

CHAPTER 1

Veriasse could taste the scent of vanquishers in the crisp mountain air. Beneath the sweaty odor of the horses, lying deep below the aroma of pine needles and leaf mold, he could barely detect the acrid scent of a dronon vanquisher's stomach acids. This was the third time he had caught that scent in as many days, but this time it was closer than in the past.

He reined in his mare at the crest of the mountain, raised his right hand as a sign for those behind to halt. His big mare whinnied and stamped its feet, eager to forge ahead. Obviously, the horse tasted the strange scent, too.

On the muddy road behind him, the Lady Everynne reined in her stallion, and Veriasse just sat a moment, looking back at her. She had the hood of her blue cloak pulled up, and she hunched wearily in her saddle, too tired to remain alert any longer. The wind was blowing at his back in wild bursts, rushing through trees with the sound of an ocean, gusting first from the east, then from the south. In such weather, one could seldom tell where a scent originated. A vast forest spread below them, and Veriasse could see little of the road they had just traversed—only a thinning of the pines in the valley. Overhead, thunderclouds rolled across the evening sky. In minutes, full dark would fall upon them, with the storm.

Veriasse raised his hands. The olfactory nerves running up his wrists could detect the subtlest smells. He could taste a person's nervousness from across a room, detect the scent of an enemy across a valley. Now, he could smell a man's fear behind him, along with the acrid odor of a vanquisher.

"Calt?" Veriasse called softly. The big warrior was supposed to be trailing them as a rear guard. With Calt's sharp ears, he should have heard the call even at half a mile. But he didn't answer. Veriasse waited for a count of four.

Downhill, far behind them, Calt whistled like a thrush, three short calls. It was a code: "Our enemy is upon us in force! I will engage!"

Everynne gouged her stallion's flanks, and the horse jumped forward. In a heartbeat she was beside Veriasse, looking back down the trail in confusion, as if to wait for Calt.

"Flee!" Veriasse hissed, slapping her stallion's rump.

"Calt!" Everynne cried, trying to slow and turn her horse. Only her ineptitude as a rider kept her from rushing headlong back down the mountain.

"We can do nothing for him! He has chosen his fate!" Veriasse growled. He spurred his own mare, grabbed Everynne's reins as the horses surged forward, struggling to match pace.

Everynne looked at him, her pale face flashing beneath her hood. Briefly, Veriasse saw the tears moistening her dark blue eyes, saw her struggling to fight off her confusion and grief. She hunched low and clung to her saddle horn as Veriasse pulled her horse over the rise, and soon their mounts were fluidly running downhill, side by side, over muddy roads where one misstep would throw a rider headlong to his death.

Veriasse pulled his incendiary rifle from its holster, gripped it with a cold hand. A wailing sound echoed over the mountains, freezing Veriasse's bones, a keen death cry that could not have issued from the mouth of anything human. Calt had confronted his vanquishers. Veriasse held his breath, listening for more such cries, hoping Calt would be able to fell more than one of the monsters. But no more cries reverberated over the hills.

Everynne gasped, and a wracking sob escaped her as the horses raced through the oncoming darkness between the boles of tall black pines.

Five days. They had known Calt only five days, and already he had sacrificed his life in Everynne's service. Yet of all the places the vanquishers could have attacked, this is where Veriasse least expected it, on a quiet mountain road in a backward place like Tihrglas. This should have been a pleasant ride through the woods, but instead Veriasse found himself hunkering down on his horse, thundering over a muddy road, numbed by cold and grief.

Veriasse was weary to the bone, yet he dared not close his eyes. For an hour they rushed through the darkness and pelting rain until the horses could no longer see well enough to run. Even then, Veriasse pushed the horses as fast as he could, sensing that the vanquishers would soon overtake them, until at last the woods opened up and they clattered over a long, sturdy wooden bridge.

The river below them was a swollen flood. Veriasse shouted, drove the horses forward mercilessly till they reached the far side of the river, then halted.

He leapt from his horse, studied the bridge. It was constructed from heavy logs with planks laid over the top. He could see no easy way to topple it, so he fired his incendiary rifle into the planks. Stark white flames erupted for fifty meters across the bridge. The mare jumped and bucked beneath him in fright. She had never seen the chemical fire of an incendiary rifle.

The cold rain had soaked through his robes, and Veriasse longed to stay a moment, warm himself beside those flames. Instead, he took Everynne's reins and pulled her stallion forward.

"Let's stop here," Everynne said. "I'm so tired."

"There is bound to be another settlement just up the road. We can't stop now, my child. We're so close to the gate!"

He urged the horses on, and Everynne did not answer him, just sat stiffly in her saddle. Ten minutes later, they climbed another small hill. Veriasse looked back to see his handiwork.

The bridge was an inferno across its entire length, lighting the muddy river in a dull red, fire lit smoke billowing overhead.

Yet on the far banks of the river, Veriasse saw the giant form of a green-skinned vanquisher in battle armor, staring at the swollen river in dismay.

When Gallen O'Day was five years old, his father took him to the Widow Ryan with the notion of getting the boy a kitten, and on that day, the Widow Ryan said something that saved Gallen's life a dozen times over.

It was a cold morning in Clere, with a dusting of new-fallen snow on the autumn ground. Gallen's father wore a badly stained brown leather greatcoat and a pair of green woolen gloves that had no fingers, and Gallen clenched his father's hand as they went to knock at the widow's door. The Widow Ryan was so old that many of the children in town told stories of her, naming her a witch and saying that the priest had drowned all her babies for being leprechauns.

The widow's house was grown from an ancient, gnarled pine tree, thirty feet in diameter and two stories tall, with assorted black branches poking out like ruined hands. Many houses in town had grown from seeds taken from its cones, but none of the other houses were quite so vast. Often, crows would fly up from the rocky bay and caw in its branches. The widow's husband had been a tinker, and when he'd found a pot that was not worth mending, he had brought it home to use as a planter. Many a blackened iron kettle still hung from branches on that ancient tree, and Gallen imagined they were suitable vessels for a witch to boil children in.

Gallen's father rapped on the heavy door. Moss grew up the wrinkled bark of the tree, and a large brown snail oozed near Gallen's foot. The widow opened the door, hunched beneath a heavy blue shawl. She ushered them into the warm house—a fire crackled in the stone fireplace—and took them to a box by a faded couch. The widow's cat had seven kittens in a variety of colors—one with orange-and-white stripes, two calicos, and four

that were black with white faces and boots. Gallen hardly knew which to choose, so the widow allowed that he could sit and watch while she and his father talked.

Gallen looked the kittens over, and he half listened as the widow told stories from her youth. Her father had been a merchant and once bought seven olive presses down in Ireland, thinking to retire. He'd taken the whole family with him, but a storm blew them into uncivilized lands where wild Owens roamed—hairy men who had lost their Christianity and now wore only brass rings piercing their nipples. The wild Owens ate her family, but held the widow prisoner on a rocky isle where they brought their dead along with gifts of food every full moon, leaving the corpses for her blessing. She'd have to feast for days before the food rotted, then she'd starve afterward for weeks. The island's soil was white with the bones of dead Owens. The widow survived for a summer in a haphazard shelter under a leaning slab of marble, teaching herself to swim until she could finally brave the vast waters.

Once she escaped, she traveled the world. She'd gazed on the statue where Saint Kelly had carved the face of God after seeing his vision at Gort Ard, and as she described the statue, neither male nor female, old nor young, she cried at the remembered beauty of it.

She told how she had wandered for days at the Palace of the Conqueror near Droichead Bo, never twice entering the same room, and there she found a small hoard of emeralds that had been overlooked by treasure hunters for two hundred years.

Gallen quit listening, turned back to the kittens. Between his breathing on them and poking them, the kittens soon woke. He watched them stretch and search for their mother's nipples; then he began playing with them, hoping that since he could not make a choice, perhaps one of the kittens would choose him. But the kittens were not used to small boys, so they ran about the house frolicking with one another.

One kitten in particular caught Gallen's eye: the orange-and-white one would glance into a shadowed nook and hiss as if it had seen a ghost, then it would leap up the couch, climbing as if