



## *Death in Tar Mira*

### Chapter 7

by Tony Graham

Vahan and Dax sat on a stone bench in the gardens, glumly staring at the back of Blue House as they shared a plate of cold chicken, pickles, fresh bread, honey and butter.

“Your mother gave me two whole chickens. I didn't even ask.” Vahan took a drink of watered wine from the pitcher between them.

“Severo caught me coming out of Serafina's room,” Dax admitted.

Vahan looked at his friend in surprise. Spending time with any of the girls this late in the day was forbidden. Serafina should have been preparing herself for the night's work.

Dax shrugged. “I needed help with all these damn buttons.”

Vahan remembered to check that his napkin was still in place, protecting the fine dark blue shirt he wore. Dax wore a matching outfit of shirt, black breeches and polished boots, the standard for Blue House male staff. The war knife was an unusual adornment for the ensemble, but its sheath had been polished.

“What did Severo do?”

“He wished me a pleasant evening.”

Vahan grunted. Dax nodded his agreement.

“These attitudes make me uneasy. It's not right,” Vahan admitted.

“It would be more comfortable in a tavern somewhere. Even with hired swordsmen after you.”

“I've been thinking about that.”

Dax held himself back from commenting despite the easy opening. It was a sign of the seriousness with which he regarded the matter.

Vahan continued, “It must be Santee. Either Luc or his father. They must have some hidden grudge or agenda towards Blue House.”

“Perhaps the Captain killed one of their relatives in a duel? Or a secret lover?”

Vahan nodded. “That would match with what Julian told us.”

Dax grinned. “Our Captain, a great spiller of noble blood. Who would have guessed.”

“It makes sense. I had no idea the Konstantin was a benefactor of Blue House. I've never even seen the old man.”

“So, fear of the Captain keeps these noble pigs on their manners.”





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“Fear or respect.”

Dax continued their new theory. “And having injured the Captain, they now send men to kill the student.”

Vahan raised an eyebrow at his stocky friend. “Students.”

Dax ignored the correction. “And having removed the student, they what? Seize Blue House? Destroy it?”

“So you think this is all about vengeance?” Vahan asked.

Dax shrugged. “It makes no sense to me. None. It is a place of joy-girls. Of no real importance in the games of these noble houses. Why attack it?”

“So Luc Santee was just drunk and out of control? There was no plan or any real motive?”

Dax nodded.

“Then why is someone paying imperials to have me killed?”

Dax stared at his friend, unable to contain himself. “Why do you assume it is gold? They are probably just offering silver nobles for an unblooded, over-tutored, lovesick pup such as you.”

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.”

They finished their meal in silence.

Sudden thoughts of Ornella Andras, the feel of her silky bronze skin, the smell of her tawny hair, the taste of her lips, filled Vahan's head. He had the urge to leave Blue House and all its problems behind. Spend the night with Ornella. He knew she would welcome him.

Perhaps Luc Santee, her future husband, would be at the Andras mansion as well.

The unexpected rogue thought killed much of his desire.

“We are summoned.” Dax picked up the plate and empty pitcher.

Vahan looked up to see Severo standing in the rear door, waving to them.



Severo stopped in the hall where the carpenter was rubbing a final stain on the new piece of



wainscoting. It had been damaged in the violence of the previous night. The new section nearly matched the original wood. Dax stepped in front of Severo, helping the carpenter move a heavy, narrow table in place to protect the still damp repair.

Severo, his face obviously discolored despite artfully applied make-up, initially looked insulted at the implied suggestion that he was too feeble to perform the task. Then he inclined his head to Dax. “Thank you.”

Dax shrugged. Vahan kept his mouth shut.

Severo left the carpenter to collect his tools, leading Vahan and Dax to a doorway at the end of the hall.

The Blue Lady and Captain Skarmann were waiting for them in the spinet parlor. All the ground floor parlors of Blue House held at least one musical instrument. The girls and most of the boys could either play an instrument or were voice-trained to recite or sing.

The Captain sat at the spinet, slowly picking out single notes. It was his favorite instrument, although he himself could play no music. It was quietly held in the house the Blue Lady continued to practice its use on a regular basis simply because it pleased him.

Severo closed the door behind himself after waving Vahan and Dax inside. The two unconsciously stood for inspection before the Blue Lady. Vahan's mother nodded approval at Dax and his over-sized knife in its polished sheath but frowned at Vahan.

“Where is your sword?”

“I am remaining in the House tonight.” Vahan, with casual defiance, sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs. Dax followed his lead without speaking, slouching into another.

The Blue Lady continued to frown at her son. The silence wore on the room, disturbed by the occasional note from the spinet.

Vahan broke beneath the pressure. “A sword is of little use inside. The rooms and halls of Blue House are too narrow. Only a fool would choose a sword first in these close quarters.”

The Blue Lady's face smoothed as she looked to Captain Skarmann, who smiled at her, a small note of pride visible in his expression.

Vahan continued. “The Captain wears his sword because it is expected of him. A part of his persona. He would not draw it save as a last measure. A dagger or knife is superior within these rooms.”

Dax added his support. “A true war knife is more superior still, but your son lacks the

skill to use one properly being a poor city dweller and would, no doubt, hurt himself if he attempted to.”

The Blue Lady looked at Dax. He became suddenly fascinated by the toes of his boots, as if marveling at their polish. She composed herself. “Very well.”

A gentle knock on the door interrupted them. Cerise entered, carrying a tray of bottles, glasses and sliced fruit. She kept her head down, dark hair falling about her shoulders without decoration or style. She wore a simple frock despite the time of day. Vahan realized she was not working with clients tonight. He approved of the decision, whoever had made it.

“Thank you, dear.” The Blue Lady indicated the table by the Captain, next to the spinet.

Cerise quietly set the tray down. She moved easily, with casual grace, displaying no sign of the previous night's trauma. At the door, she turned to curtsy. Vahan caught her looking at him sideways, a brief glimpse. He did not know her well. Hardly at all, truth be told. Seeing her without all the artifice typically employed by the girls, she seemed quite pleasant. Pretty in a way more pleasing to his eye than the immediate, almost overwhelming attraction put forth by the girls in their full regalia. He hoped the Magistrate's effort to help Cerise was effective. Hoped she did not remember the events of the previous evening save as a vague nightmare, easily forgotten in the light of day.

Captain Skarmann ignored the small bottle of essence of poppy on the tray, instead pouring himself a glass of brandy. He smiled charmingly at the Blue Lady when she frowned at his choice. “Easier for me to measure my intake with this rather than Awen's tincture.”

She let the subject drop, turning instead back to face her son and his friend, “Magistrate Fontan has issued an Imperial Warrant for Luc Santee.”

Vahan and Dax exchanged stunned looks. Both stopped themselves from speaking, taking a moment to organize their thoughts.

The Blue Lady continued. “The Warrant orders that Santee appear within Fontan's court by noon tomorrow. The Captain, Severo, and Cerise are also ordered to appear. I will, of course, be accompanying them. Both of you will attend as well.”

“Does he have the authority to issue an Imperial Warrant?” Vahan jumped to the heart of the matter.

“It is signed by the Imperial Administrator of Tar Mira. Santee dare not ignore it.” The Blue Lady was confident.

“The Emperor is gone. There is no empire. It is said the Lady Vanth has declared herself queen of her new Middle Kingdom. What force is there in an Imperial Warrant now?” Dax asked.

The Captain hit one key of the spinet three times in slow succession. “I saw an Imperial Warrant defied in my youth. A minor noble house. Proud. Defiant. Stupid, really.”

The Blue Lady stared at her Captain. He looked up and smiled at her.

“A minor noble house in Vaneth, fortress-city of the necromancers. I don't even remember what crime the Warrant accused them of. But I have no doubt of their guilt.” He sat, lost in thought, tapping seemingly random keys.

“You knew them? This noble house?” The Blue Lady prompted him. It was rare for the Captain to speak of his youth. For guests of Blue House he would often tell of far-off places, border wars and other small military campaigns, but he seldom spoke of anything personal. His injury, or perhaps the brandy, had loosened his tongue.

“Knew them? Yes. I knew them. I grew up in their household.”

Dax grinned, his long held suspicion confirmed. “You were a son of that house.”

The Captain shook his head. “No. But my family had served them for three generations. My father was the captain of their household guard.”

Dax slouched back in his chair, disappointed.

“By the time an Imperial Guardsman came to the front gate to execute the Warrant, all the servants had fled save my father.”

“Your father defended the noble family?” Vahan tried to contain his excitement at the tale.

The Captain stared down at the keys of the spinet, recalling memories long set aside. “It was a summer morning. Warm. Bright sunlight. All the flowers in the courtyard had bloomed. Color everywhere one turned. I remember the silence of the almost empty mansion. The sound of the falling waters of the fountain. I had swept the stones of the courtyard myself that morning. Couldn't find the houseboy who usually did it. My father had urged me to go with them. The servants who fled.” He gave a small, ironic chuckle at the memory of his younger self. “Tried to give me money. I refused.”

Vahan and Dax grinned at each other. The Blue Lady sat completely still, almost tense.

“My father told the Guardsman he could not enter. My father was bigger than the

Guardisman. Almost a head taller. The Guardsman asked my father why. At the time, I didn't understand the question. My father told him the boy, meaning me, was not sworn to the house's service." Skarmann searched for a new note on the spinet, gently striking keys until he found one to his liking.

Dax could not contain himself, "They fought?"

The Captain continued to stare at the keys before him. "No. I would not call it a fight. The Guardsman killed my father. I, like most boys, had thought my father invincible. My father had little, if any, chance."

"You saw him die." The Blue Lady did not question, rather it seemed as if some piece of a puzzle dropped into place.

"Yes. And then I attacked the Guardsman with my father's sword."

Vahan and Dax exchanged amazed looks.

"And lived," the Blue Lady affirmed.

The Captain looked up at her. "He broke my arm, my leg." He drew a line with his thumb diagonally down his chest. "And cut me here. He was not cruel. I was too stupid to know defeat. I would not stop. He left me lying in the courtyard with my father."

The Blue Lady rose, moved to stand beside Skarmann. She poured herself a small glass of brandy, each move graceful, precise. Vahan had rarely seen his mother drink. Her fingers lightly caressed the nape of the Captain's neck before she returned to her seat.

"The Imperial Guardsman killed everyone in the house save me. Every noble. The current lord and his mother were accounted mighty sorcerers. Both fell beneath his blade. For defying an Imperial Warrant, that lower noble house was destroyed by a single Emperor's Guardsman in a single day." Skarmann refilled his glass, grinned across the room at the young men. "Sometime after noon, two men in the livery of a greater noble house came for me. Dumped me in a barrow like so much trash. They told me an Imperial Guardsman had come to their gates and suggested they come collect me. I was sworn into that house's service within a year."

"House Vanth." The Blue Lady made it a statement, not a question.

"Yes, the necromancers. A greater noble house, one of the seventeen. I had risen up the ranks of society in my choice of master." He smiled at her. "And there I stayed until my loyalty was torn from their grasp." She returned his smile, a lively, dazzling contrast to her usual

serene demeanor.

Vahan remained patient with their silence for a few moments before returning to Dax's question. "But the Empire is gone. Fading. The last Imperial Guardsman left the city over a year ago. It is commonly said the Administrator has no strength. Does this Imperial Warrant carry any weight now?"

"Think," the Blue Lady ordered her son. "What would happen if any single noble house in this city defied the Imperial Administrator?"

Vahan leaned forward in his chair, staring at his mother, but not seeing her, turning the issue around in his mind.

Vahan did not see the approving smile exchanged between the Blue Lady and her Captain. Dax cast a speculative eye at the cut fruit on the tray next to Skarmann.

"There is no greater house in Tar Mira, only lower noble houses. The other nobles would turn on a house that defied the Administrator." Vahan sat up, looking at his mother and Skarmann.

"Why?"

"Because they are cowards and fools," Dax pronounced, rising out of his chair and making his way to the fruit.

"No one noble house is trusted enough by the others to be placed in authority." Vahan ignored his friend's verdict. "None is strong enough to take the city without the support of the others. No single house has the backing of more than a few other noble families. So the Imperial Administrator remains in power despite the fall of the Empire."

"People are accustomed to the Administrator, the Magistrates, the Orders. As soon as a noble family attempts to break that structure, a structure that has existed for all living memory, a great many questions will begin to be asked." Skarmann saved a piece of fruit from Dax. He dipped the slice of orange into his brandy before eating it.

"Such as?" Dax watched, fascinated by the Captain's method of eating oranges.

"The tax. Imperial taxes are still being levied. The noble houses have all stopped, but the common folk are still paying their Imperial tax. Where is that money going?"

Dax temporarily forgot about the orange slices. "Where is that money going?"

The Captain shrugged. "I suspect the Administrator is using it to run the city."

Vahan turned to his mother. "Does Blue House pay the tax?"

“Of course. Our Magistrate is provided for by the tax. The water system, streets, lights, city guards, docks, the new fortified city walls; all are paid for by the tax. Tar Mira runs on the tax. Without it, there would be chaos.”

“And without an Imperial Administrator to maintain the balance of power there would be chaos. So if the Imperial Warrant is ignored the other noble houses will turn on Santee to protect themselves.” Vahan finished the argument.

“It is probable. Besides, should order within the city flounder, House Vanth would land a small army and annex Tar Mira, bringing it fully within their new Middle Kingdom and collect a sizable tax from each of the noble houses of the city. None of them want that.” The Captain stood, apparently without effort. It was only the slightly exaggerated care with which he moved that betrayed the lasting effects of his injury to Vahan. “But all that is of no importance this night. It is a matter for tomorrow.”

The Blue Lady took the Captain's offered hand, lithely rising to her feet. “Tonight is for Blue House. Vahan, you will be in charge of security. If there is trouble, you will decide how best to handle it. Tonight, the Captain remains in the main parlor to provide company for myself and our guests.”

“A distraction?”

The Captain raised an eyebrow at Vahan's question. “Do you feel you are not ready for this task?”

Vahan quickly shook his head. “No, I... I am capable.”

“Cymbeline will be the distraction. She will be sitting at the Captain's feet wearing the Vanth costume.” The Blue Lady smiled at the Captain.

Dax whistled.

Cymbeline was a beautiful girl with generous hips, breasts, long red hair and pale skin. The Vanth costume consisted of a translucent black gown and matching veil. It concealed less than it revealed. Vahan suspected the Blue Lady had the costume made to tease the Captain for his years of long service to that greater noble house. Or perhaps she had it made for herself to wear for him. Vahan stopped that line of speculation. It took a path that quickly became disturbing.

A knock at the door broke his train of thought.

Severo opened the door. “Our new guards have arrived.” He smiled. “They are somewhat



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more than I expected.”

The Captain nodded and led the Blue Lady after Severo out of the room.

“They have much to learn with little time to teach them.” The Captain paused in the doorway to look back at Vahan. “It would be best if you came along. After all, they are your men tonight.”

Vahan and Dax exchanged quickly-hidden smiles and followed.



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