



Death in Tar Mira

Chapter 3

by Tony Graham

Ifor Fontan, the Magistrate for the Blue Fountain District, looked down at Cerise, her body nude beneath the thin sheet, writhing with constant, small convulsions. He considered the girl, victim of that same sorcery which had killed three others of Blue House, and crippled the House's protector. "Captain Skarmann?"

Doctor Awen picked up his satchel, "His pelvis, the hips you see, are shattered. He, I can save, though it will exhaust me."

"Do so." The heavy-set Magistrate looked up at Vahan where he stood in the doorway; arms crossed, the taut, corded muscles in his forearms belying his neutral expression. "Leave me. See that I am not disturbed."

Vahan nodded and closed the door behind himself as Doctor Awen walked down the hall with his stiff gait to where the Blue Lady and her Captain sat.

Vahan leaned against the wall, silently watching as Doctor Awen settled himself beside Skarmann.

"I would prefer more bandy to the poppy, Doctor," Skarmann volunteered. "I've been sewn and set before with less."

Doctor Awen regarded his patient. "There is not time for you to drink enough brandy. We will be doing this together, my good Captain. If you are fighting pain, if you are afraid, you would be fighting my efforts. I leave you conscious simply because I know you have been seriously injured many times before and understand your body's workings. I hope to draw upon your strength should I need it."

Skarmann offered the brandy bottle to the Doctor.

"No, thank you. Are you ready?"

Skarmann suddenly looked up at Vahan, offered him the bottle. Vahan settled on his heels next to the Captain, taking the bottle. Skarmann gripped Vahan's wrist, the strength of his hand and fierce look in his eyes a stark contrast to the pale weakness of his face. "They must be punished. An example. Blue House, your mother, will not be safe unless..." Skarmann hissed at Vahan.

"Enough!" The golden tone of the Blue Lady cut through Skarmann's commands. "These things will be dealt with. In time."



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Skarmann turned to smile at Vahan's mother, releasing his hand. "Yes, milady."

The anger drained from her face, becoming a smile. "You will live. I order it."

Doctor Awen waited patiently. Vahan stood, moving back.

Skarmann broke the look he shared with his Lady, turning to the Doctor. "Begin."

Doctor Awen reached out, placing his fingers on Skarmann's temple, slowly moving them across this face. "Yes...very good." The Doctor's dry whisper could barely be heard. Skarmann's features began to relax, the pale coloring remained, but the tension, the strongest hint of the tight control the Captain had exercised over his pain, was released.

The Doctor's hands moved lightly down Skarmann's body settling at his waist. A low groan escaped the Doctor's lips. Skarmann briefly stirred before seeming to relax completely.

Vahan looked at his mother, the Blue Lady persona was lost for the moment. It suddenly occurred to him that she loved the Captain. All her talk of the advantages of having a professional warrior protecting the House, a tutor for her son, the draw of Skarmann's conversation for visitors...all were diversions for the truth of her feelings. Vahan had not been sure his mother knew what love was. Whenever she heard Vahan or anyone within the House speaking of love, she promptly informed them love was a tool for women, a weakness for men who thought with their nether-parts. She insisted her Captain was simply an asset for Blue House, easy to keep happy, a resource in these difficult times.

Doctor Awen rocked back without taking his hands from Skarmann's body. A rictus of pain transformed the Doctor's already thin face into a death's head, a thin trail of saliva escaped his lips. A groan simultaneously erupted from both men.

Vahan realized that his mother's hand was turning white from Skarmann's grip.

Doctor Awen leaned forward, closer to Skarmann, his face relaxing. The Doctor turned his head from side to side, his wide stare unfocused. He gently broke contact with Skarmann, pulling his hands to his stomach. The Doctor sat quietly. Skarmann was unconscious.

Vahan's mother flexed her fingers without releasing Skarmann's limp hand. Vahan was unsure how much time had passed.

"He will live." Vahan's mother made it more command than question.

Doctor Awen drew a shuddering breath before nodding, "He is quite strong."

Mother turned her face to the wall. A moment and she turned back to face the Doctor and her son. The Blue Lady had returned. "You will be paid before you leave this house. If there

is any need we may provide before that time, you have only to ask.”

Doctor Awen bowed his head in acknowledgement. “I could not repair all the damage. It is easier to destroy than to build. It will be a few months before he is fully recovered. He should rest and use care in all movement for the coming weeks.”

“Vahan, help the Doctor.”

Vahan picked up the satchel, and helped the Doctor to his feet before turning back to face his mother. “The Magistrate is in with Cerise. He is not to be disturbed.”

The Blue Lady regarded Vahan for a moment before consenting to his command.

“I would like something to eat,” said Doctor Awen, ending the strange interaction.

“Yes, of course.” Vahan lead the Doctor down the stairs.



The kitchens were quiet as Vahan lead the Doctor in. Most of the servants were still clustered outside. Vahan sat the Doctor on a stool, placing his satchel beside him. He selected a thick slice of yellow cheese, moved along the stoves until he found a fresh loaf, added it to the platter, finishing the offering with a ripe pear from the crate near the door.

Doctor Awen looked at the proposed meal before smiling at Vahan. “A substantial meal, for one suffering the effects of a night of overindulgence. I would greatly prefer fish. Or perhaps fowl?” A dry cough shook the Doctor.

Vahan nodded and went to the outer door. He looked into the street where the servants still gathered. They turned to look at Vahan in the doorway. Vahan was not sure what to say to them. Aldo stepped forward, obviously awaiting an order.

“Blue House is not closed. There will be business tonight. Return to your work. Send Cook to me in the kitchen.” Vahan strived to keep his voice even, calm. Judging by the reaction of the servants, it seemed to work.

Cook entered her domain as Vahan poked through the brine barrel of fish left from the previous day. “Get out of there,” she snapped. Vahan quickly obeyed.

Vahan remembered himself, addressed Cook with careful formality, “The Doctor should be given whatever he desires and he desires fish.”

Cook eyed Vahan for a moment before turning to the Doctor and becoming a polite

hostess. “Fish?”

Doctor Awen returned her manners, “White fish if possible. Steamed? Perhaps some broth?”

Cook bowed her head, and quickly set to work, first going to the outer door to speak to the vendors still gathered. One stepped forward with a selection of fresh fish in a cold box.

Vahan caught Doctor Awen smiling at him.

“It is not always easy, finding one's place in the world.” Doctor Awen spoke in a riddle. He seemed to be regaining his strength.

Unsure of his meaning, Vahan took refuge in manners, “Would you care for something to drink?”

“Yes. Wine, please. White if you have it.”

Vahan descended the stair into the storage cellar. He ignored the tuns of common wine and beer, instead retrieving a bottle. Doctor Awen was gone when Vahan returned.

Cook noticed Vahan standing with the bottle. “The Doctor went into the garden. The fish will be a few minutes. Take the wine to him now. And don't forget a glass.”

Vahan found Dax sitting on the garden steps, watching as Doctor Awen gently examined the three dead bodies. Dax turned a sour eye at the bottle of wine.

“No thanks. I don't like that sweet stuff. But I will take a pot of beer and a loaf. Maybe some cheese.”

Vahan ignored him, gesturing at the Doctor instead. “He says Skarmann will live.”

“Cerise?” Dax asked about the girl upstairs.

Vahan frowned, “The Doctor says she will not last the day. She has been cursed. The Magistrate is trying to help her.” Vahan began a tally, “Two guards dead. One girl dead. Skarmann crippled. Another girl cursed and dying.”

“Sorcery.” Dax stated matter-of-factly.

“Nobility. Or the other clients might have helped,” Vahan concluded.

“Luc Santee.” Dax stared at the sheet-covered corpses. “Several of the servants saw him. It was his first time here, but other customers knew him. Santee and a bodyguard. No one knows the bodyguard's name, but his face was seen by many.”

“Will any of these customers speak to the Magistrate?” Vahan asked.

Dax snorted. The answer was obvious. Santee was a powerful trading house in Tar Mira.

A pillar of society. The Santee family sponsored entire parades and days of entertainment for their district at festivals. They were a major house in the red faction of the city; Westgate, where Vahan and Dax had spent the previous night. Only hours ago. It already seemed weeks.

“They must be punished. An example.” Vahan echoed Skarmann's words.

“They must be killed, this Luc Santee and his bodyguard,” Dax pronounced sentence on them.

Vahan slowly nodded his head, but made no other answer as Doctor Awen rose from the dead and joined them at the stair.

“A bottle? Excellent.” Doctor Awen seemed delighted by the wine before he even sampled it.

Vahan poured some wine into the glass he carried, checked the aroma, then offered the glass to the Doctor.

Doctor Awen, sniffed, then drank. A smile erased some of the strain from his face, as he stalked back into the house.



Fontan was already seated in the kitchen when Doctor Awen led Vahan and Dax back in. The Magistrate looked drawn, his energy expended. Doctor Awen settled next to Fontan. Cook brought the two older men fresh-sliced bread thick with butter and pickles, promising the fish within minutes.

Vahan took a seat nearby. Dax found the platter of cheese and bread, brought it over to Vahan, went to the corner and returned with two pots of small beer. Vahan and Dax quietly sat eating, seemingly lost in their thoughts, but listening carefully to the older men.

Doctor Awen poured Fontan a glass of the white wine. “The girl?”

Fontan gave the Doctor a tired smile, “She will live. If my skill is sufficient, she will remember little of what happened. The butler tells me you did well for Captain Skarmann.”

Awen nodded, sighed, “Only three dead, then. It could easily have been five.”

“The three?”

Doctor Awen coughed, his thin framed shaking before it passed. “All killed by sorcery. It appears Santee's bodyguard beat a few members of the staff while pulling his charge out of

here, but killed no one. Skarmann was also injured by sorcery. All show the results of a strange mix of disciplines; Alteration and something else. Something I have not encountered before. It would have killed Skarmann also, should have killed him, were the man not such a stubborn ox. Shattering of major bones, internal bleeding, agony and death will be the typical result of this arcane attack. Terrible that such a thing was used on so harmless a subject as the poor girl lying dead outside. The girl upstairs, the one you tended, that was an attack of a different sort. I am not familiar with it at all.”

Cook interrupted the discussion with two platters of white fish, steam still rising from the filets. “There's fresh butter and lemon should you gentlemen wish,” Cook offered.

The Doctor and Magistrate both thanked her. Cook moved away, not before casting a dark look at Vahan and Dax, who ignored her. The two younger men remained quiet, doing as little as possible to draw attention to themselves.

Doctor Awen began lifting small portions of the fish to his mouth with a table knife, careful not to touch the steaming bits with his fingers. He slowly chewed. A look of pleasure grew upon his face. “I had no idea. I should visit this house for the food alone.”

The Magistrate snorted. “You will need a fatter purse.” He tried a bite of the fish and grunted his approval. Both men ate in silence for a few minutes. Doctor Awen looked pointedly at Vahan and Dax seated within hearing. The Magistrate shrugged, he seemed to ignore the younger men. Doctor Awen refilled his glass.

“The girl upstairs? A curse?” Doctor Awen inquired.

“It took time for me to recognize what had been done to her. I have seen such things before with adepts from the Illuminated Peaks,” Fontan began.

“A Sorcery of the Mind.” Doctor Awen was pleased to be correct with the prognosis he had offered earlier.

“Yes. A discipline usually used upon oneself. It is a mediation technique, used to center the mind. One separates the mind from the body, setting aside those sensations coming from the body so that the mind may focus on inner thoughts and the Will. But in this case, the girl was terrified before her mind was torn from the body, cast into that inner space. She could no longer see, hear, smell, or feel anything from her body. No senses to give her mind a place to hang on to. Only a vast darkness and silence. And fear.” Fontan took a sip of wine.

“The convolutions?” Doctor Awen asked.

“The poor girl was terrified. When the mind was cast out, the body was left with no direction, caught in a state of flight or fight. The body was burning, all the humors gathered for action, but no mind to direct it. Exhaustion might have saved the body, but without the mind...” Fontan left off.

“Five dead without our intervention.” Doctor Awen summarized. “Which leaves us with a suspect.”

Fontan slowly nodded. “Luc Santee. The girl's memory of him is unmistakable.”

“Quite the murder spree for one young nobleman. And the method... Again, these are techniques I've not seen before,” Doctor Awen confessed. “Clearly, Luc Santee is dabbling with forces he should not.”

“His father, Cyr Santee, was punished decades ago for experiments into forbidden knowledge. It seems the son has picked up where the father left off.”

“If the father truly left off,” Awen speculated.

“Cyr Santee received a visit from an Imperial Guardsman. Cyr's survival was proof that he had abandoned his studies.”

“Perhaps the father has renewed his interest. The threat of the Imperial Guard has lost its bite in recent years.”

Fontan sat in silence, lost in his thoughts. Doctor Awen focused himself on his meal.

Vahan and Dax exchanged glances, careful not to draw notice to themselves.

Fontan, the Magistrate for the Blue Fountain District, shook himself out of his thoughts, muttering, “We shall see if a Magistrate of Tar Mira still has a bite.”

“Perhaps a visit to the Imperial Administrator of the city?” Doctor Awen said.

“He should be apprised of the situation as a courtesy if not else,” Fontan agreed before turning his sharp gaze upon Vahan and Dax. “You two young gentlemen have overheard much this morning. Come, do not deny it.”

Vahan and Dax reluctantly acknowledged the charge.

“It is right that you should know what has happened. You are, for now, the protectors of this house. I trust you have the intelligence to attempt no stupid gestures while I look into this matter.” It was not quite a question. “I will deal with Luc Santee. He will be brought to justice. That is my task. Your task is to ensure the safety of all within this house, keep its doors open and continue its trade. You cannot do so if you are seeking revenge. Do we have an

understanding?”

Dax looked at Vahan.

“I will be patient,” Vahan met the Magistrate's eyes.

The Magistrate looked at Vahan searchingly before nodding. “I ask nothing more.”



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