



## *Death in Tar Mira*

### Chapter 8

by Tony Graham

Vahan hesitated when he saw the three men sent by Julian ab Teodur waiting in the back hall. Dax unconsciously stepped away, creating space between the two of them as he habitually did whenever he suspected trouble.

The two well groomed ruffians gave Vahan no pause. It was the third figure, elegantly dressed in black, that alarmed him. It was the Dandy. The man he had almost strangled earlier this very day. There was no hair out of place on the Dandy's head, no visible mark on him. A high, starched collar closed by a single, perfect pearl hid any mark his throat might betray of their conflict.

More alarming still was the happy grin Severo wore standing next to the Dandy.

Alarm became astonishment at the Blue Lady's reaction to the Dandy. She moved straight to him, a brilliant smile lighting her face as she took up both the Dandy's hands.

“Harran! It is so very good to see you in Blue House once again.”

Vahan glanced over to see Dax, too, starrng in dumb amazement. This same man, this Harran, had spoken appallingly of his mother just hours before. Now the bastard stared at the Blue Lady, seemingly speechless, a broken smile on his face, like a dying man gazing at the light of Na'naat in the afterlife.

The Blue Lady quickly covered Harran's lapse in the ability to speak, turning to the two ruffians, “Welcome gentlemen. You've met Severo, he will provide you with a basic understanding of the rules of the house. Tonight Vahan is in charge of security. You will report to him and obey his orders in all things.” She turned back to face the dandy once more, lowering her voice, “I hope we will have an opportunity to speak later. I'm pleased you are here at this time of need.”

Captain Skarmann and the Blue Lady left the hall, seemingly taking all life with them.

One of the ruffians broke the silence with an almost involuntary murmur, “She's as beautiful as they say.”

“Of course. She is the Blue Lady.” The note of pride in Harran's comment, with just a small tinge of bitterness, was unmistakable to Vahan. It was also confusing. He would have expected something rude or insulting from the dandy given his earlier words. Or silence.

Vahan realized everyone was starrng at him, awaiting orders. “Ah. Yes. Well then,”



Vahan quickly recovered, focusing on the ruffians. Both were of a size, larger than the average man, with thick wrists and calloused hands. They were older than Vahan, almost middle-aged. Both seemed calm, but alert, and upon further study, intelligent. Not surprising, really. Julian would not send young bulls to Blue House. Neither wore any pearls displaying loyalty to what was assuredly their gang. “You two gentlemen are armed with daggers, I see. Well and good, but they are only for use if there is no other choice. Violence is to be avoided save as a last resort. If a hold or choke or punch will serve, then leave your steel sheathed.” He turned to Severo, “Find shirts for them.”

“And Master Harran?” Severo drew Vahan's attention back to the dandy.

Vahan and Harran starred at each other for a moment, no expression on either man's face.

“What purpose do you serve? Master Harran.” Vahan spoke the title reluctantly, ignoring the frown from Severo.

“Julian sent me to handle any trouble of a non-physical nature. Master Vahan.” Harran's answer was equally bland, without a trace of respect or obvious offense.

“So, you are to be our mage killer.” Dax challenged him from the other side of the room where he casually leaned against a wall. Despite his shorter stature and younger age, Dax easily looked the equal of either ruffian.

Harran shrugged. “If needs be.”

The two ruffians carefully hid smiles at the exchange between the so-casual younger men.

“Come with me, gentlemen.” Severo broke the tension, opening a door leading to the back of the house. “We shall find you proper dress for the evening.”

“No. Master Harran stays dressed as he is.” Vahan interrupted.

Severo turned back to Vahan, question clearly visible on his face but not wishing to challenge the young man before these new guards on this, Vahan's first night in charge.

“Most guests will think him a client. Which could be of benefit if there is trouble.”

Vahan thought he saw a small, grudging sign of approval cross the dandy's face before he followed Severo out with the other two ruffians.

Dax waited until the door had closed, leaving he and Vahan alone. “What is Julian playing at?”

Vahan heaved a pent-up breath, “I’m not sure.”

“Do we trust our new mage killer?”

Vahan turned the issue over in his mind. Julian ab Teodur would not send a problem to Blue House. He was a friend of the Captain and the Blue Lady. But Harran's words of the afternoon, his insults to Vahan's mother, to Vahan, the unmistakable venom in his voice, could not be ignored. Perhaps Julian didn't realize the hatred this Harran bore Blue House?

“No. We keep him in sight. On a tight leash.”

Dax nodded his agreement with the plan as he shook the tension out of his arms and broad shoulders.



When Blue House opened its doors at sundown, there was already a group of clients waiting to enter. Unusual, that. Normally, the doors were opened and guests began trickling in over the first hour. Vahan had never seen clients lined up, waiting to get in. A small collection of carriages stood in the plaza, servants standing by the heads of the horses, or in one case, a pair of large hounds. The nobles and well-to-do guests strolled about. One woman indolently held a mock-court of young men from her carriage seat. The hour of their arrival spoke volumes of their curiosity towards the previous night's events. Word of the Imperial Warrant issued for Luc Santee for his role in the deaths had quickly spread throughout the district and beyond. The local folk tried not to stare at the aristocrats as they went about their business.

The two ruffians sent by Julian ab Teodur, Simon and Horvath, now elegantly barbered and dressed in blue, had been posted in the halls. They silently greeted guests with small nods or vague smiles and generally did a fine job of being seen without being obtrusive. Harran, the dandy, stepped into the flow of incoming guests, effortlessly mingling with a group of nobles. Dax drew a few stares with the oversized knife strapped to his leg, but his boisterous grin appeared to stop anyone from taking offense.

Open displays of magic were rare for nobles of Tar Mira, but two young gentlemen entered Blue House with a glowing circlet of stars orbiting above their heads. Vahan caught the young men exchanging glances after taking in the sight of the two middle-aged guards and Dax,

all openly wearing blades. From their body language he guessed they were reconsidering a previously planned mischief. In any case, their magical lights dimmed and vanished within moments of entering Blue House proper.

Vahan was surprised when the Lady Paola of House Satrae, a handsome woman of middle years, greeted Harran by name. Her embrace of the dandy and pleasure at the meeting seemed genuine. The Satrae were cousins of the Konstantin, the most powerful noble house in Blue Fountain District. Men had wooed this woman for years. Paola was beautiful, rich and accounted formidable in matters of trade and politics. A perfect match for any noble with an eye towards advancement. A regular patron of Blue House, Vahan was witness that Paola was solely interested in female bed-partners. She did little to hide the fact, but it only seemed to encourage some suitors.

Paola's greeting of Harran was as to an old friend, or perhaps a distant nephew. It occurred to Vahan that Paola's greeting of Harran was quite similar to the manner with which she cheerfully greeted Dax, even as she took in the tribes war knife strapped to his leg and cautioned him against injuring himself when sitting with the thing on. Such familiar behavior between a noble and commoner would never be countenanced outside the confines of Blue House. Like many of the regular guests, Lady Paola came to relax, cast off social restraints, have a fine meal, be entertained and enjoy herself in all ways possible.

The guests quickly spread out to the multiple parlors, sitting rooms and garden, chatting with each other and Blue House staff. Music, song, storytelling and dance could be found everywhere as Blue House filled. At Vahan's instructions from earlier in the day, the staff spared nothing, offering up the rarest wines, brandies and strongest liquors from across the former empire that were found in the storerooms beneath Blue House. Had anyone harbored a doubt as to the condition of Blue House after the previous night's trouble, it was banished by the lavish delights offered to one and all. Within an unusually short time, the garden baths and upstairs bedrooms began to fill as well.

In the main parlor, the Blue Lady and her Captain held court, entertaining all who joined them. More than one guest offered a premium to take the mysteriously veiled, luscious Cymbeline upstairs from her post at the Captain's feet. All such offers were turned aside with jests and the friendly assurance that her charms had been claimed by the Captain for the night. Of course, no one made any such offers for the Blue Lady's services. In the history of Blue

House, the Lady did not serve guests save on the very rare occasion she chose someone as a bed partner. Such occurrences were always handled with utmost discretion. To Vahan's knowledge, his mother had no physical relations with any man save her Captain.

Within hours of opening the doors, Vahan was forced to post Severo and Renatta, a clever, saucy girl, at the front gate to turn away additional customers with apologies, regrets, and the promise of future favors.

Near midnight, Vahan was standing just inside the doorway to the main parlor, trying to catch a bit of the Captain's conversation with a guest who seemed to be an old friend. The man was a soldier of some sort, perhaps a decade younger than the Captain. His garb told of fortune's smile, but his mannerisms told of a common upbringing with few of the social niceties found amongst the well-born. Vahan had been able to discover little else than the man's name, Aske.

Amidst the familiar sights and sounds of Blue House, Vahan's thoughts began to drift. Images of Ornella Andras filled his head. He found himself staring at one of the girls across the room. From this angle, her hair and shape were a near match for Ornella. Why didn't this girl satisfy? She was easily available to him. Probably eager for his attention judging by past experiences with girls of the house. Why his undeniable fixation with Ornella?

A loud voice broke into his thoughts. Aske. The soldier was telling the Captain a story of famine and siege at some place called Helgarde. He seemed to be trying to convince the Captain of something.

Vahan didn't know where Helgarde was. His life was Tar Mira. He had rarely been beyond sight of the city. Only when he accompanied Dax on hunting expeditions or during his friend's efforts to teach him to ride did he leave the city.

Dax was of the tribes. His dead father had been a horse lord of the Sea of Grass. Like most boy-children of the tribes, Dax rode before he learned to walk. Dax might live in Tar Mira, but he was not of the city. Not as Vahan was.

Vahan had no idea who his father might be, but he, Vahan, was of Tar Mira, born and raised. He supposed he would probably die in Tar Mira. Sometime in the distant future.

It was said the world was changing. The Destruction had destroyed the center of the world and now the Empire had spun out of control. The new kingdoms were a futile effort to preserve the order of things. Vahan suspected he didn't know enough of the world to truly



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understand. To him, Tar Mira remained the same tumultuous, colorful, exciting world it had always been. In their teenage years, he and Dax had pushed ever-outward from Blue District in their explorations of the city. Its dangers were known, predictable. From rooftops to the cisterns, sewers and underground river that lay beneath the city, Tar Mira was Vahan's home.

Vahan realized he was intensely curious about Aske's tale. He wanted to know what lay beyond Tar Mira's new walls. He looked for a way to move closer to the conversation without drawing attention to himself.

The scream put an end to Vahan's attempt at eavesdropping.

Many of the patrons in the room stopped their conversation to look around at the sound. Just such a scream had signaled the previous night's excitement. One or two men chuckled, as if the scream were some lewd joke. The staff of Blue House paused for an instant, then covered the lapse with with polite words and movement. One of the girls threw her arms into the air in a mock-faint inspired by passion, eliciting laughter from the men around her.

The Blue Lady requested a song from one of the guests, commanding two of the girls to play an accompaniment for the singer. The Captain looked at Vahan, but made no move to rise. His companion, Aske, looked up at the ceiling, then followed the Captain's eyes to Vahan, quickly appraising the young man's measure.

Vahan spun into the hall, not running, but moving quickly nonetheless. He motioned Simon, one of the new guards, to stay at his post near the front door and smiled apologetically at a passing guest who tried to question him.

Vahan was joined by Harran at the foot of the main stair. Vahan hesitated but Harran did not. Vahan quickly followed him to the second floor landing.

Harran spoke in a quiet but urgent tone over his shoulder. "He is using sorcery. Second floor, east hall." Harran seemed to force himself to a halt. He wanted to move but waited for Vahan, acknowledging his authority.

Dax met them at the top of the landing, having come up one of the back staircases. "I ordered men to the kitchen and garden entrances."

Vahan nodded. "Good." He stared at Harran, not wanting to trust him. "One man?"

Harran's eyes momentarily took on a distant focus. "Yes."

Vahan led the way down the hall. A door opened, a disheveled man stood ready with a bared dagger in his hand. Vahan smiled at him. "No cause for worry."



Dax chuckled with a lewd grin. “Poor girl was frightened by a tribesman from the Sea of Grass. Man is apparently a true stallion.”

The guest frowned at them. In the guest's room a nude girl with large, splendid breasts sat up on the bed. “My lord.” Her voice was a lascivious invitation. “Noble sir?” Her salacious tone did more to convince the man to shut the door than the assurances of Vahan and Dax.

A weaker scream came from around the corner of the hall.

Harran stopped them in front of the door. “Wait.”

Vahan nodded to Dax, accepting Harran's order for the moment.

Harran put both his hands on the wall next to the door, fingers spread wide, leaning in until the side of his face was pressed against the wall, eyes wide and unfocused.

Vahan became aware of the girl's voice emanating from within the room. Pleading.

Vahan tried to slowly turn the doorknob. None of the doors on the second floor had locks, but the knob refused to turn, as if it had been welded shut.

Harran's words were whispered, suddenly harsh. “He has secured the door with a small charm. I will break it and, for a moment, confuse him. It will not last long. You must deal with him quickly. Stand ready.”

Vahan rested his hand on the doorknob, prepared to throw his shoulder against it. He looked at Dax.

Dax nodded, ready to add his weight against the door should it prove barred by physical means as well as magical.

“Now.”

Harran's word sent Vahan through the door, the ease of passage almost causing him to lose his balance.

The tableau that greeted his eyes seemed frozen in time. The petite girl, nude save for bits of jewelry, suspended three feet in the air. Floating, her hair moving in a breeze that Vahan could not feel. Her eyes wide with terror. A few thin streams of blood adorned her flanks and buttocks. The Noble, a young man, fully clothed, holding himself up with one arm wrapped loosely around a bedpost. A lash dangling from the wrist of his other hand. A besotted smile on his face.

Vahan seemed to be forced outside himself by the vision. He watched as a Vahan, one moving outside his control, charged across the room towards the Noble. One clenched fist

struck the Noble in the gut, folding him in half, while his other hand seized a cover from the bed.

Vahan was aware of the girl suddenly dropping. Of Dax catching her before she hit the floor.

He watched as this strange Vahan threw the bedcover over the Noble's head, wrapping it tightly around the man's skull. Holding the Noble's head with both hands on the tightly wrapped bedcover, Vahan began driving his knee into the man's skull. Again. Again. Again.

He could not escape. Vahan was trapped inside a madman. A madman intent on crushing the Noble's head.

“Vahan! Let be. Stop!” He knew this voice. Dax.

“Vahan. You must stop. His death curse. The curse. It could kill you.” A stranger's voice. The dandy?

Vahan found himself seized from behind by a powerful embrace. One he could not escape. One he did not wish to escape. Dax. He focused on his breathing as he had been taught. As Skarmann had taught him.

The madman fled. Vahan momentarily staggered before regaining his footing. He relaxed his body. Nodded his head.

Dax released him and stepped back. Vahan moved away, finding a small clear space on the floor on which to stand.

Vahan looked around the room, once again within himself. The petite girl on the floor, hugging herself. Dax examining the unconscious Noble, head enswathed in a bloody bedcover.

“He's alive.”

Harran eyed Vahan warily from just inside the closed door.

Vahan closed his eyes, taking another moment to breath. That was twice in one day he had lost control. This morning with Harran and now this. He did not understand himself. He had been in fights before. Never had he lost control as he had twice this day. It went against all Skarmann's teaching.

“He must be killed. An example must be made. But not here.”

Harran already had a plan. While he, Vahan, was trying to regain control of himself, the dandy was already thinking ahead. It was embarrassing. All his training down the well at the small sight of some young Noble's sorcery. Vahan forced himself to look around, take stock of

the room.

“What of the death curse? Can you shield yourself from it?” Dax questioned Harran as he draped a sheet around the girl.

“Drowning will not trigger his death curse. We can sink him at the docks or beneath the city. Once dead, we can hang his corpse from a lamp post to send the message.” Harran seemed to be speaking from experience.

Vahan looked at the table beside the bed. A pipe, candle, smear of tar and small collection of chewed leaves on a tray. He looked at the girl, Lia. He knew her to be older than she appeared. She was experienced, frequently playing with some of the rougher clients of Blue House. She was shaken. Frightened, but not seriously hurt.

“He wasn't going to kill me. I don't think he meant to injure me. I think he just lost control.” Strangely, Lia seemed to be trying to reassure Vahan.

“He must serve as an example. He must die.” Harran voiced what Vahan was thinking in response to her words.

Vahan drew a deep breath. “No.”

Dax opened and then shut his mouth. Harran glared suspiciously at Vahan.

“No. We do not kill him.” Vahan's tone left no opening for argument.



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