

There was a chapel in the second ring of the imperial palace that for many years had been tended by a single priest. The priest was mostly blind and deaf and went about his daily rounds as he had for sixty years, not caring much anymore whether or not anybody came to worship. Throughout his long tenure, knights and lords and ladies had come and gone. There was a time when this little chapel might have been crowded at dawn, when knights-elect in gilded armor would spend the night kneeling here in silent contemplation before taking their vows. It is the manner of all things to ebb and flow, however, and the habits of people are no exceptions. Now the chapel smelled like dust, and the stones that had been gently worn down by thousands of shuffling feet seemed to exude silence.

A solemn balcony extended from the back wall of the chapel, from which the priest might address a throng of worshippers. This balcony was reached by way of a steep set of stairs outdoors that the aged priest had not climbed for many years. From the top of the stairs, it was an easy scramble up to the roof of the chapel, where the eaves of the peaked roof blocked the rain and wind, and where a small stained glass portal provided a view of the interior of the chapel, dyed in blues and reds. It was here that Celani came when she wanted to hide. She sat, leaning her head against the cool stone and watching the old priest sit in contemplation.

Her Uncle Dilluther was looking for her, and probably the Seer Corvyne, and maybe even her brother. Corvyne had shown the stablemaster a shattered lantern-- where it had come from, she could not say-- and tried to explain away another accident, glaring over the tops of his spectacles, daring the stablemaster to object. Dilluther had hissed words at her that she could not even hear, with the world swimming in front of her, close to sickness. He had taken her by the shoulders and shaken her, not hard. She had retched, and he had recoiled, ashamed, and she had run. Somewhere, she had lost a slipper, and now she was alone.

Celani had not wanted to cause trouble. She never wanted to cause trouble. She had gone to the stables to see Pepper. After stroking his muzzle for a while and feeding him carrots, the stablemaster had left, and she had been left alone with her favorite horse. She had spoken

the forbidden words that her cousin Myriel had taught her. Her mind opened like a floodgate, and she heard Pepper's voice.

"I missed my lady," the horse said, pressing his head hard against her hand, and the first flicker of light had flashed behind her eyes.

"Pepper," Celani had whispered his name without speaking, swallowing hard and trying to blink back the light. "I've missed you, too."

"Shall we run today?" He had asked, but she had not responded. The outside world had gone dark, with flashes of light bursting behind her eyes. She had been aware of her body hitting the rough floor of the stables, but she had not felt it. She had not fallen asleep exactly, but the shouting, and the fire, and the panicked horses had been very far away. She had been at peace in the dirt and straw, eyes open, while her mind convulsed and her body was absolutely still. Then, Corvyne had knelt beside her and touched her brow, and she had sat up, vomiting. The stablemaster was screaming, and servants were running all around her, hurling buckets of water at the spreading fire.

Now she was alone, huddled against the stained glass window of the chapel, watching the old priest. She trembled a little, exhausted as she always was after she lost control. There was a constant, searing, pain behind her eyes. She had not knocked over a lamp, and even if the Seer managed to convince the stablemaster that a broken lamp had caused the fire, she would still be the Emperor's odd sister, the one who was not quite right, the one who took after her mother, the one who seemed to always be followed by strange occurrences. She would be scolded, by Dilluther and her brother, and told to control herself, as if were that easy. Some days, she wished she could trade her lot for that of her mother, who wandered the corridors of their palace day and night in her robe and slippers, eyes wide and expressionless, silently searching. People averted their eyes with pity when her mother approached, but her mother never lost control. Her mother never hurt anybody.

Celani bit her lip, hard, and watched the old priest lighting candles in the chapel. She wiped the beginnings of tears out of her eyes. The old man moved serenely around the

chapel, and pinpoints of light sprang to life wherever he went, blue and red in the stained glass. She watched and eventually she even smiled. She felt as if a raging beast had been let loose in her mind, and it had just now layed down to rest. She let out a shuddering sigh and closed her eyes. There was still a low pulse behind her eyes-- the resting beast-- but it would be gone soon. She laughed, probably only in her mind, and drifted into something that resembled sleep.

Darkness pressed in around her. She was under water. She struggled toward the surface, fighting the drag of her long dress. The pressure on her chest was unbearable. She fought to hold her breath. The surface was far away. It was too far. Dark, dead, shapes floated in the water around her. One was her brother. His belly was torn open, and his face was bloated, still bearing a look of fear and confusion. A white fish with huge, pale, eyes nibbled at one of his eyeballs. His other eye turned suddenly to look at her, and the shock forced the last bit of air from her lungs. She struggled after the bubbles, up toward the surface, but instead she sank further into the murk. The other dead things were her mother, her cousins, the gatekeeper, and the cooks, and the stableboys-- all corpses, discolored, disfigured, bloated, and drifting in the dark water. She was dying, drowning, struggling pathetically, miles from the surface and surrounded by the corpses of everybody she had ever known. With her last act, she would take control. She took a deep breath...

...and she found that she could breath the water as easily as if it were air. She felt the blood coursing through her veins as never before. She glided easily to the surface and broke through the waves to emerge into a room lit by lamplight. She saw no ocean, no water at all, just a wood floor. A man sat at a table, studying an ancient book, bound in dark leather. She had seen him earlier that day. She had nearly run him over when she had fled from the stables. He had picked up her slipper.

"I've been waiting for you," the man said.

He held out a hand to her, and she took it. He pulled her close to him, and she thought for a moment that he meant to dance with her, but instead he withdrew a long blade from his

sleeve and plunged it into her. She looked into his eyes, now cold and pitiless, and then down at the dagger, which had disappeared up to its hilt into her chest. A dark stain spread quickly across the front of her dress. She fell to her knees, her lips trying to form words that she did not know, and the world went dark once more...

...and then she felt strong arms bearing her up. She opened her eyes and the sunlight pierced her. She retched and clamped her eyes fiercely shut. She would have fallen again, but for the arms that held her. Gradually, she came to see again. She was on the chapel roof. The sun had risen. Her head ached. She was being supported by Althurre Barwell, the Captain of the Guard. Her first impulse was to accept the strength and comfort that he offered, but then she pushed away.

"You were having some terrible dream," Althurre told her, smoothing back his hair and licking his lips.

"How did you find me?" She demanded, worried that he had been sent to bring her back, to punish her, to arrest her for setting fire to the stables.

"I know a lot about you," he said, smiling eagerly, but without warmth, "as a matter of duty." Now she remembered why she did not like the man.

"Are you taking me to be punished?" She asked.

"Nobody sent me here," Althurre said, pulling her close to him. He smelled of lamp oil, sweat, and scented powder. She pushed away, but he held her fast, and whispered, "Nobody else knows about your hiding place..." She realized with horror that he was caressing the back of her neck. His hands were soft and clammy. She was pressed against his chest. She stiffened and tried again to pull away. "...and nobody needs to find out about your hiding place."

Celani stopped struggling and shook her head, crying now, as the flickering lights blotted out her peripheral vision. She felt Barwell caressing her. He had taken her stillness as acquiescence. She shook her head again and tried to mouth a warning, but the world was already receding from her, and Barwell was already screaming. He writhed in front of her,

screaming in pain and terror, clutching his face with both hands. The skin on his face was black and cracking. Smoke rose from his charred skin and empty eye sockets stared at her through his fingers. What was left of his nose hung from his face in a ragged clump. She watched with distant fascination as he fell, screaming, and rolled back and forth, clutching his ruined face.

She was sitting, somehow, when her Uncle Dilluther pulled himself up onto the roof. Althurre Barwell had only just stopped thrashing. She stared at his charred body. The smell was nearly unbearable. She leaned over to vomit, but there was nothing left inside her.

"Celani?" Her Uncle Dilluther said, covering his nose with his sleeve. She sobbed and tried again to empty her stomach. Dilluther looked at Althurre Barwell's blackened corpse and then at Celani, and she saw only sadness in his eyes.

Chapter One