

# THE WAY OF UNITY

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VELSPAR - ELEGIES

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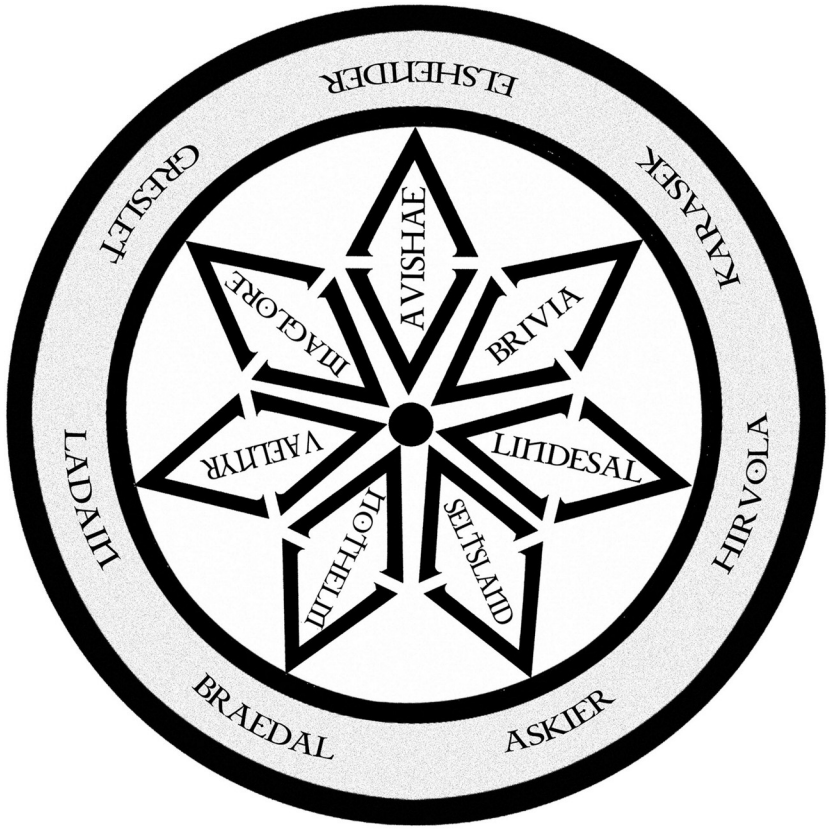


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Full map of the Seven Lands of Velspar available at [www.sarahkbalstrup.com](http://www.sarahkbalstrup.com) or via QR code.

See end matter for detail maps of Avishae, Brivia, Lindesal, Maglore, Seltsland, Vaelnyr and Nothelm.



## BADEN FOREST, AVISHAE

### One Year Before The Fire

“INTERCESSOR CAMIS?”

“Yes...”

“Shall I extinguish the Alma?”

“Yes.”

“You are shaking. Is it too strong? I will open the tent.”

“Please.”

“Can you open your eyes?”

“No. Pass my Meridian, the vision is too strong.”

“Your hands aren’t moving. I will position it for you. The first stone is at your forehead. Now the second is in place, at your crown. You will feel the nape stone as I tighten the band. There.”

“Thank you.” Intercessor Camis felt the sensations return – flesh and hair and earthly scents. His heart dully thudded. A rasping dryness in his throat.

Camis opened his eyes.

Landyn Raeburn was with him, and Camis looked about the tent, regaining his bearings. The swept earthen floor, the sacred instruments, the parchment and ink set out, ready to record his vision.

Camis wiped the sweat from his aged hands, his white robe

smudged with dirt, the leather pouch of dried Alma still hanging open at his waist.

Landyn secured the flap so the smoke funnelled out, and looked down at him nervously.

“I am well, Landyn. Sit down,” Camis said with a gesture of his hand.

The two men sat on stones either side of a small fire pit, and Landyn smothered the coals with a copper dish, placing a lantern amongst the ashes. Twilight had fallen since Camis had arrived at the Raeburn camp, and Landyn’s eyes pursued him in the dim grey light.

“What did you see?”

Intercessor Camis regarded the man. “I am curious to know what you saw. Were you able to penetrate my vision?”

Landyn’s throat clicked as he tried to swallow. His brow furrowing as impressions coalesced in his mind. “I felt my heart being torn from my chest. Some great tide stealing my daughter away.” He tried to smile. “Such is a father’s grief when his daughter marries.”

Camis saw real terror in the man’s eyes. “Rebekah is a Skalen now and I am sure you feel the distance of her new station, but the dread that hovers about you in this moment, it is stronger than that. You do not fear simply for your daughter.”

Landyn frowned, then rose suddenly to close the tent. When he returned to his seat, he leant forward and whispered. “What did you see? Please, Intercessor.”

Camis met Landyn’s stare. “Around the seven-pointed Skalens’ Star is a circle. At its heart there is a circle. My vision clothed itself in the Chant of Conception, drawing my attention to these circles, to the cycles that purify, to rebirth, and the eternal spirit of which we are part.”

Landyn gathered the parchment and began to write. “Would you recite the Chant for me?”

“Only High Initiates are allowed to hear the sacred chants. I am sorry, Landyn.” Camis drew a long breath and exhaled. “I believe we are approaching a time of great transformation. A difficult time, as you have sensed.” The Intercessor paused. “Landyn, I came here not

simply to teach you the principles of Intercession, as you have asked, but because I have seen you in my visions.”

The man looked up.

“You are connected to Velspar’s fate, as is your daughter, but perhaps not in a way you will like. There are parts...that are yet to become clear, but I must impress upon you that whatever sacrifice you are asked to make, it will be for the glory of Velspar.”

Landyn licked his lips. “What type of sacrifice?”

“There is blood in it. And that blood will open The Eighth Gate.” As Camis spoke, an image arose in his mind. The self-fertilisation of a holy seed. The absorption of Mother and Father into an eternal child. An image of actualisation, of perfect unity. An image that this man before him would not understand.

Landyn’s quill scratched out the words and hovered there, a drop of ink falling from its tip, spreading dark upon the page.

“What is the Eighth Gate? I know of the Seven Gates of Wisdom. Is this for the Intercessors alone to pass through?”

Camis nodded. “Those blessed by Velspar will hear the call.” The Intercessor laid his hand upon the wiry muscles of Landyn’s arm, that twitched, giving off waves of heat. He siphoned the redness out until the man’s spirit grew calm.

“You will not be among them,” Camis said. He absorbed the flicker of anger as it issued from somewhere deep in the man’s gut. “We each have our holy purpose, and yours is to be our sentinel.”

Landyn’s mouth formed a grim line.

Camis shivered, a feeling of lightness coming upon him. “You must protect this place for our return. Will you do it?”

The man set down his parchment and drew a shaking breath. Camis sensed his thoughts twisting this way and that, searching for a way to be counted among the elect.

Landyn drew his ink-stained hands to his forehead and bowed. “Yes, Intercessor.”

Camis stood, readying to depart, for already he had stayed too long. “Velspar’s blessings upon you.”

“Velspar’s blessings,” Landyn murmured as he stared, transfixed, at the words on the page.

**PART I**

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**THE FIFTH GATE**

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# WALDEMAR



## The Year of The Fire

*THE WAY OF UNITY must not be lost. When you read my words, slow first your breath, and open your inner eye. Among them is a silver thread. Follow it, and you will find Velspar. Return always to Velspar.*

*We are the threads that together form the Great Stream.*

*Before Velspar, we were fragmented.*

*Death desiccated the spirit,*

*And we were lost to the wind.*

*The light in us scattered, ever outward.*

*Like so many bright stars, we separated,*

*And other forces held us at their mercy.*

*We were mixed with the dark spaces between the stars, and we remained unconscious.*

*Then, Velspar, the eternal,*

*Called the silver threads of spirit to gather,*

*In one place: in Velspar;*

*As Velspar.*

*When the Holy Ones were revealed,*

*The Stream was purified, and fortified, through our unity.*

*Mother Siatka, serpent of sea,*



*Father Kshidol, bird of sky,  
Opened their mouths,  
And guided us home.  
And so opened the eye.  
It opened in the earth, beneath and among us,  
and within our own minds.  
All who are lost – in vision – may find Velspar.  
All who are lost may return to Velspar.  
Turn inward.  
You have passed this way before.*

*INTERCESSOR WALDEMAR RASMUS OF BRIVIA, 700.*

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## SYBILLA

### **Six Years Before The Fire**

HER FATHER WAS YOUNG. He was Reyan Terech then, and nobody's father. He was just out of boyhood and there at his mother's behest. Reyan was running down the Temple stair, slipping on blood as he tripped, but the Intercessor drew him back into the room. Reyan was afraid. He had passed the First Gate of Wisdom – sympathy; the Second – to know a vision's source; and the Third – to instil a vision. The Fourth was to administer blood rites, and these he had performed, but to pass through the Fifth was to follow red thoughts right down to the base of the stem. To know the substance of evil intimately, so one might recognise its symptoms in others. The necessity of the Fifth Gate was to be alleviated by the promise of the Sixth – where red thoughts were drawn out; and the Seventh, where one learned how to cause evil's dissipation.

The Blood Call had ended for the day, and with the sealing of the door, smoke rose thick around Reyan, stinging his eyes. The Intercessor was still there, the soft flesh of his cheek quivering as it rose into a half-smile. Was he the only one there? No, there were others. The Intercessor's fingers were greasy with oil of Alma as Reyan's wrists were bound. He could not run now if he tried. Reyan's tongue

grew heavy in his mouth and could no longer form words, but he knew the binds were to prevent the initiates from clawing their eyes.

Reyan's name swung back and forth in the gloom. The smoke was so sweet he began to drool. *Reyan*. They were checking whether he was still there, or if he had passed through. All parts of him swelled, as if he were an overripe fruit, the animal essence rising in his flesh, showing itself. The pain in his head was unbearable, his fingers like sausages, and his other part deformed past imagining.

In a shocking surge of will, he prised open his eyes. A momentary breeze passed through the window. They stood there, motionless and trembling, naked of their robes, their faces naked of skin, their eyes seeking some forbidden place at the back of their skulls. An excretion pulsed from their bodies that stank of pack animals and rutting, of raw flesh ripped with the teeth. Reyan could not bear to look at them, and with all of his strength, he moved his eyes to the wall.

The wall was white.

He stared at it, refusing to close his eyes. Smoke coiled and shifted and, in a flash, he saw something concealed there. A scaled form liquefying the marble, pushing up against it as if encased in an egg sac. She split through. Siatka's scaled body emerged from the wall, first in relief, then fully formed. She slithered low across the floor so the others wouldn't notice, moving quietly around Reyan's legs, encircling him – his ribs, his neck – cracking his bones into splinters. She smelt of soured milk, of bloodied rags. She squeezed until the world turned white – Reyan's thoughts exploding into stars.

He was almost gone when he felt Her release. Her scales whispered across his skin, Her body slick with spiritual blood. She moved away from him, leaving the throb of his injuries, the chill of his nakedness.

He could hear Her, a sound all meaty and wet, but he did not want to see. It went on and on, Her fevered presence circling, waves of terror emanating from the bodies in the room. They were there, the others – on some level he knew that – but when he opened his eyes, the space was empty, bone white and blood stained, a forsaken place where they had left him to die.

Only then did he see what had become of Kshidol – The Father –

the winged one. His belly had been full to bursting with the flesh of the dead. So heavy was He that He could not fly. So sated was He that He fell drowsy and slept. His eyes were glossed with Alma, skyward in ecstasy, even as She gorged herself, ravaging the swell of His belly.

Her eyes fixed on Reyan, sensing the rousing of his consciousness. She tasted the air, yearning for the oil at his wrist, the sweet smoke in his hair, and his flesh that was suffused with it where it had got in through his mouth and nose. The Alma. She neared, and nobody came to help him. She slid through his spirit like a knife—

Sybilla gasped for air.

Her body was drenched in sweat and the sheets stuck to her skin.

The vision had come again. She stared at her hand as if it were on fire, a prickling sensation running up and down her arm.

Sybilla considered lighting a candle but did not want anyone to know she was awake. The sick feeling lingered, drawing menace into the darkened rooms of the Skalens' House. Unable to withstand the intensity of her own imaginings, she slid out of bed and crept across the flagstones to find her sister. In the hallway, one of the night lamps spluttered, a mouse darted, but all else was still.

She opened her sister's door. "Lucinda," she whispered.

Nothing.

"Lucinda," she said, louder this time.

The mound of sheets groaned as she tiptoed into the room.

"Sybilla? What are you doing?" Lucinda mumbled.

"Can I sleep here till morning?" Sybilla perched herself on the edge of the bed.

Lucinda sat up, glaring in the grey light.

"I just..." Sybilla could not find the words.

"You had a dream."

Sybilla nodded.

"Why don't you just put on your Meridian and sleep in your own bed?" she said, pulling the covers around her.

Sybilla hugged her knees, emptiness shivering at her back.

Lucinda sighed. "It's alright. Take mine." She reached beneath her pillow and offered the Meridian.

Sybilla traced the leather straps, determining which way it should

go. She positioned the blinding stone at the three points – forehead, crown, and nape – then tightened the band. The stones exuded their cool serenity, their obliterating numbness spreading out to encompass her.

“Thank you,” Sybilla said and lay down beside her.

“Don’t be like that, you can come under the covers,” Lucinda said, turning on her side to face her.

Sybilla shuffled in, staring at the ceiling. “Did you go to town today? I could hear the drummers practising from here. I don’t know why they start so early, Festival is more than a month away.”

Lucinda exhaled sharply. “Do not wake me in the middle of the night to talk of trivial things. What is going on? This is the second time this week. You are too old to fear your dreams.”

Sybilla remained silent. She’d bothered her sister too many times with this, but she preferred Lucinda’s lectures to a night alone in her chambers.

“Siatka and Kshidol are symbols, not gods, Sybilla. You have to trust in this. The creatures that come to feed at the altar do so because they are hungry. They hold no power over the living or the dead.”

Sybilla looked at her sister. In the soft light, she could just make out the curve of her cheek, the gleam of her eyes. She wanted Lucinda to understand. “Are you telling me that you feel nothing at Blood Call?”

Lucinda sighed. “I don’t like to be near them, but that is because they are dirty animals. If they were anything more, then Mother would have told me.”

She must have felt the sting of her own words, the favouritism they implied, because when Lucinda spoke again it was in a more careful tone. “I’m sorry, Sybilla. I know it is hard, but they are only distant with you because you feel things so deeply. They don’t want you to worry. Mother is preparing me and I want to tell you everything, but I must also keep her confidence. Just know that things are going well. Father is making progress.”

Sybilla shifted away from the pressing warmth of her sister’s arm.

“You know what scares me?” Lucinda gave her a half-smile. “That

horrible guard from Maglore. His face would give anyone nightmares.”

Sybilla let out a snort of laughter.

“See? Things are not so bad. We are safe here,” her sister said. “Now try to get some sleep.”

Sybilla turned to face the wall. As the smile faded from her lips, a familiar disappointment settled around her. Lucinda seemed to live in a different world. The one person Sybilla could have confided in about her dreams was her grandfather, and he was gone. She remembered how he had looked up at the Intercessor at his bedside when he was days from death. How the flick of his hand told Sybilla to conceal her thoughts, and quickly.

The Intercessors had their tendrils everywhere, and her grandfather did all he could to arm her against them. Ever since she was a child, he had set aside his duties in the Skalens’ Guard to train with her. Most afternoons, Sybilla and her sister would go down to the barracks to see him, and there he would be, staring into the middle distance, waiting for their silence. He’d present a cup or a leaf or a stone, and ask them to fill their minds with it, to become nothing but the thing they saw. They’d practise with sounds, with feelings, with nothing itself. Then they would test one another. *What am I thinking of now?* To Lucinda it was a game, and she enjoyed it even though she rarely won.

For Sybilla, the silence preceded a yearning to spill out of herself, to be taken by the flood of images and sounds that shook from silver threads. This was not Hiatus, her grandfather told her, but the first stage of Intercession, and his look told her that she should not pursue that path. He wanted his granddaughters to learn Hiatus, the Guard’s principle – the remedy he had taught his son – to make them impervious to harm. For if the spirit was silent, it could not be heard. If it was protected, as if by a shell, it could not be breached. And that was his gift to them.

The day he died, his body was washed and wrapped in white cloth. The Intercessor held her hand above her grandfather’s forehead and closed her eyes, listening for the call. Numbly, Sybilla watched the woman’s eyelids flicker and the reddening of her hands.

*Mother Siatka hears his call*, she said, and so it was decided that her grandfather would be buried at sea, to be reborn as a girl-child.

The next day, Sybilla and her family arrived at the Gulf, making their way to the front of the crowd. The Intercessors had cleaved his body into seven pieces, wrapping each in fine muslin, anointed with oil of Alma. They had built a raft for him, chanting softly as they sent him out upon the waves. The shore was thick with mourners and Sybilla was thinking of the tumour at his throat, wondering whether the Intercessors had cast it out, or whether they had wrapped it up with the rest of him.

The first of the siatka rose from the waves, tipping the raft. She saw one of the white-wrapped parcels lodge in wide jaws before it disappeared beneath. Her father gripped her arm. A sickly pulse went through her and she glanced up. She looked into her father's eyes, and that was when it happened. The vision coursed through her, every part of it – from him to her – in a surge of anguish. It could not be undone. And when they roused Sybilla from her faint, her father looked upon her in shame.

The vision lay between them like a burning chasm, the horror of what had been done to him, and he would never let her in again.

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## SYBILLA

### **Six Years Before The Fire**

SYBILLA SHIFTED IN HER CHAIR. All day she had been troubled by feelings of unaccountable dread, but when she saw her father, she knew he felt it too. Something had happened – was happening, would happen – and its darkness would run all the way to their door. She tried to catch Lucinda's eye, but her sister chose that moment to pour the wine. A sweet, sharp tang filled the room, but no one reached for their glass. At the head of the table, Sybilla felt the charge of her father's silence, and the rushing torrent beneath.

Her mother's thorn-bitten hands fussed over an arrangement of crimson roses at the centre of the table. They were the first of the season – impressive in number – and arranged lengthways in a glass vessel that showed the cleanness of their stems. With petals pursed, the newly opened buds sat atop one another, fringed by dark leaves. One was too long and had to be pushed down, another unfairly shaded by foliage. A wet smear needed to be polished from the vase. And all the while the Attendants waited, the evening meal growing cold as they stood with their silver trays along the far wall.

Finally satisfied, her mother sat, smiling briefly at her daughters. Her father signalled the Attendants, and the white-capped proces-



sion advanced. Dinner was roast fowl, pale carrots, nubby potatoes, and turnip. The Attendants ladled gravy into their trenchers. Lucinda took a single spoonful, her mother slightly more, but her father did not notice till his meat was drowned.

With a clatter of plates, the Attendants filed out, closing the door behind them.

Finally, they were alone.

Her father rubbed his face, groaning slightly, but his frown did not shift.

Sybilla drank deeply of her wine, willing the muscles in her jaw to relax.

“The roses are beautiful, Vivienne,” her father said, lifting the fork to his mouth.

“They are indeed,” her mother said, smiling.

Sybilla could hardly bear their conversation. She could feel the half-formed words, the restlessness of her father’s thoughts as he maintained his inner focus, his barrier against her. But her mother’s arrogant displays of normalcy were especially tiresome. The way she fawned over her flowers, wasting her mornings in the garden as if the future of Vaelnyr did not hang in the balance.

Her parents were in talks with the Greslets of Maglore, that much was obvious, but every ally her father brought over to their cause widened the web of trust, leaving them vulnerable. The Intercessors’ psychic tyranny was subtly woven, impossible to trace, and every move her father made to prepare a force against them laid a greater weight of culpability on her family. When he disappeared for days, forging allegiances, whispering with her mother in the dark, he drew their enemies closer. Soon they would notice, soon he would make a mistake.

Sybilla’s gaze was drawn by the movement of Lucinda’s hand smoothing a lock of blonde hair behind her ear, and she could tell her sister was thinking about Bryden. It showed in the quirk of her mouth, the dimple forming on her cheek. She just carried on as if life would be a fine adventure. Did their father not see that Lucinda was unfit to rule? That she was pliant and easily led astray by dark-haired

men? That Sybilla was the only one who could see the devils among them that hid in human skin?

She tried to think of the right words to say, each unspoken impulse leaving her throat a little tighter. She needed to know what her father was doing.

Sybilla swallowed the piece of carrot she had been chewing. “I saw guardsmen from Maglore in the training yard today.”

Her father raised his eyebrows. “We welcome guardsmen from all the Seven Lands.”

Sybilla reached for her glass. “Will he be sharing a banquet with us at the Skalens’ table?”

“He has dined with us already,” her father said, the firm set of his shoulders reminding her of a stone wall.

Her mother gave her a pinched smile. “Guardsmen Rayhmer has just been appointed Head Guard of Maglore. This is his first tour of Velspar and he brought a small contingent with him, but he is not a cultured man. Not much of a conversationalist.”

Sybilla exhaled slowly, cutting the gristle from her meat.

Her mother moved forward in her chair so the lower half of her face disappeared behind an effusion of flowers. With eyes downcast, her mother’s cheeks flinched with the action of chewing. Her father scooped his gravy to one side, scraping a skinless section of breast against the lip of his trencher.

Sybilla nudged her food about, separating the turnip from the potatoes, the carrot from the meat, the meat from the fat, until she had five equally unappetising portions.

There was a knock at the door.

Her father turned in his chair at the sound of the bolt and Peran appeared in the doorway. The Head Guard of Vaelnyr strode toward her father and whispered in his ear. The colour seemed to leech from her father’s face.

“Yes, I agree, it would be best,” he said, “make all the necessary arrangements.” He looked at her mother first, and then at his daughters. “Skalen Jagoda Hirvola is dead.”

Her mother’s face went still, calculating.

For the first time since their meal began, Lucinda broke from her daydream. “How? Was she murdered?”

“She died of pneumatic flu, and yet her husband and sons were not afflicted,” their father said, pushing out his chair.

Her mother’s eyes sought his and her father’s gaze darkened in reply.

“Peran tells me the Intercessors have decided on sea burial,” he said.

His chest rose and fell, a tense exhilaration building in him. He glanced at Sybilla pointedly and with a jolt of shame, she withdrew her mind from his. She stared at the roses, willing their colour to fill her, along with the shape of their repose. To immerse herself in Hiatus to give them the privacy they sought, but her heart was pounding too hard for her to concentrate. Under the table, she reached for Lucinda’s hand. A childish habit but one that worked when nothing else would. She concentrated on the softness of her sister’s hand, the fine bones of her fingers, the place inside her that was unharried and free.

“When will the burial take place?” her mother asked.

“Peran did not say, but we should leave tonight. Best that we offer our condolences before the other Skalens arrive. The situation is far too sensitive.”

Lucinda shook Sybilla off, and stared at their father with incredulity. “Can they not wait until morning? What are we to do with Guardsman Rayhmer?”

Her mother stepped in. “Skalen Cerek is grieving, as are his sons. We would not want the wrong words to be spoken into susceptible ears.”

Lucinda pressed her lips together in frustration. “Can you not wait until the Skalens’ Council is called?”

Sybilla knew Lucinda would only bite back with such keen irritation if her parents’ absence affected her plans with Bryden. The absurdity of her sister’s perspective might have amused her if she did not feel as if the world around her was falling apart.

Her mother held her hands together and stared intently at the floor waiting for Lucinda to regain her composure. “We must go

because it is our duty," she said quietly. "Your duty, Lucinda, is to remain here in our stead."

Lucinda met her mother's gaze before offering a conciliatory nod.

Her mother's eyes flicked back and forth between her daughters. "While we are away, you are to remain here, in the Skalens' House. If anything happens, Peran will know what to do. He will be keeping watch, and will convey our apologies to our guests."

Her mother cradled Lucinda's head in her hands, pressing their foreheads together.

"Goodbye, Mother," Lucinda said, softening at last. "Velspar's blessings upon you."

"Velspar's blessings," her mother whispered.

As they embraced, Sybilla watched her father, his shoulders hunched as he paced, the name *Karasek* teeming about him like a plague of ants.

"Farewell, Sybilla," her mother said, her face oddly expressionless, her thoughts already on the journey ahead.

They touched foreheads, and her father approached to say his goodbye.

Sybilla looked up at him as he bent down, not wanting him to go. When their foreheads touched, she felt the firmness of bone, smelt the homeliness of his hair, but his movements were absent of feeling.

Tears rose in her throat, and as the door closed behind them, she felt the distance between them widen.

Sybilla looked at her sister with reddening eyes. "I hate this."

Lucinda shrugged in sulking resignation. "It will be a month, nothing more."

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## SYBILLA

### Six Years Before The Fire

SYBILLA PEERED DOWN at the figures in the training yard, comb gripped tight in her hand, concealing herself behind the thick velvet drapes. As the guards went through their drills, Peran and her father walked, locked in focused conversation, her father shielding his eyes from the sun. Peran spoke with a placatory tilt of the head, his gestures imploring, or apologetic – she could not tell. Her father paced, his hands on his hips. The two looked at one another and nodded, some decision being made, then walked out of sight.

In watching them, Sybilla had stopped brushing her hair. She daubed oil on her fingers, smearing it along the teeth of the comb, setting to work on a stubborn knot that had been bothering her all week. She didn't like the Attendants touching her, but her mother would send Anlyn with a comb and shears if Sybilla made a habit of leaving the Skalens' House unkempt.

Finally, the knot gave way, and she relished the smooth path the comb made through the dark waves of her hair. Parting it neatly down the middle, she swept the length of it down her back. She wore black britches and a belted maroon tunic adorned with Alma blos-

soms of appliqué silk, an ensemble respectable enough for a Skalens' daughter, but plain enough to allow her to melt into a crowd.

Sybilla was to meet Lucinda at the front of the Skalens' House at midday to accompany her on an errand in town. She strolled the empty hallway with time to spare, the sweet aroma of Alma incense wafting past, but soon she heard voices, and the creak of the council room door. The Intercessors must have just finished their audience with her mother. Sybilla froze, listening as their footsteps grew faint, the Intercessors descending the stairs, her mother crossing the entry hall on her way to the East Wing.

In the silence that followed, Sybilla's heart thumped and she stared at the hall's end, breathing the fragrant draught as she continued onward once more. She turned the corner, finding the council room door ajar, casting a splinter of light upon the flagstones. A gentle push, a quick glance behind her, and she went inside. Honeyed light filled the room, streaming in through diamond-shaped windows, illuminating the bluish smoke that still hovered in the air. It was as she'd suspected – on the copper dish at the centre of the Skalens' Table, the Alma still burned. Her arms grew heavy as she breathed, but she fought the feeling, reaching for the bell cover that should have been used to extinguish the spark.

Nothing else was amiss. The Skalens' Table and its fourteen chairs were perfectly aligned at the centre of the room, the floor swept clean. Still, her eyes skimmed every surface, as if she might discover some necrotic stain, some foul residue the Intercessors had left behind. Chewing her lip, she considered opening the window but thought the better of it. Her mother would be furious if she knew Sybilla had been in there.

Sealing the room behind her, she went down to wait for Lucinda.

The carriage was ready and the horses stood at attention, but she would have much preferred to ride in the saddle, she and her sister side by side. Sybilla lifted her hand to the gelding's black muzzle, his breath warm on her skin as he watched her with deep brown eyes. His chestnut companion had a stiffer temperament, and she moved her hand along his coat in firm strokes.

A moment later, her sister appeared dressed modestly in grey, her

loosely braided hair shining like cornsilk. Seeing her, the coachman advanced.

“Ready?” Lucinda called.

“And waiting,” Sybilla replied.

Lucinda laughed, hitching her skirt as she climbed into the carriage.

Sybilla jumped in beside her.

When her sister did nothing but stare out the window, Sybilla gave up any hope of conversation. She could sense the nervous thrum of Lucinda’s pulse, her floral perfume heavy in the air. Sybilla folded her arms, pressing her thumb to each finger, working her way back and forth, just to pass the time.

As they moved into town, the streets branched into laneways, the grey stone terraces standing wall to wall, their lower floors caught in perpetual shade. The Krigers’ shop had a red door, and when it came into view, Lucinda pressed her eyelashes with her fingers so they feathered brightly about her amber eyes.

A faint breeze was blowing and the door sign squeaked on its salt-rusted hinge.

Sybilla followed her sister, and the coachman departed, promising to return in an hour.

Mrs Kriger was poised for their arrival and smiled broadly as they entered. “Miss Ladain!” she said, only once, as if Sybilla were not there. “I have your order just here.” Mrs Kriger presented a small item wrapped in silk, peeling back the folds for Lucinda’s inspection.

Sybilla looked about the room, ostensibly admiring a set of framed scrolls on the far wall that recounted the Visions of Skalen Karasek. She wandered back to the counter as Lucinda drew out the fine silver chain, laying its gleaming pendant on her palm. A Vaelnyri woman had recently given birth to twin baby girls, their birth date coinciding with Lucinda’s own. The pendant was for the mother, who’d received Siatka’s blessing, twofold, and whose daughters would forever have the honour of taking pilgrimage with the future-Skalen of Vaelnyr, now that they were Birth-Kin. The front of the pendant featured two rubies nestled between the paired mouths of Siatka and Kshidol. On the back, their birth date was inscribed.

“It is perfect. Thank you, Mrs Kriger.”

Sybilla noticed Bryden waiting in the back room. With a reflexive smile, he moved out of sight. A moment later, he reappeared with a tray of biscuits, glazed fruits and a pot of spiced tea. His hands looked awkwardly large as he set out the shining teacups, pressing a finger to the lid of the pot as he poured. He placed a Kshidol-shaped biscuit on the side of Lucinda’s saucer, but Sybilla held up her hand, taking the tea on its own.

Bryden disappeared out the back and his mother proceeded to show the sisters about the shop. Lucinda dipped her biscuit into the tea, and sipped, complimenting Mrs Kriger’s fine taste, speaking of the mother and her infants and what a glory it would be when they were old enough to join her at Blood Call.

Bidding Mrs Kriger good day, the sisters walked two blocks before Lucinda squeezed her hand and departed down a side street, covering her hair with a grey kerchief.

Sybilla took a great breath of air and exhaled, making her way to the main street. She did not want to imagine what they were doing. Crammed in an alleyway somewhere, tugging at each other’s clothes, Bryden’s hot breath on her sister’s neck. No.

As she rounded the corner, she heard voices in their steady murmur, the caw of sea-birds, the splash and draw of the sea. People passed her, going about their business, paying her no mind. A cart squeaked along with its jostling cargo, and she could smell the acrid tang of potatoes brown with earth. She did not know why her sister took such risks. One night, in the dark, when Sybilla could not sleep, Lucinda had told her that she wanted to make a few choices of her own before a political marriage was forced upon her. That was all very well, Sybilla had said, but what if he got her with child? Her sister had laughed at that. *Don’t let your Temple lessons scare you, Sybilla, or you’ll miss out on all the fun.*

But her Temple lessons did scare her. The sharing of spirit, through touch or by other means, brought the Holy Ones close. When a child entered a woman, the spirit was put there by those same entities that consumed the dead. Lucinda dabbled with forces she did not understand – that is what instinct told Sybilla. But



perhaps her sister was right. The siatka and kshidol were animals, their etheric bodies nothing more than an Intercessor's trick.

Sybilla wandered past street vendors with their trays of cooked clams and merchants of all stripes selling Seltslandi water chestnuts, Maglorean spiced sausage and preserved roots from the forests of Brivia. She drank it all in, the sun warm on her face. As long as none of them spoke to her, she could enjoy this.

She passed a sweet shop where she used to buy candied aniseed for her grandfather. The door opened and the heady scent of peppermint and cinnamon brought her back to a simpler time, but she did not go inside. The Bindery next door was still closed, she saw. There against the glass sat a lopsided sign, 'Apprentice Wanted', written in Mr Watson's confident hand. The Intercessors had taken him a while back. Sybilla liked the man and had looked up his name in the execution tally, knowing what she would find. *Red thoughts, unrepentant*, it read. If only they knew the contents of her own mind.

By the dock, a man plucked out a tune on the lyre, and people from the tavern gathered to hear him play. A group of them peeled away from the crowd, stumbling as they sang.

Moving to avoid their path, she almost bumped into an old man who'd crouched to take his turn in a children's game of knuckles.

Sybilla slowed, pretending to examine lengths of cloth laid out in baskets beneath a billowing awning. The man wore a threadbare shirt and a faded leather cap. The children stared at him apprehensively as he took the knuckles in his fist and put them to his mouth. A moment later, he coughed, pretending to spit the knuckles on the ground. "Gah! Me teeth! Quick, help me put them back in!"

The children laughed, their faces full of glee.

"Again!" the youngest boy cried after he'd repeated the trick three or four times.

The old man got up with some difficulty. "Oh no, no, I need to keep a few. I won't be able to eat my supper."

Sybilla smirked, the man ambled on, and the children returned to their game.

Without the man there to make them laugh, the children seemed suddenly remote.

At Festival, the little ones tugged at Lucinda's skirts, wanting to dance with her, or steal a flower from her hair, but Sybilla, they left alone. Sensing the darkness in her, or the fear.

She stopped, having reached the end of the harbour, and sat on a low stone wall. From this vantage, the Temple loomed, dizzyingly white, making the clamour of the street below seem small and insignificant. For a while she stared out to sea, watching the bright waves whisper toward shore. The chiming of the Temple bells brought Sybilla back to herself. The pilgrims must have reached the Sky Altar, and in the distance she saw the kshidol circling like black sickles in the sky.

Here and there, families were arriving, claiming a spot close to the Long Pier so they could greet their loved ones when they came down from the mountain. A group of Intercessors joined the throng, emerging from the dormitory gate. It must have been the fine weather that drew them out; they did not normally come so early in the afternoon.

Sybilla started back, quickly, and with her head down. She sidled past a group of sweaty fishermen only to get stuck behind two men arguing over a mess of smashed glass and mustard seeds.

"Excuse me," she said, stepping around them.

There was a back route she could take, and once she found an opening in the crowd, she slipped down a side-street, sighing with relief. She needed to calm herself. If she was calm, they would not notice her.

Sybilla kept the rhythm of her breath. Thought of the old man spitting knuckles, the burst of laughter that made her smile. She renewed the thought over and over. It worked, at first, but then it didn't. It was not strong enough. Sybilla exhaled, held her breath a moment, and brought to mind her grandfather's face, his weathered hand holding a haloed dandelion. She inhaled, and with her breath's release, the dandelion seeds took flight, dissembling her thoughts... on the wind she was, unknowable, untraceable – nobody at all.

"Sybilla?"

A hand on her arm.

Blankly, she followed the white of his sleeve to a face that she recognised.

His smile was warm, his blue eyes bright.

"It is nice to see you here," he said, when she did not respond.

He removed his hand, his expression hesitant now.

"Intercessor Caleb," she said breathlessly. "I didn't see you, I was walking so fast, I am late to meet my sister." Sybilla looked down, noticing his robes were still grubby at the hem from walking with the farmers at dawn.

"I will see you at the Temple then," he said.

"Yes, of course. Velspar's blessings, Intercessor."

He held her gaze a moment longer. "Velspar's blessings."

The smile slipped from her face the moment she turned her back. She sensed that he still watched her as she walked, his curiosity casting hooks, but she would not be caught.

When she emerged from her detour, Lucinda was talking with the coachman.

"Dammit," Sybilla cursed.

The coachman saw her first, and looked her over with a mild expression.

Lucinda clapped her hands together. "Sybilla, there you are! Did you find the bracelet that I dropped?"

Sybilla held up her hands, shaking her head.

"Never mind," Lucinda sighed, her face flushed with the lie.

On their way home, Sybilla began to feel the creeping sensations of regret. It was not like her to lose track of time.

Lucinda's back was very straight, her jaw stiff with fury. "If you ruin this for me, Sybilla, I will never forgive you."

The silence stretched, and then it was too late to reply.

When they reached the Skalens' House, her mother was waiting at the entrance and she waved, smiling. Sybilla got little more than a nod before she took Lucinda on her arm, eager to see the pendant for herself.

Sybilla wiped her damp palms on her britches and stood there a moment, not wanting to follow too close.

As the coach drew away, she noticed someone standing in the

doorway of the Guard's barracks. Peran had watched them arrive and was watching her still. There was no place for secrets, no deceit that would not be discovered in time.

Lucinda was not free, but if she believed it was so, then Sybilla would not take that from her sister.

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## SYBILLA

### Five Years Before The Fire

THE ATTENDANTS STOOD in line to wave them off. In her lap, Sybilla held a basket of oranges that Anlyn had packed for the journey. The Ladains would be gone three days, hunting at Lake Nanthe. The Guard gave escort and Sybilla busied herself peeling an orange, the skin's sharp spray filling the carriage. Pasture extended in its endless monotony, but when Sybilla turned to point out a field of bright flowers, she saw Lucinda's chin had fallen to her chest. For a while, Sybilla ate her orange in silence, collecting the seeds in her hand before tossing them out the window. An hour or so later when Lucinda woke, the sisters looked nervously at one another but did not speak, keeping their eyes on the horizon and the thickening tree-line.

When Lake Nanthe came into view, the sun was low and there was a chill in the air. Sybilla stared out the window for passing farmers or people from the Lake town, but there was no one in sight. She tapped Lucinda's knee, and they put their Meridians on, concealing the band beneath dusty-brown kerchiefs. In the clearing, Peran and his men made camp, starting with the Skalens' tent. Sybilla and her sister waited in the carriage until they were done.

Once the fires were lit, the Ladains went quietly to their horses, for their true destination was a cave high in the Mountains of Jokvour. On horseback, her father led the way with her mother at his waist, and Sybilla behind with her sister. Peran assured them the people of Maglore did not travel the mountain paths often, and never by night. Still, they disguised themselves in shabby cloaks. As darkness fell, Sybilla could almost hear her father rehearsing the words in his mind. Her mother's body obscured sight of him, but Sybilla watched for a glimpse of his face within the hood, his eyes like shining coins.

The mountain path wound upward, and finally her father pulled on the reins. Sybilla could not see how this cave differed from any other. Once inside, her mother set Sybilla the task of preparing the fire while Lucinda swept out the entrance with a thatch of dry leaves. The cold wilderness took on a purposeful air as the fire settled into a steady glow, illuminating Lucinda's fine brushwork and the circle of stones their father had gathered as seats.

Her father called it a meeting of Council, and he was correct in calling it such, for any meeting of Skalens was a meeting of Council, but her father did not wish to speak with the Hirvola or the Karaseks, the Askier or the Elshenders. This Council drew allegiance from Vaelnyr's neighbouring lands. The Braedals of Nothelm in the north, and the Greslets of Maglore in the south. To the others, the truth would be given more gently, the temperature slowly changing so that when the time came, they would recognise the kinship of Skalens, and the Intercessors' treachery.

Sybilla looked out into the night. The wind came in waves, but through the rush she heard the thin whinny of a horse. She tensed. Her father called out in greeting. Sybilla edged closer to her mother at the sight of the lone horseman. It was Domhnall Greslet of Maglore. He was not yet a Skalen but would be soon enough. The man's black eyes appraised her father from a height. In the midst of his black beard was a soft mouth, his skin youthful and unblemished. Descending his mount, Domhnall secured the reins and moved stiffly after her father.

Her mother emerged in the firelight holding clay cups of water,

her eyes glassy with sleeplessness, her hair lit up like the setting sun. Domhnall's attention was on her father, and he barely glanced at the women, but soon realised his mistake and bowed deeply to Skalen Vivienne and her fine daughters. Important business rolled from his tongue, and her father received it with knitted brows, giving the Magloreatan heir deference, for he needed much from him in return.

Moments later, her father turned from Domhnall to the entrance where Skalens Damek and Lenna Braedal of Nothelm stood unsmiling, shaking off their riding furs. Lenna's reddish hair was braided high and tight, accentuating both her graceful brow and angular jaw. She was a full head shorter than Damek, whose broad shoulders and wolfish beard gave him a predatory appearance. Lucinda took their garments on her arm, laying them on a stone ledge in the shadows.

"Skalens, it is good to see your faces after a long journey," Damek said, looking at her mother and father as he removed his gloves.

Domhnall's face soured as he waited for the introduction that never came.

"Skalen Vivienne," Lenna inclined her head and her mother returned the gesture.

Damek looked at Sybilla, who stood in the corner with her hands behind her back, and then pointedly at Domhnall. "I did not know this was a matter for living heirs. We would have brought our Voirrey."

"Skalen Nevis is gravely ill and would not have survived the journey to Jokvour. Domhnall will be Skalen of Maglore soon enough. My daughters accompany us as a precaution," her father said.

At her mother's signal, Lucinda took Sybilla by the arm, and led her outside. The wind blew wildly, making the horses restless. Sybilla sat close to her sister, huddling for warmth, the two of them listening, just out of sight.

"Let us begin our Council," her father said.

Inside, they were silent for a time, the sweet Alma smoke wafting from the mouth of the cave soothing Sybilla's nerves. Time stretched, so that she noticed only rhythms for a while – Lucinda's breath, wind

rushing over stone, the throb of her toes as she squeezed them and let go.

Then came her father's voice. "We bear the title of Skalen as a demonstration of our clan's faith in the visions of Skalen Karasek, the First Diviner. Skalen Karasek revealed the name of spirit, and in Velspar we discovered the common thread that enjoins the living with the dead and the unborn. The thread that enjoins the Seven Lands in eternal friendship.

"But Skalen Karasek's vision said nothing of Intercessors. He did not command that we set people apart and clothe them in white. He did not say their visions should be the arbiter of truth. He did not ask us to build Temples or to give blood sacrifice on the anniversary of our birth. He did not decree that people be condemned for their red thoughts before they have committed any crime. He did not name a priesthood impervious to the Skalens' judgement, who should rule the people by stealth, encouraging the view that Skalens are best suited to the measure of earthly things – to matters of administration – and they the measure of spirit."

Sybilla glanced at Lucinda, who stared back, wide-eyed. It was one thing to know their father despised the Intercessors, but quite another to hear him pontificate in the presence of others.

"The Intercessors speak often of heresy," he went on. "In the execution lists it is by far the most prevalent crime. My reflections on this matter have led me to but one conclusion. I say that Skalen Karasek had one vision and one vision only. It was of Velspar – of seven clans united as one. That vision was true. But who was it that claimed the divinity of Siatka – a sea serpent, no less – and Kshidol, a foul-smelling carrion bird? These are not the words of Skalen Karasek. This is the corrupt vision of some other – some vile whisperer – perhaps the first Intercessor. It may have been his brother, a servant, a trusted advisor. Their name may never be known to us, but we know the import of that vision, we know what it has done to our people. It is our sacred duty as Skalens to remove the leech from the heart of Velspar. To pull out the weed that has grown up beside us, intertwining itself so that it would not be seen. We must put an end to the First Heresy."



Sybilla's heart thumped in her ears. She could hardly stand the silence that followed and pressed her fingernails hard into the flesh of her palm. Her father spoke of heresy, but by the laws of Velspar, he would be the one cast as a heretic. How could the Braedals be trusted with this? How could Domhnall Greslet? A son who would leave his dying father's side to collude with strangers. Or were they in on it together? Had they drawn the Ladains of Vaelnyr to this desolate place to end them?

Lenna coughed and spoke in a high, thin voice. "That was a rousing speech, Reyan, but I must confirm something before we commit the weight of the Nothelm Guard. You have come to this through *reflection*, yes? We have not come this far to name you the 'Second Diviner'."

"I understand that it discomforts you to know that I entered training at the Temple when I was a boy, but I assure you it was nothing more than my mother's fervour that sent me there. I have never been partial to vision. Yet, being among the Intercessors opened my eyes to the extent of their corruption, and for that insight I must thank her."

"In all seriousness, Reyan," Damek said, "the Skalens of Nothelm have awaited this day. We abide the Intercessors and their rites but it is high time our society progressed and left these primitive customs behind. You well know that I believe the lands of Velspar extend beyond the continent. The Nothelm Guard have sailed beyond the places where the siatka swarm, and there is free ocean out there. There is no telling what we will discover once they have been eradicated. And the first step toward this is the removal of the Intercessors. I do not believe the people will mourn their blood rites when they have the hope of new horizons."

At those words, Sybilla felt relief's softening glow. They would be allies. She closed her eyes and pressed her head into her hands.

"I can see you are hungry for this, Damek," her mother said carefully, "but we should not begin until we have the weight of numbers."

"Do not condescend to me, Vivienne." And by Damek's tone, Sybilla could imagine his sneer. "You speak indirectly, but I will lay your message out for the one to whom it is intended. Domhnall: we

must not seek to prove ourselves too early, your lands share a border with the Karaseks, so your task is to remain faithful to our cause, to keep quiet and to stand aside when the Karaseks put their noses to the wind. They will think you young and easily manipulated, and that is best, for they will count the Southlands as entirely within their control.”

Domhnall was quick to reply. “But what of the Elshenders? It makes strategic sense to establish a new trade route from Maglore. If the Greslets can keep the islanders in supply of food, they will not be so reliant on Port Innes.”

Damek scoffed. “It may look well on a map, boy, but the Karaseks will see your ambition and will have you surrounded. Do not think this alliance is forged to provide backing for another Greslet conquest.”

A tense moment followed. It was a horror from the history books that the original clansmen of Maglore had taken to consuming their own dead, believing they could absorb the spirit by mouth, thereby fortifying their bloodlines with the power of Velspar. The Greslets and their people’s army had ended all that, rising from obscurity to the holy station of Skalen. Domhnall’s imminent reign would herald the fourth generation of Greslet Skalens, but still, the Braedals did not seem inclined to welcome him on equal footing with the ancestral clans.

“Damek, please,” her father said, his voice barely audible.

Damek’s low chuckle echoed from the cave mouth. “I am just testing him, Reyan. Seeing if I can get his temper up, seeing what the Intercessors can get out of him. I’m impressed.”

Her father responded in a measured tone, turning their talk to other things. “Now that you are satisfied, can you advise of your brother’s progress—”

Just then, a strong gust of wind came, making it impossible to hear, and when it died down, they had moved on to the closing prayer.

Sybilla and her sister jumped to their feet, brushing the dirt from their clothes and moving to the horses. From the corner of her eye, Sybilla watched the assembly as they pressed foreheads, giving their

oaths. The Braedals departed first, leaving her father to pat Domhnall on the back, whispering some final confidence to see him home.

When her parents came near, they smiled. Despite the Braedals abrasive manner, all had gone as they had wished and they were happy. Sybilla burned with questions she could not ask. Behind her Meridian, a storm of words tumbled and swirled, places and names and the myriad ways in which their fates could proceed. Her father could not have perceived this, but perhaps it showed on her face for he reached into his pocket and set his own Meridian in place. Only then did he put his hand on her shoulder, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

The way back down the mountain was treacherous, and moonlight shone fitfully upon the path. Her parents were seasoned riders and took one daughter each, Lucinda at her mother's waist, and Sybilla at her father's. She felt his focus entirely on the task at hand, on wrangling the reins, so the horse did not try to forge its own way down. And so, Sybilla's thoughts returned to the cave, considering what had changed. They had Domhnall Greslet now and the future promise of their southern neighbour, Maglore. They had Nothelm to the north. But more than that, her father's vision for the future of Velspar had a name. The First Heresy. He spoke it like an accusation, but she knew – more than anyone – what that accusation meant.

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## SYBILLA

### Three Years Before The Fire

SYBILLA HUMMED, LOW AND DEEP, in breath's slow rhythm. She kept her eyes downcast and moved nearer to the others to hide her fear among their faithfulness. Each time her note ended, she gasped, sucking grey air that was sweet with smoke. Each inhalation softened her, welcoming her let go, to join them: her Birth-Kin.

The Intercessors swayed, the chains of their censers clinking as they ascended. Sybilla followed them, this year as every other, up the spiralled stair that wound the inner dome. She passed the fifth floor of the Temple without incident, as she had mastered that particular spur, but each time she found Hiatus, some flash of the Council meeting at Jokvour would return to her, and she scrambled to conceal it. If she did not, she wouldn't live to walk this stair again. Her name would join a different procession: *Sybilla Ladain – heretic*.

The echo of their footfall, the breath and the humming swirled around her. All about her, she saw her Birth-Kin, old and young, fair and afflicted, how they gazed at one another, their faces gentle with comfort. Sybilla ached to join them in the growing ecstasy of their breath as they moved higher, above the town. Within the humming

she eventually found her cold place, the point of unthought, cleaving to it as they reached the top of the seventh stair.

They stood in the Temple's holiest part, and all went quiet. The Intercessors came, one at a time, and Sybilla's hand trembled at the thought of the dagger. Intercessor Maeryn came toward her. Without wanting to, Sybilla met her eyes. Maeryn's pupils were black with Alma; they seemed to suck Sybilla down, like a rock into a chasm.

The Intercessor's warm hands held hers. "Speak your prayer, Sybilla."

She sweated hot and cold, unable to keep herself from the Intercessor's mesmerism. Sybilla's face fell heavy and the words spilled out of her, ringing in her ears as all the others recited theirs, starting moments before and after one another, blurring and overlapping in the hiss and clack of words that held magic but no meaning.

*Siatka of sea  
Kshidol of sky  
Life brings  
Gatherers  
Hear my Blood Call  
At last breath  
Guide me to Velspar  
Return me to the Stream  
Pure is the Stream  
Clear and bright*

With the cut, Sybilla flinched. Intercessor Maeryn pressed the cloth into her palm to soak the blood.

"Three drops for sky and three drops for sea, that is all they need, my dear," she said and smiled.

As the Intercessor took the cloth to the offering bowl, Sybilla glanced around at her Birth-Kin. Their faces were passive, hands dangling as droplets fell on the white floor. The Intercessors tore the white rags in two, mixing them in copper bowls with meat paste and Alma.

At the ringing of the bells, they descended, red drips smearing

underfoot. They followed the bowl carrier and the Intercessors with their drums, on and on in an endless trudge, out of the Temple, toward the Atilan Mountains and the Sky Altar. The pilgrimage was long, and the sun rose high above them, making the skin of her forehead sting. She drew the veil from her satchel and wrapped it about her head. Though she wore soft woollen socks, her boots rubbed blisters on her heels. She walked steadily, ignoring her Birth-Kin. Sybilla did not want their words of encouragement, their cloying hands or sympathy. She was one of them, yes, but she was also a Skalens' daughter. They all knew Lucinda was destined to rule, but remained wary of Sybilla, the sullen, dark-haired sister who could whisper things to change the tally or to turn their fortune.

The pilgrim's trail was well-worn, and there were places where they rested along the way. A little boy smiled at Sybilla over his mother's shoulder, sticking his fingers up his nose. A lad behind her laughed and patted her back. His touch scalded her, but Sybilla gave him a look mirroring the one he gave, a look of solidarity, of fellow feeling. Sybilla found the strength to walk faster then. She could not stand the child's eyes on her. Passing a man she recognised from the tannery, and a pretty maid with freckled skin, she tried not to notice the scent of their flesh, the unique story their sweat made known to all who came near.

Then the wind swept up from the mountainside, bringing heat from sun-drenched stone, and the whisper of reddening leaves. Sybilla loosened the sash about her waist and breathed. In the sunlight, the blue silk of her robe was mottled with stains. Insufficiently scrubbed stains. Anlyn always made a fuss over her birthday, pressing Sybilla's robes between hot irons, steaming the outer silks, airing the garment, smoking it in myrrh. But her sentimentality made her reluctant to scrub the blood, to completely remove its memory. It was disgusting.

Up ahead, Sybilla glimpsed the Intercessors, their censers in pendulous swing. The wind brought a meaty waft from the offering bowl, laced with wisps of smoking Alma. Upon the rise, the Intercessors began to chant. They had reached the Sky Altar. Sybilla stood at the back, her feet tight and throbbing. There, they smoked down the

kshidol. Four or five of the great birds hovered above, hanging lower on the air before they came to land on hulking claws. Even as she hated them, their presence paralysed her. Their plumage shone silvery black and their hook-knife beaks opened just a little at the scent of blood. The kshidols' eyes knew the Birth-Kin. Black breasted and ungainly in their movements, they walked like men, cloaked and ruffed. And then, stalking toward the bowl, the hunch-necked beasts began to eat. The Intercessors recited the Hymn to Kshidol, beating the drum.

*Kshidol!*  
*Swift feather*  
*Traveller*  
*Blood beaked*  
*Kshidol!*  
*Hear the call*  
*Heralded by blood*  
*Birth Call*  
*Kshidol!*  
*The flesh it wilts*  
*Carry the spirit*  
*Of our dead*  
*Kshidol!*  
*Bright wing*  
*Deep eyed*  
*Consumer of our dead*  
*Kshidol!*  
*Return to our kinfolk*  
*Boys*  
*Of bright flame*

When the bowl was empty, the kshidol took wing and the procession walked by drum down the mountain. It was quicker on their return. Sybilla gazed at the vista of Vaelnyr, imagining it free of the Temple's white obscenity. Time at home in her father's presence had filled her mind with sharp fantasies. In the years following her grand-

father's death she had felt prey to everything, but now she saw her father's mission as a glinting knife, and their allies the fist that would drive it home. She had dared to wish that this year she would not have to perform the Blood Call, but the months had rolled by, and still they were not ready. Things were delicate in Seltsland. The Askier could not be pushed. Cerek Hirvola was not in his right mind, and it was likely Lindesal would be ruled by his sons. The Karaseks... the Elshenders... the Braedals busy with their boats.

Sybilla willed herself to concentrate, to heed the danger of letting her thoughts wander onto dangerous ground. She focussed on the scene before her. A tessellation of grey roofs split by rivulet paths, running down to the Gulf, and on to the endless sea. As the pilgrim's trail passed the curve of the mountain, the Temple disappeared from sight, replaced by mottled trees that sheltered fonder memories. Swinging from branches. Diving into the cool stream. Shouting secret words to her sister beneath the surface. Listening through the echoes for her reply.

She kept her mind in that forest as the sun sank low, harnessed to the sound of her breath, the ache of her muscles, the sting of her blisters, and away from thoughts of what awaited her there. Nonetheless, with one foot after the other, she and her Birth-Kin made their way down, past the Temple, over cobblestones, past well-wishers with eager smiles, to the Long Pier at the Gulf.

At the end of the pier sat the Sea Altar. The wooden boards were strong. Blessed with smoke and infused with prayers. But there were cracks between them that showed the water below, and each gleaming gap threatened the sureness of her step. *They were nothing*, she told herself, *they could not harm her. They were nothing.*

Up ahead the Intercessors poured the Alma wine, and soon dark shapes gathered in the water beneath her feet. Black scales slithered to the surface, twinkling green with moss and plunging deep again, beyond sight. Dusk was falling and Sybilla shivered beneath the thinness of her robes. A jet of water shot up, leaving droplets on her skin. The siatka circled, undulating in their hidden tidal dance. They opened their jaws, anticipating the Blood Call, breaching the surface with red eyes fixed upon the Intercessors and the Birth-Kin. The



Intercessors scooped out the meat paste with their hands, tossing it high in the air for eager mouths that swallowed and resurfaced, again and again. The Intercessors raised their voices to drown out the wind as they recited the Hymn to Siatka, and with each word Sybilla felt an imperceptible tightening.

*Siatka!*  
*Large mouth*  
*Glint*  
*Of deep places*  
*Siatka!*  
*Salt one*  
*Keeper of dreams*  
*Hearth eyed*  
*Siatka!*  
*Hear the call*  
*Heralded by blood*  
*Birth call*  
*Siatka!*  
*Womb giver*  
*Milk one*  
*Purifier of spirit*  
*Siatka!*  
*Return to our kinfolk*  
*Girls*  
*Of bright flame*

At this final word Sybilla's heart nearly burst and she wanted to run ashore where her parents and sister were waiting. A band of Intercessors led the procession landward, as others gathered behind to nudge the Birth-Kin along. She was surrounded on every side. Sybilla counted her steps, counting loud in her mind to stave off their ever-attentive gaze. The blue-robed boy in front of her walked too slowly. With mounting anger, she watched his blood-smudged hand dangling at his side. He shuffled forward, smiling at the lights of Vaelnyr.

Then finally, underfoot, she felt stone.

She searched the darkened faces of the crowd. With a rush of relief, she saw Lucinda walking briskly, jostling past proud fathers and beaming nervous mothers.

Sybilla smiled, her eyes watering of their own accord. Her sister embraced her, a mutual squeeze, tight and brief. Later, Lucinda would comb out her hair and they would talk, but not here.

Linking arms, they made their way to the Skalens' carriage. Inside, her father gave Sybilla a hesitant smile. But there was pain in his eyes. The wound was there in the palm of her hand, and he did not protect her. It had happened again.

Her mother reached over, placing Sybilla's hand in her lap and set to work. Wetting the cloth, she scrubbed the redness that grimed the lines of her daughter's wrist. Gently, she dabbed at the gash till it shrank to the shape of this year's scar. Sybilla stared at it. Flexed her fingers. Curled her hand into a fist. The carriage had already started moving, and soon she would be back at the Skalens' House. She would not do it again. She swore it.

They would have no more of her blood.

## MAERYN

### One Year Before The Fire

IT WAS A COOL EVENING and the little house was hidden behind a copse of trees. Intercessor Maeryn's hair and neck were bound in muslin, her hands protected by long gloves, her robe hanging to the ground. Across her plump face she wore a veil so the man could not mar her with his spittle or his blood. It was important she did not have any physical contact with him, for the vital fluids were both potent and contagious.

She walked in the company of four guards, their faces hard and ghostly.

*"He will kill me this night,"* the woman had said.

Intercessor Maeryn had laid her hands upon the woman; had taken her guilt, her doubt, her shame, and promised her a remedy, but Maeryn would not end his life to save her. She would save them both.

As they neared the house, lamp light shone between the branches. Maeryn could feel them in there. The woman, her three young children, and the man. From within the house a storm was about to break.

Maeryn signalled the guards, and two of them moved off, circling around to the back of the house.

The Intercessor plodded onward, a full head shorter than the guards at her side. One of them opened the gate for her, its squealing hinge drawing the man's face to the glass. His eyes widened at the sight of her, the unmistakable figure of an Intercessor, all dressed in white. He barked something at his wife, and Maeryn saw his teeth flash within his black beard.

A second later he was gone.

Inside, there was shout, the smashing of glass, and a sound like a bullock trying to free itself of its pen.

Slowly, the front door swayed open; the woman, listless and thin, her children clutching at her skirt.

The boy caught Maeryn's eye and his voice issued into her mind.

*Don't kill him! Don't take my daddy!*

She crouched before him, though it hurt her knees, and removed her veil.

Outside, they heard grunts and a low thwacking sound that roused the hens.

The boy's hands were tight fists, and she took them in hers. She looked at him as a grandmother would, though she was not much older than his ma. With the warmth of her expression, she willed his hands to soften, and drew him into a memory, where he lay atop a hay bale, summer wind upon his face. ...He could feel it now, a smile forming on his lips. The hay prickled his back, and white clouds scudded the sky. The dry, horsey scent of the bale mingling with the smoke of some distant fire.

*Your father is sick, my dear. I am here to heal him.*

The boy strained weakly against her words, but then accepted them like a long drink.

Maeryn took the woman's face in her hands and drew their foreheads together.

*I will deliver him to Kshidol's sight and he will be cleansed. Do not go near him. He will lay in the field for three days and then return to you, anew.*

As they drew apart, the woman looked at her with pale, bleary eyes. “Yes,” she murmured. “Thank you, Intercessor.”

Maeyrn nodded and went out the way she had come, her heavy figure swaying as she walked.

The door clicked shut, and among the shadow of the trees she felt the carnal heat of him, the tightness of his sinew, the way he coiled like a snake, just waiting for his chance to strike. He was doubled over on the ground. Writhing this way and that as they bludgeoned him with their clubs.

At her approach, the guards stepped back and stood at attention.

Maeyrn smiled at them and repositioned her veil.

She walked close to the man, who panted, the sack over his head making it difficult for him to determine the direction of the next blow.

Then slowly he turned to Maeyrn, hearing the light crackle of her footstep.

He tried to stand, but his hands were bound behind his back, and one of his legs appeared to be broken.

He cried out, his breath steaming through the sackcloth.

*Be still*, she commanded.

“Fuck you!” he roared. “Aaagh,” he cried out in agony, and collapsed on the ground.

She stepped closer and crouched beside him.

The man’s body was rigid and his limbs twitched spasmodically.

Maeyrn filled her lungs with holy light and slowly exhaled. She held her hands above his abdomen and made room for him inside herself. Making herself a vessel for his animalism.

Her hands grew hot as it began to flow from him, feverish with predation. Beneath her long gloves, the hairs on her arms prickled as if she stood in the shadow of a great black bear.

The man whimpered and voided his bowels, giving off a sickly stench.

The Intercessor’s eyes leaked as she held the connection, drawing hard on his essence.

His body shook, his pelvis rising toward her outstretched palms. Maeyrn had that familiar feeling of drowning in flame as she fell into

rhythm with his laboured breath. The air heaved in and out of her lungs, in and out of him, like a bellows, sweat and mucous soiling her veil.

Gritting her teeth, she reached for that last part, the part hidden like a worm at the base of his spine.

She could not get it.

“Guards!” she spat, and they knew what to do.

One of them belted the man across the face.

As pain pierced though the man’s eye, something in him released, the animal essence losing hold on his spirit.

“Again!”

Maeyrn readied herself for the next blow, which landed on the man’s ribs. When the pain sparked, she reached in as far as she could go without killing him.

“One more...” she panted.

As they broke the man’s nose, he keened, and finally she got it. He was empty now, his body falling slack.

“Stop,” she said. “Stop, it is done.”

The Intercessor staggered back, shaking her hands as if they were sticky with tar. She tore at her veil just in time, removing it from her face as she collapsed on her knees and vomited into the grass. She rocked back and forth, moaning like a beast in labour, vile fluid pouring from her mouth.

When the sickness had passed, one of the guards brought her pack, and behind her she could hear them tending to the man, who was unconscious as a doll.

She stared at the golden light of the cabin, the way it leaked around the curtains, seeming very bright. First, she removed her head wrappings, and then her robe. She used the water skin in her pack to wet a cloth, and with firm strokes, she cleaned her face and neck.

Maeyrn thought of the woman inside, of the boy, and the two little girls – what this would mean to them – but still she felt defiled.

Putting on a fresh robe, she bundled her soiled garments into her pack. She could see where the guardsmen stood in the centre of the field and with a sigh, she followed them.

Beyond the copse, the grass grew high and Maeyrn stumbled

forward, her legs weak as a new lamb's. She stared down upon the sleeping man; how peaceful he looked now. The guards had removed his clothes, washed him the best they could. They had wrapped him in bandages and covered him in furs, for it was cold in the field.

A guardsman passed her a bundle of dried Alma he'd lit on her behalf. The smoke drew off in whorls, marbling the air.

Though her face was numb and her lips did not want to move, she spoke the prayer.

*“From vastness preserve,  
In continuity,  
In holy unity  
I enfold you in Velspar’s light.”*

And with this last, she unstopped the vial of Alma oil in her hand and dripped it onto his tongue.

Maeyrn glanced at the guards. “Let us go now.”

“Can you walk, Intercessor?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She started for the carriage that waited for them at the edge of the pasture, aware of nothing save the rasping of her robe. Maeyrn was weightless and hollow, and her body felt strange.

The guards woke her when they reached the Intercessor's dormitory. She must have fainted out there in the field.

A guard escorted her, taking her on his arm as she staggered through the archway, through the main doors, and down the hall to her room. Inside, three solemn-faced initiates awaited her.

When the guard had gone, the girls commenced to remove Maeyrn's garments, peeling them gingerly from her pale, blotched skin.

A kettle of salt water steamed in the fireplace, and they poured it into copper urns, scrubbing her skin with linen, kneading the loose flesh of her arms and thighs. Wringing the cloths, rubbing until her skin felt raw.

With closed eyes, she let them do their work. In her mind she saw

the bearded man, the wild look in his eye, the redness of his spirit. His sickness was still in her and would not be gone in the morning.

When finally the girls had dried her and put on her smock, they tucked her into bed and put out the candles. She stared above, a censer of Alma burning softly in the dark, laying upon her the heaviness of sleep.



## MAERYN

### **One Year Before The Fire**

IN THE MORNING, MAERYN DRESSED and headed to Intercessor Rankin's apartments to be cleansed. She felt diseased. Her veins prickled with the grit of impurity, her body eager to sweat it out.

As her slippers feet traversed the hallways and the stairs, she imagined they left stains of blood and dirt, and she hung her head so the other Intercessors would not have to see her this way.

When she approached Intercessor Rankin's door, she caught the strong scent of wood polish.

She knocked.

"Enter!"

Intercessor Rankin had flung the curtains wide and the brightness of the sea beyond made Maeryn squint. He had the same simple furnishings as she, the same table and chairs, the same cot and cupboards, the same fireplace and desk, but everything in this room gleamed, the instruments of his station on full display, not hidden away in some dark cupboard.

Rankin greeted her with a broad smile. He was a tall man with straight dark hair and hazel eyes, and the mere sight of him normally put Maeryn in good humour, but not today.

“Oh, Maeryn. You look ghastly.” Intercessor Rankin wrinkled his nose. “Take a seat and we’ll get started.”

She sat on a wooden chair in the centre of the room, her motions automatic. Intercessor Rankin stood behind her and breathed slowly, in and out, before placing his hands on her shoulders.

At first, she felt an almost irrepressible desire to slap him away but mastered the urge, reminding herself where the feeling came from. Rankin snorted with amusement and intensified his will. He was a powerful Intercessor, his hands growing hot as forged iron, sucking at her wounded spirit, drawing the poison out. The process was intense, but Maeryn had been through it many times before and knew it would be over soon.

As redness began to flow out of her, a profound sense of relief blossomed in her chest. Her jaw relaxed, and she felt like herself again.

“*Pure is the Stream. Clear and bright,*” Intercessor Rankin intoned, and tapped lightly at the three points – forehead, crown and nape.

Maeryn shivered and opened her eyes.

Intercessor Rankin went to the corner and spat in a copper pot before cleansing his hands in a bowl of salt water. He looked a little ill.

He sat in the chair opposite and gave her a weary look. “You keep yourself busy, Maeryn.”

She smiled, her heart serene. “I feel good. It feels good to help them, Rankin.”

“You serve in holiness, that is certain, but it ages you beyond your years.”

It was true, Maeryn’s hair was streaked with grey, her knees ached, and she had the fleshiness of a grandmother who cooked all day and never sat down to a meal but ate often from the wooden spoon. In truth, she was only forty-five, and Rankin her junior – in age, at least.

“But you, Rankin, you look so young,” Maeryn chided.

The Intercessor stared at her, his expression grim. “I respect you, Maeryn, but do not think yourself a lonely bastion of wisdom in a foolish world. Sometimes, the spirit is best cleansed by death. It is an

absolute cleansing. I prefer to welcome the spirits home upon their return. To give my energy to the children and nurture them in their faith. A happy childhood is the best preventative of red deeds.”

Maeyrn looked at his hands, wondering if they had ever been dirty in the way hers had been. Whether he had ever tried to help someone who was not already saved by their own volition. “I think sometimes we condemn them too soon.” Maeyrn searched her friend’s eyes but saw her words had not moved him. He was so very stubborn.

“Be careful you do not cling too tightly to personhood, Maeyrn – yours, or mine, or anyone else’s.” Rankin leaned back in his chair. “*I am Velspar*. That is a superior knowledge. Do you know it?”

She nodded. “I do, Rankin.”

He held his arms wide. “I am Velspar. Every spirit that has been or will be. And this is why we must respect the sanctity of Velspar with harsh judgement. You would not forgive yourself what you forgive in others. The animal in them will perish with the passing of time, do not let it distract you from what is pure – it is the spirit we must shepherd.”

Maeyrn’s eyes narrowed. “I wonder, Rankin, are you trying to draw me into an argument? Because it will not work. I feel there is something else on your mind. Will you tell me what it is?”

“Ah, I see your wits have been restored in full.” Rankin rubbed his knuckles across his lips and then folded his hands in his lap. “The High Intercessors have conferred, but I do not have answers, only suspicions. It is too early to know what is to come.”

“Of course.” Maeyrn bowed her head. She sat there, sensing he wanted to say more, but the moment passed. “Well, thank you, Intercessor. Best I leave you to your meditations.”

Rankin went to the window and traced his fingers along the lead-light design, the encircling curve of the Skalens’ Star.

She was about to leave when he held up his hand and ushered her to return.

“Maeyrn,” he said in low tones. “There have been developments in Brivia.”

She met his eyes, the sunlight accentuating the dark spots about

his iris. Maeryn nodded. “Emryl and Medard have passed the Seventh Gate?”

Rankin laughed. “No, no. But they have passed the Third.” His smile faded. “It is a dangerous business. If they become full initiates of our order, they will be at odds with the other Skalens. But if they are not capable of passing through the Seventh, the outcome will be far worse.”

Maeryn considered. “What do your visions tell you?”

He stared out at the waters of the Gulf. “Like you, I see rivers of blood. I hear the ancient women of Jokvour calling to the battle dead. I find myself drowning in the tears of Siatka and being reborn, but the world of my birth is hazy and mutable.” He sighed. “I do not know what it means. But I feel we must ready ourselves to enter the Great Stream. We have all felt its pull, and it gets stronger every day. It calls to the Intercessors alone.”

Maeryn stroked his arm and he turned his face to her. She gave him a gentle smile. “This Festival, Velspar will reach its seventh centenary. It is a sacred time. But it is not a time of certainty. Imagine how the First Diviner must have felt when he walked the mountains of Jokvour, surrounded by blood and desolation. His first vision, strange as it was, has bound these Seven Lands in peace. We know its truth, and we live it each day, but there was a time when he did not know – the time before the vision – and that is where we stand.”

They fell into thoughtful silence.

Maeryn reached forward and drew their foreheads together. “Do not be troubled, my friend,” she whispered. “I will know your smile, in this life and the next.”