

# Vanor

The Journey Begins



By Vicki Wilson

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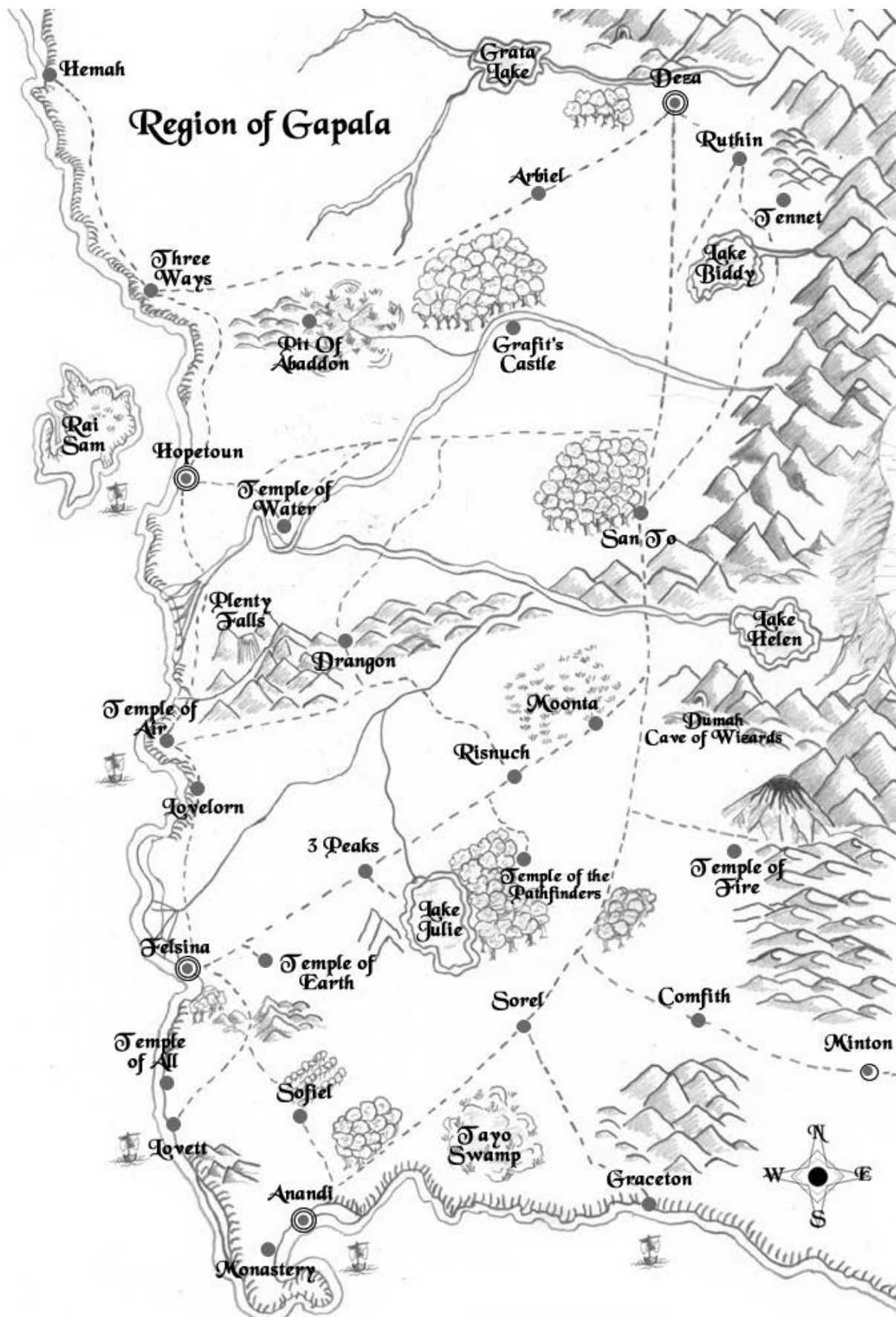
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# Chapter 1

## Freckles

The dapple-grey warhorse lunged again at the nearest wolf. He bit hard into the black fur and threw the beast aside into yet another snarling wolf. Vanor had been taken from the saddle only moments before as a large black wolf had leapt high, with teeth bared, tearing a large gash to the bone in her leg. She had somersaulted backwards off the saddle and had landed on her feet ready for the next onslaught. Vanor fought hard and strong, slicing through wolf after wolf with her thin glowing longsword. It danced in her hands as her robe of chain mail jangled and sang, small flurries of snow kicked up with each movement.

But they attacked again attempting to reach the stallion's mistress on the ground behind him. The stallion fought hard, dodging the bared teeth of the wolves, but there were too many in the pack. Then the stallion squealed with pain as a wolf raked its belly. They were down to four wolves now but these four were tougher and stronger than the others combined. Vanor jumped over the wolf that had broken its neck when it had attacked her in the saddle moments before and sliced through another snarling wolf; it yelped before its final breath and landed on the reflective snow.

The remaining two wolves retreated through the snow leaving blood trails in their wake. Silence descended and Vanor limped over to the stallion, clutching her leg as the pain swelled in the wake of receding adrenaline. Vanor touched Freckles' proud neck as his laboured breathing became apparent. He turned and looked full in her eyes and held her gaze for a moment. Then those large dark eyes closed for the last time and he fell on top of her, and everything was pain and then darkness.

Vanor woke confused as everything was white, her face was cold and she could not breathe. She coughed and then the snow fell from her face and she realised she was pinned to the snow. She had pain, lots of pain, and then she remembered and in shock and disbelief, struggled away from the weight.

Standing and shaking with cold and trembling with remorse, she reached down and touched the now cold neck of Freckles. Tears streaming down her face, she remembered the night he was born and how he had walked up to her on trembling legs and nuzzled her hair and then returned to his first drink from her father's prized mare. She could even remember the smell of the barn, the taste of her mother's cooking and the good times she had when she was only eight. Two years later things changed when the wolves came down from the hills and killed her father's horses and nearly her as she had been tending them. But Freckles had galloped like the wind away from the carnage with Vanor badly wounded on his back.

Freckles had taken her unconscious body to the local inn and had kicked at the door for someone to come and rescue her. Apparently he had waited there all night, biting anyone who came close, waiting for her to recover, and only then would he go to the stables and rest. The blacksmith was then allowed to come close and stitch his wounds. They had become inseparable in the years since and she now regretted the stupidity of this journey, the draw of something she could not define and her loss.

Tears drying in the cold wind, Vanor knew that with the baying of wolves in the distance they would not be long. The snow was almost sleeting as she collected all she could carry and staggered under the weight of her pack, her misery and her pain. She felt the snow easing off slightly and she stumbled and almost fell as she trudged onwards.

Eventually she tripped over and fell onto the embankment at the side of the road. As she tiredly stood up, she knew from memory that off to the right, just above that small hill, she would be able to see the lights of Ruthin twinkling in the distance. The pain was worse and each step seemed to be getting shorter and shorter until she stumbled and fell into the soft snow and lay still, wanting to forever sleep. Sleep was good, sleep now and everything will be better, sleep... and she tumbled into that darkness, not resisting or fighting, just falling.

The three friends laughed at the bawdy pitiful joke that Kajn told as he took off his chain mail and breastplate and placed it in the corner of the room. The handsome dark knight with dark eyes flashing, chuckled at his own joke as he reached for the mug of warmed ale his friends had poured for him. The fire crackled and hissed in the corner of the room as they all discussed who was going into the tournament the next day and which events each would be competing in.

The oak door crashed into the wall as the Old Man, his cobalt blue robes shimmering about him, stormed into the room and swiftly moved to the table of friends.

“NOW!” cried the old man. “I need you to go now.” His voice rattled dust from the tower’s rafters and he continued. “I don’t care that it’s snowing. I don’t care that you will be playing with your friends early tomorrow, I need you to go NOW!” His brilliant blue eyes flared with anger and even the tall dark-haired knight cowered slightly. They were left alone as his friends fled; they knew that the Old Man could easily turn them into something nasty or worse ratlike – with a glance when he was this angry.

The old man quietened and swiped his wooden staff across the table. Spilling the drinks that were half consumed he lay out a hastily drawn map that showed the nearby town and outlying roads. “She will possibly be at the Inn in Ruthin or on the North Road. She is riding a dapple-grey warhorse and has a longsword that I gave to her years ago and she is not afraid to use it. She is to come straight here before the end of the full moon has run its course for the ritual.

“She will not know of this ritual but will be compelled to travel with you,” the Old Man said. He sighed: “the last scrying showed that she was close to Ruthin, on the south side heading here. Your horse is saddled,” he added dismissing him with a wave of his hand.

The knight glared at the Old Man, “And who is this young waif?” he sneered, “that you would send a champion out to play nursemaid for a faster journey. Who is she that is so important to you Old Man?”

The Old Man’s eyes flared. “She is the Beginning, the Future and perhaps also the ‘One’. She is to fight all present and future evils and needs our help to get there. She has been given talent by the Gods to help the balance of good, but she has no way of knowing how to use these talents yet. This is our mission. You are part of the equation to help her learn to be even better than a knight, to think on her feet and to always strive for the greater good.”

Kajn relaxed his gaze and realised now that the Old Man would not humiliate him in front of his friends unless it was for a great cause. His anger subsided and was lost in the dark corner of the room. His mission would bear great consequences. “Did you saddle the black?” he asked, strapping on his shoulder armour. The breastplate with dragon insignia flashed silver in the candlelight. Kajn wondered why being a champion did not let him relax as the weight of the armour made his muscles ripple in the firelight.

The Old Man furrowed his brow and then held his head and looking distressed answered, “Of course, you will find him in the courtyard. I feel something is happening, please hurry,” and the Old Man was gone, with only a mote of light sinking slowly to the floor to show he had even been there.

On cold nights like this, the innkeeper seldom left his old wooden rocking chair by the fire as he sipped his mulled wine. His inn was successful enough that he could let everyone else do the work on slow nights like tonight. The two local farmers chatted away quietly in one of the booths; a drunkard had fallen asleep and was snoring softly in the corner but he seemed to be comfortable.

As the innkeeper was just nodding off in his chair, the door opened, letting in cold wind and snow flurries, revealing the dark knight. "Innkeeper, have you seen a young girl traveller come through here tonight?" The knight looked distressed and his snow-covered armour and cloaks were leaving icy trails in his wake. The innkeeper frowned at the muddy boot prints left on his just cleaned floor.

"A girl? No, only my girls are here tonight. Dorothy is over there by the bar and Marion is upstairs asleep."

The knight sighed and looking temptingly at the fire and ale, turned around and headed out the door again, leaving only the now melting snow and mud on the floor. All could hear the warhorse gallop off into the distance. The innkeeper was bewildered that a knight would travel so fast and furious in this kind of weather and he sipped his warm mug of wine, pondering the insanity of one such knight.

The galloping horse made no sound as it dashed into the snow-covered track of the North Road. They had made good time to Ruthin but Kajn had been disappointed that the girl was not at the inn. Kajn pushed the black to jump a snowdrift over the road and was surprised into nearly losing his grip on the saddle by the black shying sideways. Kajn regained control and wondered what was beneath the snowdrift that would scare the horse. As it snorted and pranced, Kajn watched the snowdrift turn from a clean white to a patch of red and he realised that it was not a snowdrift at all.

He leapt out of the saddle, drew his sword, but as he got closer he saw a slender black boot that was surely not a male's. He quickly uncovered the body of a girl who was covered in deep gashes and wounds. One very deep wound was bleeding profusely from her leg. There were tears in the chain mail and something white and triangular fell onto the snow. "Why would this girl be wearing chain mail?" he thought. He picked up the triangle of white and from the light of the full moon he growled, "Wolves, I might have known."

Kajn placed his bandanna onto the deep wound and then placing both hands under the girl's back, gently cradling her in his arms, he lifted her onto the black. "Damn, I hope this won't take long," he murmured to himself as he cantered back to the inn. The sword lay glowing blue in the snow and quietly winked out without anyone noticing.

The innkeeper fell out of his chair and spilled his wine when the knight booted the door in. "Innkeeper, help me with this please." The innkeeper rushed to the door and noticed the knight carried a bundle of blankets. The girl murmured something and the innkeeper jumped again.

"It's just a girl, but she's badly injured and needs help. I have to return to my quest. Look after her and I'll return soon." The knight dropped a bag of coins on the bench and as he did so the girl opened her eyes.

"Who, where?" Vanor murmured. Kajn looked at her and was instantly mesmerised by how blue her eyes were. They seemed to have flecks of light that danced in his soul.

"I ... I'm going out for a moment," he said, "but I'll be back." He turned and dashed out the door, leapt into the saddle and headed out of town.

The innkeeper grumbled and yelled out to Marion to clean up the mess that the knight had again left on his floor. With the help of Dorothy they carried Vanor upstairs to a spare room. Marion