

CHAPTER ONE

Let anyone should suppose that I am a cuckoo's child, got on the wrong side of the blanket by lusty peasant stock and sold into indenture in a shortfallen season, I may say that I am House-born and reared in the Night Court proper, for all the good it did me.

It is hard for me to resent my parents, although I envy them their naïveté. No one even told them, when I was born, that they gifted me with an ill-luck name. Phèdre, they called me, neither one knowing that it is a Hellene name, and cursed.

When I was born, I daresay they still had reason for hope. My eyes, scarce open, were yet of indeterminate color, and the appearance of a newborn babe is a fluid thing, changing from week to week. Blonde wisps may give way to curls of jet, the pallor of birth deepen to a richness like amber, and so on. But when my series of amniotic sea-changes were done, the thing was obvious.

I was flawed.

It is not, of course, that I lacked beauty, even as a babe. I am a D'Angeline, after all, and ever since Blessed Elua set foot on the soil of our fair nation and called it home, the world has known what it means to be D'Angeline. My soft features echoed my mother's, carved in miniature perfection. My skin, too fair for the canon of Jasmine House, was nonetheless a perfectly acceptable shade of ivory. My hair, which grew to curl in charming profusion, was the color of sable-in-shadows, reckoned a coup in some of the Houses. My limbs were straight and supple, my bones a marvel of delicate strength.

No, the problem was elsewhere.

To be sure, it was my eyes; and not even the pair of them, but merely the one.

Such a small thing on which to hinge such a fate. Nothing more than a mote, a fleck, a mere speck of color. If it had been any other hue, perhaps, it would have been a different story. My eyes, when they settled, were that color the poets call bistre, a deep and lustrous darkness, like a forest pool under the shade of ancient oaks. Outside Terre d'Ange, perhaps, one might call it brown, but the language spoke outside our nation's bounds is a pitiful thing when it comes to describing beauty. Bistre, then, rich and liquid-dark; save

for the left eye, where in the iris that ringed the black pupil, a fleck of color shone.

And it shone red, and indeed, red is a poor word for the color it shone. Scarlet, call it, or crimson; redder than a rooster's wattles or the glazed apple in a pig's mouth.

Thus did I enter the world, with an ill-luck name and a pinprick of blood emblazoned in my gaze.

My mother was Liliane de Souverain, an adept of Jasmine House, and her line was ancient in the service of Naamah. My father was another matter, for he was the third son of a merchant prince and, alas, the acumen that raised his father to emeritus status in the City of Elua was spent in the seed that produced his elder brothers. For all three of us would have been better served had his passions led him to the door of another House; Bryony, perhaps, whose adepts are trained in financial cunning.

But Pierre Cantrel had a weak head and strong passions, so when coin swelled the purse at his belt and seed filled to bursting the purse between his legs, it was to Jasmine House, indolent and sensual, that he hid himself.

And there, of course, betwixt the ebb tide in his wits and the rising tide in his loins, he lost his heart in the bargain.

On the outside, it may not look it, but there are intricate laws and regulations governing the Court of Night-Blooming Flowers, which only rustics from the provinces call anything but the Night Court. So it must be, for we—odd, that I say it still—serve not only Naamah herself, but the great Houses of Parliament, the scions of Elua and his Companions, and sometimes, even, the House Royal itself. Indeed, more often than Royal cares to admit, we have served its sons and daughters.

Outsiders say adepts are bred like livestock, to produce children who fall within the House canon. Not so; or at least, no more so than any other marriage is arranged, for reason of politics or finance. We wed for aesthetics, true; but no one ever within my recollection was forced into a union distasteful to him or her. It would have violated the precepts of Blessed Elua to do so.

Still, it is true that my parents were an ill match, and when my father bid for her hand, the Dowayne of Jasmine House was moved to decline. No wonder, for my mother was cast true to the mold of her House, honey-skinned and ebon-haired, with great dark eyes like black pearls. My father, alas, was of a paler cast, with flaxen hair and eyes of murky blue. Who could say what the commingling of their seed would produce?

Me, of course; proving the Dowayne in the right. I have never denied it.

Since he could not have her by decree of the Night Court, my father eloped with my mother. She was free to do so, having made her marquise by the age

of nineteen. On the strength of his jingling purse and his father's grace, and the dowry my mother had made above her marque, they eloped.

I am sure, though I have never seen them to ask since I was but four, that both believed my mother would throw true, a perfect child, a House treasure, and the Dwayne would take me in open-armed. I would be reared and cherished, taught to love Blessed Elua and serve Naamah, and once I had made my marque, the House would tithe a portion to my parents. This I am sure they believed.

Doubtless it was a pleasant dream.

The Night Court is not unduly cruel, and during my mother's lying-in, Jasmine House had welcomed her back. There would be no support from its coffers for her unsanctioned husband, but the marriage was acknowledged and tolerated, having been executed with due process before a rural priest of Elua. In the normal course of events, if my appearance and budding nature fell within the canon of the House, I would have been reared wholly therein. If I met the canon of some other House—as I nearly did—its Dwayne would pay surety for my rearing until ten, when I would be formally adopted into my new household. Either way, did she choose, my mother would have been given over to the training of adepts and granted a pension against my marque. As my father's purse, however ardent, was not deep, this would have been the course they chose.

Alas, when it grew obvious that the scarlet mote in my eye was a permanent fixture, the Dwayne drew the line. I was flawed. Among all the Thirteen Houses, there was not one whose canon allowed for flawed goods of this kind. Jasmine House would not pay for my upkeep, and if my mother wished to remain, she must support us both in service, not training.

If he had little else, my father had his passions, and pride was one of them. He had taken my mother to wife, and her service was only for him and no longer to be laid at Naamah's altar. He begged of his father stewardship of a caravan en route to trade in Caerdicca Unitas, taking my mother and my two-year-old self with him, seeking our fortune.

It will come as no surprise, I think, that after a long and arduous journey in which he treated with brigands and mercenaries alike—and little enough difference between the two, since Tiberium fell and the surety of the highways was lost—that he traded at a loss. The Caerdicci no longer rule an empire, but they are shrewd traders.

So it was that fate found us two years later, travel-weary and nigh unto penniless. I remember little of it, of course. What I remember best is the road, the smells and colors of it, and a member of the mercenaries who took it upon himself to guard my small person. He was a Skaldi tribesman, a northerner,

bigger than an ox and uglier than sin. I liked to pull his mustaches, which hung on either side of his mouth; it made him smile, and I would laugh. He made me to understand, with *langue d'oc* and eloquent gestures, that he had a wife and a daughter my age, whom he missed. When the mercenaries and the caravan parted ways, I missed him, and for many months after.

Of my parents, I remember only that they were much together and much in love, with little time or regard for me. On the road, my father had his hands full, protecting the virtue of his bride. Once it was seen that my mother bore the *marque* of Naamah, the offers came daily, some made at the point of a blade. But he protected her virtue, from all save himself. When we returned to the City, her belly was beginning to swell.

My father, undaunted, had the temerity to beg of his father another chance, claiming the journey too long, the caravan ill-equipped, and himself naive in the ways of trade. This time, he vowed, it would be different. And this time, my grandfather, the merchant prince, drew his own line. He would allot a second chance to my parents, but they must guarantee the trade with a purse of their own.

What else were they to do? Nothing, I suppose. Aside from my mother's skills, which my father would not let her sell, I was their only commodity. To be fair, they would have shrunk in horror at the thought of selling me into indenture on the open market. It would come to that end, no matter, but I doubt either of them capable of looking so far down the line. No, instead my mother, whom after all, I must bless for it, took her courage in both hands and begged an audience with the Dwayne of Cereus House.

Of the Thirteen Houses, Night-Blooming Cereus is and has always been First. It was founded by Enediel Vintesoir some six hundred years past, and from it has grown the Night Court proper. Since the time of Vintesoir, it has been customary for the Dwayne of Cereus House to represent the Night Court with a seat on the City Judiciary; it is said, too, that many a Dwayne of that House has had privilege of the King's ear.

Mayhap it is true; from what I have learned, it is certainly possible. In its founder's time, Cereus House served only Naamah and the scions of Elua. Since then, trade has prospered, and while the court has thrived, it has grown notably more bourgeois in clientele: to wit, my father. But by any accounting, the Dwayne of Cereus House remained a formidable figure.

As everyone knows, beauty is at its most poignant when the cold hand of Death holds poised to wither it imminently. Upon such fragile transience was the fame of Cereus House founded. One could see, still, in the Dwayne, the ghostly echo of the beauty that had blossomed in her heyday, as a pressed flower retains its form, brittle and frail, its essence fled. In the general course

of things, when beauty passes, the flower bows its head upon the stem and fails. Sometimes, though, when the petals droop, a framework of tempered steel is revealed within.

Such a one was Miriam Bouscevre, the Dwayne of Cereus House. Thin and fine as parchment was her skin, and her hair white with age, but her eyes, ah! She sat fixed in her chair, upright as a girl of seventeen, and her eyes were like gimlets, grey as steel.

I remember standing in the courtyard upon marble flagstones, holding my mother's hand as she stammered forth her plight. The advent of true love, the elopement, her own Dwayne's decree, the failure of the caravan and my grandfather's bargain. I remember how she spoke of my father still with love and admiration, sure that the next purse, the next sojourn, would make his fortune. I remember how she cited, voice bold and trembling, her years of service, the exhortation of Blessed Elua: *Love as thou wilt*. And I remember, at last, how the fountain of her voice ran dry, and the Dwayne moved one hand. Not lifted, not quite; a pair of fingers, perhaps, laden with rings.

"Bring the child here."

So we approached her chair, my mother trembling and I oddly fearless, as children are wont to be at the least apt of times. The Dwayne lifted my chin with one ring-laden finger and took survey of my features.

Did a flicker of something, some uncertainty, cross her mien when her gaze fell on the scarlet mote in my left eye? Even now, I am not sure; and if it did, it passed swiftly. She withdrew her hand and returned her gaze to my mother, stern and abiding.

"Jehan spoke truly," she said. "The child is unfit to serve the Thirteen Houses. Yet she is comely, and being raised to the Court, may fetch a considerable bond price. In recognition of your years of service, I will make you this offer."

The Dwayne named a figure, and I could feel a flutter of excitement set my mother atremble beside me. It was a charm of hers, this trembling. "Blessed lady—" my mother began.

Watching hawk-like, the ancient Dwayne cut her off with a gesture. "These are the terms," she said, voice remorseless. "You will tell no one. When you take up residence, it will be outside the City. For the world's concern, the child you spawn four months hence shall be the first. We will not have it said that Cereus House gives succor to a whore's unwanted get."

At that I heard my mother's soft indrawn breath of shock, and witnessed the old woman's eyes narrow in satisfaction. So that is what I am, then, my child-self thought; a whore's unwanted get.

"It is not—" My mother's voice trembled.

“It is my offer.” The ancient voice was pitiless. *She will sell me to this cruel old woman*, I thought, and experienced a thrill of terror. Even then, unknowing, I knew it as such. “We will raise the child as one of our own, until she is ten. Any ability she has, we will foster. Her bond-price will command respect. That much, I offer you, Liliane. Can you offer her as much?”

My mother stood with my hand in hers and gazed down at my upturned face. It is my last memory of her, those great, dark, lambent eyes searching, searching my own, coming at last to rest upon the left. Through our joined hands, I felt the shudder she repressed.

“Take her, then.” Letting go my hand, she shoved me violently. I stumbled forward, falling against the Dowayne’s chair. She moved only to tug gently upon the silken cord of a bell-pull. A sound like silver chimes rang in the distance, and an adept glided unobtrusive from behind a discreet screen, gathering me effortlessly, drawing me away by one hand. I turned my head at the last for one final glimpse of my mother, but her face was averted, shoulders shaking with soundless tears. The sun that filtered through the high windows and cast a green-tinged shade through the flowers shone with blue highlights on the ebony river of her hair.

“Come,” the adept said soothingly, and her voice was as cool and liquid as flowing water. Led away, I looked up in trust. She was a child of Cereus House, pale and exquisite. I had entered a different world.

Is it any wonder, then, that I became what I did? Delaunay maintains that it was ever my destiny, and perhaps he is right, but this I know is true: When Love cast me out, it was Cruelty who took pity upon me.

CHAPTER TWO

I remember the moment when I discovered pain.

Life in Cereus House settled quickly into its own rhythm, unchanging and ceaseless. There were several of us younger children; four others, all told, and myself. I shared a room with two girls, both of them fragile and soft-spoken, with manners like exquisite china. The elder, Juliette, had hair darkening to a brassy gold in her seventh year, and it was reckoned that Dahlia House would buy her *marque*. With her reserve and solemn air, she was suited to its service.

The younger, Ellyn, was for Cereus House and no mistake. She had the frail bloom and pallor, skin so fair the lids were bluish over her eyes when she closed them, lashes breaking like a wave on her tender cheek.

I had little in common with them.

Nor with the others, in truth—pretty Etienne, half-brother to Ellyn, with his cherub's curls of palest gold; nor with Calantia, despite her merry laugh. They were known quantities, their worth determined, their futures assured, born of sanctioned union and destined, if not for this House, then another.

It is not, understand, that I was bitter. Years passed in this manner, pleasant and undemanding, spent in the company of the others. The adepts were kind, and took shifts to teach us the rudiments of knowledge; poetry, song and playing, how to pour wine and prepare a bedchamber and serve at the table as pretty adornments. This I was permitted to do, providing I kept my eyes cast always downward.

I was what I was: a whore's unwanted get. If this sounds harsh, understand too what I learned at Cereus House: Blessed Elua loved me nonetheless for it. After all, what was he if not a whore's unwanted get? My parents had never bothered with teaching me the basics of faith, caught up in the rhapsody of their mortal devotions. At Cereus House, even the children received the benefit of a priest's instruction.

He came every week, Brother Louvel, to sit cross-legged among us in the nursery and share with us the teachings of Elua. I loved him because he was beautiful, with long, fair hair he bound in a silken braid and eyes the color of deep ocean. Indeed, he had been an adept of Gentian House until a patron

bought his marque, freeing him to follow his mystic's dreams. Ministering unto children was one of them. He would draw us upon his lap, one or two at a time, and spin us the old tales in his dreamer's voice.

This is how I came to learn, then, dandled on a former adept's knee, how Blessed Elua came to be; how when Yeshua ben Yosef hung dying upon the cross, a soldier of Tiberium pierced his side with the cruel steel of a spearhead. How when Yeshua was lowered, the women grieved, and the Magdelene most of all, letting down the ruddy gold torrent of her hair to clothe his still, naked figure. How the bitter salt tears of the Magdelene fell upon soil ensanguined and moist with the shed blood of the Messiah.

And from this union the grieving Earth engendered her most precious son; Blessed Elua, most cherished of angels.

I listened with a child's rapt fascination as Brother Louvel told us of the wandering of Elua. Abhorred by the Yeshuites as an abomination, reviled by the empire of Tiberium as the scion of its enemy, Elua wandered the earth, across vast deserts and wastelands. Scorned by the One God of whose son he was begotten, Elua trod with bare feet on the bosom of his mother Earth and wandered singing, and where he went, flowers bloomed in his footprints.

He was captured in Persis, and shook his head smiling when the King put him in chains, and vines grew to wreath his cell. The tale of his wandering had come to reach the ear of Heaven, and when he was imprisoned, there were those among the angelic hierarchy who answered. Choosing to flout the will of the One God, they came to earth in ancient Persis.

Of these it was Naamah, eldest sister, who went smiling to the King and offered herself with lowered eyelids, in exchange for the freedom of Elua. Besotted, the King of Persis accepted, and there is a story still told of the King's Night of Pleasure. When the door to Elua's cell was opened, a great fragrance of flowers poured forth, and Elua emerged singing, crowned with vines.

This is why, Brother Louvel explained, we revere Naamah and enter her service as a sacred trust. Afterward, he said, the King betrayed Elua and those who followed, and gave them strong wine laced with valerian to drink. While they slept, he had them cast on a boat with no sails and put out to sea; but when he awoke, Elua sang and the creatures of the deep came to answer, guiding the boat across the sea.

The boat came to land in Bhodistan, and Naamah and the others who had come followed Elua, not knowing or caring if the Eye of the One God was upon them, and where they went they sang, and wound in their hair the flowers that sprang up in Elua's wake. In Bhodistan, they are an ancient people, and they feared to turn from their multitude of gods, who are by turns capricious and compassionate. Yet they saw the light in him and would allow no

harm to Blessed Elua, nor would they follow him, so he wandered singing, and people made the sign of peace and turned away. When he went hungry, Naamah lay down with strangers in the marketplace for coin.

From there, Elua's course drifted to the north, and he wandered long through lands harsh and stony, and the angels and creatures of the earth attended upon him, or surely he would have perished. These stories I loved, such as the Eagle of Tiroc Pass, who flew over the crags and ice each morning to stoop low above the head of Blessed Elua and drop a berry into his mouth.

In the dark woods of the Skaldic hinterlands, the ravens and wolves were his friends, but the tribesmen gave him no heed, brandishing their terrible axes and calling upon their gods, who have a taste for blood and iron. So he wandered, and snowdrops poked their heads above the drifts where he went.

At last he came to Terre d'Ange, still unnamed, a rich and beautiful land where olives, grapes and melons grew, and lavender bloomed in fragrant clouds. And here the people welcomed him as he crossed the fields and answered him in song, opening their arms.

So Elua; so Terre d'Ange, land of my birth and my soul. For three-score years, Blessed Elua and those who followed him—Naamah, Anael, Azza, Shem-hazai, Camael, Cassiel, Eisheth and Kushiel—made to dwell here. And each of them followed the Precept of Blessed Elua save Cassiel, that which my mother had quoted to the Dowayne: *Love as thou wilt*. So did Terre d'Ange come to be what it is, and the world to know of D'Angeline beauty, born in the bloodlines from the seed of Blessed Elua and those who followed him. Cassiel alone held steadfast to the commandment of the One God and abjured mortal love for the love of the divine; but his heart was moved by Elua, and he stayed always by his side like a brother.

During this time, Brother Louvel said, the mind of the One God was much preoccupied with the death of his son, Yeshua ben Yosef, and the course of his chosen people. The time of deities does not move like our own, and three generations may live and die in the space between one thought and another. When the songs of the D'Angelines reached his ears, he turned his eye to Terre d'Ange, to Elua and those who had fled Heaven to follow him. The One God sent his commander-in-chief to fetch them back and bring Elua to stand before the throne, but Elua met him smiling and gave him the kiss of peace, laying wreaths of flowers about his neck and filling his glass with sweet wines, and the leader of God's host returned ashamed and empty-handed.

It came then to the One God that his persuasion held no sway over Elua, in whose veins ran the red wine of his mother Earth, through the womb she gave him and the tears of the Magdelene. And yet through this he was mortal, and thus subject to mortality. The One God pondered long, and sent not

the angel of death, but his arch-herald to Elua and those who followed him. "Do you stay here and love as you wilt, thy offspring shall overrun the earth," said the herald of the One God. "And this is a thing which may not be. Come now in peace to the right hand of your God and Lord, and all is forgiven."

Brother Louvel told the stories well; he had a melodic voice, and knew when to pause, leaving his listeners hanging on his next breath. How would Elua answer? We were in a fever to know.

And this he told us: Blessed Elua smiled at the arch-herald, and turned to his boon companion Cassiel, holding out his hand for his knife. Taking it, he drew the point across the palm of his hand, scoring it. Bright blood welled from his palm and fell in fat drops to the earth, and anemones bloomed. "My grandfather's Heaven is bloodless," Elua told the arch-herald, "And I am not. Let him offer me a better place, where we may love and sing and grow as we are wont, where our children and our children's children may join us, and I will go."

The arch-herald paused, awaiting the One God's response. "There is no such place," he answered.

At that, Brother Louvel told us, such a thing happened as had not happened in many years and never since: Our mother Earth spoke to her once-husband, the One God, and said, "We may create it, you and I."

So was created the true Terre d'Ange, the one that lies beyond mortal perception, whose gate we may enter only after passing through the dark gate that leads out of this world. And so Blessed Elua and those who followed him did leave this plane, passing not through the dark gate, but straightways through the bright one, into the greater land that lies beyond. But this land he loved first, and so we call it after that one, and revere him and his memory, in pride and love.

On the day he finished telling us the Eluine Cycle, Brother Louvel brought a gift; a spray of anemones, one for each, to be fastened on our plackets with a long pin. They were the deep, rich red which I thought betokened true love, but he explained that these were a sign of understanding, of the mortal blood of Elua shed for his love of earth and the D'Angeline people.

It was my wont to wander the grounds of Cereus House, soaking in the day's lesson. On that day, as I remember it, I was in my seventh year, and proud as any adept of the anemones fastened to the front of my gown.

In the antechamber to the Receiving Room, those adepts summoned would gather to prepare for the viewing and selection by patrons. I liked to visit for the refined air of urgency, the subtle tensions that marked the waiting adepts as they prepared to vie for patrons' favors. Not that overt competition was permitted; such a display of untoward emotion would have been reckoned

unbecoming. But it was there nonetheless, and there were always tales—a bottle of scent switched for cat piss, frayed ribbons, slit stays, the heel of a slipper cut to unevenness. I never witnessed such a thing, but the potential always eddied in the air.

On this day, all was quiet, and only two adepts waited quietly, having been requested already in particular. I held my tongue and sat quiet by the little fountain in the corner, and I tried to imagine being one of these adepts, waiting with a tranquil spirit to lie down with a patron, but a dreadful excitement gripped me instead at the thought of giving myself to a stranger. According to Brother Louvel, Naamah was filled with a mystic purity of spirit when she went to the King of Persis, and when she lay down with strangers in the market.

But that is what they say at Gentian House, and not at Alyssum, where they say she trembled to lay aside her modesty, nor at Balm, where they say she came in compassion. I know, for I listened to the adepts talk. At Bryony, they say she made a good bargain of it, and at Camellia, that her perfection unveiled left him blind for a fortnight, which led him to betray her out of uncomprehending fear. Dahlia claims she bestowed herself like a queen, while Heliotrope says she basked in love as in the sun, which shines on middens and kings' chambers alike. Jasmine House, to which I would have been heir, holds that she did it for pleasure, and Orchis, for a lark. Eglantine maintains she charmed with the sweetness of her song. What Valerian claims I know not, for of the two Houses that cater to tastes with a sharper edge, we heard less; but I heard once that Mandrake holds Naamah chose her patrons like victims and whipped them to violent pleasures, leaving them sated and half-dead.

These things I heard, for the adepts used to guess among them, when they thought I was not listening, to which House I would be bound if I were not flawed. While I had many moods in turn, as any child might, I was not sufficiently modest nor merry nor dignified nor shrewd nor ardent nor any of the others to mark me as a House's own, and I had, it seemed, no great gift for poetry nor song. So they wondered, then, idly; that day, I think, left no question.

The spray of anemones with which Brother Louvel had gifted me had slipped into disarray, and I drew out the pin to fix them. It was a long, sharp pin, exceedingly shiny, with a round head of mother-of-pearl. I sat by the fountain and admired it, anemones forgotten. I thought of Brother Louvel and his beauty, and how I would give myself to him once I was a woman proper. I thought of Blessed Elua and his long wandering, his startling answer to the arch-herald of the One God. The blood he shed might—who knows?—run in

my very own veins, I thought; and resolved to see. I turned my left hand palm-upward and took the pin in a firm grip in my right, pushing it into my flesh.

The point sank in with surprising ease. For a second it seemed almost of no note; and then the pain blossomed, like an anemone, from the point I had driven into my palm. My hand sang in agony, and my nerves thrilled with it. It was an unfamiliar feeling, at once bad and good, terribly good, like when I thought of Naamah lying with strangers, only better; *more*. I withdrew the pin and watched with fascination as my own red blood filled the tiny indentation, a scarlet pearl in my palm to match the mote in my eye.

I did not know, then, that one of the adepts had seen and gasped, sending a servant straightways for the Dwayne. Mesmerized by pain and the thin trickle of my blood, I noticed nothing until her shadow fell over me.

“So,” she said, and fastened her old claw around my left wrist, wrenching my hand up to peer at my palm. The pin dropped from my fingers and my heart beat in excited terror. Her gimlet gaze pierced my own and saw the stricken pleasure there. “It would have been Valerian House for you, then, would it?” There was a grim satisfaction in her voice; a riddle solved. “Send a messenger to the Dwayne, tell him we have such a one who might benefit from instruction in accommodating pain.” The grey-steel gaze roamed my face once more, came to rest on my left eye, and stopped. “No, wait.” Something again flickered in her mien; an uncertainty, something half-remembered. She dropped my wrist and turned away. “Send for Anafiel Delaunay. Tell him we have something to see.”