



Death in Tar Mira

Chapter 4

by Tony Graham

Vahan found his morning spent getting the Blue House back into the routine necessary for a night's business. Fontan and Doctor Awen had left, the Magistrate's watchmen had taken the bodies to the city morgue. The Blue Lady had retreated into her rooms with Skarmann. Cook ordered her kitchens, but Severo, the butler, was clearly unable to perform his duties. The household servants and the girls were frightened, excited, and not sure what the immediate future held. Vahan was forced into the roles typically taken by his mother and Severo; settling petty disputes, providing encouragement and reassurance where it was needed, and generally being a stable presence. Dax had garnered great amusement at Vahan's expense during this process, but at least he had kept his thoughts and opinions to himself before disappearing upstairs.

As the afternoon heat settled over the city, reinforced by the Southern wind, Vahan had found refuge in the garden bath house generally reserved for guests of Blue House. Settling into a tub of lukewarm water, Vahan had draped a cold towel over his head and promptly fallen asleep. He woke up surprisingly refreshed.

A crowd of worries had intruded into his mind during his sleep. He climbed out of the tub, sat on a wooden bench in the dark room, and began to carefully sort them. The doors of Blue House must open for business as usual. New guards would have to be found. Doctor Awen had been paid, but the fees for proper entombments of little Daga and the two dead guards would have to be paid to the city morgue. Any and all damages within the house must be repaired or covered before the night's business. The staff of Blue House must be confident tonight, assured of their personal safety, and the future safety of the House. An update on Luc Santee was in order by nightfall. His crime could not be forgiven.

Ornella Andras. Beautiful, lovely, delicious Ornella would be waiting for him tonight. Vahan reluctantly decided she would be disappointed. With Skarmann injured, he and Dax would have to be at Blue House all this night even if he found new guards. He had no idea how to send word to Ornella. Vahan perversely hoped she would be angry and disappointed.

Vahan quickly toweled himself dry and pulled on his pants, but carried his shirt, boots, small clothes, belt, and knife over his shoulder when he left the bath house in the garden. The main house was quiet, as it should be in the afternoon. Climbing to his room on the third floor,



he was stopped by a door opening at the top of the stair.

His mother, the Blue Lady, waited for him.

“Captain Skarmann?” Vahan asked.

“He is resting. We need new guards for tonight. Someone trustworthy until we can find new men to join the household.”

“Julian?” Vahan was surprised when his mother nodded in agreement.

“It would be a comfort to the staff if you and Dax would be here tonight as well.”

Strangely, his mother did not order him, she simply suggested. Vahan was rarely given a choice when dealing with the Blue Lady. Her attitude towards him had suddenly changed. “I planned to be.”

“You will be armed until this Santee affair is settled.”

Again Vahan was surprised. The Blue Lady commonly discouraged him from wearing a sword. In the streets of Tar Mira, anyone wearing a sword could, and frequently would, be challenged to a duel. Vahan bowed his head in assent.

“Very well.” The Blue Lady turned down the hall, entering her rooms, leaving her son alone in the quiet hall.

Vahan stared after her for a few minutes. He realized that she was not treating him as just her son. She was treating him as an adult, if not an equal. If not obviously manipulating him as she did most customers, her attitude towards him was the same she used when dealing with Severo, the senior butler. Or perhaps even the public manner she reserved for Skarmann. Vahan found it disquieting.

Vahan pushed thoughts of his mother's strange behavior out of his mind as he entered his room. Clean trousers followed fresh small clothes onto his body. Clean boots and belt went on next. Despite the heat, he pulled a sleeveless, stiff leather vest on over his shirt; protection from the glancing blow of a blade if not a direct cut or thrust. A small purse of coin was hooked out of sight onto the belt beneath his leather vest. A second belt for his sword and knife went on next over the vest. His knife was worn in its accustomed spot on his right hip.

The sword was a gift from Skarmann. It was Vahan's treasured item, a long, straight, single-edged blade. The dueling masters who instructed the nobility of Tar Mira typically taught the use of a slender, straight, double-edged blade in a highly stylized method of swordplay. Skarmann kept the focus of Vahan's instruction to only those skills and techniques



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that were proven in battle, and strongly discouraged him from dueling. Vahan wiped the blade down with a lightly oiled cloth before settling it into its scabbard on the left side of his waist.

Vahan made his way down to the first floor servants quarters where Dax had his own room. That Dax had his own room was testament to his value in the household, although Vahan wasn't sure what that value was. It was empty, showed no sign of recent activity. Vahan briefly considered asking Cook if she knew where her son was before deciding it was too harsh a sentence to pass on his friend. A moment of thought recalled Serafina as Dax's current favorite. Vahan made his way through the quiet house to Serafina's room.

A light knock at Serafina's door brought no answer. Vahan eased the door open, light from the hall spilling across the shadowed room. A pale, sleek, half-moon buttock was exposed upon the bed. Definitely not belonging to Dax. Vahan's eyes followed the path of the girl's back to a head of blond hair. Definitely not Serafina, who had night-black hair. Vahan was not startled to find another girl in Serafina's bed. Many of the girls preferred female bed-mates when not working. But a careful examination from the door as his eyes adjusted to the dark revealed three sleeping forms, not two. Serafina in the middle with a thickly muscled arm thrown across her chest from the far side. Definitely not a third girl.

“Dax,” Vahan hissed at his friend.

Dax's head rose from the camouflage of Serafina's dark hair. He looked relaxed, if not rested. Vahan nodded towards the hall and then closed the door.

Dax joined in Vahan at the garden gate a short time later. Dax now wore a heavy, sleeveless leather vest of his own over his dark shirt. He did not carry a sword. Instead, at his waist hung his tribal war knife, a foot and a half of broad, heavy, curved blade with a hawk's head pommel from the Sea of Grass. Vahan knew there was a fan-shaped sheath holding three throwing knives hidden somewhere on Dax, along with the visible flat hilt of the blade showing at the top of his right boot. Dax had obviously noticed the vest and sword Vahan wore. He, too, was dressed for trouble. Neither wore a faction patch today.



The stone-paved streets of Tar Mira were still quiet, but coming back to life in the late



afternoon as people set about finishing their day's business and preparing for the evening. During the summer months, the people of Tar Mira conducted much of their affairs well into the night after the worst of the heat faded.

Vahan and Dax had walked several city blocks towards their destination near the South Docks when they exchanged looks and abruptly changed direction into a side street. They did not pause, rather they picked up their pace down the narrow street, turning twice more, deeper into the maze of two, three and some four-story buildings. Judging by the few shabby banners, they were in a grey faction area of the city, half-way to their destination.

Vahan spotted an oval portal into an interior courtyard and quickly led Dax through. Inside, a once-grand central courtyard with a small fountain, open to the sky, was enclosed by four levels of balconies leading into multiple rooms. Vahan and Dax climbed the first staircase to their left as they came into the courtyard. They moved quietly along the length of the first balcony, away from the stair, to a spot opposite the courtyard entrance. A few faces inside the building watched them pass by doorways, but no one objected to their progress. Drying laundry hung upon lines strung from balcony railings, forming a tattered web in the air above the courtyard. The sheets and clothes provided Vahan and Dax cover from the courtyard entrance. They stood still in the shadows of the balcony.

A thin boy, no more than ten years old, crept through the entrance from the street outside, surveying the courtyard. The boy did not see Vahan and Dax. He turned and waved. A small host of street urchins, none older than the boy, flowed into the courtyard, looking around in confusion.

“Children,” Dax identified their pursuers.

“A lot of them,” Vahan agreed.

“Reporting to who?”

Vahan and Dax watched as the children spread out across the courtyard looking for their trail.

“We could grab one,” Dax offered.

“Not as easy as it sounds.”

“No. And I have little taste for interrogating children,” Dax admitted.

Vahan pointed out two of the urchins making their way up the stairs. Their hiding place would soon be discovered.



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Dax quietly drew his war knife and made a fierce face. Vahan snorted.

Dax let out a wild, piercing battle cry, ran five steps along the balcony and launched himself over the rail.

Children froze in place, their heads lifted, shock blossoming on their faces as Dax appeared to fly into the air above them, glittering steel in one hand, shrieking like a demon.

Children bolted, screaming.

Dax reached out with his free hand for a laundry line, capturing it to stop his fall, swinging up from his momentum until his body was parallel with the courtyard below.

The laundry line snapped.

Dax lay flat on his back in the suddenly quiet, empty courtyard, trying to recapture his breath.

Vahan's laughter filled the silence as he ran down to check on his friend's welfare. He helped Dax sit up. Dax tried to contain a grin as he drew in great breaths of air.

“You bastards!” The cry interrupted their amusement. “What did you do to my clothes?”

Vahan and Dax looked up to see a short, fat woman on the second-floor balcony brandishing a broom over her head as she waddled towards the staircase.

“You'll wash that laundry with your own hands when I'm done with you!”

Vahan pulled Dax loose from the tangle of broken line and its wet burden, and hurried towards the entryway to the street outside.

“Stop! My wash! Villains!” The yelling pursued them, echoing out of the courtyard and down the busy street as they tried in vain to control their laughter. Pedestrians started at the cries, but most ignored the dispute, some even smiling as they witnessed the two young toughs fleeing their waddling accuser. Had Vahan or Dax been wearing their blue faction patches in this decidedly grey neighborhood, it would have been a different story. Loyalty to one's faction as festivals approached often resulted in violent conflicts over the smallest, frequently imagined, offense.



The children caught up with them again near the Plaza of Talire, next to one of the skeleton



mansions. There were several such mansions in Tar Mira; uninhabited, unclaimed, their owners forgotten. The city watchmen kept beggars from taking up residence in these sprawling homes, but otherwise ignored the buildings. The people of the city did not. These abandoned mansions became urban mines for construction materials. Someone had a building project underway nearby judging by the neatly ordered stacks of scavenged bricks and roofing tiles.

Despite the increased foot traffic, most wearing their black faction patches of the South Docks as they went about their business, Vahan and Dax both spotted their child shadowers as they closed in from behind.

“Should we grab one now?” Dax asked without breaking stride or staring at his intended victims as they passed stalls and wandering vendors selling everything from sliced fruit to fine cloth, cold steel to imported spices.

“No,” Vahan kept walking, ignoring their pursuers. “Let's see what they bring.”

“Ah, yes. Walk into an ambush with your eyes wide open. It hurts less.”

“It is a plan.”

“Oh, yes. A plan. One that fills me with confidence,” Dax assured his friend.

Completing one corner of the Plaza of Talire was the Grand Dome. Constructed of white marble, its walls were pitted and stained. Part of the roof was missing. No longer grand, the Dome had long been abandoned by its forgotten builders. Not quite a secret, but by no means official, the Grand Dome was the de facto headquarters of the Pearl Buttons, the gang that controlled the criminal activities of the South Docks.

Vahan and Dax made their way up the broad public stair to the plaza and through the crowd to the double doors of the Grand Dome. Their child shadowers made no move to follow them into the building. As dwellers of the streets, they knew the Pearl Buttons would not tolerate them. The two friends paused a moment, then opened the doors and went inside. Those citizens passing by avoided looking within. They, too, knew better than to be curious about this building and its inhabitants.

There were holes in the peak of the dome, some said by design, that provided sunlight to the vast center room. A balcony circled the entire dome twenty feet above the floor, regularly spaced columns holding it up, but there was no obvious staircase in sight to access it. The oddly patterned pools of sunlight on the tessellated floor were speckled with bird droppings, the pigeons apparently not afraid of the human inhabitants. The floor directly beneath the circling

balcony was lost in shadows save where Vahan and Dax stood in the double doors, letting their eyes adjust to the dim light.

The room appeared empty, but soft notes from a finely tuned set of strings floated with the dust motes in the shafts of light. Rough laughter rang out from the shadows across the floor, followed by the sound of breaking glass.

Vahan and Dax walked towards the laughter, avoiding the brightest pools of light.

“Well, well, well. What reason could possibly exist that we lowly rogues, cut-purses, thugs and assassins should receive such august guests from Blue House?” The modulated voice echoed from the shadows.

An elegant figure stepped into the light trailed by three men of the sort most often found during the night in dark alleys. Each of the men had daggers sheathed at their belt, wrist or boot. Each was adorned with at least one pearl prominently displayed on their clothing or in a piece of jewelry. All had obviously been drinking heavily. Their leader, wearing a bright green vest of fine silk fitted with pearl buttons, lectured his followers as he approached Vahan and Dax.

“I suspect the Prince of the Blue and his particular friend are here to ask for our lowly help.” The Dandy swept a bow to Vahan. “What service could we possibly perform for Your Grace?” His voice and manner displayed breeding and education at odds with his companions and his surroundings.

Vahan stared at the man. “Do I know you, sir?”

The Dandy staggered back. “Know me? Sir? How should you know me? Am I not beneath your notice? Unless...” The Dandy turned to play to his companions, “Did you gentlemen...” The Dandy swung back to face Vahan and Dax with an exaggerated aside, “Forgive my bad manners. I would introduce you to my associates properly if I could but recall the bastards' names.”

The three men laughed at the Dandy's antics as he turned back to play to them.

“Where was I, ah yes. I strongly suspect the young Prince of Whores and his particular friend are here to beg for protection. Did you not hear? It is the talk of the city. An attack made on Blue House by a single nobleman. Whores murdered. Guards killed. The indomitable Captain Skarmann struck down. Why, the Blue Lady herself will soon enough again be on her back, grunting like a sow as the common workmen of the city take her one after another in a

single night.” The Dandy pitched his voice to a falsetto and arched his back, “A pimp, a pimp. My cunny for a pimp!”

His laughter was choked off by Vahan's vice-like grip on his throat.

Vahan drove the Dandy backward until his spine met the pillar, lifting him by his throat, forcing the Dandy to the tips of his boots. The Dandy made no move towards the pearl-handled dagger sheathed at his waist as Vahan strangled him. Rather, his eyes opened wide, staring into Vahan's expressionless face.

Vahan heard – felt a voice in the back of his head urging him to release the man. It seemed a reasonable request, one likely to profit him. Vahan chose to ignore it.

Panic appeared in the Dandy's eyes for the first time as Vahan's grip tightened. The Dandy's hand reached to pull his dagger. Vahan's hand slapped the dagger from the Dandy's grasp before returning to its place on his throat.

Dax crouched, back to Vahan, war knife bared in one hand while the other held a throwing knife cocked by his ear. The three companions of the Dandy had all drawn steel, but were slow to move against Dax. They were obviously still struggling to comprehend the new situation.



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First Published February, 2009.