



Death in Tar Mira

Chapter 1

by Tony Graham

The blue patch on their sleeves was the guarantee of a beating if they were caught. Travel along the rooftops had seemed the safer option when Dax proposed it. Not that Dax had been happy about the whole venture when they began, but his enthusiasm had grown in proportion to the dwindling wineskin of sack they were drinking.

Fortunately, the night sky was clear, the hot Southern wind keeping the clouds of the Inner Sea at bay. Unfortunately, the resulting stench of the Lagoon came with the wind, as did the flotilla of bugs, the humidity and heat.

Vahan held the wineskin as his friend, Dax, backed away from the roof's edge, stumbled, then straightened and shook himself. Vahan looked at the gap between the roof they were on and the roof across the narrow street. The overhangs of the buildings shrank the distance between the two rooftops a bit, but it was still easily over a man's height. Especially a short man's height, and Dax, despite the wide shoulders and brawler's build, was a short man. Vahan looked over the edge at the cobbled street fifty feet below.

“We could climb down, cross into that alley over there, and climb back up,” Vahan pointed out his proposed path as he spoke.

Dax clapped his hands. Vahan tossed him the skin of sack. Dax snapped it out of the air, pulled the cork and took a long swallow before answering. “Much too dangerous down there. Festival's next week. Everyone's blood is up.” Dax indicated the blue patch sewed onto his shirt. “Wrong faction. This is a red district. Stupid people in this city get too excited by this city-district competition festival nonsense. Too much value placed on a colored bit of wool.”

“I know.” Vahan again looked at the distance between this roof and the next. He studied the drop over the edge before turning back to his friend. “We could cut our blue patches off.”

Dax protectively shielded his patch with his hand. “That would be wrong.” Dax corked the skin and tossed it back. “I go.”

Vahan watched his friend run at the roof's edge and launch himself across the space. Dax landed on the far building, sending a tile skittering across the roof. Dax turned back to Vahan and clapped his hands.

Vahan pulled the cork from the skin and took a drink of the sack, the strong dry wine doing little to wet his increasingly dry mouth. Sack was cheap and easily had, a commoner's



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drink. Vahan and Dax had discovered it several months ago and had adopted it as their drink of choice when out of the house. Vahan's mother labeled it coarse and did not allow it within the walls of her domain, quite possibly explaining the two friends' attachment to it. Vahan replaced the cork, seating it tightly, and tossed the skin across the gap between the buildings to Dax. Vahan again examined the street far below.

Dax had a drink, giving no sign of challenge or impatience as he waited.

A small group of revelers burst out of a doorway below. Their loud conversation echoed up and down the streets, breaking the still of night. In this, the early hours of the morning, it was uncommon to see such an excursion. The typical late evening meals, drinking and strolls were well past. Anyone at a party this late usually stayed.

Vahan watched them stumble up the street until they disappeared around a corner. He looked around for any other night traffic.

Dax quietly watched him from the next roof. He leaned forward, speaking quietly, "Is she truly worth it?"

Vahan stared at his friend for a moment, backed up, ran, and jumped. He saw nothing of the cobbled street below, only the tiles of the roof ahead. He landed with a grunt and somewhat awkward roll. He pushed himself up to grin at Dax, who handed him the wineskin.

"A good leap for a city-dweller," Dax complimented him.

"But nothing for a man of the tribes," Vahan answered.

"True. Is this her place?"

Vahan looked around, climbing to his feet. He stood a full head taller than his stocky friend. The contrast did not end

there. Vahan had straw-colored hair, Dax's hair was black. Vahan had eyes of grey like the sea, Dax had bright blue eyes like gemstones. Vahan was fair skinned beneath a slight sunburn. Dax was swarthy, seemingly immune to the summer sun. Both were young, broad shouldered, well-muscled, quick and agile.

Vahan got his bearings and pointed, "Two buildings down this row."



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The roofs were as good as connected on this block of wealthy townhouses on the up-slope of Tar Mira's Westgate district. Three to four stories high, the buildings were old but solid; well constructed of the finest cut stone and brick. Some of them even had glass in the windows. Many of the city's merchant princes, minor nobles all, had homes in the area. The roof they stood on belonged to the lower noble house of Andras.

Vahan crouched on the edge of the roof and examined the balconies of the upper floors below him.

“See any familiar doorways you've hidden in these last few nights?” Dax teased.

Vahan ignored him. “This is it. The thief said this balcony is hers.”

“So go. It is not a long fall. I can help you back up later.” Dax seated himself near the edge of the roof with the wineskin.

Vahan looked for some trace of the balcony's owner. There was nothing to indicate who used it. But there was a soft light from within the townhouse escaping the curtains that served as a door to the balcony. He slid out over the edge of the roof, attempting to get a peek inside. “I can't see anything.”

“I'll look,” Dax volunteered. Dax stepped to the edge of the roof, dropped to his knees, and folded his body over the edge head first. Vahan caught hold of Dax's ankles before they followed his head over the edge. Vahan held his friend upside down over the side of the building. “Lower,” Dax hissed up at Vahan.

Vahan lowered himself to a prone position, all the while retaining his grip on Dax's legs. Only Dax's feet were now at the level of the roof. Vahan looked down but could see little beyond his friend's legs and groin. Vahan decided to look outward over the street instead.

“Ah.” This from Dax's upside down viewpoint.

“Ah, what?” Vahan whispered. “What do you see?”

“You have made a mistake. This is the room of a wet nurse.”

“Damn.” Vahan started to pull his friend back up. And failed. Vahan looked down to see Dax grinning up at him, one of his hands holding a wall sconce.

“This girl of yours. She has hair like the mane of a lion?”

“Her name is Ornella, and yes, she has dark golden hair,” Vahan whispered back.

“She is truly blessed by Na'naat,” Dax observed without looking away from his view through the balcony curtains.

Vahan tried again to pull his friend back up by the ankles. Dax retained his hold on the sconce, refusing to move.

“Thank all gods for hot weather. It makes girls such as your Ornella wear very little in their private chambers.”

Vahan dropped him, releasing his ankles.

Dax used his grip on the wall sconce to turn his body, allowing his feet to land softly on the balcony tiles. He gave Vahan a big grin and waved him down.

Vahan dropped lightly onto the balcony next to Dax.

“I’ll wait here,” Dax volunteered.

“I left the sack up there,” Vahan replied, gesturing to the rooftop.

Dax looked hurt. Vahan offered his cupped hands as a boost. Dax used Vahan's hands as a step, easily pulling himself up to the roof and over. Vahan could hear Dax moving about for a moment until he settled.

Vahan had little interest in having Dax watch him from the balcony. In truth, he had no idea what he would do now that he was here. Sneaking into a girl's home was a new experience for him. He suddenly realized he could be taken as a thief. Notching an ear was the common punishment for a first-time offender, but that was street-theft. He was more likely to be seized as a burglar. Loss of a hand was becoming a common punishment for burglars. Assuming her house guards did not simply kill him as an intruder. Rumors of assassins were becoming a standard in Tar Mira's taverns. Vahan suspected such rumors made house guards touchy about young men such as himself sneaking in through the third story balcony to the private chambers of young, nubile – but still very noble – daughters. And, of course, he was still wearing his blue faction patch on his sleeve here in the heart of a red district. His ardor was dying under this assault of practicality. What was he doing here?

“Dawn will come soon enough. Stop wasting time,” Dax whispered from above.

Vahan took a deep breath, shook himself and moved to the curtains. He could see a female figure moving within. Ornella, of House Andras. Vahan stepped through the curtains.

It was a lavish chamber: finely crafted cabinets, divans, a lady's table with mirror, all centered around a large, low bed filled with pillows and cushions.

Ornella Andras sat up in the middle of the bed to stare at him.

Vahan stood frozen, looking at her. He had never been this close to her. Or seen this

much of her. Her long tawny hair was a banner he had memorized, as were her large brown eyes. It was the expanse of lightly bronzed skin that was completely new. In public, she was always veiled and robed, as current fashion dictated for an unmarried girl of Tar Miran nobility. Here she wore only a short, loose, white silk robe over a skirt so short it left the tops of her thighs bare. Vahan unconsciously licked his lips.

Ornella smiled at him and rose to her feet. The short robe fell open revealing more



tanned flesh, from slender neck to low down her hips and all the soft wonders between.

All thoughts of guards, notched ears or even lost hands deserted Vahan. It wasn't the sight of a semi-nude girl, it was the sight of this girl, the girl that had haunted his dreams for weeks. His dreams had consisted of rescues, Ornella in peril, they had not followed this delightful path.

“My poor maid.” Her voice was beautiful as well; a voice that invited worship. “This is the second night she has slept downstairs next to the street door, waiting for you.”

Her words created a warning that broke through the glamour her body wove.

“She is waiting for me?”

Ornella stopped close before him, teasing. He could feel the heat of her body. Her smell filled the air around him, slightly sweet with a hint of spice. Part of him wondered if it was her scent or a perfumer's fragrance.

“I called to you three days ago.” She looked up at him from beneath half-closed eyelids, lips slightly parted.

“You...called? I thought...” Vahan thought this rendezvous his idea. True, she had looked at him, met his eyes. He had thought, hoped, there was invitation in the look, but they had never spoken, there had been no exchange of notes.

“I saw you at the Blue Fountains. My brothers speak of you. I wished to meet you.”

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Vahan studied her, puzzled. “Your brothers?”

“My brother Maso doesn't like you.”

“I don't know anyone named Maso.”

“My brother wouldn't speak to you. You are a commoner. But he does not like you.”

Vahan was now completely confused.

“He does not like your look or your manner. I think he is jealous.”

“Jealous? He is a son of the house of Andras. What reason does he have of me for jealousy?”

Her eyes sparkled up at him as she smiled. “Do you truly not know?”

Vahan shook his head, wished he had drank less sack, anything to clear his head.

Ornella began to circle him, staying very close, examining him. “Their sword-master tells them not to fight you.”

“Fight me? Why? Why would they wish to fight me?”

“Because of what the other young men say. The boys in Maso's sword school say you are one of the most dangerous blades in Tar Mira. Their sword-master says that you would kill them if they challenged you.”

Vahan shook his head; this was simply not true. He learned the sword. It was one of his duties in his mother's house. Gossip of this sort could get a man killed.

“You are not wearing your sword.” She stopped in front of him, placed one slender hand on his left hip, opposite his knife, raised her eyes fully up to his as her hand gently tugged at his belt. “Where is your sword?”

Her breath was sweet, her eyes bewitching. “I...saw no reason to bring it.”

“What if you had to protect me? What if I wished you to kill someone?”

Vahan looked around the room for threats, confused by her words. Her small hand on his cheek brought his eyes back to hers.

Ornella rose up on her tiptoes while guiding his face down to meet hers. “You are the only danger here,” she whispered just before their lips met.



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Illustration *A Good Leap* by Andy Underwood.

Illustration *Ornella's Web* by Andy Underwood.

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