seen all the girls of the house nude at some point. He was shocked by her empty stare, like one dead, and the spasmodic convulsions that plagued her beautiful body. Vahan stayed just inside the door, still.



Doctor Awen's emaciated form stood over Cerise's head, forcing a small leather-wrapped bar into her mouth like the bit of a horse's bridle. Vahan and the Magistrate watched as Awen tied the bar in place with a strap around Cerise's head. “It stops her from swallowing her tongue or chewing it to pieces,” the Doctor's dry, dusty voice explained to them.

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“What's wrong with her?” The Magistrate moved closer to look down at her.

With sudden modesty, Doctor Awen attempted to cover her nudity with a sheet. “It is not physical. Nor is it an Alteration.” Doctor Awen was a known master of Alteration. The Art formed the foundation of his professional skills. “A Sorcery of the Mind? Necromancy perhaps, an affliction of the soul?”

“You are sure it is not some mixture of drugs, a poison?”

Doctor Awen met the Magistrate's eyes. “Sorcery. Irresponsible, barely controlled, but powerful sorcery. And quite beyond my capabilities. Without aid, she will not last the day.”



Illustration *Blue House Garden* by Andy Underwood.

Illustration *Blue Room* by Andy Underwood.

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