

The Saga of Valric the Wanderer

Book Two:

ALL HALLOW'S EVE

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It was about noon on a chilly All Hallow's Eve. People were preparing a feast in the town of Finnadian, in the highlands of northern Britannia.

All were invited, including passerby's, one of which happened to be a kilted half-elf Ms hair was shoulder length, to hide his elven half because some Gaul a few towns back had a problem with that. Not that Valric was afraid of a fight. Just not one every time he walked into the tavern, or the livery, or the market...

Anyway, Valric was enjoying a roasted boar and listening to a bard string a yarn to the local 'wee ones, about a local noble lord named "something or other" MacFinnan (Valric wasn't to good with first names). " He had everything: a wife, a manor, even a gambling problem. One day, MacFinnan, went to the inn in town and gambled all night, winning every hand of cards he played. Dozens of men left that place broke and in debt. Around dusk, MacFinnan was getting ready to leave when a single man entered. He was dressed in black armor and a helm. The stranger gestured to the card table. MacFinnan couldn't resist one last game. So they played for two hours, and at the end, MacFinnan had lost everything, his manor, title, and even his wife.

The mysterious man left the inn with one word. "Midnight."

MacFinnan, the coward he was in heart, ran into the highlands, never heard from again. But, that night, the Black Knight came to his keep and took his wife.

And ever since that day, on All Hallow's Eve, her ghost searches for her champion, to protect her until the sun rises, for that is when the Black Knight must return to his lair, or else perish by the sun-light. " the bard finished, leaving the children awestruck.

Valric snorted. "MacFinnan was a coward, and I'd kill him myself, given half a chance. "

The bard turned and smiled. "Perhaps brave one, but would even you fight the devil?"

With that, the bard was gone. Valric left as well, a few hours later, with a full belly and feeling like just leaving the next time a bard decided to give a "free" story.

The moonlight illuminated the silvery mist that teased the mossy ground beneath Valric's feet. The kilted half-elf shivered uncontrollably in the night air. Throwing on his cloak, the clansman looked up at the harvest moon through the trees above.

"Sweet Bridget, you'd think the blasted moon was 'argon," he wryly observed.

No sooner had his breath crystallized in the highland air, then a huge wolf came out of the brush. Valric quickly drew his sword, the ancestral weapon of his clan, then the beast leapt at him, knocking him prone. Struggling underneath the unusually large creature, Valric bit it's foreleg in desperation.

Surprised the beast jumped off Valric and turned to face him. Valric scrambled to his feet and assumed a defensive stance with his blade. The wolf charged Valric, who side-stepped the attack, but not before being cut by a razor sharp claw. Warm blood gushing from his wound, Valric slashed at his furry attacker with vigor, but only succeeded in slaying thin air, for that was all that was left.

"Sweet Jesu, what was that?", he demanded.

Hastily binding his wound, Valric took off deeper into the wood. As the night wore on, the cold cut even through the tartan cloak Valric wore. He tired quickly and cursed his luck.

Exhausted and numb, Valric came across an old keep in the middle of the night. He rapped on the heavy oaken door with his fists, succeeding only in hurting his knuckles.

"Ah, blameny"; he cursed as he drew his sword. Three swings later, the splintered door lay on the floor and a drained Valric was starting a fire in the old fireplace.

Minutes later, with a decent blaze going, and the damaged door leaning against the door frame, Valric took a look around. It was an old place, with cobwebs hanging in the ceiling corners, and faded tapestries on the stone walls. Several velvet chairs lay around the room where Valric was warming himself. Pulling one up to the fire, Valric fell asleep.

Valric awoke in a bedroom. The sheets on the bed were new, and the wool blanket was tucked tightly into the sides of the bed. Feeling around the sides of the bed for his sword, he grasped a pair of silken slippers. "What in blazes, I know I had a little 'stout in the last pub, but this is ridiculous," he murmured to himself as he slipped out of bed.

As his bare feet touched the carpeted floor, a hand touched his shoulder from behind. Whipping around with a start, Valric prepared to face his "companion". Boy, was he surprised. A woman, of about 25 years, with dark auburn hair, and striking purple eyes stared at him as though he were mad.

"Duncan, what's wrong?" she pleaded, her voice etched with concern.

"Wha- what's wrong? Who are ye, and how did I get in this bedroom, and who are ye!" stuttered Valric.

She sat up in the bed, her hair falling on her nightgown. She looked confused for a second and then smiled.

"You're my Duncan!" she exclaimed, catching on to what she thought was a joke and leaned over the bed and hugged Valric fiercely.

Valric pushed her away gently and spoke.

"Sorry lass, but I am Valric Connal of the clan Connal, not, um, Duncan."

She laughed again, the laughter sounding like the tinkling of small bells. She rose and ushered Valric into a hall. She led him through the hall, down the stairs, to the den, where he had started a fire seemingly moments earlier.

But, it was as if it were a different room altogether. The once faded tapestries were alive with vibrant colors, depicting pictures of a handsome man, dressed in plate armor, holding a shield. The carpet, once tattered and worn was rich and soft to Valric's feet. Shadows danced on the painted walls from the fireplace.

"Duncan..."

Valric turned around and was confronted with a hand mirror. He was about to announce that he was growing tired of this charade, when he noticed the reflection. It was that of a stranger. The hair was shades lighter, the contours of the face were different, the elven features that distinguished Valric's ears had been rounded out. This was the face of a different man.

"Witchcraft. You've cast some sort of spell on me, haven't ye?" demanded a very distraught Valric.

"Oh, Duncan no, what are you talking about? It's me, Cora, how could you accuse me of such a thing?"

Cora collapsed on the ground by the portrait of the man, and began weeping.

Valric sighed and looked up towards the heavens as if for guidance. "So Cora's your name. It's a good one, lots of famous people named Cora, that's for sure."

Realizing small talk futile, Valric stepped to the door and opened it. He was hit by a gust of cold air.

"At least the weather hasn't changed," he mumbled. "Cora, what day is it?"

"All Hallow's Eve, dear, same as this afternoon, when you went to town."

Valric could tell her voice was strained, but she hid it well. He didn't mean to upset her, but it's hard to stay calm when you're looking like a stranger. Gazing into the night, Valric heard something approach the door. He strained his eyes to see what it was, but it was too dark. Then suddenly it came into view. A figure riding on horseback galloping straight for them. Any other horseman wouldn't have raised much suspicion in Valric. Nor did this one, this one struck terror in Valric. The horse's eyes and mane were aglow with fire, and it's hooves trod on air, inches above ground.

Valric slammed the door shut and placed the piece of timber that barred the door in place. "Cora, were you expecting company?"

"No, no I wasn't, Duncan, is something the matter?" she asked after putting herself back together.

The door flew off its hinges as a blast of searing heat struck it. Part of it caught Valric in the back of the head and knocked him to the ground. He groaned and collapsed in a heap. Then a gust of cold wind blew through the room, extinguishing the fire and chilling Cora to the bone.

She turned her head towards the door and gazed into the blackness. But that blackness wasn't the night, no it was much worse. It was the only way to describe the aura of fright that the figure standing in the doorway projected. The figure was huge, at least eight feet tall, and filled the doorway of the keep. It wore plate armor which was charred the deepest black and covered his entire body and a helm that covered its entire head. An ornate sword hung at its side. It was shaped in the form of a man, but its humanity stopped right there.

The creature surveyed the room and then moved towards Cora, slowly but deliberately. Cora, terrified shrank back into a corner by the fireplace, whimpering. The Black Knight was unaffected by this ingenious hiding place, grabbed her by the waist and swung her over its shoulder. Turning around it headed back for the door.

"Buaidh no bas", shouted Valric, charging the creature.

Valric impacted the monster, and bounced off, succeeding only in bruising his head. The Black Knight continued to move forth towards the door, unaffected by the attack. Valric leapt once again this time succeeding in taking Cora from the fiend's grasp. The monstrosity turned towards Valric and began lumbering after him.

"Come on!" shouted Valric and ran with Cora into the bedroom, where he locked the door.

"Like that'll help", he muttered. He was about to search for his sword when Cora pushed him against the wall and kissed him.

"You saved me", she whispered.

"Ha! Hardly, that *thing* will be comin' through that door any second now, but, um, you're most welcome lass." Quickly slipping past Cora, Valric found his trusty blade under the bed with his dirk. He sheathed the blade and slipped the dirk under his belt. He glanced at his bow in the corner, but judged them worthless against this foe.

He instructed Cora to hide under the bed and escape through the window if Valric didn't come back in ten minutes. Then, Valric left the chambers.

Reciting a prayer in his mind, Valric stepped forth into the hearth-room. The Black Knight stood in the center of the room, sword drawn, waiting. Inhaling deeply Valric saluted his opponent by holding his sword up to his face, then assumed a defensive stance. The Black Knight returned the salute mockingly and swung its blade in a wide arc towards Valric.

Quickly blocking the attack, Valric recovered and made a thrust towards his opponent's stomach. The Black Knight threw its own sword up in the air, grabbed Valric's sword with one gauntleted fist and back-handed Valric in the face with the other. The force of the blow sent Valric spinning like a top into the hearth (thankfully extinguished) without his sword.

Then the Black Knight laughed, the first sound to come from it since it entered the keep, a sound that chilled you to the bone. It yanked its own sword back from the spot where it stuck on the ceiling and threw Valric's own sword back to him. Valric accepted it warily, the realization that he was being toyed came to him then, and made him reassess his opponent. Then the two combatants entered battle once again. This time though, Valric was careful not to give his opponent an opportunity to disarm him.

And so the two warriors fought. The Black Knight making powerful slashes and thrusts, while Valric blocked and dodged, hoping to wear his opponent down. They continued like this for quite a while until Valric had an idea.

"Noble opponent," Valric began as he blocked a particularly strong head-shot, "Begging yer pardon a moment, I have an idea as to how we can end this."

"So do I, here's how it works - I cut your head off, you die, I take the girl." Boomed a voice inside Valric's head.

Valric licked his lips and continued, his plan still forming inside his mind. "A tempting offer, but nonetheless, why don't you listen to mine before you make any rash decisions. "

The "knight" stepped back and leaned on it's sword.

"Excellent. Here's my proposition, we'll have an archery contest. The one man who sinks the most bulls-eyes with a dozen arrows takes the girl."

The fiend laughed again, it's grating voice sounding like broken glass tossed about a barrel. *'7 will play your silly game, but only because you amuse me, mortal'*

A chill went up Valric's spine as he heard that. Could this be the devil the bard sole of?

Soon, they were both outside the keep. Valric checked his lemonwood bow for any cracks and picked out his straightest arrows. Ms opponent produced a black bow, made from a material Valric didn't recognize, thought it looked like bone...

A single lantern illuminated the target, a hastily set up bale of hay from the stable with a circle painted on the center. It was only about half an hour until sun-rise.

Valric shot the first arrow, hitting dead center. The knight followed suit, splitting Valric's shaft with his own bone arrows. The two competitors took their time with the next few shots, until they each had one arrow left. Valric fired first, and hit the target Bulls-eye! Then the knight nocked his arrow and aimed, but at that moment, the first rayof light emerged from the horizon and fell upon the Dark Knight. The light burned him, and sent his arrow off course and into a tree, yards away from the target.

The fiend turned on Valric and shouted: *"You tricked me!"* Then the defeated "Knight" disappeared in a flash of red smoke.

When Valric returned to the room where he had left Cora, she was gone. He gathered his things and left the keep, which had mysteriously reverted back to the shabby state Valric had found it in originally. On his way out the door, a gravestone caught his eye grown over with vines and shrubs. On it was inscribed: *Here lies Cora. Protected, she rests in peace.*

Epilogue

For years after that fateful night, the bard ended the story with a lone adventurer who broke the cycle of tragedy, by beating the Devil at his own game: a fixed bet.