

Dark Solus
An Assassin's Tale

by
David Andrew Crawford



Strategic Book Group

Copyright © 2011

All rights reserved—David Andrew Crawford

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, from the publisher.

Strategic Book Group
P.O. Box 333
Durham CT 06422
www.StrategicBookClub.com

ISBN: 978-1-60911-339-1

I

Let me tell you a story—but not your typical story, where the prince saves the princess, or even the one about the knight who slays the dragon and becomes king. No . . . this is not even a story at all, but rather a tale. This is an assassin's tale.

The sun had set and nighttime had fallen upon the City of Duergar, so named for the Dwarven King who had built the city and ruled here many years ago. The moon was full and the stars were shining brightly, lighted by Nyx, the goddess of the night sky. Usually a time of mischief and thievery, eventide in the City of Duergar was a time when the creatures from the dark would venture forth, performing ungodly acts of evil. Duergar had a reputation for being the greatest city in the world, full of wonder, magic, and mystery, as well as being the wickedest, filled with villainous and powerful entities.

With the onset of darkness, the once bustling and hectic streets became silent. Shops closed as most of the citizens retired to the safety of their homes. The coming of the night tide opened the taverns, brothels, and gambling dens, with numerous merchants and innkeepers willing to relieve a traveler of his cumbersome load of treasure.

City constables were common during the hours of daylight, but to keep the peace during the witching hour, the Night Watch, an elite group of guards, was required. Maintenance of law and order fell to this group, which incarcerated any individuals who committed any offenses against the Code of Justice in Duergar. Silence reigned in the city this night, as people tended to desert the streets, seeing only those with dishonest intent venturing out into the capital after nightfall. The members of the night watchmen were thus a common sight on the boulevards of the city after dark. But on this night, there were no patrols, no citizens—no one.

The city was indeed quiet, uncommonly quiet. But a creature did stir this night—two, in fact. Scurrying along the

rooftops were two dark-cloaked figures clinging to the shadows so as not to be seen. Bounding from one building to another, hastily making their retreat, they passed the high market in the garden quarters, a residence for the rich and wealthy. They made their way to the Grand Bazaar, both stopping atop the Great Library of Duergar and quickly ducking behind two sizeable gargoyles for cover.

The Grand Bazaar, located in the center of the city, was a huge open area with numerous stalls, tents, and a plethora of little booths. Large, two-story shops surrounded the grandiose market, and located at the core was the Ring of Champions. The Grand Bazaar was known for its many different shops, galleries, and specialty shops that you couldn't find anywhere else. Its cobblestone streets teemed with skilled craftspeople selling their unique wares, numerous elegant taverns, and a monument to the city's greatest heroes.

The monument was comprised of five, forty-foot-tall statues resembling the brave martyrs who sacrificed their lives to save the city from almost certain destruction. Among the stone goliaths was the female priestess from the Holy Cross Order, mace in hand. Next was Dwaric the dwarf fighter clad in chain mail, his oversized axe held high above his head, ready to cleave a man in two. The third and fourth were the thief Baal, named after the demon lord, and Haffaer the wild mage with his famed crimson crystal staff. Finally, there was the most widely known and celebrated champion of Duergar, Sir Tristram Aeronenbras, the Knight of the Red Branch, his great shield and sword in hand, ready for battle.

The silence was finally broken when the larger of the two cloaked figures turned to his smaller companion and began to speak.

"Leynorr . . ." His voice trailed off as the second cloaked figure held her hand up, cutting his sentence short, her eyes darting left and right, searching the night sky. Drawing back the cowl exposed small, pointed ears and an elven heritage. Removing the veil revealed the slender, beautiful face of a half-elven woman with a slim nose and chin and thick, red lips that quivered slightly as she looked back at her confrere.

"The Arch Mage has found us," she spoke fearfully, her face showing grave concern.

No longer crouching, the bigger of the two companions threw off his black cloak, hurling it onto the cobblestone streets below the library. What stood there now was the figure of a demon with a wiry physique. Armor made of tiny, dark scales covered his body from head to toe, and he had claws for hands. He wore a helmet that held the image of the face of a demon with two short horns and glowing, red eyes. At his waist was a plain, black bag.

The once clear night began to darken as black, ominous clouds started to form and swirl about overhead. Tiny droplets of fire began raining down, striking the demon character and making a hissing sound as they quietly extinguished upon contact.

"Is this supposed to stop me?" the dark man said defiantly, turning to look at Leynorr.

"No . . . it's the beginning of a spell," she said, looking extremely annoyed at her brash partner.

"What spell?" Leynorr's dark consort asked curiously with little or no concern in his voice.

"A spell of animation," Leynorr stated worriedly, gazing in the direction of the five huge statues.

"What could he possibly . . ." The scaly armored man's voice trailed off as he, too, looked at the stone giants standing before him. "Shit!" he swore. "You need to get out of here . . . now! The docks are just past the cargo gate. Get to the *Albatross*, and get to Mephisto's and tell him what we know." His tone was now angry as he faced the Grand Bazaar, his eyes glowing red.

"I am not leaving you, Demon!" Leynorr shot back with stubborn conviction in her voice.

Demon turned back to Leynorr as drops of fire fell all around them. Leaning over, he held the slender half-elf in his scaled arms and placed a claw-like gauntlet on her abdomen. "You carry our son," he said, gently rubbing in a circular motion on her stomach. "Your safety and his are all that matters."

“Or her safety,” she sang back with a smile.

“Leynorr, you need to go,” the dark demon spoke gently, but with conviction in his voice.

His focus turned toward the ring of heroes as he pulled a white, rolled up parchment from deep within his black bag and unfurled it. Leynorr’s lips began to move, but her words were cut short as the fire from the sky stopped falling and the two gargoyles perched in front of them began to stir. Both heads turned simultaneously and stared with grey stone eyes at Leynorr and her dark protector Demon. Little shards of rock fell around their feet as the two stone sentinels turned slowly to face them. The two gargoyles had the bodies of lions with extremely large claws, gnarled teeth, and oversized horns atop their demonic heads. Free from their bonds, they extended their stupendous stone wings and crept forward on all fours, looking ready to pounce, but instead sat down on their hindquarters.

“Have no fear, Leynorr,” the animated gargoyle on the left said in a deep tone.

“We will not harm you or your companion,” the other stone twin said in turn.

“How do you know my name, guardian?” Leynorr snapped back, demanding an answer.

“Her Majesty instructed us to watch over you,” the beast on the left spoke up quickly.

“Mother sent you?” Leynorr shouted in response, visibly upset at what she had just heard.

“We don’t have time!” Demon flared up. “We have bigger problems at the moment,” he said, pointing to the ring of heroes as he spoke. “Ugly twins,” he began again, staring directly at the now-animated gargoyles. “You have a new job now,” his tone became cold as ice. “Make clear the way from here to the *Albatross*. Then guard the way to Mephisto’s,” Demon’s determined voice whispered.

They did not move or budge an inch, nor did they pay heed to the demands of this man called Demon.

“Do as he says,” Leynorr spoke out quickly, staring directly at the stone twins.

The two gargoyles turned without hesitation, leapt down onto the floor of the Grand Bazaar, and loped away down a dimly lit alley toward the wharf. As the stone sentinels vanished into the darkness, booming sounds like rolling thunder were heard as stone began to crack and break and the five huge statues started to animate. Large shards of rock fell, smashing onto the cobblestone streets of the great city as each one of the sculptures lurched forward from its marble pedestal.

The first to break free and turn toward the two fugitives was the thief Baal, his curved short sword of stone being raised up to strike as he lumbered forward. Leynorr walked toward the edge of the library rooftop, arms outstretched, hands held high in the air. She began chanting an ancient passage known only to the druids of the elven clans. The dark clouds in the sky began to whirl around faster and faster, like a rapid, vorticose current of liquid. The air around her seemed to snap and crackle with intense heat and electrical energy. Bolts of lightning began flashing down in vertical streaks, with caps of thunder instantly following. Bolt after bolt burst down, striking both the thief and the priestess and shattering limb after limb. The most spectacular was the explosion that slashed through the head of the giant thief and down through his torso, launching large, stone fragments like catapulted missiles everywhere. Both statues soon lay shattered in heaps of crushed rock, billows of white wispy smoke rising skyward. Demon had moved quickly, snatching Leynorr by the waist and rolling both of them to the hard surface of the library's marble rooftop. He used his own body as a human shield as a rather dangerous and large piece of stone debris came hurtling by where Leynorr had been standing.

"Sorry I destroyed your statue," she said with a smooth smile, kissing his steel-clad cheek.

"I never carried a short sword," Demon declared. "It doesn't even look like me. I'm clearly more handsome," he mused mockingly.

They both sprang to their feet as the rumbling beneath them meant the remaining massive giants had finally broken

free of their bonds and were heading straight for them. Demon removed his clawed gauntlet from his right hand, flexing it gingerly, indicating he had not been quick enough to escape the flying projectiles.

“I wonder if it still works,” the dark, horned figure said, looking at the cracked, plain silver ring on his index finger.

Demon had no time to check. The three surviving statues were his first priority, and the Arch Mage would soon be upon them, if he weren’t already. Picking up the parchment he had dropped, Demon now turned to face the last of the stone behemoths. With one longing last glance at Leynorr, he ran to the edge of the greatest library in the free world and jumped.

“Get to the *Albatross*!” roared Demon in mid-flight.

As the cry from Demon rang in her ears, her beautiful green eyes began to well up, and a single teardrop ran down her cheek. She wiped the tear from the side of her face as the drop of clear liquid magically transformed into a small, blue gem. Leynorr pushed her lips together and blew on the precious stone, causing it to glow in a brilliant blue hue. The gem quietly shot from the back of her hand like an arrow shot from a longbow. The blue jewel plunged in between the last of the stone abominations, making a faint ping, like a small bell being rung.

A circle of runes and strange symbols in radiant light flashed out brightly, encircling the three larger-than-life heroes. As the circle of symbols faded away, a thick sheet of ice now held fast the giant’s feet to the cobblestone floor. Demon landed on the icy rink, pressing his clawed gauntlet into the now frozen battlefield, leaving large scratch marks behind him. The three animated stone heroes struggled to break free from their icy incarceration as Demon came to rest between them.

Leynorr took from under her cloak a wooden baton the color of obsidian with strange hieroglyphs carved deep into the wood. Holding the baton out in front of her, the hieroglyphs began to glow faintly as the baton extended to the size of a long pole. Running toward the edge of the library

rooftop, she planted the black pole and launched herself skyward toward the other side of the Grand Bazaar. The staff extended to a great length toward the ground and retracted to secure a safe descent to the cobblestone below. Two more times she extended and contracted her magical pole to dizzying heights, until finally touching down on the roof of Reginald's Arcane Emporium. Hopefully not for the last time, Leynorr turned to cast a glance at her dark demon prince. Making an about face, she once again started her journey along the rooftops toward the cargo gate. Searching for the night watchmen that were usually on guard, she found none.

"Strange, not one guard," she muttered to herself.

Near the Peasants' Playhouse, a seedy sailors' tavern next to the docks in Duergar, she found her longship tied to the end of a pier. The longship called *Albatross* looked more like . . . well . . . an albatross. It had a stout, heavy body with a shallow-draft hull designed for speed. Unlike longships that were double-ended, it had one bow with the head of an albatross, a long, hooked bill, and long, narrow wings that wrapped around its hull to the stern. There was no mast or sail, no visible rudder, and the cockpit had only seating enough for two—maybe three, but it would be a tight fit. The leeway told her the current was strong and heading out toward the Solstice Sea. Leynorr boarded the vessel, and almost immediately the boat came alive and spread out its gigantic wings in preparation for flight.

"Not quite yet, my friend," she said, talking to the *Albatross* in an ancient elvish tongue. "Let's start heading out. Just over there will be sufficient," she said, pointing to an area just ahead of them.

The *Albatross* started to move, making its way past a set of piles on the port side. The ship was planing just above the water, leaving no wake in its trail. The *Albatross* stopped just far enough from shore as to keep away from the lighted lamps at the end of the many piers that lined the docks. Leynorr's keen elven eyes darted back and forth, searching the shoreline frantically for her dark champion.

"Hurry up, Demon," she said in a slightly worried tone.

She caressed her belly with her slender hand and found herself wondering if she would have to leave without her husband and raise their child alone.

“Stop that!” the half-elf exclaimed suddenly. Scolding herself silently for thinking such thoughts, her mind now focused back on the task at hand. After all, this was Demon, one of the world’s greatest assassins, and if anyone could take care of himself, it was he.

“No one could stop him from returning to me.” She paused, as if reflecting on her own words, and resumed watching vigilantly for the return of her dark hero.

Coming quickly to his feet after his surprising first-time skating lesson, Demon held the ancient scroll at either end and began reciting the ancient incantation. A nearly invisible ripple of magical energy waved down through his body, and a small circle of smoke and flame in the center of the scroll began growing in size. From the core of the flaming parchment, a ball of red-hot fire sheathed in arcane energy was launched toward Demon’s gigantic stony opponent. Upon impact, Dwaric the battle dwarf exploded into millions of tiny shards, with sparks raining down like pyrotechnics on the eve of Summer Solstice. Haffaer, the great battle mage with crystal staff in hand, now had one foot loose and was trying to free the other entrapped limb. He too had suffered the same fate as the dwarf after a second ball of orange, red, and gold flames with a fiery tail of sparks collided with the big mage. The violent release of energy from the flaming globe detonated with a low roar, sending more debris shooting out in all directions. The smoking parchment disintegrated into flaming ash as Demon turned toward the huge stone knight and let loose the last ball of fiery doom.

The glowing orb streaked toward the last of the stone giants, but was deflected by the knight’s great shield. The diverted blow crashed into a group of assorted shops and apothecaries, leveling the area and spraying more deadly debris skyward. With a mighty blow, the great knight brought down his enormous sword, smashing the thick ice that held

fast his feet. The colossal Red Branch Knight began striking at Demon, hitting only the cobblestone street, leaving vast craters in its aftermath. Each powerful blow that Demon skilfully evaded violently broke the surface of the ground, creating wavelike crests and troughs through the earth. The hulking stone statue raised its shield high and slashed down toward Demon, shattering its shield and left arm as it struck the solid bazaar floor.

Demon, now on the offensive, pulled a small, translucent vial from his ebony bag and smashed it on the ground. The solution, upon mixing with the air, created a misty vapor that arose all around him, obscuring the stone monument's vision. With great dexterous ability, Demon leaped onto the stone pillar in front of the library and, like a graceful cat, bounced easily on the knight's back. Demon held on with one of his clawed gauntlets, digging deep into the leviathan's stone shell. On his scaly forearm suddenly appeared a small-hand crossbow crafted from solid black wood, inset with red rubies, and with the bowstring dyed black.

"Block this, you giant, stone bastard!" he hissed, firing flaming bolts in rapid succession into the back of the statue's neck.

The stone-visored head snapped free from its giant torso, crashing loudly to the ground like a huge redwood to the forest floor. Now headless and missing its shield and arm, the still-animated Goliath swung its mighty sword wildly in the air. Demon scarcely held onto the back of his mountainous enemy as the headless knight jerked left, then right in sudden and abrupt motions.

Reaching into his black bag, Demon yanked out a small grappling hook with a red silk rope attached. With great force, the dark assassin rammed the barbed hook into a voluminous fracture in the statue's neck. Grasping the silk rope firmly, Demon descended the tall statue, wrapping around its massive frame like a barber's pole. With tremendous agility, Demon dashed in between and then around the stone sculpture's legs. Quickly, he darted behind one of the wide marble

pillars of the library, wrapping the silk rope around like a giant pulley. Bracing his feet, Demon with superhuman strength strained backward, forcing his gigantic adversary off balance. The stone monument to Sir Tristram Aeronenbras, greatest hero and knight to the people of Duergar, fell onto the steps of the Great Library with a resounding crash.

From the large dust cloud, amongst the piles of ice, wood, and stone debris, Demon emerged, running toward the route taken by Leynorr. He quickly bounded up onto the rooftop of Reginald's Arcane Emporium, not glancing back from whence he came, but forward to where he needed to be. After passing the strangely unguarded cargo gate, Demon saw the Witch Raider's mark atop a warehouse right on the docks, his stopping point.

In this part of the city was a mixture of boarding houses, taverns, and warehouses, holding much of the cargo brought down the river to be stored on the quay. Duergar Harbor at night was usually a symphony of noises with flickering torches and blazing lamps, but tonight it was empty and quiet. Peering over the edge of the warehouse rooftop, he saw the calm waters of the Solstice Sea below, with many ships of different shapes and sizes lining the piers.

"This is all wrong," Demon mumbled quietly to himself.

Warily, he set his feet down upon a pile of boards below, no doubt used to repair this highly used port. Looking down the long, torchlit pier in front of him, he saw two large galleons docked on either side. These were large, heavy ships, broad in the beam and characterized by high multiple decks on the fore and aft. Climbing off the stacked planks, Demon bent to one knee, placing his clawed gauntlet on the wooden floor, his eyes glowing. A mystical light in the form of a shadowy illumination stretched out, coating the lamps and torches around him and down the pier, extinguishing each flame in turn. Making his way in between the two castle-like galleons, he paused, turned back around, and came to a standstill.

From the docks of the boats sprang forth dozens upon dozens of leather-clad little halflings holding short bows with arrows drawn back, aimed directly at him. From around the bow of one of the galleons strode a tall man with pale, white, weathered flesh, making his bones horribly visible, with shaggy eyebrows that knotted fiercely over a long, flat nose. The hideous man was cloaked in long, flowing, deep-red robes and had large, jeweled rings adorning every finger on both hands. He had greying hair, balding at the crown, and a thick, fresh scar running from just below his right earlobe halfway around his throat.

Following behind the pale figure was a weasel of a man with greased-back black hair, wearing dark leather armor, and with a broadsword at his side. He stood half as high as a human, with large, hairy feet, olive skin, and balding, brown hair, and his robust belly showed a lust for food. The halfling butterball wore a fur jacket two sizes too big that dragged on the ground behind him, and a large cross was draped around his swollen neck. Bringing up the rear was another halfling with an athletic build, ruddy skin, the same hairy, jumbo feet, curly, black hair, and dark, brooding eyes.

"Kalifen, how nice of you to see me off. And I see you brought the circus with you," the horned assassin said, with obvious disdain in his voice.

"Hold your tongue Demon . . . or better yet, let me cut it out!" the weasely man said with a raspy voice while sneaking his broadsword from its sheath.

"I didn't know puppets could speak on their own," was the quiet retort, Demon's eyes glowing a bright red.

"Enough!" the pale wizard screamed, clutching his scarred throat with his bony hand in obvious agony.

"I may not have taken your head, Kalifen, but the poison will finish the job I started." Demon's speech softened a bit, his mask hiding his icy stare.

The pale wizard's face turned hard. "Where's the Witch Raider? I sure hope the Grey Elf hasn't found her . . . yet."

The wizard's speech was almost inaudible, showing obvious signs of discomfort.

"I don't know how you're still alive, Kalifen. Maybe I should just finish you off . . . here and now!" Demon belatedly, his hands moving to rest on the bag about his waist. The Arch Mage paused suddenly, his grim features lined with anger.

"The Wallet of Perseus won't save you now . . ." The skeleton figure began again, but his words stopped short as he once again clutched his throat in obvious pain.

The fat, furry halfling waved his hands in a secret gesture only known to the Halfling's Guild, sending ten more halflings dropping from the ships behind Demon, bows drawn and ready to let death loose.

"Kill him!" the rotund halfling shouted, his eyes wide with bloodlust.

"Wait!" The cry came from Kalifen as he noticed Demon wearing a silver pendant in the likeness of a broken arrow.

His outcry went unheeded as the arrows were let loose, speeding steadfast toward their intended target. Seconds before certain impact from a myriad of arrows, the silver pendant glowed slightly, dispatching the missiles in reverse, each returning from whence they came. Halfling after halfling fell, each bearing a look of shock and surprise upon receiving the rebounded projectiles.

Kalifen flicked his wrist as if brushing away a fly, sending two arrows hurtling into the large halfling who sprang in front of his fur-clad boss, his eyes no longer brooding. The repellent, greasy-haired man had picked up a halfling archer, using the diminutive creature as a living shield.

Kalifen returned his stare back at Demon, but his eyes met only dark shadows as the assassin had vanished into the night.

"No . . . NO!" Kalifen's screams trailed off as both of his hands now clasped tightly around his scarred throat.

"Find them," he said, picking up the fat halfling by his neck making his face turn blue from lack of air. Dropping

the little humanoid on the ground gasping for oxygen, he turned with the weasely-faced man, walked toward the cargo gate, and disappeared into the darkness.

Leynorr, who was watching and waiting anxiously, turned her head to see Demon pulling himself slowly into the *Albatross*. Splashing water into the boat as he brought his legs over the side, he laid his head back and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"You took too long," Leynorr said, wrapping her arms around his neck with tears streaming down her rosy cheeks.

"I had to see the circus one last time," he said, laughing.

"Can we go now?" Leynorr asked with a smile forming on her lips.

"We're all leaving," Demon said, gently touching Leynorr's pregnant stomach. "*Albatross*, take us to Mephisto's . . . and hurry," Demon said, facing Leynorr.

The *Albatross* cocked her long, hooked bill skyward, stretched out her slender long wings, and lifted them into the night, flying out toward the sea.