

Death in Tar Mira

Chapter 6

by Tony Graham

“I will give you six bits for two pies if it is as fine as you claim,” Dax offered. “If it is dry, I will give the rest of it back to you and pay nothing.”

The vendor stared suspiciously at the short, stocky, young man with his war knife and heavy leather vest, worn despite the hot season.

Dax flashed his best smile. While he would not win any beauty contests, there was something so pleasantly inviting and mischievous in his smile that it tended to cause women and children's hearts to melt. Men had other reactions depending on the circumstances.

The vendor accepted the challenge and let Dax choose a meat pie from his cart. Dax took a small bite out of the corner of the meat pie. Warm gravy escaped out the side of the pastry and down his chin. Dax grunted, wiped his chin with his free hand and licked his fingers. Dax dug two copper pennies out of his belt pouch and handed them to the vendor.

The vendor grimaced at the two coins. Dax shrugged. One penny disappeared into the vendor's apron. The vendor placed the second penny on his board. He carefully placed his cleaver on the coin, then applied pressure until it split. One half was slightly larger than the other. The vendor muttered under his breath. Since the vendor cut the coin, Dax had his choice of which half to take as his change.

Dax chose the smaller half of the coin, slipped it into his pouch.

The vendor smiled, carefully picked a second meat pie of obvious quality from his box, warm and golden brown, and presented it to Dax.

Dax joined Vahan in the center of the Plaza of Talire where he sat on the edge of the Fountain of the Heavens. Dax nudged Vahan to get his attention and handed him one of the meat pies. The two young men ate, Vahan staring at the waters of the fountain, Dax watching the crowd.

“We will kill him before she can become a widow.” Dax washed his hands in the fountain. “Or the magistrate will punish him. Prison perhaps. The loss of face will end the marriage.”

Vahan finished chewing his last bite, rinsed his hands. “It's not Ornella. Luc Santee is marrying her sister.” He spoke with certainty.

“Ah, I did not think of that. Your lion-haired girl has a sister. Of course. How many



sisters?”

Vahan shrugged. He didn't know, but it was too painful to believe Ornella was promised to Luc Santee. He stood, adjusted his sword, and began the walk back across the city.

Dax followed, leaving the conversation behind them.

As they walked down the broad public stair out of the plaza, Dax noticed their child-stalkers lying in wait. Having trailed Vahan and Dax to the Grand Dome, the children had simply been waiting outside for their exit.

Dax realized Vahan wasn't paying any attention to their surroundings. He put his hand on his distracted friend's shoulder to break him from his thoughts, and nodded towards the children.

“Perhaps if we stand in place their master will show himself,” Dax offered.

Vahan grunted his frustration with the situation, but did not pause.

The children kept their distance, hurrying along in their wake, two running ahead.

Vahan and Dax watched the two runners.

Vahan slowed as they reached the square next to the skeleton mansion. Dax saw one of the runners speaking to two men who sat on a bench in the shadow of a tavern wall. Both men wore swords. Both wore leather jackets despite the heat. Both men looked up to watch Vahan and Dax as they entered the small square.

“Only two. Professionals by the look. Now we know who hired the children,” Dax grinned as he drifted slightly away from Vahan.

“Three.” Vahan watched a man in the center of the square. Expensive clothes, ornate leather vest, sword worn in a horizontal scabbard. A Duelist. He was flirting with a buxom girl when the other child-runner got his attention. The Duelist looked around to see Vahan watching him. The Duelist nodded to him, subtle, but there could be no mistake. He was waiting for them. He was young, older than Vahan, but not yet a man in his prime. A clean, thin scar ran down the left side of his face.

Vahan judged the Duelist a student of one of the drawing schools. They prized the swift, controlled draw, a series of deadly strikes and re-sheathing, all in precise, fluid motions. The horizontal scabbard was a common trait. Skarmann had shown Vahan the basics of the technique, its strengths and weaknesses.

The Duelist made a show of standing straight as Vahan walked towards him. He posed,



pointed at Vahan, and announced, “Blue faction, you are far from home this day.”

It was a poor opening. The crowd, with the realization that a duel was beginning, parted between the two men. Some observant few in the crowd began snickering when they saw Vahan wore no faction patch.

Vahan continued towards the Duelist without changing his pace or placing a hand on his sword. Vahan's face was without expression.

The Duelist quickly realized his mistake. “No matter. Hiding your loyalty will not hide the dishonor you have...”

The Duelist was taken off guard as Vahan closed on him without pause. Too late he attempted to draw his sword.

Vahan closed the last three steps in a rush. Locking his left hand on the Duelist's hand and sword hilt to keep him from drawing, Vahan smashed his right forearm and elbow into the Duelist's jaw. The Duelist was knocked off balance. Vahan landed two more quick blows to the man's head as he held the Duelist up with a grip on the man's hand and sword hilt.

The Duelist staggered, losing his grip on his sword as he fell to his knees.

Vahan pulled the Duelist's sword from its horizontal scabbard as the man went down and tossed it to the paved streets behind himself.

The Duelist rolled to his hands and knees, trying to clear his head.

The crowd looked on, curious. This was not a typical duel. But it was entertaining.

Vahan pushed the Duelist onto his back with a boot. The Duelist looked up at Vahan.

“If you get up, I will kill you. Stay down and it ends here.” Vahan placed his hand on the hilt of his own sword.

Vahan watched as the Duelist located his sword a few feet away, moving nothing but his eyes. The Duelist licked his lips, looked at his sword. His eyes went to the crowd, registering their growing amusement at his expense. He looked again at Vahan's impassive face.

His choice was taken from the Duelist as one of his former employees, a boy of twelve or so, dashed forward to snatch his sword from the paved street and run. Many of the other children followed after the thief, yelling their support. The price of a good sword would feed them all for a month or more.

The Duelist nodded to Vahan and held up his hands in surrender.

The other two professional swordsmen forced their way through the crowd, one of them

pushing forward into the open space around the combatants. “You fight without honor, sir. I name you coward.”

Both swordsmen drew their weapons and moved on guard, preparing to advance on Vahan from separate directions.

Before Vahan could draw his sword in response, a brick flew in, striking the lead swordsman in the shoulder. Almost instantly, a roof tile sailed after it, clipping the second swordsman's head despite his awkward effort to dodge the missile.

Both swordsmen turned to face the source of the unexpected threat.

Dax stood atop the stack of bricks scavenged from the skeleton mansion, straightening with a fresh brick in one hand, roof tile in the other. Dax looked to be enjoying himself tremendously.

Blood began to flow from the brow of swordsman struck by the roof tile.

Vahan temporarily forgotten, both swordsmen stepped towards Dax.

Dax laughed and launched his next brick and tile.

The crowd rushed to escape the flight path as one of the swordsman was struck, staggering to keep his feet.

“Bastard!” The two swordsmen faced Dax from twenty feet. Dax stood with fresh missiles in either hand, laughing.

The crowd laughed at the swordsmen. They had been brave enough against a single opponent with a sword, but they were obviously having second thoughts about a man with a ready pile of bricks. The ambush was not proceeding according to plan at all.

Dax threw his next brick. As the swordsmen ducked, Dax quickly threw the roof tile, striking one of the pair. Both swordsmen broke, limping a retreat into the laughing crowd and out of the square.

Dax danced a victory jig atop the bricks, much to the delight of the onlookers.

Vahan realized the Duelist had taken advantage of the aerial conflict to disappear, perhaps in pursuit of his stolen sword.

The buxom girl the Duelist had been flirting with took Vahan's arm, presenting him with a broad smile full of invitation.

Dax appeared behind the girl, wrapping her in his arms, and whispering, “That one is already in love, but I am a poor, lonely hero seeking only the favor of a beautiful maiden to

make my heart whole.”

The girl spun within the circle of Dax's embrace, roughly kissed him, then pushed him away. She rushed from the square with a last smile over her shoulder aimed at Dax.

Dax blew her a kiss, turned, and bowed to his audience in the square. The crowd laughed at his final antics, pleased with the unexpected entertainment.

Vahan and Dax made their way out of the square, continuing their trek home.

“A poor ambush,” Dax passed judgement with a grin. “But now we know who hired the children to follow us.”

“They were professionals. The taverns are full of them, looking for work with their blades.”

“Not very good professionals.”

Vahan thought it over for the length of a block. “The Captain says most of the professional swordsmen in this city are too-well trained in blooding their opponent rather than the kill.”

“Yes,” Dax agreed, “They were too concerned with the crowd. Making a show of it.”

Vahan nodded, choosing not to comment on Dax's own theatrics in the short-lived battle.

“In the Sea of Grass, a duel is fought out of sight. Only close friends may watch. These city-folk are not serious about their killing.”

“Who hired them?” Vahan's question hung between the two friends.

“Perhaps they are these 'men of the sword' Julian spoke of. The ones who wish to test their skill against the prime student of Captain Skarmann.”

“Perhaps.”

They walked another block. The faction patches on the sleeves, shirts and belts of the people on the street were changing from black to green. Vahan and Dax were leaving the South Docks behind without anyone following them that Dax could detect. Vahan was again lost in his thoughts, taking little notice of their progress.

Vahan came to an abrupt halt, looking at their surroundings before focusing on his friend.

“They were hired.”

“Yes.”

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