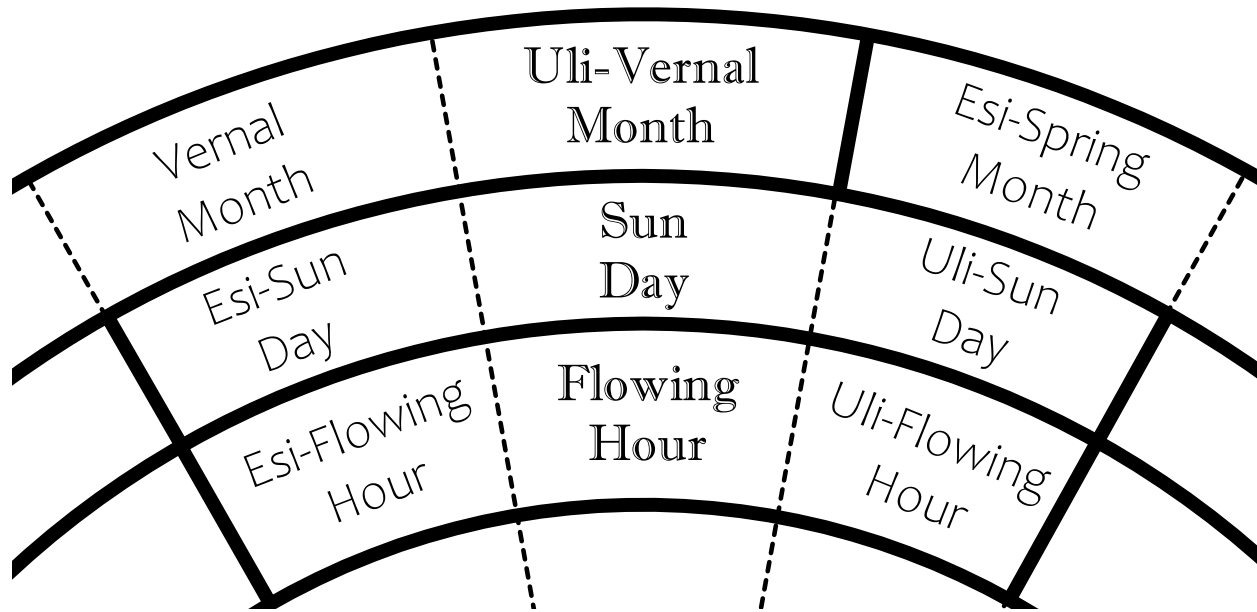


Chapter 4: Sabbath Outside Town

YEAR 647



LYRA of House Dennar was at her uncle's Stables near his Farmhouse as the Morning white Sun rose higher over the horizon in the East on this beautiful Sabbath Day. She was outside, brushing the smooth white coat of her Curelom, Firedrop, with a motion that rippled calm and serenity through her and, through her, to her riding Steed.

Like her father, Lyra loved her Animals. She loved their beauty, their feel, their smell, and their innocence, wild or tame. As the Almighty Father's beloved Creatures, she loved tending to them, and taking the time to just relax with them.

A rare opportunity, that.

How fortunate that Master Mahan was away on another Sabbath, which meant no work for her at his Keep Today. How fortunate that she could take the time and go to a Hall Meeting and be able to take her Sacraments again. It had been a while since the last time she could go. It would indeed be a beautiful Sabbath Day!

Lyra patted her male Curelom with one last pat on the rump and then went to get the blankets and saddle for riding. A few other work Steeds were still in their tidy Cubicles of the small Stables and they would also get the Day off. They had plenty of Gatgrass for the time being, and all the Animals were already watered and fed.

Her Uncle Bismar and Aunt Fenny raised Bilgoats, for their milk, and they had over a nine-by-nine of the Animals roaming around the fenced in Fields. There were even two new Bilgoat kids this week!

Lyra grabbed a blanket, bridle, and saddle from the Rider Room next to one Cubicle and came back to tend to Firedrop, who stood there waiting patiently. He would not move a muscle unless told to do so, or if he or she were in immediate danger.

“Gorgeous day, Firedrop!” she said as she fitted the blanket on his back. “We are going to a Hall Meeting this Morning! Maybe we will see Lightstar. Admit it, I know you like her!”

The muscular Animal brayed and stamped a foot in response. Cureloms were the primary source of transportation on Land as they could ride or pull Carriages tirelessly for Hours.

To Lyra, however, Cureloms were more than just a work Steed: they were family; especially Firedrop. Her grandfather had given the riding Animal to her as a gift a long time ago. He was a marvellous and obedient Animal, and Lyra would always try to keep his long white-haired coat in pristine condition.

Lyra continued the saddling routine as she spoke to her Firedrop, hardly realizing her motions. As a Stabler, she had done nonillions of them over the Years. She was now Master Mahan’s Head Stabler at his Keep, like her father before her. That was before he was arrested and taken away when she was younger.

Even though Lyra worked at the Master’s Stables most Days now, she was glad to help on her uncle’s small Farmhouse from time to time. With most of the chores done the previous Night, even her cousins that still lived here had the Day off.

Lyra was left to herself now. Her aunt and uncle, grandfather, and all her cousins were already on their way to the Hall for the early Council Meetings. It surprised her at how lively and convivial they all were this

Morning when they broke their fast. Lyra's grandfather was also unnaturally spry and whistling a Hymn, even though Lyra knew he had arrived Home very late last Night with Firedrop.

"There! How's that, Firedrop? Ready to go?" Lyra asked, adjusting, without thinking about it, the final belts of the reins. The Curelom clamped another foot, eager to ride. "I'll just be another Minute, okay? Grampy asked me to bring the Manna this Morning." She stroked her Animal again and left the Stables to head to the Fields.

All the Bilgoats grazed on the fresh Vernal grass around the fenced in Farmhouse. The Migration was still many Days away so there was no worry about penning them up just yet. Even after the Migration Tax, there were still plenty of Bilgoats left of all ages. They were all bleating, frolicking, and chewing; mostly chewing.

The newest Bilgoat kid, just four Days old, was with its mother not too far from the Gate where most of the feeding troughs were. It was an adorable thing; small, soft, and full of energy. It jumped around its mother as if rediscovering its legs for the first time every Quark.

The kid's mother did not mind that Lyra and her cousins would play and coddle with it from time to time. The mother Bilgoat was used to the attention her babies got from her Caretakers.

"Hey, mum!" Lyra called out to the mother as she approached, "You're looking content on this *beautiful* Morning!"

The baby kid, hearing Lyra's voice, started bounding up to meet her. Lyra bent down and allowed it to lick her fingers. "And *you*, my spry little one! It is *your* lucky day!" The little thing bleated high-pitched vibrating sounds of great excitement. Lyra stroked its fine, soft, unblemished coat and picked it up with one arm. As she stood, it squirmed and kicked a bit. The mother Bilgoat looked up and bleated to herself.

"I'll be back, mum! Don't worry! The Almighty will take good care of your little one!" With that, Lyra turned and walked away, smiling radiantly. The mother's bleating diminished behind her.

By the time she was back at the Stables, the excited little thing needed two arms and hands to hold it steady. Lyra knew it was scared, this far from its mother and so close to a new environment. Firedrop's braying did not help either.

Cooing and whispering affectionately to the baby kid, Lyra tried to calm it down. With care, and with a skill developed over many Years, Lyra pulled some soft twine that she had prepared from her pocket and wrapped the kid's two front legs together. The high bleating intensified, and Lyra continued to coo at it. Then, placing the baby Bilgoat in front of the saddle on the blanket, Lyra began wrapping the hind legs.

"Darling!" Lyra coddled. "We need to keep you safe! We must go for a ride, and I don't want you hurt as we travel. I promise, little Billie, that I will ride smoothly. Shh, now. You are doing wonderful! What a brave Billie!" A few more pieces of soft twine secured the little kid in front of the saddle on top of the blanket as comfortably as possible.

Hopping onto the saddle herself with practiced ease, Lyra grabbed the reins with one hand and stroked the baby Bilgoat kid with the other.

The current locale of the Hall Meeting was at House Renlun's Farmhouse, which was not that far away. The Hall Meeting's location had to change constantly and be kept secret ever since the King's Resolution to disband all gatherings of the Faith seven Years ago.

Only about an eight-by-nine of Adherents to the Faith, who lived in Town or in the surrounding neighbourhood, knew where the Meeting was; and that was including her own extended family.

Lyra took the Field Path to the Renlun Farmhouse rather than the Seaside Road that lay along beside her uncle's property. The fewer the People she met along the way, the safer. The bleating kid would attract unwanted attention. Lyra hurried as fast as she could with the Animal in front of her, Firedrop obeying her every touch and voice command. Lyra needed to take her Sacraments. It had been too long since last time!

As Lyra rode, the bleating lessened, and she continued to look around at the beauty of the Morning. Evidence of the Great Almighty was all about her in-between the Fields. Lyra passed by blooming, sweet smelling Trees, colourful assortments of natural Vernal flowers, and even a few other Animals that were grazing in other Pastures. Songbirds, like the common Birdpie, the Sigil of her House of Dennar, flitted across the Sky chirping away.

Up ahead, she could already see Brendan of House Drayson, her Betrothed, on his brown Curelom, Lightstar, waiting for Lyra on the side of the Path.

Her Future husband was humbly smiling as she rode up. He wore modest riding gear, like she was. He was handsome, with short trimmed dark hair, and was always clean shaven. His muscular arms, groomed from many Years working at the Mine, clung to his own reins. He also knew how to use a Sword and he had one tucked beside him on his belt.

Lyra smiled back at him, grateful for his presence.

Growing up in the Faith, with so few Adherents around, the pickings for a Future husband, also in the Faith, other than one of her cousins, were slim to none. She always knew that she would marry inside the Faith.

What a blessing it was that Brendan and the Drayson family settled into Town shortly after the Resolution. Yes, she and her sister-cousins all swooned over him and his younger brothers, but it was *she* that Brendan had chosen, even though he was five Years older than her own eighteen.

“You are cutting it close, Lyra,” Brendan said as she pulled up. “The Hall Meeting is about to start. I thought it best that I should come out to meet you before you Daydreamed the Sabbath away.”

A bleat from the baby Bilgoat took his dark, handsome eyes away from her and towards the Creature. “A nice one,” he continued. “I am sure the Almighty will be pleased.” He then turned his Curelom off the Path and towards a distant Farmhouse across the Field. Lyra followed.

“He’s just four Days old,” Lyra replied. “A happy little Fella and very jumpy, so take care when handling him. You know that you have the dexterity of a Cumom when it comes to being gentle! And, for your information, I wasn’t Daydreaming!” She gave her Curelom a nudge and it obliged by slightly nudging Brendan’s Animal. Brendan looked back with a loving smirk and raced a little faster. She easily kept up.

Soon enough, they arrived at the Renlun Farmhouse. Already, the Stables were packed with Animals already tied to posts. Lyra recognized most of them. Besides her own family’s Animals, many of the others here belonged to those who worked at Master Mahan’s Mine, and they would bring their Cureloms to work at his Stables for her to look after.

After tying Firedrop to another post, Lyra told her Curelom that she would be back soon. Firedrop and Lightstar always got along nicely together.

It appeared that she and Brendan were indeed the last to arrive.

Untying the baby Bilgoat from off the blankets, Lyra held it tight while keeping its legs tied together. It bleated again at the sudden hope of freedom and tried to jump around.

While walking to the Renlun Farmhouse, which was only a few Spans away, Brendan offered his open arms. "I'll take that and give it to the Brethren. You go on inside and I'll join you soon."

"Okay... but be careful!" Lyra insisted.

As Lyra passed the Animal over, she gave it a few strokes across its soft brown fur and whispered to it soothingly. The Bilgoat, despite the caresses, and upset at the sudden handover, still jerked, almost wiggling right out of their hands. Brendan held onto its hind legs and carefully began cradling it with both of his powerful arms.

"See!" Lyra blurted out accusingly. "You big Cumom! You almost dropped him!"

"I've got it now, Lyra. I will see you inside." Brendan then raced off towards the front of the Farmhouse without so much as a peck on her cheek. Lyra, a bit disturbed, went for the backdoor, nearer the Stables.

Upon entering, she stamped the dust off her riding boots and headed towards the large Common Room where the Hall Meeting took place. The whispered brouhaha of a niner of voices got louder as she entered the windowless room from the large back doors. They automatically shut behind her.

Most of the Adherents sat in rows of chairs behind a raised platform that held the large Homemade Altar at the front. The sweet smell of incense burned from a Pyre near the fireplace at the centre. Two other doors flanked either side of the raised platform.

Larger chairs for the Brethren on the platform encircled the Altar, and they all faced the front. Most of the Congregation turned to look at Lyra as she entered, and many of them smiled to see her there. Some of her friends gave silent waves. Most sat with their immediate families with

the small children on the laps of their mothers or older siblings. Her Aunt Fenny, with a few of her cousins, was near the crowded front.

Some Adherents that were standing in the back and chitchatting when Lyra arrived greeted her with more warm smiles and shook her hands. Many whispered their greetings and acted as if they had not seen Lyra in a long time. Lyra did not think she was away from these Hall Meetings for *that* long.

Most of the seats at the front were taken, but there were still a few empty chairs at the back close to her, so she took one and reserved another for Brendan.

As she sat, one of the side doors at the front opened and a hush stirred around the large room. Others at the back also took their chairs. Lyra's heart quickened with anticipation of the Sacraments. After so many Months away—or was it over a Season now?—Lyra had a lot to be forgiven of. Mostly petty thoughts and actions, but forgiven, nonetheless.

Lyra's grandfather entered from the side door. Everyone stood as one with some children on their mother's hips. Her grandfather wore the ceremonial robes, cap, and jewelled Breastplate of his station as Elder of the Church. In his hand was the Scepter of The First: a white rod, gilt with jewels and intricate carvings.

Rulon's long, white beard was neatly tucked into a sash about his waist. Others followed, including her Uncle Bismar, also dressed in ceremonial robes. One of her grandfather's followers, Brother Renlun himself, carried her little Billie, still tied by the legs and bleating squeakily. Lyra resisted giving it a little wave and only sent silent words of comfort towards it.

The Brethren all stopped in front of a chair assigned to each of them. They waited a beat, and they all sat as one save her grandfather, who still stood behind the Altar in the centre. The rest of the Congregation also sat. All was quiet except for a few squawks from infants and, of course, the baby Bilgoat. The Meeting was about to begin.

Where was Brendan? Lyra had expected him to enter through the back doors after handing off the Bilgoat kid and then sit down beside her.

Her grandfather raised his Scepter and began the Meeting: "My Brothers and Sisters, we welcome you Today, this fine Sabbath Morning.

We welcome your devotion for coming to take your Sacraments on this Day and for receiving forgiveness for your sins. We are grateful that the Almighty Father has granted us this time to worship Him and honour the First for the Sacrifice that He will make. We are also grateful for Brother Renlun and his House for the use of their Property to host this Hall Meeting. Let us begin with an Invocation.”

Lyra and the rest of the Congregation bowed their heads to listen to the opening supplication. In the prayer, her grandfather thanked the Almighty again for everything he had previously given gratitude for, and more besides. Lyra’s Mind could not help but wonder what had happened to Brendan. He was most certainly waiting for the Invocation to end before entering, so as not to disturb anyone.

The Invocation concluded, and no one came through the back doors. A Hymn started, and the Congregation started singing.

Singing softly with everyone else, Lyra looked back around towards the doors behind her, her hand resting on the empty chair next to her. Others were looking at her, also expecting to see her Betrothed at her side. She shrugged at them as if saying, “I don’t know where he is either.”

The Hymn ended and her grandfather, still standing at the centre of the Altar, spoke again: “Brothers and Sisters, it is time to prepare the Manna so we can take our Sacraments.” He then gracefully sat down on his large chair behind him. The room continued its silent stupor as Brother Renlun and her Uncle Bismar rose from their seats.

Placing the wiggly Bilgoat on the Altar, Brother Renlun tied a few strands of twine that were there and secured the Manna tightly to pins that were at each corner of the Altar. The small Animal stretched its neck upwards as far as it could, and Lyra could see its vibrating tongue as its little mouth opened and closed with the cadence of its bleats.

From inside her uncle’s robes, the Ceremonial Dagger was brought out and placed on the Altar in front of the baby kid.

The Dagger was of curious workmanship; a rare Artifact from the Founders before the First Landing. It was like a single cut of a translucent green Crystal, beautifully crafted with engraved Glyphs on both the curved Blade and its handle. The two Brethren bowed at the brave little Bilgoat and sat down.

Rising again with his Scepter, her grandfather stood in front of the Altar. It was time for the Sacrament! Forgiveness! Brendan was going to *miss* this!

Taking up the Dagger with his other hand and raising it, her grandfather spoke the ritualistic words: “In similitude of the Greatest Sacrifice of the First that will come, a Final Sacrifice that will one Day end all Sacrifice and allow salvation to penetrate all living Minds, we covenant to remember...”

BANG!

The entire Congregation, all focused on the Elder in front of the Manna, jumped in their seats. One of the side doors was just then kicked open, and it now hung limply on its top hinge and began swaying. The doorframe was filled with members dressed in the blue fatigues of the Town Watchmen: the King’s Policing Force in most Towns and Cities.

The other side door popped open, only not as loudly, and it, too, held members of the Watchmen. They all marched in as screaming mothers pulled their children tight towards them. The back doors also flew open behind Lyra, and more Watchmen entered.

How did they find out where this Meeting was held?

The Watchmen, at least two niners of them, moved around the room to surround everyone, their backs against the walls. They each had the standard Shortswords fastened to scabbards on their hips, undrawn.

The Brethren at the front each stood up to protect the Elder, who still held the Dagger and Sceptre. Brother Renlun screamed out, “This is my Property! This is a private Meeting! You have no business here!”

The leader of the Watchmen, called the Regent, pressed forward towards the front of the Altar. His dark clean-shaven face, speckled with adolescent scars and a bulbous nose, looked witty with elation. It was not a pretty face.

The Regent reached forward and stroked the bleating Bilgoat with a gloved hand. Lyra frantically looked around for Brendan. He must be out there somewhere! He must have seen the Watchmen arrive. Lyra was worried about his safety.

Her grandfather was the next to speak: “Regent Jardin, we are having a peaceful gathering. We are only worshipping the Almighty Father. We are performing necessary Rituals for...”

The Regent raised his hand at the Elder and said, now looking at her grandfather, “You will first relinquish that Dagger and your Stick, or I will have it forcefully removed.” He then glanced at one of the other Officers that stood by her uncle and that Watchman immediately stepped forward to confiscate the items.

Her grandfather turned them over without a rebuttal. The Regent was now looking at her grandfather a little more carefully than before.

“You! Yes, I know you...” the Regent exclaimed, stepping forward to inspect a little closer. “Ah! You’re that old Beggar on the Road to Governor Mahan’s Keep! Is this what you do all Month? Act as a Serf? Then you brainwash these Zealots on the Sun Week?”

Lyra’s Uncle Bismar stepped forward and exclaimed: “We are not Zealots! We are having an innocent meeting to take our Sacraments! We are not doing anything antagonistic against anyone! We...”

“Now, now,” the Regent jumped in. “You know the Law. I will harm none of your Adherents. I will take their names and mark this illegal Meeting on their individual records. You, however, and your great Serf leader here will come with me to be impounded and questioned. In the Name of the King and under the dictates of the Resolution on Insurgencies, I do so enforce!”

The Regent turned toward the Congregation and slowly circled the Altar so he could be in front of it. “Listen up, everyone! This Meeting is a violation to the Resolution on Insurgencies, no matter how innocent you claim it to be. Your belief in this Religion is in vain! You think gatherings like this can better your petty lives? You praise a Serf because he can kill baby Animals? Look at me!”

Then, with one swift movement of his arm, the Regent’s Shortsword swung out from its scabbard and in one large swooping arc, the Regent brought the Weapon down to land with a *clang* on the Altar, cleaving the Bilgoat neatly in two.

The reaction was immediate. People screeched, with hands coming up to their faces to cover their open mouths. With tears burning into her eyes, Lyra screamed, “Nooo!”

No one moved from their seats, but the Watchmen all half-drew their Swords and took a half-step forward.

Her Uncle Bismar shouted again, “You ignorant Squit! That was just a Symbol of our...”

The Watchman behind her uncle gave him a swat on the head with the Scepter he had recently confiscated. Her uncle dropped to his hands and knees.

The Regent turned and continued to shout above the din of the sobs and shouts, bloodied Shortsword raised, “See! Why not praise me? See how easy it is to kill an Animal in the name of your Almighty! See how ridiculous this is? You are all fools! Now, I need you all to remain here while we take your personal information. Ret, Machon! Take these robed Rebels of the King to the Carriages! These Premises are now under the King’s authority!”

Lyra could not hold still any longer. Tears pouring down her face, Lyra got up and raced forward. A few of the Watchmen reached out to grab her, but she twisted away. She lunged forward, not at Regent Jardin, who had his Shortsword ready, but at the Altar where the remains of her Bilgoat lie.

“No! No! Nooo!” Lyra cried, patting its still upper torso. “I’m so sorry! Billie!”

Regent Jardin laughed and, placing the tip of his soiled Shortsword under Lyra’s chin, he raised Lyra’s head up to face him. Lyra glared into his eyes with enmity.

“Who is this, now?” the Regent said. “Ah, I know you, too! You’re Markkus’ little Punit! The Stablergirl! Ha! It figures you would follow in the footsteps of your traitorous father! I hope your pathetic father *ROTS* where he is...”

Lyra now lunged at Regent Jardin. Shortsword or no, he was caught unawares and was not prepared for her attack and they both fell off the raised landing together.

Rage filled Lyra. She used her hands to grab whatever she could on his stuck up, deformed face and pull—

Instead, it was her grandfather that was pulling Lyra away by her waist. “Lyra, No! Don’t touch him! He doesn’t understand.”

Two Watchmen were there to help Jardin back up onto his feet. He shook them off to stand on his own. Other Watchmen came to surround both Lyra and her grandfather, Shortswords drawn. Her grandfather hugged Lyra close and held her tight. Was that to stop her from another outburst?

His mouth was right by her ear.

Whispering quickly, Lyra’s grandfather said, “It must be you, Lyra. Be Faithful my child. In my Secret Place, you know the one, there is a Metal box. Inside the box, there are instructions in a Pouch. Lyra, follow them to the letter. Do it Tonight.”

Placing his loving hands now on her chin, the other Watchmen slowly separated them. Eventually, her grandfather let go and he stared at her. He said it again, out loud, “Tonight!”

Waves of pain shot up Lyra’s arms as the Watchmen wrenched them behind her back. Her grandfather and the other Brethren had Workmen also at their backs. They were all being led away, with her uncle staggering and holding his head.

Lyra was still facing the vile and unforgiving Regent. The Workmen holding Lyra, awaiting, stood their ground.

The Regent raised his eyebrows at her. “Wow!” he said, saving face. “Now that was impressive! I should recruit you as a Watchman... er... Watchwoman!”

Then he laughed, bloody Shortsword still out. Other Watchmen laughed with him.

A voice from the Congregation, Lyra recognized it as her Aunt Fenny’s voice, came up shrill: “Please! No! Don’t hurt her!”

Lyra did not look at her aunt, as she only had eyes for Regent Jardin. “Where is Brendan?” Lyra furiously asked. “What did you do to him?”

Again, a startled look came over the Regent’s scarred face. “Who?” he inquired. “Do you mean Brendan of House *Drayson*? You know him?”

The Regent awaited an answer. When nothing came, he continued, “You *do* know him! You... you care for him, don’t you? I can see it in you!” He came close then, his horrid breath flushing her nasal senses. Lyra did not struggle, but she feared what he was about to say.

“Well, this *is* fortunate!” he bantered. “A perfect punishment for you!”

“Where is he?” Lyra asked again, shouting. She knew, but did not believe, what the answer would be.

The Regent chuckled some more. “Oh, my!” he continued in utter elation. “He is long gone and counting the Credits we gave him to give up this rebellious assembly.”

Lyra closed her eyes and tried to drown the startled reactions and gasps from the Congregation. The only sound that penetrated Lyra’s Soul now was the continuous horrid laughter of the Regent and his Watchmen.