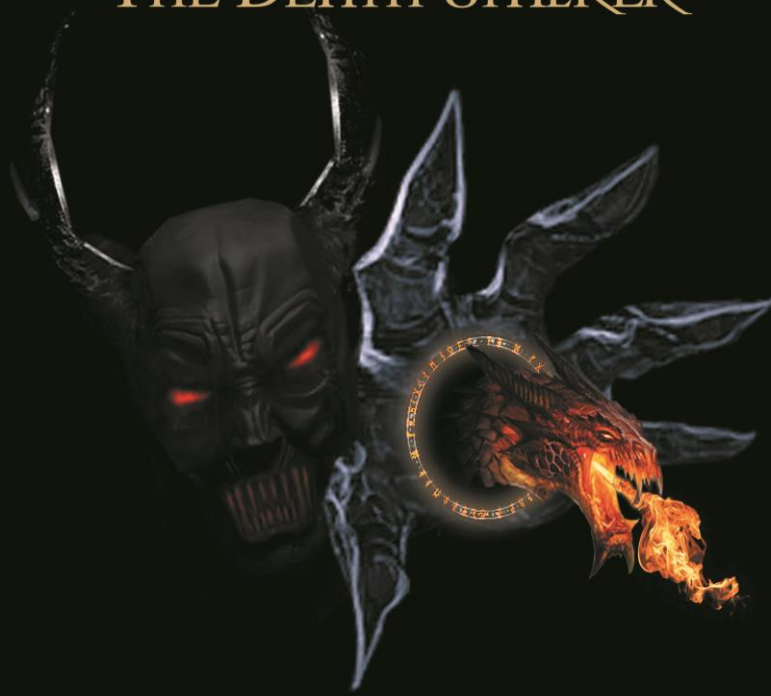


DEMON RAIDER

THE DEATH STALKER



DAVID ANDREW CRAWFORD

Demon Raider
The Death Stalker

By
David Andrew Crawford

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Dedication

*To my Mom, through her all
things are made possible*

Now...where was I...ah yes I remember now.

When Dark awoke the next day, it was just dawn, the time that marks the beginning of the twilight before sunrise. The faint red and yellow slivers of sunlight had crept slowly over the land of Sommerset and as Dark made his way down stairs he saw his grandfather resting peacefully in his favorite chair. The tall dark figure sat there motionless, his deep set eyes black beneath his great brow. Dark knew Mephisto must have stayed up all night without any sleep. It almost seemed impossible that the old mage could be rested at all, yet he rose without stretching and still somehow the grim face of his grandfather looked relaxed and alert.

“Are you ready for this?” Mephisto asked at last.

“Just tell me the Styg was able to get me the information I asked for,” his grandson replied anxiously.

“He has indeed,” the old magus declared shortly. “And I think you will be quite pleased at what he has obtained.”

Without warning Mephisto took hold of Dark’s arm with urgency and propelled him through an opening in the cave wall that magically manifested itself upon their approach. Together they hurried through the still glowing stone archway and down a long hallway lined with magic sigils and symbols that glowed a deep red. They continued down the long, high corridor of his grandfather’s cave and up a winding staircase as the walls echoed with the rapping of their boots on the worn stone floor. Finally, when at last they were atop the stairway, he found the entrance was surrounded by a litter of blackened rocks, and what stood closed before them were two gigantic wooden doors, with no apparent handles or visible locks of any kind. They featured a pair of beautifully carved ferocious looking dragons, set here to guard what lay beyond. They crouched on clawed feet underneath enormous coils, their scaled sides slightly gleaming. Their large leathery wings were folded and their huge heads rested on their wooden perch as hooded membranes were closed over ancient eyes. Smoke curled from blackened nostrils, and as Dark watched, the two dragons both exhaled a ribbon of blue flame. All-seeing and ever alert, the dragons awoke and slowly they peeled their heavy heads from their wooden confines and both turned in unison to stare directly at the two intruders.

“Who dares to approach us?” The dragons gave a grating hiss, swaying over them, crested heads erect, as their golden eyes flamed and smoke shot from their nostrils.

“I am Mephistopheles, the Silver Dragon,” he shouted triumphantly. “Now let me pass and open the door, then rest your weary heads and slumber once more.”

Immediately the dragons obeyed and retreated. Spurting flecks of foam and smoke, they lurched back and both resumed their initial position on the huge doors until at last they were still, and slumbered once more. Mephisto’s great library opened slowly in front of Dark; he stared guardedly at the dragons, but both lay motionless as the flames in their eyes now burned out. After some hesitation, the young grandson of the Silver Mage moved forward and entered the massive chamber, his elven eyes quickly noting the ancient austerity of the library as he moved into the multi-colored light that slid down tired streaks through a mass of large stain glass windows. Nine wide marble steps led down to the gallery floor. On each side of the staircase, Greek and Latin letters described the life of one Mephistopheles, the ancient silver dragon.

“Is that new?” Dark exclaimed.

“Sure is,” was his grandfather’s casual response.

“Nice touch,” his grandson added thoughtfully.

“...Thanks,” he smiled faintly in the darkness.

Along the inner walls, four recesses contained female statues of solid gold representing wisdom, knowledge, intelligence and virtue, eerily each one turning their head in procession, as stone eyes began to follow Dark’s every step. The vaulting, two-story gallery was lavishly decorated with ornate ornaments and carvings. The floors and walls were faced with colored marble with low Ionian pillars supporting small reading tables.

“You going to tell me any time soon what we are doing here?” snapped Dark irritably.

“Patience my young impatient apprentice,” his grandfather advised lightly. “All in good time.”

They walked through another set of double doors, separated by yet another corridor where rolled up manuscripts were stored in square niches along the inner walls. Down a narrow walkway they came where stairs in this cavity lead to the upper level. In here, the upper level contained a collection of fine paintings and artifacts, a pair of confidantes with matching arm chairs and a large circular rowan mountain ash tree table with a specimen marble top inlaid with the Silver Dragon’s Coat of Arms.

They moved past numerous clay tablets and dusty leather bound books until they stood at the far end of the room under a glittering tapestry. What was depicted on the hanging was a fool wearing black and gold parti-colored garments with a matching eared and belled hood. The jester’s hosiery was footed with exaggerated curling points at the toes; he played a pipe and rode a sort of hobbyhorse with a man’s head. In the fool’s hand he carried a bauble with a small head on a thin black rod and concealing the character’s features was a black expressionless mask.

“This is what you needed to show me!” Dark exclaimed in disbelief. “I don’t even know what this is...”

“This is what I spent all night waiting for,” his grandfather continued quickly. “This is the only known historical record of Giacomo the Jester and it lies, not in a library and not even in Ravenherst its last known home, but in my own specially-built... personal...library...”

“I’m going back to bed.” He started to move away from his grandfather.

“All right get back here, I’ll tell you what this is.” The Silver Mage motioned for him to come back, then he began to speak. “Reputedly he was the first court jester in the Northern Kingdom of Ravenherst. He is by all accounts a devil character responsible for a number of deaths during his time at the King’s court. Some say he is even responsible for the murder of Sir Conall Kernach, famed Knight of the Red Branch Order. One of his ideas of a ‘joke’ was directing anyone asking for directions to Ravenlock towards the hidden quicksand and bog marsh by the River Esk. Some realized in time, while many did not and were never seen again.”

“And what exactly does this have to do with me?” he questioned.

The old sorcerer frowned and shook his head, a look of consternation registered on his hardened face.

“This is your passport into Duergar and your way into the Assassin’s Guild. On this wall hangs an extremely rare embroidered tapestry done entirely by hand from the world renowned weaver Ficini, whose skills and trade have been passed down from generations. He used an ancient technique that attached gold and silver threads on magically infused backing cloth and decorated it with real jewels and gem stones. His tapestries are quite rare and exclusive to only royalty and the very wealthy.”

Dark opened his mouth and glanced questioningly at Mephisto in objection but was cut short.

“The reason the Styg picked this particular scoundrel is for two reasons. The first, Giacomo has already been chosen worthy by the Black Council to gain membership into the Assassin’s Guild in Duergar, a feat not so easily gained. As you know, the Regent or Head Guild Master only allows ten new hopefuls to join the Guild each year.”

“And the second,” Dark asked curiously.

“Giacomo is famed for never removing his mask, not even for Kings or Queens. In darker circles they say you will never see what lies underneath his fool’s mask, but when he does remove it, it usually means death is nigh for the viewer. His face has never been seen by a living soul able to tell the tale...until now.”

The wise wizard slowly brushed his right hand gently against the gold and silver threads of Ficini’s magnificent creation. Only then, after the briefest of moments, did he speak the arcane words that activated the spell.

“Ficini I ask of you with all my might, can Giacomo come out and play this night?”

Immediately after the magic words were spoken, an opalescent glow quickly spread across the intricately hand-made tapestry, imbuing it with a pearl-like sheen. The weaving was so spectacular that the scene within it came to life until it became a living wall that allowed both of the anxious onlookers to see the play unfold before their very eyes. What played out before them was a mixture of various tricks and slight of hand, skilled juggling with extraordinary feats of acrobatics and tumbling routines. At the very end of it all was the final act where the jester dismounted his human horse, strolled straight up to the pair, bowed gracefully for the expected applause and finally removed his fool’s mask.

He stared at it with great wonderment, as everywhere there were touches of color and life and with wide anticipating eyes Dark spied Giacomo’s true identity and was disappointed almost immediately. Physically, the jester was hardly an imposing figure. He had short, plain brown hair with no distinctive marks or features of any kind...he was perfect. His plain features made it much easier for him to play the part of a faceless servant, to become one of many figures in a crowd or to escape notice in any city on Eorth.

“Are you not pleased my boy?” the tall mystic asked quickly.

The dark assassin nodded his satisfaction, as a slow smile crept briefly over his lips.

“He’s definitely the one,” his lean face stared steadily back at Mephisto. “But just one question; if Giacomo’s face has never been seen by a living soul, then what about Ficini? He must have seen his face or how else could he have captured his features in this enchanted moving picture?”

“There were rumors of course, but only rumors,” his grandfather answered slowly. “Sometime shortly after his gift was presented to Giacomo, Ficini disappeared without a trace and was never heard from again.”

“And where is this Giacomo now?” Dark urged a moment later.

“According to the information given to the Styg, you should be able to intercept this dark fool at a place called King’s Crossing, just northeast of Innsbrooke, near the City of Carnac,” the Silver Mage responded quickly. “You’ll have to leave soon if you wish to locate him in time. *Alba* already awaits outside ready for you and your command.”

The half-elf assassin nodded solemnly, as both exchanged quick glances at one another in silent agreement.

“Wait...just one more thing before you go!” exclaimed the excited wizard incredulously, motioning for him to follow.

Mephisto stopped and murmured briefly under his breath; an ancient bowl made of solid

gold taken from the tombs of Scottish Kings was now found sitting on the large circular table in his private library. The tall, dark figure of his grandfather mechanically raised his right arm until his tightly clenched fist was in position directly over the golden artifact. The outstretched hand of the old mystic began to take on a bright bluish hue that quickly faded to a barely perceptible aura that now surrounded it. Tiny floating silver clouds instantly whirled into existence and as his hand slowly began to open, tiny droplets of rain started to fall until finally letting loose a drenching downpour. The water that gushed stopped almost as suddenly as it began, filling the bowl only inches from the rim. Then he offered the bowl to his grandson and Dark stared down into the water and saw nothing but the shimmer of the fold that held it. He bent even closer until shapes began appearing in the gilded depths; before his eyes a miniature city formed itself in the clear liquid. A fortress city, massive and aerie, graced with high glass rooftops and dozens of slender towers fringed by green forests and surrounded by mountains. Within seconds the City of Duergar faded from view and new shapes formed into the tall reeds of Sommerset and lapped by the gentle waters of Dragon's Mouth Lake. Entranced by the vivid imagery Dark bent closer still, until his face touched the cool magical water.

At that very instant, it seized him. Down he went headlong into the water amid roaring laughter that filled his elven ears and darkness his eyes. He struggled slowly at first, as one would when waking from a dream; he pushed against rolling waves; his mouth opened and he tasted the fresh water of Dragon's Mouth Lake. As quickly as he was caught, he was now freed. His head broke the surface once his feet found solid footing again. Gasping for air, he quickly wiped the water from his eyes.

He stood chest deep in the lake next to his home he had seen in the bowl, facing a sandy shore fringed with green reeds and the *Albatross* only a few feet away. Instead of wading ashore, the wet assassin instead blinked from existence and when he did so, he saw not watery shafts, but the stone walls of his grandfather's library.

"Have you lost your mind old man!" Dark sputtered angrily. "What would make you do such a thing? Look at me, I'm soaked to the bone!"

"Just hang on one second and hear me out and I'll explain everything," he promised amid bursts of laughter.

Mephisto watched his grandson's reaction for a moment and then continued. "You're about to embark on a very serious undertaking and who knows when or if we're going to have a laugh at your expense ever again," he smiled. "In all honesty, I just wanted to add a little levity to the situation...that's all...just have a little fun...just in case."

Dark Solus shook his head once again in disbelief, the anger now gone from his eyes and a faint smile played over his tightened lips as he looked up at his grandfather.

"How can I stay mad at a face like that," he shrugged shortly and nodded, then quickly folded his wet frame around the old man. "I didn't know you were so worried about me."

"Me worry...why should I worry?" he mused mockingly, pushing away the wet child that now clung to him. "It's your neck out there not mine. Now come along my boy, we really should be on our way. Duergar is a long way off."

The grandson of Mephistopheles bore a look of confusion. "We old man?"

"You didn't think I was going to let you have all the fun did you?" the old mystic responded quickly, with a faint smile. "Besides who else are you going to get to pilot your cloud castle to Duergar?"

Dark looked back at his grandfather sharply, studying the serious face and for a few moments he fell silent as he slowly mulled the prospect over.

“Well, it’s not like I have a choice.”

“You don’t,” the tall mage added. “I’ll be there in less than a fortnight. Now get out of here and be careful.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” Dark promised quickly, a pool of water already formed about him.

“Before you go though, be a dear would you.” Instantly in his outstretched hands were a bucket and a mop.

Dark sighed heavily.

Upon quick inspection of the now dry floor, his grandfather nodded his approval with a smile and the two said their brief farewells with mixed emotions and parted. Mephisto had already gathered up a few belongings; quickly grabbing a rather large leather bound manual and a few rolled up scrolls and a moment later was traveling through the skies above Dark Manor Castle.

So it was that on an autumn morning, after changing into his dry armor, he left under bright skies alive with racing clouds and sailed on towards Duergar. With a brisk wind at his back, they glided through the protective veil of Sommerset and soon reached the blue waters of the open sea. Steadily northward the *Albatross* flew, past the string of seemingly endless islands that made up his homeland of Faëroes. Past towering mountains that framed the highlands, past misty meadows until finally they soared out over the vast great ocean. Out over endless waters his faithful flying friend flew, quicker than the spring wind on the backs of tall mountains. Far across a plain of blue they went, until the Islands of Faëroes dwindled to tiny specks on the horizon and vanished altogether.

On the ride towards Duergar, he had fallen asleep, but now awoke and peered out from the concealment of his warm cloak. He saw the clouds racing around him and far below he saw the gray and rippling eastern sea. The *Albatross* sped steadfast over the unfamiliar waters and never slowed until they saw a light, which appeared to shimmer off the high headland on Duergar’s western coast. The bright light lit their way, guiding them through a thick blinding mist that drifted aimlessly in the windless air. As they came to a rocky shoreline, the fog dissolved, drifting away in gray tatters to reveal a rolling landscape dotted with white huts of fishing villages and where sheep and cattle grazed. Crumbling walls showed where great forts of old had once been and close to their walls stood a castle that was little more than a stone watch tower now. Dark called down, but no sentry answered; the fortress stood silent and shuttered, apparently deserted.

As Dark traveled the late hours of daylight before the evening sky embraced the lonely night, he watched below those people who braved the late hours to travel the open road. Some were merchants who followed a circuit of markets and fairs, their pack animals and carts laden heavy with furs and fresh hides. Some were troubadours and jugglers, with minstrels and bards who performed from court to court. There were soldiers going to or returning from one of the innumerable wars going on at the time. For an hour or more he traveled through high mountains, until he eventually reached the border region where green forests swept into the distance as far as the eye could see.

By the time Dark arrived at King’s Crossing, it was sundown and the faint rays of the late afternoon sun only barely lit the dark forest and evening crept into the western sky in blue and purple streaks. For several long minutes they circled around the large stately elm tree that served as a signpost for the intersecting cross roads. The marker tree guided all travelers alike pointing the way to the locations of the greatest kingdoms on Eorth. The worried assassin had risen slowly to his feet and began scanning the land about them for any sign of Giacomo.

“Damn it!” he growled, breathing heavily and shaking his broad horned head. “Where is this little bastard?”

It was becoming dark too quickly and the jester had carefully erased all signs of his passing, leaving a number of confusing false trails for anyone who attempted to follow. Less than an hour of sunlight remained and the coming of the night would help to hide the little fool from any stalking assailants. Dark found it difficult to surmise where this trickster might be, but decided it would be unwise to stay here for much longer. If Giacomo reached the gates of Duergar and gained the protection of the guild, his plan for revenge would be over before it ever began.

Dark moved quickly now and with great purpose and reached eagerly into the dark interior of the demon’s mouth on his armor. The black-garbed assassin removed his hand and withdrew the large Gem of Location and a moment later asked for the whereabouts of the elusive jester. A blue glow spread outwards as the Son of Solus brought the power of the magical stone to life. Then the shimmering star stirred and from its mist rose and shot upward and disappeared into the air.

“Let’s go *Alba*,” he ordered quietly.

The highway they followed quickly dwindled to a common tinker’s trail, where a man would have to stand aside when a horse-drawn wagon passed. He found himself sailing over a rolling moor when the sun dipped into the west and the tall trees threw long shadows across the ground. The air grew still and cold as darkness fell, causing the armored assassin to pull his hooded cloak tightly around him.

The darkness that blanketed this part of the world in those days was a little hard to envision now, but through this sparkling tapestry they smoothly sailed guided by the light of the radiant moon. When it was full, even the smallest blade of grass on earth shone sharp and clear. When it waned or was obscured by dark clouds, a man could not see his own hand in front of his face. The night sky was an ebony canopy crowded by a retinue of stars and banded by the Milky Way. Off in the distance he spotted a pale sliver of light, a point of brightness so familiar and easily seen like a beacon for sailors. It was the Lighthouse of Duergar.

They were quite close to the borders of the great city now, and once he reached this point, he knew he would have to find his new friend quickly. He traveled on through lonely roads, hills and woods, rendered lightless except for the pulsating glow from the gem that suddenly lit bright. There in the distance, Dark saw the jester’s outline at midnight and heard, floating through the air, the voice of his intended target, singing a merry little tune. He was extravagantly bedecked in black and gold as a court jester would and bejeweled as a sultan.

The *Albatross* dipped down towards the unsuspecting entertainer; Dark caught himself abruptly, afraid he had given himself away, but a mirror on Giacomo’s carriage had. He paused with the thought left hanging, when suddenly the jester, now wise, urged his team of horses faster. He set off after his prey moving steadily through the air, neither rushing nor pausing, but always gaining on the fleeing fool. The huge black shadow of the *Albatross* suddenly fell over the rapidly moving carriage. In an instant Dark had used the power of his necklace and now settled himself beside the masked rogue. Giacomo felt a chilling fear surge through him at the sight of this demon-like being, feeling bewildered by the sudden appearance of this creature, but still he abruptly turned to face the strange newcomer.

“Just what manner of creature might you be?” the jester stammered fearfully, his courage gone, as the cruel red eyes of Demon Raider passed quickly over him.

The black-garbed assassin snatched the hapless clown by his front tunic, pulling him

close, until their faces were only inches away.

“I am Death,” his words were spoken in a barely audible whisper. “And I have come for you.”

A blinding blue glow spread outward just as Dark uttered his last word. Too late the horned assassin saw the master fool bring the power of his mock scepter to life. A bolt of shimmering light streaked from his outstretched marotte, striking Dark with crackling energy and sending him crashing backwards into a thick and sturdy maple tree. Giacomo had slowed his carriage and brought it to a stop and was already leaping down to the forest floor, his eyes fastened on his attacker, studying the being closely for the first time. Then his blackened eyes went wide in astonished disbelief. For this horned creature was not so easily finished as Dark began to stand, the surface of his body crackling with tiny bolts of energy.

“I see you are versed in the black arts,” his voice pierced the distressed mind of the jester. “So am I.”

The conversation was brought to a sudden halt and Giacomo suddenly felt something had changed in the forest. No birds sang, no breeze blew in among the pine needles or even rustled the fallen leaves. His eyes went large with fear and he stopped all movement and stood as still as a statue, all except for his trembling hands that clutched at the talisman around his neck.

With the ancient words still on his tongue, a flash of light and a roar of fire wrapped Dark’s steel hands with wisps of black flame. An instant later the area surrounding the two combatants became sheathed in barely perceptible yellowish-orange flames. With a mighty explosion, the flames burst into a fiery wall that exploded skyward with such a brilliant radiance that it bathed the area surrounding them in a flaming tongue of fire as bright as sunlight. The hot unearthly black fire crackled and hissed and from this magical flame emanated the smell of molten metal and sulphur.

“We wouldn’t want you to wander off now, would we?” Dark’s voice rasped menacingly. “Who knows what possible terrors could await you out there. It’s best to keep you here...safe...with me.”

While still bewildered at the sight of this demonic fiend, Giacomo abruptly remembered the object he clutched so dearly held his means of escape. About his neck on a fine chain of steel hung a platinum amulet, sculpted to resemble a shining star. It was embossed with golden symbols and intricately engraved with ancient Elven runes. Dark was already moving forward, his searing red eyes narrowed and began to smolder with a formidable look of anger. At that moment, a divine power began to radiate from the jester’s talisman, which started to glow and pulse with a soft golden light. The pulse quickly began to steady and brighten into a constant flow of brilliant yellow and within seconds Giacomo disappeared.

Dark suddenly stopped and slowly looked around; then both demonic faces smiled grimly. There was no movement anywhere. The assassin’s sharp gaze moved robot-like from one area inside the curtain of fire to the next. A sudden movement to his left snapped his attention to an area only a few yards away, making a quick study, then a moment later he was back to his search. For a few moments no one moved, then abruptly the unwise fool took a step forward.

“Watch and stare my final coming of might,” Dark began to invoke the powers of the Plane of Shadow. “Under a full moon, between both worlds we fight. For when light is fleeting, you become a shadow of eternal night!”

Immediately, a shifting, whirling field of semi-solid shadows began to rise around him, like trained snakes with an innate link to his own shadow, compelled to do his will, for the

darkness was attached to his very soul. A creeping darkness began to spread, streaking outwards like the night that overcomes the day, cloaking the ground and filling the area with these wisps of writhing blackness. The shadow flickered, moving in an aggressive and independent manner; it stretched out passing through any and all objects that impeded its path. The dark gray haze appeared around the invisible jester, surrounding him in an aura of shadow, leaving Giacomo trapped in a patch of strange shifting darkness. Dark quickly pointed a single clawed finger at the enchanted talisman around the fool's neck and the bauble he held so firmly in his clenched fists. With a simple command the transparent tendrils reached into the very shadow of the fool. They seemed to grasp and tug at the objects until finally tearing them away. Within seconds, Dark had stolen the two artifacts, recalled the shadows back into his own and stored the items safely away inside the forged demon's mouth.

"Real magicians don't need wands to perform magic," he announced curtly. "Now fool, any more parlor tricks up your sleeve?"

Giacomo, now visible, stood silently on shaking legs, his blood turned to ice, his usually keen senses were now raw and distorted with horrifying terror, the last vestige of his courage now gone. There was no where left to run and like it or not he knew this was a battle to the death.

"Just one!" Left with no other choice, Giacomo removed his belled hat and with his right hand placed it inside, quickly unsheathing a long sword at his side with lightning-like motion, then crouched down ready to attack. "I am Giacomo, the incomparable. King of Jesters and Jester to Kings and I will not die this night!"

The muscular form of Dark moved forward a few paces at the same instant, then darkness surrounded his hand, turning it into a deadly weapon. His own shadow began to coalesce into the shape of a long sword, its shadowy form darkened as if perpetually in shadows.

"I know this sword and only a being from the pits of Hell itself could construct such a weapon," Giacomo muttered almost inaudibly.

"Then you know about its poisonous blade," Dark's voice broke out of the growing darkness. "And how once delivered, the poison takes only a short time to exert its lethal effect. This venomous substance enters into one's bloodstream and then is quickly carried throughout, slowly turning the victim's heart, body and mind to a black...lifeless...ash."

Out of sheer fear the jester attacked with surprisingly blinding speed, but the deadly horned assassin was not to be so easily finished. Parrying the death blow dealt, he lunged quickly to one side. Before the attacker could find his target for a second assault, the nimble form of the half-elf assassin was upon him. Dark dealt the jester a savage blow that sent him tumbling backwards onto the hard ground. Giacomo, still on his knees, was holding his blackened visage in pain, trying desperately to recover as blood streamed steadily down upon the red stained ground. His black mask had fallen off, separated into two pieces, and just like his disguise, so was his ordinary face, split perfectly down the middle from his forehead down through his chin.

"Die you black faced emissary of the devil!" the jester roared in anger, his wild eyes widened, his own blood ran in small rivulets down his pale face and into his soaked garments.

Climbing unsteadily to his feet, the flamboyant jester retrieved his fallen sword and trying desperately again, he rushed forward trying vainly to strike a solid blow. The two-faced fool was determined to finish his demonic foe, thrashing and swinging madly over the leaf littered battle ground. Giacomo cried out in fury and struck wildly at the black-garbed assassin, but his blows were parried easily with wisps of shadowy tendrils constantly following Dark's

weapon as it moved about. With a devilish grin and moving as fast as thought, Dark began to flash through the conduits and pathways of the ethereal plane, manifesting into multiple locations. Faster than the eye could blink, this unsuspecting attack came from behind; Giacomo tried desperately to turn around but it was too late. The stealthy assassin reared back his shadowy blade and with a forceful lunge shoved the sword completely through the man's caped back and out through his chest. Giacomo shuddered horribly, turned almost completely about, then slid slowly to the blood soaked earth and sank to his knees. Dark brought forth the fiery rage of the dragon wand, his blackened body was instantly engulfed. The swollen flesh split and shredded so that the bones showed through until finally the bones themselves crumbled. With no more than a faint cracking and pattering, the curtain fell for the last time for the fool and the body of Giacomo, the incomparable, was at last, gone. When the fire died, all that remained was a charred outline of the man, and a small handful of black ashes remaining. Dark stood motionless, the wall of fire abruptly ceased and the battle was finally ended; the last assassin standing stood positioned like a statue in the silence and emptiness of the bloodied battleground.