



Death in Tar Mira

Chapter 5

by Tony Graham

Vahan's hands tightened their grip on the Dandy's throat. Vahan felt removed, as if he were watching from a distance, as the man in his hands began dying.

The Dandy's face reddened, eyes wide as he sought a last gasp of breath. There was no fear in the Dandy now, rather a manic humor. Irony, and perhaps a sense of relief.

Dax, back to Vahan, war knife and its slender brother forged for throwing at ready, faced three armed thugs with a smile. It was partially that eager expression which held the men in check.

A goblet flew down from the balcony above striking one of the thugs in the back before shattering on the tiles.

“Hold, dammit!” The gravelly voice demanded obedience.

The three men stepped back, lowering their weapons. Dax maintained his position. Vahan showed no sign of having heard the command.

Silence filled the vast space of the Grand Dome save for the Dandy's struggled attempts at breathing.

“Young Vahan.” Dax looked up to see the dark, bearded face of Julian ab Teodur, leader of the Pearl Buttons, leaning over the balcony above. Dax realized the music had stopped.

Julian took a drink from the ornate bottle in his hand before starting again. “Young Vahan, the man whose throat you are squeezing has noble blood in his veins. I personally aided him in setting his death curse. I should hate to have to explain to your mother how you died as a result of drunken stupidity.”

Dax risked a quick glance over his shoulder. Vahan had not moved. The Dandy's face was alarmingly red.

Julian sighed, “Vahan, I have spent a significant amount of time and money training that particular doorman. I would hate to see it go to waste. As a favor to me, please excuse whatever it was the fool said.”

A small tremor shook Vahan's shoulders. He released the Dandy, who slid down to lay upon the floor. Vahan heaved a breath before turning to look up at Julian.

Julian waved at the three men, then pointed at the Dandy, “Take him outside and sober him up. Bring those two up.”



Dax sheathed his war knife, the throwing blade disappeared back into his vest.

One of the thugs gave Dax a grin, “Damn quick with those beauties, eh? You should think about joining us.”

Dax made a show of looking around. “Not enough sky. I like the sun.”

The thug laughed as, with a wave, he led Vahan and Dax into the shadows to the base of a wrought iron spiral staircase. “Up you go, now. His lordship is waiting.”

Vahan and Dax were met at the top of the staircase by a large, curving rectangular room, one entire wall forming a balcony overlooking the main floor below. The other three walls were formed by an array of bookcases, glass display cases, maps and charts. It was a learned gentleman's study, the quality of which Vahan would expect to see in the most powerful noble houses, not the headquarters of a street gang. But then, the dark, burly, brooding figure waiting for him was not what most people imagined when they thought of a street boss. Despite his appearance of a man in his prime, Vahan knew Julian to be over sixty years old. A gift of his father's blood.

Julian ab Teodur was a welcome, if infrequent, client at Blue House. Vahan and Dax had, in the manner of typically curious boys, gone to significant effort to learn about the mysterious figure over the years. Vahan did not understand the exact nature of the relationship, but both the Blue Lady and Captain Skarmann trusted and enjoyed the company of this reputedly most-dangerous of underworld warlords.

Julian greeted Vahan and Dax with two crystal goblets of a rich amber liquid. “I repay the favor. Brandy from Mulcar. Quite probably the last that will be seen in Tar Mira for many years. We took six casks from the *Wavedancer's* cargo last night when she docked. Our import tax.”

Dax sipped from the goblet, smiled and inhaled through clenched teeth in reaction to the brandy.

“Favor?” Vahan took the goblet, but ignored its contents.

“You taught my men down there a much needed lesson, particularly Harran. He has become too confident in his abilities of late.” Julian took a drink from his own glass, watching Vahan as he did.

Vahan took a measured sip of the brandy. It was a plush velvet fire.

Julian turned to the other man in the room; tall, lean, elegantly dressed, the man sat in a

chair, cradling a nine-course lute in his arms. “Allow me to introduce my friend Thethlion.”

Vahan was surprised. Thethlion was a renowned lutanist, considered by many the greatest musician currently alive in Tar Mira. What the bard was doing here, Vahan could not begin to imagine.

“And these two young gentlemen, I use the term despite their aggressive entrance, are Vahan and Dax.”

Dax raised his glass to the musician. Vahan bowed in proper fashion.

Thethlion plucked a selection of the seventeen strings on his lute. The melody was simple, each note beautiful. “Forgive me for not standing. I am pleased to meet you both, but this nectar of Mulcar has robbed me of my legs.” An empty brandy bottle lay on its side on the table at Thethlion's elbow.

“Why the last?” Dax gestured with his empty goblet.

Julian indicated the bottle, an offer for Dax to help himself. “A perceptive question, Dax. Take care, or some might think you more than a fast blade.”

Dax refilled his glass, ignoring the compliment.

“Last of the Mulcar brandy because the old order is broken. Swept away by the Destruction. Some of the great nobles, Vanth, Ishi, and Kaday, have declared themselves kings and queens. But they are clinging to what has been. Mulcar... Mulcar is breaking with the past. Mulcar has burned the Imperial Orders and scattered their ashes to the winds. Its soldiers seize the lands of Kaday,” Julian nodded to Dax, “your people, killing those who defy them, replacing the dead with men and women who will owe it fealty.”

Julian refilled his goblet and leaned against the rail. His eyes focused on an errant shaft of sunlight playing across his glass. “Mulcar has bottled the smiths of Mogadur in their mountains, fortifying the Imperial road against them. Its ships prey upon the Inner Sea in defiance of Vanth, taking both cargo and people. Slavery. Mulcar embraces slavery. What more proof is needed that Gallidon is dead.”

A lingering series of notes filled the silence as Thethlion, seemingly without conscious thought, moved his fingers across the strings of his lute.

“Who rules Mulcar?” Vahan broke the silence.

Julian roused himself, “Straight to the heart of the matter. The great question, who rules Mulcar? You would be a rich man if you could answer. I've watched it play out here. I've seen

much of it coming. I even saw hints of the Destruction days before it happened.” Julian turned to face them. “But Mulcar... Mulcar is a great emptiness. A void, even to the stars. Whoever...” Julian shrugged. “Whatever, rules in Mulcar has gone to great lengths to remain in the darkness.”

Julian watched Vahan and Dax for their reaction before smiling at his musician friend. “They are too polite to openly question, but doubt me they do.”

“And who could blame them?” Thethlion didn't even look up from his strings, the notes somehow making an accompaniment to his words.

“Who indeed.” Julian studied the content of his glass.

Vahan and Dax exchanged an uneasy look. Both were familiar with the unpredictability of the truly drunk.

“Do you know where you are?” Julian did not look up from his glass.

“The Grand Dome. Home of the Pearl Buttons. Tar Mira,” Vahan offered.

Julian nodded his head, still studying the brandy in his glass.

Thethlion's hands lay still across the strings. Vahan and Dax both stood still, not willing to offend the silence.

“And what is the Grand Dome?”

“A fine building,” Dax offered, “Perhaps in need of repairs to its roof, and a bit of cleaning, but a fine building.”

Julian threw back his head and laughed.

Thethlion's fingers began to dance across the strings, creating an intricate theme suggesting running water or the night wind.

“There is nothing wrong with the roof here, gentlemen. Cleaning, I grant you, but the roof is as it was designed.” Julian refilled his glass, waved Vahan and Dax to join him at the rail, refilling their glasses.

“History, gentlemen, history. The old order. Tar Mira was founded by the children of three great houses: Vanth, Atiron and Talire. Celestial Forces. That is the important discipline for our Grand Dome. The masters of Celestial Forces built this place, and then, centuries later, abandoned it. Look at the sunlight moving on the tiles of the floor. From it, I can tell you the time of day, the day of the month, the month of the year, the year of the decade, the decade of the century, the century of the millennium. On a clear night, observing the stars from this

dome, I can foretell events that have yet to occur. Tomorrow. Next year. A hundred years. If I were to study long enough, I might witness the end of all things. But down that path lies madness. And that, I leave to the Vakur.”

Julian left Vahan and Dax studying the tessellated tiles of the Grand Dome floor below. “Which brings us to your visit.”

Vahan put down his goblet. “We request a...”

Julian waved him to silence. “Done and done. I foresaw your visit last night through my leaky roof.” Julian grinned at Dax. “You need men. It is already being arranged. I saw violence. I saw death. But strangely, I could not see who brought it.”

“Luc Santee.”

Julian turned his head to study Thethlion, whose hands repeatedly plucked a single note. “Luc Santee?” Julian repeated.

“The boy has no spine,” Thethlion pronounced.

“You know him?” Vahan studied the lutanist.

“I am retained to play at the announcement of his marriage tomorrow evening. He is to be joined with a daughter of the Andras house.”

Vahan froze. He fought to contain his surprise. Dax choked on brandy.

Julian studied the two for a moment before continuing. “Luc Santee. The boy means little. But the father... Cyr Santee is formidable. Do not be too eager for vengeance.”

“Ifor Fontan intends to seek justice.” Dax spoke up to cover Vahan's distraction.

“Does he, now? A Magistrate accusing a noble of Santee's stature. A decade ago, I would have bet on Fontan. Change, young sirs. Change. The Imperial Orders placed the nobles within the law.”

Thethlion moved his fingers across his strings as he recited, “Gallidon, seventeen greater noble houses, imperial administrator, magistrate, lower nobles in their multitudes...”

Julian finished the list, “And the rest of we poor bastards. But that is all changing. Has been changing.” He abruptly switched subjects. “Blue House is just over two hundred years old, did you know? Founded for the favored mistress of a young son of the Konstantin house. In time, that son became the Konstantin. And in all that two hundred years, the Blue Lady enjoyed the favor of the Konstantin. No other noble would dare bring harm to Blue House for fear of his wrath.”

Julian pointed his finger at Vahan. “Until your mother. Change. She broke with tradition. The Konstantin finally lost his obsession with young women and she did nothing to hinder it. Change. She relies on the balance of power between the various city factions and noble houses for protection.”

“And the sword of Captain Skarmann.” Thethlion added with a quick martial air.

“Just so. He certainly killed enough noble sons and prized retainers in the first years after his arrival.”

Julian caught the quick startled looks of his two young guests. “You don't know? Every fool who considered himself a superior swordsman challenged Skarmann. He was the ultimate test for the champions of each of the sword academies.”

“He has shed more noble blood over the last decade than any man I know of.” Sharp, hard notes emphasized Thethlion's point.

“Because they challenge him, he has no need to fear a death curse. It would shame their families. And the appearance of honor is everything when one has everything.”

“Or when one has nothing.”

Julian laughed at his friend, nodding in agreement. “Or nothing.”

Vahan and Dax stood still, keeping their mouths shut as the two drunken men fell silent.

Julian straightened, his manner becoming decisive. “You've given me a great deal to think on, there's no doubt. Skarmann?”

“He was wounded. Doctor Awen says he must take care for several weeks if he is to recover fully.”

“You must take care as well, young Vahan. Skarmann has spoken of you too fondly, with too much pride, to too many people. Once it is known he is injured, there are those who will challenge you just to test his boasts while they may without fear of his reprisal.”

Julian waved Vahan and Dax to the stair. “I will send guards. Give the Blue Lady my fond greeting.”

Vahan bowed. Dax nodded to Julian and the seated musician. They descended the spiral stair, leaving the balcony's light behind.



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