

Part I

Nathaniel couldn't sleep. He was becoming frustrated; he hadn't had trouble sleeping on the eve of battle in years. When midnight has passed and he still hadn't been able to close his eyes more than a few moments, he stood, pulling on a pair of pants and picking up his sword, and left his tent.

The night was moonless, cloudless, and he walked off into the darkness away from the knights' tent camp, more agitated than he had been in some time. He settled in the hollow under a large tree's roots on the edge of a stream, looking up at the stars blanketing the sky. There, slowly, without realizing it, he drifted off.

He was standing on the shore of a large lake, a mist obscuring the distance, but not the stars, which seemed brighter, closer. A small island was opposite him, and a huge tree with broadly spread branches grew from its center. A woman was washing her hair in the waters between him and the island, and after a moment – or several, he couldn't seem to tell – she turned and approached him. The lake was only waist-deep to her, and the mists clung to her as a translucent robe.

“You're late, Sir Knight,” she said, stopping before him on the shore. “You'd have been here hours ago if you weren't so stubborn.”

“Who are you? Where am I?”

“Does that matter? You're here now.”

He drew his sword when she approached him again, wary of her alluring manner. “Back, foul temptress. I'll not succumb to your wiles.”

She drew back, confused. “How's that?”

“I will not fall under your spell, night-hag. I am not so weak-minded as some.”

Her face fell; she didn't understand his reticence. “I cannot help you if you will not help me, Sir Knight. I shall find another, then.”

“Help you? What do you—”

Nathaniel jerked awake, finding himself cramped under the tree. The dream had disoriented him, and it took him a moment to remember where he was. When he stepped back out from under the tree, he could see that the camp was afire, and he drew his sword as he headed back, not sure what to expect.

He was swearing as he walked through the ruins of the camp; the demon's army had swept through it, wiping out the battalion of knights to the man. Except him. He frowned to himself as he picked through the remains of his tent. Is that why he couldn't sleep? Why hadn't the battle waken him? Why hadn't the trolls and goblins that made up the bulk of the demon's army found him?

He bundled what he could salvage in a relatively intact patch of canvas, then stood and surveyed the ruins once. Should he bother? His horse was lost or dead somewhere, his armor scattered and ruined... How could he go back to his king without a scratch on him, unblooded in this fight?

After several minutes he headed in the general direction of the nearest town, Giant's Crossing, still mostly numb. He had just crested the first hill when he ran into a straggling group of trolls, and he drew his sword again. They would be too much for him, and he knew it, but he was determined to take them with him.

The woods were dark, the trees gnarled and contorted, almost as if they were in pain. Nathaniel was wandering blindly, the mist hanging heavily on the trees, the path itself ever shifting...

The knight drifted awake, the forest fading slowly. He was lying on a pallet in a small, dark hut, and a bent figure in a ragged cloak was stirring a small kettle on the not-so-far side of the room. He moved as to get up, and the figure turned, revealing itself to be an ancient woman.

“If you reopen the wounds in your shoulder, they’ll kill you,” she said. He eased back. “You did a number on those trolls, you did.”

He was silent, and she frowned.

“Something led ye off, or you’d have died with the others,” she said. “They didn’t take your tongue, lad. I know that much.”

“Who are you? What am I doing here? How do you know what happened?”

She chuckled. “A suspicious one, I see. I am Agatha. I’ve lived in these parts for most of eighty years now, and I brought you here because someone obviously needed you to survive this for some reason.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you left before the fight began. Something made you leave. But what?”

He turned his eyes back to the wall.

“Do you have a name, knight?” she asked.

“Nathaniel Gray.”

“You seem the type that even were I sixty years younger, you’d still be difficult.”

“You could have left me to die.”

“There was a powerful magic present last night, and I want to know what it was.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You saw nothing? No one?”

He remained silent, and she hobbled over to him.

“I can make you tell me, lad, but it would be painful,” she said. He was quiet for a moment yet before speaking.

“There was a woman with long black hair, and eyes the color of twilight. But that was just a dream.”

“Was it?” Agatha said. “Did she say anything?”

“Something about needing someone to help her. Then she left.”

“And from the Raven’s own tongue,” she said, amazed. “And you refused her?”

“It was a dream,” he frowned.

“Oh, yes. It would have to be. She is trapped there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s known as the Raven in the circles which know of her. Once, long ago, she was one of the most powerful of demon hunters. But she was trapped in the dream world.”

“Demon hunter? Her? A frail, dainty woman?”

“You trust your eyes too much, Sir Knight,” she said. “You should already know that demons are impervious to your swords and lances. You need powerful magics on your side.”

“I am sworn to oppose the heretics,” he frowned.

“Well, this heretic has saved your life. If you can find her again and find a way to free her, she can help you defeat this demon.”

“I could never—”

“They will tear through the rest of this land as easily as they did your knights. Everything will fall under the demon, and your people will be enslaved, the men in the fields, the women in his harems. Those with the strength and training to kill demons are few and far between, lad.”

He was silent.

“I’ll let you think on it a while, then. You won’t be going anywhere for a while, anyway.”

The woods grew darker, the path murkier, the mists thicker. Nathaniel stumbled onward, the stars fainter, further now, yet somehow constant. Frustrated by the twists and turns in the path, he finally focused on a star and followed it, heedless of the road. When he had walked seemingly forever, he came upon an enormous frog.

“Why seek you me out, human?” the frog asked. It was the size of a small dog, though mottled green and brown on its smooth, damp back.

“But I didn’t,” the knight said.

“But you must have. No one gets anywhere here by wandering aimlessly, so you must have followed my star here.”

“Your star?”

“Every star leads somewhere.”

“How do I know which star to follow?”

“That depends what you want to find,” the frog said. The knight was quiet for a moment.

“I’m looking for a woman.”

“There are many women here,” the frog said.

“She has long black hair and dark blue eyes,” the knight went on.

“So that narrows it to... maybe half.”

“Some people call her the Raven.”

The frog frowned. “She is a bad omen, human. The path to her is fraught with perils, for she is dangerous, and they do not wish her freed.”

“Who does not wish her free?”

“The demons, of course. They could not kill her, so they found a way to trap her.”

“How can she be freed?”

“Only she knows that, human,” the frog said. “I do not know her star, anyway.”

“Who does?”

“The boatman might. He should be there,” the frog said, shifting the knight’s attention to a faint star. “Just a friendly warning – when they find out you’re looking for her, they’ll kill you.”

Nathaniel jerked awake again. Agatha was sitting in a chair beside the pallet knitting, and she shifted her eyes to him.

“You’ve been restless,” she said.

“I should go,” the knight said, still somewhat groggy.

“If you leave now, in your condition, they’ll kill you before the day is out,” Agatha said.

“And they won’t seek me out if I stay?”

“Why would they? They think the knights dead.”

“I should be.”

“But you’re not, because she needs your help.”

“I don’t think she wants it anymore.”

“You should not have refused her,” she said.

“No?”

“A damsel in distress?”

“Oh, please. My duty is to my king, not to some romantic’s idea of chivalry.”

“She may be the only way to defeat this demon.”

He sat up stiffly, gathering his things, then pulled himself up to standing. “I should go,” he said again.

Agatha held her tongue as he stumbled out of the hut. Young and foolish. They all were.

The woods thinned, flattened, disappeared. Nathaniel found himself on the edge of an ocean, the seabirds wheeling above him, the salt air stinging his eyes. A single pier extended out from the beach, and at the end was moored a large ship. He walked down the pier to the ship.

“Why do you seek the boatman?”

The knight could not see the speaker, but he replied, “I seek a woman called the Raven.”

“The path to the Raven is not an easy one.”

“I was told you know her star.”

“She has no star.” A man appeared on the deck. “She is the moon.”

Nathaniel shifted his eyes up to the tiny sliver of moon hanging over the sea. “I cannot cross the waters.”

“Are you certain that you wish to find her?”

“Yes.”

He found himself upon the ship, and it was moving.

“The other side of the sea is more dangerous,” the boatman said.

“How was this side dangerous?”

The boatman looked at him, his brows furrowed. “You have met no troubles yet?”

“None that I know of.”

“That is unusual.”

“How do all you people end up here?” Nathaniel asked.

“End up?” the boatman said. “Most of us began here. She is one of the exceptions.”

Nathaniel found himself cold and alone when he woke. He had rolled off the edge of the road where he’d passed out and into a ditch; when he pulled himself up, he found himself to be in an encampment of ogres. When one of them noticed he was awake, he roared in laughter.

“Hey, lads,” he called to the others, “our sleeping beauty is awake.”

Nathaniel tensed as the ogres approached, but they had already taken his sword, and the wounds in his shoulder burned still.

“He’ll sell real good at the auction,” the first ogre said. “Patch him up, Noraka.”

“I don’t know, Gerog,” the ogre which had been addressed as Noraka said. “This one has the bearing of a Salendovaran knight. He might be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“We could get two hundred crowns for him. That’s not worth the trouble?”

“We all know that you’ll see most of the cash. So not to me, it’s not.”

“There’s six of us,” a third ogre said. “So we should each get at least thirty.”

Nathaniel eased to sitting on the edge of the ditch, his head swimming.

“There doesn’t have to be six of us, Drok,” Gerog said, putting a hand to his club.

“Yes, fight over money you don’t even have yet *now*, making it easier for me to kill the

survivors while you sleep and escape,” the knight said. The ogres’ eyes shifted back to him.

“We should just kill him now, Gerog,” Noraka said, pulling a long knife from his belt.

“Why?” Nathaniel said. “If you’re just going to sell me to someone easier to kill, I don’t *have* to be trouble.”

“No?”

“Though when the demons looking to kill me catch up with me, they could be. Not sure how much anyone’s going to want to buy me.”

“What demons?” Gerog asked, moving closer.

“I’m searching for a woman known as the Raven,” the knight said.

“See?” Noraka said. “He is dangerous baggage, Gerog.”

“If the demons find him before we’ve unloaded him, we’ll just hand him over,” Gerog said. “Now patch him up and get back to work on those nets.”

Nathaniel sat silent as the ogre called Noraka approached him after sheathing his blade, and the other ogres wandered back to what they had been doing.

“A little cynical for a Salendovaran knight, aren’t you?” the ogre murmured, stripping off the remains of his shirt and the bandages Agatha had put on his shoulder.

“I somehow slept through the battle which killed my battalion. A bad omen sought me out and asked me for help. And I can’t stand right now. Going back to my king alone, half-dead, and empty-handed isn’t really an option. If you kill me, you kill me. If you sell me, that works too. I can’t go back until I find this Raven woman.”

“She must be desperate, to have asked one of your kind,” the ogre said, placing a heavy hand on the knight’s shoulder. A few short words evoked the magic he was looking for – the wounds closed almost completely.

“Why?”

“Because she is a mage, and your kind hunted her.” He lowered his voice further. “You are seeking to defeat this demon?”

“Yeah, why else?”

“You will help me mend the nets.” The ogre took his arm and helped him up, half carrying him to the nets he had been working on. Shortly the other five ogres left to find food, and the knight was left alone with Noraka.

“What is this net for?” Nathaniel asked.

“Fishing. We stretch it across the river. If you truly seek to free her, I will help you,” the ogre said, keeping his voice low.

“How’s that?”

“This demon... he has upset the balance of the world. We ogres are not very social – we have our clans, our war bands – but we normally live alone, or with a mate. He has forced us together. And those of us with minor magics – we have not fared well.”

“Why not?”

“He bound us all to the leader of a war band, meaning to make us serve in battle. But they push it further.”

“Bound? What is that?”

“It’s a form of slavery aimed at magic. It puts use of our magic at the bidding of another. I cannot use it unless Gerog commands it... and I cannot deny his demands. I understood that the Raven had been under something similar.”

“And how could you help me?”

“If you can kill Gerog, I would be free to help you find the Raven.”

“You’ll turn on your comrades just like that?” Nathaniel said.

“I have been under Gerog’s heel for over a year,” Noraka growled. “It was not a sudden decision, but I am not going to pass on an opportunity anymore. You survived the trolls that put the marks on your shoulder. If you take out Gerog first, I can help you with the others.”

“And how do you expect a human and an ogre to be able to travel together without getting one or the other killed?”

“It wouldn’t be difficult to pass you off as a slave.”

“And among humans?”

“Eh, I’m not that familiar with them.”

“You’d get run out of every village and town in Salendovar,” the knight said.

“You don’t seem to be objecting to the offer,” Noraka said.

“The idea of roaming Salendovar alone while there’s an army of trolls and goblins marauding isn’t that appealing.”

“So you’re willing to work with a heretic?”

“You’re an ogre. As long as you’re not pillaging villages, your religion is immaterial to me.”

“And if you *do* manage to find the Raven?”

“Why would Gela make magic heretical if demons can only be harmed by it?” the knight replied. “Personally, I don’t think Gela gives a shit about magic. But I do my job.”

Noraka cocked his head to one side, hearing the other ogres returning. He reached over and picked up the sword laying amongst Gerog’s things, setting it beside the knight.

“Gerog first, or you’re on your own,” he murmured, and the knight nodded slightly. “Rested enough?”

“We’ll see.”

He waited until the ogres were back and had scattered in the camp, making up his mind to move when Gerog headed in their direction. He drew the sword as he stood, rushing the ogre before he could raise his club and driving the blade up into his heart. He heard Noraka swear as the other ogres moved towards him.

“The binding passed to you!”

“Then help me,” the knight snapped, finding his knees weaker than he’d anticipated as the four ogres encircled him. A sudden flash of lightning dropped three of them, and Nathaniel finished the last.

“What do you mean, it passed?” the knight said to Noraka as he wiped the gore off his blade.

“It’s now bound to you, instead of Gerog,” the ogre growled.

“So now how do we get rid of it?” Nathaniel asked, settling – somewhat dizzily – on a large stone by the camp’s cookfire.

“You – you don’t intend to keep it?” the surprised ogre stammered.

“What good is it if I have to ask you for help?” the knight said. “Besides, you would know what you can do better than I.”

The ogre flushed after a moment. “Quite honestly, I don’t know.”

The knight blinked. “You mean it’s *stuck* like this?”

“I only have minor magics – a little healing, some weather related abilities. Enchantments like a binding are far beyond my skills.”

“I guess we need to consult a stronger mage, then.”

“Where is this Raven you’re searching for?”

“So far as I know? Still trapped in the dream world. I’ve only just figured out how to find her there. This whole thing with the dream world and bindings and demons is way beyond my ken, believe me. All my studies were in killing and history and religion, and I don’t believe half of the last anymore.” He rubbed the stubble on his jaw. “Five dead ogres. We had probably best get out of the area.”

“Wait – you don’t know where she is?”

“Eh, when she initially approached me, I had no idea who she was, and rebuffed her. Then I find out she’s a demon hunter who could end this war. So I’m going to see if she’s still amenable to working together.”

“She’s been trapped there for hundreds of years,” Noraka said. “I doubt she’ll be difficult about it.”

“Let’s get going before someone stumbles across us, huh?”

The knight and the ogre stopped on the edge of a forest about a quarter mile from a village that evening.

“Well,” Nathaniel said. “Do you want to test the run-out-of-the-village theory, or should I just bring you back food?”

“Eh, let’s at least test it. I wouldn’t object to staying indoors if we can,” Noraka replied, shifting his pack.

“Does a seven-foot ogre *fit* indoors?” the knight asked as they started in the direction of the village.

“Sometimes.”

“I suppose we could just say Gela turned you into an ogre for your heresy, and you’re stuck like that until you’ve repented.”

“If we get the opportunity to offer an explanation.”

The village was unusually quiet, and the knight and ogre found the inn’s bar to be full of old men. They fell silent when the ogre appeared in the doorway behind the knight. The knight frowned.

“You all look as though you’ve never seen an ogre before,” he said.

“Oh we’ve seen ’em,” the bartender snapped. “Too damned many. They stole off most of our’n young folks. I suggest you get out now, before things get ugly.”

“Yeah, well, we can’t really do that,” the knight said. “Besides, Norman here wasn’t *always* an ogre. It’s just Gela’s way of punishing him until he’s atoned for his heresy.”

“Bullshit,” the bartender said. Nathaniel sighed slightly.

“You people always do things the hard way. I am a knight of Salendovar. You will provide room and board for me and my entourage for the night. Refusal in time of war carries a penalty of death.”

“I’m not going to be bullied by a two-bit bandit,” the bartender said, picking up an axe handle from under the bar. Nathaniel just blinked.

“Good lord, do people really only identify a knight by the armor?”

“You *are* pretty vulnerable without it,” Noraka said.

“Heh.” The knight shed the cloak he’d scavenged at the ogre camp as the bartender approached, revealing his still-bare torso, the blue tattoos of the knighthood clearly visible on his ribs, back, and arms despite a healthy crop of body hair. The wounds from the trolls were also still apparent. “You know, I was willing to pay in gold, but if you’re going to make me work for it, I’m not unwilling just to bleed it out of you.”

An arrow hit the axe handle as Nathaniel met it with his blade, drawing both men's eyes to a hooded figure in the corner – who already had another arrow on the string.

“You’re being an ass, Chester,” the hooded figure addressed the bartender, the voice revealing her as a woman. “Get the knight and his friend their supper and take their gold. The rest of the Fourth Battalion’s dead. The king needs what men he can get.”

“But—”

“Do you *want* an ogre rampaging in your bar? Just do it. Not many men have made the Raven cry. This one must be special.”

“You know,” Nathaniel said, “my life was damned complicated enough already. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh, you didn’t know?” The woman with the bow stood and headed over, the arrow still on the string. “You’re pissing me off, Chester.”

Nathaniel sheathed his sword when the bartender went back to the bar.

“Join me,” the woman said quietly, nodding to her table. The knight and the ogre exchanged a glance, then followed her back into the shadows.

“Should I ask you to explain, or is it just going to muddle my already unclear understanding even further?” the knight asked.

“She’s been asking me to help her for four or five years,” the woman said, “but I keep telling her that I can’t, not alone. I’m an archer. I need a front line or something, or I’ll be dead before I can do anything.”

“What does she need done?” the knight asked.

“She won’t tell me. She won’t tell anyone until they agree, unequivocally, to help her. She was really hoping that you would be it.”

“Why?”

“Can you blame her? She’s a lonely woman, and every woman has her knight-in-shining-armor fantasy at some point. I think she’s desperate enough to be having hers now.”

Nathaniel blinked. “*Me?* But I’m a damned crappy knight.”

“Everyone projects a little differently in the dream world. It’s a purer distillation, in some ways, but it can be deceptive, as well.”

“So who are you?” the knight asked.

“Tabitha Swift. I generally keep the areas within a three days’ walk scouted, but you’ve slipped in between my patrols.”

“Ah. My name’s Nathaniel Gray. Knight of the Fourth Battalion... or former Fourth, however you want to put it. This is—”

“Noraka, Gerog’s mage,” she murmured. “And so you’re going to call him Norman now?”

“God, I hope not,” the ogre muttered. The knight smiled slightly.

“Only if I have to. We have to figure out how to unbind him from me.”

She raised her brows, waiting until the bartender had brought their food and left again before speaking. “An ogre bound to you? How did you manage that?”

“Killed Gerog,” the knight said. “We were expecting it to end, not pass.”

“Ah. From what the Raven’s said, they only end by death, formal dismissal, or a stronger mage’s magic, depending how they’re set up,” she said.

“How’s one dismissed?”

She shrugged. “No clue. Where you’d find a stronger mage than a demon, I don’t know.”

The knight and ogre glanced at each other.

“Demon hunter?” Nathaniel said.

“I would hope so,” Noraka replied.

“Why *are* you helping him, anyway?” she asked the ogre.

“What, you think I *like* what the demon’s doing here? I had a nice, quiet life going for me. I’m not a very good mage, but I know enough to know that there’s likely only one way to kill this demon, barring the reopening of the ancient schools of magic. He had the marks of four trolls freshly on him, and he was still alive. Whatever she needs done to bring her back, if it involves killing, he’ll likely manage it.”

She rubbed a scar on her neck. “The schools could stand reopening anyway.”

“Yeah, like the temples will allow magic openly back in the kingdom,” Nathaniel said.

“Hey, I’m not saying it’s likely,” Tabitha said, “but it would be useful.”

“You give me the impression you’re expecting to go with us,” Noraka said to her. She shifted her eyes back to the ogre.

“I suppose I don’t have to, but I’ve been telling the Raven I’m willing to be back up for a couple of years. I’d appreciate the opportunity to keep my word to her.”

“And if it gets you killed?” Nathaniel said.

“Better than sitting around here waiting to get kidnapped into a demon’s harem.”

“Well?” Nathaniel said to Noraka.

“She’s not as helpless as most human women,” the ogre said.

“Yeah, but the question is whether that’ll make her more or less annoying,” the knight said.

“Two humans and an ogre will probably be easier to swallow than one of each,” Noraka said.

“Any way it goes, I recommend you procure a new shirt before you manage to find her in this world,” Tabitha said to Nathaniel. “The Raven can be shy.”

“Shy? *Her*?” the knight said.

“You may be getting a more open projection of her right now. Which will surface when she’s actually here is anyone’s guess.”

“You seem to be on fairly good terms with her,” Nathaniel said.

“I know what it’s like to be a capable woman in a world of men. She never fared so well, from what she’s hinted.”

“Not if she’s bound to someone,” Noraka said.

“I supposed in that respect having a woman along would be useful,” Nathaniel said.

“In what respect?” Tabitha asked.

“If she’s in one of those ‘claw out all men’s eyes’ female moods when we find her.”

“You’re not married, are you?” Tabitha said.

“What, that’s not obvious?” Nathaniel said. “I’ve spent the greater part of my meager adult life spilling blood. Wife and kids doesn’t really figure into that. I figure at this point in time, it’s probably better not to inflict myself on a woman full time.”

Noraka glanced at him. “I don’t know. Some of the farm lasses of your species are daft enough to just cook and reproduce.”

“Yeah, but that means I’d be somewhat obligated to contrive supporting them. I’m probably not going to live that long, anyway.”

“Are you more optimistic?” Noraka asked Tabitha.

“Generally,” she answered.

“Then I, for one, would very much appreciate your presence.”

Nathaniel lay awake late that night, staring at the ceiling of the room as the ogre snored on the other side. One day, two allies... if that kept up, he could have a regular army... Nah.

He was reluctant to fall asleep. He needed to find her, but he knew he couldn't really control his dreams, couldn't control their length... He was asleep before he realized it.

He found himself standing in the middle of an open plain, looking up at a crescent moon. Where, when – they didn't matter, he told himself after a moment. It was a dream. He began walking, then running, following the moon.

The plain fell away to desert; the desert rose back into hills; the moon sank lower in the sky. He was beset by monsters – her nightmares, he realized. Vampires, both seductive and deadly; dragons, cunning and cruel. Then he found himself pursued by bears, and sometimes tigers. Why would these things scare a demon hunter? He couldn't quite understand, following the moon up into the mountains, finding the only pass blocked by a massive fortress. The path just below it was littered with the skeletons and corpses of dead warriors.

“The end,” he murmured, mostly to himself. No one could beset such a fortress alone... He settled his eyes on the moon, then took a step towards it, then another... and the path emerged, up the slope, up a steep ridge, away from the fortress, until he was scaling a cliff. He reached the top to find the moon before him, and he continued on. So the fortress was off the path...

The path descended into a glade, through it, to a mist-covered lake. The stars seemed closer, the moon bigger—

He stopped on the edge of the lake, opposite the island with the tree. She was sitting at the base of the tree with her head on her knees, crying.

“Why do you weep?” he asked softly, his words drifting across the lake, and she startled.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“We got off to a bad start,” he said, “and I misunderstood your intent.”

“Not completely,” she said, her face sad. She was clothed now in a gown of white silk. “I cannot ask this of you, Sir Knight.”

“But I need your help. All of the world does. No one else has the training to kill a demon.”

“No one has ever managed to free me, Sir Knight. Why could you?”

“I don't know. How *does* one free you?”

“There is a dragon named Theranor, to whom is bound an elf commonly called Puck, but his name is really Aron. Killing the dragon will free the elf, and the elf can bring me back.”

“Only the elf can?”

“He sent me here. So yes.”

“And why would the elf be willing to free you, then?”

“He didn't *want* to send me here. The dragon made him.”

“Why did the dragon want you here?”

“The demons approached him about it. Aron is an extremely powerful and skilled enchanter. The dragon forced him to bind himself to him as part of an agreement to keep the dragon from using an artifact to take over the four duchies. The demons gave the dragon one of their own for ten years in service in return for having the elf send me here.”

“The four duchies have been the kingdom of Salendovar for over four hundred years,”

the knight said.

“I’ve been here a while.”

“So all we’ve got to do is kill the dragon?”

“You say that as though it will be easy.”

“Why not? I mean, yeah, dangerous, but I’ve been killing things for most of ten years now. I *am* getting somewhat good at it.”

“At killing things,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“And that’s all you do?”

“Not really much else I’m good at.”

Her eyes welled up again, and he sighed slightly.

“Where is this dragon?” he asked.

“He used to have his den under the Shattered Crown.”

“The what?”

“You aren’t familiar with it? They say it is where Reginald threw down his crown and gave up the throne of the Salendar Empire, dissolving it into the four duchies, the county of Marcova, and the free city of Pelar.”

“But where is it?”

“Atop the Marshal’s hill in Pelar.”

“The Standing Stones? All right, now *that’s* crazy. They’re full of old magic, and Gela’s priests have declared even just approaching them an act of heresy. That’s not to mention that they’re under twenty-four hour, daily guard, and Pelar is the capital of Salendovar.”

“So you won’t do it?”

“No, I didn’t say that. It’s just going to be more complicated.” He paused. “Do you have a name besides the one everyone seems to know you by?”

“Veronica.”

“Just Veronica?”

“I was taken from my family when I was four. That’s all I know.”

“Taken from your family why?”

“To enter the Academy.”

“That’s a little young, isn’t it?”

“Not for training to hunt demons. You have to know a little bit of everything for that, and a lot of some things.”

“And you didn’t mind?”

“What did I know? I was four. I left the Academy when I was twelve.”

“If it only took eight years, why didn’t they just start you later?”

“I said that I left, not that I graduated.”

“Why leave?”

Her face fell slightly. “It doesn’t really matter anymore. What is your name, Sir Knight?”

“Nathaniel Gray.”

“Hm. I had guessed you to be more of a Michael. Ah, well.”

He found himself on the island suddenly. “Shouldn’t I get going?”

“Time has no effect here. Infinity is but a moment, and every moment is infinite.” She stood. “Do you not want pleasant dreams, Sir Knight?”

“They’re not an option for me anymore,” he said. “If we’re going to be meeting face to

face shortly, I'd rather you didn't develop too many unrealistic expectations about me. I'm just a man, and generally not a very good one."

"But you're a knight," she said.

"That's why. I serve a king. And what the king tells me to do, I do. If he wants a village punished for refusing to pay its taxes, I do it. If he wants heretics killed, I do it. My life is ultimately going to be short and unpleasant. I try not to let people get too attached to it."

"Then why do you serve a king?"

"Because there's not much else I'm good for besides that."

"You are not that bad a man."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you are trying not to hurt me."

"I said I wasn't a very good man, not that I was cruel. If helping you helps my king, that's two reasons to."

"Your king doesn't seem like a very nice man."

"Yeah, well, I can't do much about that."

"Where are you from?"

"What does that matter?" he asked.

"I would like to know you."

Nathaniel was quiet a moment before answering. "I don't think that's a good idea."