

THE SAEREN CHRONICLES

BOOK ONE



HAZEL ACADEMY



POST PELEOS

CHAPTER ONE

The Path to Hazel

The last ordinary morning of Viridia's life smelled like scorched bread and her mother's tea.

She had come down the stairs still half inside a dream, socks loose on her heels, and found the kitchen already awake. Her father stood at the stove in his work shirt, sleeves shoved past the elbow, scraping at a pan with the particular hopeful determination of a man losing a fight to his own breakfast. Smoke curled thin and grey toward the window. He waved it away with one big hand.

"Don't tell your mother," he said, without turning around.

"Tell me what," her mother said.

Bella was at the table with the newspaper creased into quarters and a cup of tea going cold beside her, and she had not looked up, and somehow she always knew. Viridia slid into her chair across from her. Her mother held a particular stillness — not the stillness of rest, but of deep water. Viridia had never had a word for it. She only knew it did not mean her mother's head was empty. It meant the opposite.

"Leon has invented a new color," Bella said, turning a page. "I believe it is called toast."

"It's character," her father said. He set the plate down in front of Viridia with a flourish, dark crusts and all, and kissed the top of her head on the way past, smelling of soap and machine oil and the cold morning he'd already half walked through to fetch the milk. "Eat the character. It builds character."

Viridia ate the character. It was terrible. She said so, and her father pressed a hand to his chest as though she had run him through, and her

mother laughed, a short, surprised sound, there and gone, the laugh of someone who did not give them away cheaply.

For a moment the three of them simply existed in the small warm room while the smoke thinned and the kettle ticked as it cooled, and her mother reached across the table and tucked a loose strand of silver-blond hair behind Viridia's ear without seeming to decide to do it, confirming it was still there.

"You'll do something with all that quiet someday," Bella said. "All that watching. You see more than you let on." She held Viridia's eyes a beat longer than the moment asked for. "Just be careful who you let see you do it."

Viridia had thought it was an ordinary thing to say.

She thought about it for the rest of her life.

* * *

Viridia stared up at the building that was meant to be her home for the next four years.

The Hazel Preparatory School sat behind a high iron gate and a run of hedges trimmed so precisely they looked less grown than manufactured. The brochure her father had been so proud of called it an impressive institution, founded in 1735 by Hazel Greenwich, and it was impressive, in the way of things that are designed to make you feel small before they have spoken a single word to you. Grey stone the flat colorless grey of a sky that has not decided whether to rain. Tall windows that gave nothing back but a flat shine of morning light. Somewhere beyond the gate a bird sang two notes and stopped.

She had been excited, once. Three days ago, a lifetime ago, she had torn open the letter with the Hazel sigil pressed into the wax and felt something lift in her chest for the first time in weeks.

Now she stood at the gate and felt nothing she could name.

Her hand found the stone at her throat without asking permission. Her mother's stone, the smooth dark-blue weight of it, the carved symbols that held a faint light even out here in plain sun. She closed her fist around it and the edges pressed into her palm, steadier than anything else she had. For a moment it warmed under her fingers. The carved lines glowed a shade brighter as her pulse climbed, and under the warmth came a thin taste of cold metal at the back of her tongue. She had known it before and never told anyone. It answered her own feeling, she thought, warming when her pulse climbed and cooling when she did, as though it ran on whatever she was holding down. No one else, she was fairly sure, tasted the gate they walked through. Then it was cool glass again, the taste gone. The sun, she told herself.

She had let her silver-blond hair hang loose this morning; braiding it had felt like more than she could manage. She was slight and fine-boned, the sort of girl grown-ups wanted to feed, and she stood with her shoulders curved inward, not slouching so much as drawn in, making herself a smaller target. Her green eyes had fixed on nothing at all.

Beside her, Aleric Porter had not stopped talking since the motorcar.

"You'll do well here, I'm sure of it," he was saying, hands clasped behind his back, rocking slightly on his heels as he surveyed the school like a landlord pleased with a property he had personally arranged to exist. "They've trained the top light mages in this country since the doors opened. The very top. The fact that they selected you. Well. That's an honor, Viridia. A genuine honor."

"Yes," Viridia said.

"Four years here, then on to a proper specialty school. Healing's the prestigious route, of course. But there's intelligence work, therapy, the building disciplines. A great many doors are about to open for you. That's the thing to hold on to."

A great many doors. Viridia thought of two that had closed three days ago, her mother and father, three days dead, and would not open again no matter how she stood in front of them. She did not say this. Grief made other people uncomfortable; the kind thing was to keep it where they could not see it.

"I know it's a great deal of change," Aleric went on, and for one moment his voice dropped out of its bright register into something gentler, almost careful. He glanced down at her. "Especially with everything that's happened. But it really is for the best. You believe me, don't you?"

He wanted her to. She could see that he wanted her to, the way a man wants reassurance that the heavy thing he has carried was worth carrying.

So Viridia looked up at him and tried to smile.

It did not work. Her face had forgotten the shape of it. What she produced was closer to a wince, a brief unconvincing twist of the mouth that fooled no one. But Aleric's expression eased anyway, because he wanted to be eased, and he set one large hand between her shoulder blades and steered her gently through the open gate and up the path toward the doors.

Behind them, the iron gate swung shut on its own weight, the sound of it a held note finally let go.

Aleric knocked twice, briskly, then stepped back and settled both hands on Viridia's shoulders, lightly, but with a certain readiness, half expecting her to bolt the moment the door opened and wanting to be in position to stop her.

For a few seconds nothing happened. Then one of the tall double doors swung inward, and a young woman looked out at them.

She was older than Viridia but not by much, seventeen, eighteen perhaps, a fourth-year by the easy, proprietary way she occupied the doorway. Her hair was long and very black, pulled back into a ponytail that had been redone in a hurry. Her nails were painted black too, chipped at the edges. She wore the Hazel uniform with the small carelessness of someone who had worn it a long time, and at her throat hung a thin chain with a pale stone that caught the hall light.

"Can I help you?" she said, her gaze moving past Aleric to settle on Viridia with frank curiosity.

Aleric cleared his throat. "Ahem. Yes. My name is Aleric Porter, and I'm escorting young Miss Viridia Saeren." He produced the acceptance letter from inside his coat with his free hand, keeping the other firmly in place, and held it out. "She is expected, I believe."

The young woman took the letter and scanned it, and Viridia watched something shift in her face, a small recalibration, quick and contained, gone almost before she had seen it. Her eyes lifted from the page back to Viridia, and this time they did not go to her face. They went, for the space of a single heartbeat, to the dark-blue stone at her throat.

Then she smiled, and whatever it had been smoothed itself away.

"I see. Well, Viridia. My name's Amber Summers. I'm a fourth-year here." She stepped back and held the door wide. "Come in, both of you. Most everyone's arrived already. We're only waiting on two more."

Not last, then. It was a small thing, and Viridia despised that it mattered to her, but it loosened something all the same. She stepped over the threshold. Behind her the heavy door drew shut, and Aleric's hands left her shoulders at last, and she had the disorienting sense of being handed off, passed out of one set of careful hands into another.

The hallway beyond was long and lush, the floor swallowed under thick carpet that took the sound out of their footsteps. What kept Viridia's attention, though, were the walls. They were hung end to end with paintings: landscapes and portraits and a few stranger things she could not place, some of them clearly old, the varnish gone amber with age, the figures in them dressed in fashions she did not recognize.

She slowed without meaning to.

Amber noticed. Of course she did; Viridia would learn, in time, that Amber noticed almost everything and simply chose what to do about it.

"That one's a Verrane," she said, nodding at a dim seascape where a single ship leaned against a wall of grey weather. "He taught here, supposedly, generations back. And that one there." She nodded at a tall portrait of a stern woman with a hawk on her wrist. "Nobody's quite sure who painted it, or who she even was. One of the early headmistresses, supposedly. The hawk's the giveaway, apparently. I never understood why." She said it lightly, walking backward now to keep facing them, easy and unhurried. "They like their history here. You'll get used to it. Half the building's a museum and the other half's a classroom and sometimes it's hard to tell which is which."

Viridia looked at the woman with the hawk a moment longer. Being told a thing's name helped. The world seemed less likely to come apart if its pieces could be labelled. Verrane, and the hawk. She took the names with her and walked on.

The hall ended at another door, this one already open onto a large bright room.

Amber stopped at the threshold and turned. For a moment she looked at Viridia again, and there was nothing of the tour guide in it now, something steadier, almost weighing. "Orientation's in here," she said. "Headmistress takes it herself." A beat. "You'll be all right."

It was not phrased as a question, but Viridia understood that it was one, asked sideways the way kind people sometimes ask the things they are not sure they have the right to.

"Yes," she said.

Amber's mouth tipped, not quite a smile. "Right," she said, and led them in.

* * *

The room was built to make an impression, and it succeeded.

It was long and high-ceilinged, a hall or a chapel once, before someone filled it with rows of chairs and a purpose. Light came down through arched windows in long pale columns. High above, the ceiling had been painted ages ago with a faded scene she could not quite make out: figures with their arms raised, and above them something bright that might have been the sun or might have been a fire. No one else was looking up at it.

Fifty chairs faced a raised platform with a single dark desk. The arrangement was deliberate in a way she felt before she understood it: the newest arrivals seated closest, where every word would reach them and where they could be seen, all at once. A room designed so the front row had nowhere to hide.

The front rows were already half full, and they were loud.

Not loud in any rude way. It was the bright, overlapping chatter of girls who already knew one another, who had met at this gathering or that one, whose mothers were acquainted, who had been writing letters all summer and now fell on each other with the relief of finally being in the same room. They leaned across the aisles. They compared the trim on their uniforms and the charms on their bracelets. One girl was demonstrating something with her hands, a small flourish, and three others were laughing. They had the easy gravity of a thing already formed, a group with edges, and Viridia, standing in the doorway, was very plainly on the outside of those edges.

She was good at this part, at least: the watching. Grief had only sharpened it, stripping away whatever part of her had once wanted to step forward and be included. The one demonstrating the flourish was used to being watched and liked it. The two by the window were performing their friendship a little, for the others.

A tall girl with copper hair turned in her seat and picked Viridia out where she stood. Her eyes did the quick sum strangers do, the loose hair, the slight build, the plainness of her, and landed last on the dark-blue stone at Viridia's throat. They stayed there a moment too long. Then the girl leaned to her neighbor and said something behind two fingers, and both of them looked, and looked away, and laughed. Cruel, Viridia decided, and filed her under it: the kind who picked. It would be weeks before she learned the copper-haired girl had been asking, low and worried, whether the new one had come straight from the funeral she'd heard about, and that the laugh had been the other girl's, at something else entirely. Viridia, this once, had read the surface and called it the depth.

Up on the platform, behind the desk, a woman sat reading through a stack of papers and did not look up.

Viridia's eye went to her last and stayed longest.

She was not a large woman, but she filled the platform the way certain people fill a space simply by being indifferent to it. She wore a dress in the deep colors of late autumn, burnished gold at the bodice shading to a rose so dark it was nearly wine, with a high collar of emerald green that caught the window light. A pair of rose-tinted spectacles sat low on her nose, and through them her eyes moved down the page with brisk, unhurried attention. Her hair was pinned up. Everything about her was composed and exact and expensive-looking, and then Viridia's gaze dropped, the way it did, to the small wrong detail at the bottom of the picture.

Her shoes were blue. Bright, plain, slightly scuffed blue, the blue of a thing chosen because it was liked rather than because it matched. Under all that careful autumn, the blue shoes were practically shouting, and something in Viridia eased at the sight of them.

Beside her, Amber leaned in, her voice dropped low. "That's Lady Lightwell. The Headmistress. She takes orientation herself every year. Likes to see the new ones with her own eyes." There was something under the words Viridia couldn't read, some private weather, and then it passed. Amber tipped her head toward the front rows. "Take a seat up there. She has it set up so all the new arrivals are sure to hear everything."

Viridia looked at the bright crowded rows. Her stomach tightened. "Where will you be?"

"Don't worry." Amber's smile came easier this time, almost gentle. "I won't be far. Fourth-years sit in the back." She nodded toward the rear of the hall, where a thinner scatter of older students lounged with the boredom of people who had done this three times already. "I'll come find you the second it's over. You won't even have to look for me."

And with a small wave of her black-nailed hand she was gone, down the side of the room and into the back, leaving Viridia alone at the head of the aisle.

There was nothing for it. She went.

The carpet gave under her feet and took her footsteps with it, so that she crossed the front of that bright room in a silence that felt, to her, enormous. A few of the girls glanced up as she passed, a flick of attention, a quick weighing, the brief curiosity reserved for a newcomer, and then went back to their conversations, because she did nothing to hold them. She did not smile too widely or speak too soon. She simply found one of the last empty chairs near the front, on the aisle, and sat, and set her hands in her lap, and let the noise close back over her like water over a dropped stone.

At the desk, Lady Lightwell squared her stack of papers against the wood with two crisp taps, set them down, and at last lifted her head. The tinted lenses swept once across the rows of waiting girls.

The stone at Viridia's throat went warm. Not the faint warmth of the gate this time. It pulsed once, hard, a heartbeat that was not hers, and the carved lines flared bright enough that she clapped her hand over it before she could think. When she looked up the lenses had stopped moving. They had stopped on her. For a half-second, no longer, Viridia had the distinct and uncomfortable sensation of having been seen. Not glanced at. Seen, the way her mother used to see her across the breakfast table, as though the surface were not the interesting part. Then the lenses moved on, and the stone went cool under her palm, and there was no telling whether the Headmistress had marked it or whether she had only wanted, badly, to be wrong.

Then the moment let go. The Headmistress clasped her hands, and the bright chatter began, all on its own, to fall away.

* * *

"Hi."

The voice came from her right, low and bright and entirely unbothered by the hush settling over the room. Viridia turned.

A girl had taken the chair beside her. Had, in fact, moved into it, judging by the bag still half-shrugged off one shoulder and the slightly breathless look of someone who had relocated across an aisle on purpose. She was about Viridia's age, with long blond hair and green eyes and a smattering of freckles scattered across a small nose. She was a little heavier than the other girls, and she wore the uniform, the black vest with its white embroidered H over the right breast, the white undershirt, the brown skirt to just above the knee, the long white socks, with none of the casual carelessness Amber had. She wore it as something brand new and slightly miraculous, still not quite able to believe it was hers to wear.

She was smiling. It was a wide, open, helplessly friendly smile that showed teeth a little crowded at the front, one of them turned just slightly out of line, and there was nothing in it of the weighing Viridia had felt from the other girls. It was a smile with no edges at all.

"My name's Alice," she whispered, leaning in close and conspiratorial. "Alice Pembroke. What's yours?"

"Viridia," she said. And then, because the girl was still looking at her with such frank expectation, "Viridia Saeren."

"Viridia." Alice tried it out, and seemed pleased with it. "That's a good name. Mine's just Alice. There were three Alices in my year at home." She

made a small face about it, comic and unselfconscious. "I always had to be Alice P."

Viridia did not know what to say to that, so she said the first true thing that came to her. "I like your uniform."

It was a small thing, almost nothing, but Alice's whole face lit with sudden pleasure. She smoothed the skirt down over her knees with both hands, a quick proud gesture. "Do you really? I keep thinking it's going to turn out to be a mistake, that someone's going to come and tell me there's been a mix-up." She laughed, soft, so as not to carry. "Nobody in my family's ever. I mean, I'm the first. The first one of us who could do any of it. So all this still feels a bit like I borrowed it." She tucked her hair behind her ear, and there was, for just a second under the brightness, something carefully managed, a self-consciousness she was choosing to wave off rather than let sit. "Is your family, were they all mages? You look like you belong here. You've got that look." And then, lighter, but with a small edge under it she did not seem to hear herself put there: "Old blood, I bet. You can always tell. It must be nice, knowing the room's yours before you walk into it."

It was not meant unkindly. Viridia understood that even as it landed. But it landed all the same, on the one morning she had nothing to land on: the assumption that the stone at her throat and the name on her letter were a kind of welcome she had been issued at birth, when in truth they were the last warm things left of two people three days dead. For a moment she could not answer, and the silence stretched a beat too long, and she watched Alice register it without understanding it, watched the bright face flicker, uncertain whether it had given offense and how. The room's not mine, Viridia did not say. Nothing is, just now. She let the silence cost her the smile she might have given, and let Alice sit in not knowing why. It

was the first thing between them that did not go smoothly, and it would not be the last; but it was the first.

Before either of them could mend it, a clear voice cut across the hall from the platform, and the last threads of conversation died at once.

"Good morning."

Lady Lightwell had risen. She stood very straight behind the desk, hands resting lightly before her, and her gaze moved unhurried across the rows. She did not raise her voice. She did not have to; the room had already given itself over to her.

"Welcome to Hazel. Some of you have waited a long time to sit in those chairs. Some of you have family who sat in them before you." A small pause, weightless and precise. "And one or two of you, perhaps, are still wondering whether you have made some kind of mistake in coming."

Beside her, Alice went very still.

"You have not," Lady Lightwell said. "You were chosen. Every one of you. Remember that, in the months to come, on the days when it does not feel true."

It was a kind thing to say, and meant kindly; Viridia could hear that much. And yet something sat underneath it she could not quite name. A second meaning, tucked beneath the careful words the way her mother used to bury meanings in ordinary advice, be careful who you let see you do it. The surface warm, the thing beneath it watchful. You were chosen. Said one way, it was reassurance. Said another way it meant you were selected, and assessed, and we know exactly why you are here.

The Headmistress went on: the daily schedule, the rules of the grounds, the four years here before they moved on to schools of their specialty. It washed over Viridia in a low even tide. She caught pieces and let the rest go. She was tired in a way sleep did not touch, the bone-deep

tiredness of holding a great deal of weight very still for days on end, and the bright hall and the level voice made it hard to keep her edges from blurring.

Twice, Alice nudged her gently with an elbow, once at something funny Lady Lightwell said about the kitchens, and once, more quietly, when the Headmistress mentioned that students who had lost family were always welcome to speak with the staff. The second nudge was softer than the first. It was not a did you hear that nudge. It was a small wordless I'm here nudge, offered and then withdrawn, and Viridia understood that somehow, without being told, Alice had read something in her in the last five minutes that the rest of the room had not.

She did not look over. She could not, just then. But she let her arm stay where it was, a hair closer to Alice's than it needed to be, and Alice did not move away either, and the two of them sat like that, not speaking, while the Headmistress told them all the things they were now permitted and forbidden to do.

When at last Lady Lightwell drew her hands together and said, "That is all. Welcome again. You may go," the room came apart into noise and motion all at once, fifty chairs scraping, fifty voices rising, the formed and friendly group reassembling itself in an instant.

Viridia stayed sitting a moment longer than the rest.

* * *

The room emptied all at once, loud and relieved, the way a crowd lets go the moment it is allowed to.

The girls rose in a wave of scraping chairs and bright voices, gathering bags and gathering each other, already deciding in clusters where to go

and who would walk with whom. Plans formed in seconds. Did you see, are you in the east wing, come find me at. The formed and friendly group simply picked itself back up and carried itself out the tall doors. The copper-haired girl passed at the head of it, and slowed as she came level with Viridia's chair, her eyes going again to the stone at the throat.

"Saeren," she said, reading the name off nothing, tasting it. "You'll want to keep that tucked under your collar, you know. People talk." She smiled, sweet and exact. "I'm only being kind. Welcome to Hazel." And she was gone before Viridia could decide whether it had been a warning or a threat, leaving the words sitting where she'd dropped them.

The sound of the crowd thinned down the carpeted hall until the great room had nearly drained.

Viridia stayed in her chair.

It was not a decision. Her body had declined to stand, and she let it, because the effort of rising and arranging her face felt like more than she had.

Her hand had found the stone again, the carved edges biting gently into her palm. None of them knew, the girls with their plans and their easy gravity. They walked out into the bright simple front of their lives and not one of them could have guessed that the quiet girl in the front row was drowning, and had been for three days, and was getting frighteningly good at doing it where no one could see. The pressure behind her eyes built. She breathed around it. She did not let it past. No one sees you do it, she told herself, in something close to her mother's voice. You decide who sees.

"Hey."

Alice had not left.

She was standing in the aisle with her bag on her shoulder and one hand resting on the back of the next chair, and she was not smiling now, or rather she was, but it had gone soft and uncertain at the edges, the smile of someone who has noticed something and is not sure they are allowed to have noticed it. She did not sit. She did not crowd. She just stood there, near but not too near, and asked the question gently, as if it might break if she said it too loud.

"Are you okay?"

For a moment Viridia could not trust her voice. She got it under control. She loosened her grip on the stone, and she looked up, and she made her face do the thing faces are supposed to do.

"Yes," she said. "I'm fine."

Alice looked at her.

She knew. Viridia could see that she knew, that the yes had not landed, that it had gone out into the air between them and simply failed to convince anyone. Something passed behind Alice's green eyes, some small recalculation. And then, instead of pressing, instead of asking again or saying anything kind enough to undo her, Alice did the one thing that worked: she let it be.

"Okay," she said easily, as though she believed her completely. "Come on, then. We're probably supposed to find out where we're sleeping. I'll get lost on my own, I just know it." She tipped her head toward the doors, friendly and unbothered, holding the moment open without ever once stepping into it. "Walk with me?"

And Viridia, who had not let anyone see her since the morning the world ended, found that she could stand up after all.

Keep reading.

That was Chapter One of *Hazel Academy*, Book One of The Saeren Chronicles.

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