

# **A GARDEN OF SALT**

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**includes**

**HUMILITY GARDEN: AN UNFINISHED BIOGRAPHY**

**and**

**DELTA CITY**



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**HUMILITY GARDEN: AN UNFINISHED BIOGRAPHY**

**Chapter One**

Beau knelt a little way off, smashing his head methodically into the dry-stone wall. Silky white curls tumbled over his forehead every time it hit. His lavender eyes were squeezed shut against the pain.

“It won’t do any good,” Humi said. She sat in the shade of a stunted oak with a torn shift in her lap. Though she’d been pretending to stitch as Beau talked and raged out his despair, at sixteen years old she wasn’t callous enough to watch him hurt himself any longer. “The scars will only make you look exciting.”

She got up and crossed the dell, dragging him away from the wall. The short grass scratched her legs as she pushed his hair back. There was no blood, only bruises, livid on the dark, grainy skin beneath his golden fur. He would have no scars, though she had spoken the truth: they couldn’t have detracted from a beauty like his.

“I shan’t go.” His voice was nearly inaudible. “Humi, I won’t I won’t die.”

She squeezed him. It was hard not to let slip how desperately she longed that he could stay. “You’ve got nothing to say about it! How can you even think of disobeying the flamen?”

“I won’t disobey. I’ll make him take back his choice! He won’t want me with a smashed face!” He pulled against her arms, but she held on. In a moment he relented. It was late summer; the sun stood midway down a sky the translucent blue of an aquamarine. The temperature was as high as it ever got in Westshine, this western province of the continent, Domesdys. Humi gazed over the top of Beau’s head across the low, dry valley, to a slope which had been desolate ever since time began. It was too close to the salt for anything to grow. The grass on that side was copper-colored, sparse.

Above the ridge, over an expanse of other barren ridges, a long, thin glitter sparkled. It was like the sea, but it was not the sea. It was the salt.

“You know what Mum would’ve given for a chance like this, Beau?” Humi said. “You know what *anyone* would give to’ve been born like you?”

To her, he was just Beau. Betrothed, childhood companion, worst enemy and best friend. But when he was born, the sight of him lying like a squalling, unearthly little vision next to his mother, Mercy, had driven all other expectations out of the minds of his family. They asked nothing of him beyond his face, which knew no such thing as a bad angle, and his body, which moved like fur-covered steel. They knew they would get their love’s worth out of him later on.

Now that investment had been returned. The traveling flamen Godsbrother Sensuality had chosen Beau to be a ghost, a beautiful statue of himself for the gods, to enjoy however they wished. In return, the Garden family would get two hundred sheep, sixty shillings’ worth of metal tools, a cask of Royalland wine, and festival clothing for the whole family. All of Westshine would envy them.

It was like being told that the gleam at the bottom of your well is gold, as you’ve always hoped. There was as much laughter as tears.

That Beau was not equally overjoyed did not matter.

His ambition was to marry and have children, to be a farmer like his father and uncles. But no one suspected him of such ordinary desires. He was too beautiful. Last night, he, Humi, and their older cousins Brit and Emper had been roughhousing around the fire in the courtyard. Forgetting their grown-up dignity, Brit and Emper had teamed up to take their two smaller cousins down. Giggling hysterically, Humi had caught a sudden glimpse of Beau—his face reddish on one side from the firelight and ghostly pale on the other from the stars—and fallen silent.

She did not usually notice his beauty, but right then he seemed to have become a god.

And huddled by the flames with his leman at his feet, Godsbrother Sensuality had lifted his head as if his blind, salt-encrusted eyes could see. He had stared in Beau’s direction for a long moment. It was said that flamen *could* “see” the gods to bow to them. Mightn’t the same be true for a beauty not quite divine, but almost? Humi had never seen a god, though one was said to have appeared to

her great-grandmother. But she was sure they were as beautiful as the statuettes that her father and uncles carved. More beautiful, in their perfection.

The Divine Balance swung. Beau's life dropped down, down, down, out of sight, while his beauty was exalted to the sky.

And Humi went up into the hills to cry by herself. Without Beau she had no future here in the hamlet that her family had farmed for thousands of years. Since the time when Domesdys had been a land of stupid, heretical peasants, since before the Divinarchy came into being, the traditions had been the same. Humi would be an inferior being if she did not marry. And Beau was her only cousin anywhere near her age. Even if the others hadn't had wives or sweethearts, they would not have taken her, for she was not pretty. Her hair and face and body were all the same dirty tawny shade; her grayish-black eyes were the color of blood, her figure only passing. It had even made Beau ill-tempered about betrothing her at first, for he did have a streak of vanity, slender though it might be.

She wanted to leave Beaulieu. But where would she go? The outside world was a colorful blur of tales that the lemans of wandering flamens had told her. In it, the gem that was Delta City gleamed like a diamond. That was where the Divinarch sat and ruled over Salt. The Divinarch. God of gods. In Royalland.

Lesser gods were supposed to frequent the saltside, to appear to lonely girls tending sheep on the hills and give them strange, furless children. But those were only stories. Humi knew what she would really be when Beau was gone—old maid, work-ox, nurse for little nieces and nephews. The hamlets of the saltside strained every muscle to drag their living out of the thin earth. No one was spared. Even Beau was only worked more lightly than the others.

Humi had sunk so deep into her own misgivings that she scarcely noticed when Beau began to smash his face against the wall again. When she did see, she forestalled her impulse to grab him. Maybe that was where she'd gone wrong last time. And indeed, just when she thought she'd have to stop him before he killed himself, the sharp movements in the corner of her eye stopped. She kept her eyes down. A moment passed and another; then a heavy, painful weight came crashing down onto her feet.

"Gods' blood!" she whispered.

He stood over her, breathing shallowly. One cheek was a black mess of blood. He had dropped the stone in her lap. Wincing at the shooting pains in her ankle, she stood up. He wiped his eyes. "It's a lot harder to hurt yourself than you'd think."

"You *are* going to have a scar now, Beauty Garden."

"Made you notice, didn't I!" The leaves mottled the blue sky behind his head. The sun shone through a gap in the foliage onto his blood-smeared golden face. "Humi, you've got to come with me. I can't stand to go on my own."

Her breath jammed in her lungs. In the instant before the world turned the right way up again, her thoughts flew free of Beaulieu, out, out into a universe that was brighter and deeper than she would have dreamed possible. In Royalland, the lemans said, everything was green.

Is it true that in Delta City, the gods walk the streets every day? she wondered.

Will I ever see a god if Beau leaves me here?

What will I see?

It was agonizing to let go of those fantasies.

She had cherished hazy dreams of getting away ever since she was nine, when the outside world intruded upon the hamlet like the fanged mouth of a predator, in the form of a flamen, Godsbrother Transcendence. He had taken Humi's little sister, Thani, away to be his leman. A five-year-old chatterbox with white-blond fur, Thani had skipped away by the Godsbrother's side, leaving Humi looking after her. That was when she had first realized that it was possible to leave. And there was Humi's mother, Faith. When Humi was one year old, Faith had nearly been chosen to be a ghost to

decorate the inauguration of a new Heir in Delta City. Humi knew that if her mother had been chosen, she would have gone. And Humi, growing up in someone else's care, would never have forgiven her for it.

"You've probably got chips of wall in that cut, Beau." She probed it with dexterous fingers, wiped it with a fresh oak leaf, avoiding his eyes.

Bruises were puffing his other eye shut, but he seized her shoulders without fumbling. His hands were calloused, and strong from manual labor. She couldn't writhe free. "If I have to die, I want you there with me. Come."

"Beau, you're crazy. What would I do in Delta City?" *After you die*—she could not say it.

"When the flamen told me I was chosen, he said I could take a companion. 'It is an acceptable practice, if the companion is content never to return,' he said. Now listen, why would you want to return? There's nothing for you here! Aunt would never let you farther away than Butterfly Cote to marry, and there's no one there, nor in Garden Vale. D'you want to live under her eye for the rest of your life? Working for Brit's and Emper's and Gent's families?"

His voice was rough. They were unused to expressing their emotions to one another. Her nose stung with imminent tears.

"Come with me."

The sun lay on his perfect lips. She watched them shape the words. Her fantasies fluttered round her head, blinding her. "Come with—"

"Stop! I'll ask! But she won't let me!"

"Yep," Beau said in satisfaction. "She will."

**I**n the saltside every acre was precious. The low stone walls which marked out cultivated property stopped well short of the beginning of the salt. But sheep and goats wandered on the unclaimed brown slopes, and from time to time, parties from the hamlets ventured into the salt itself, seeking transparent berries and fruits. They wore cloths pulled over their faces. It was dangerous to go out in the salt when there were no clouds, or even at night if the stars shone brightly. The glare of every color in the rainbow at once could blind you. And even if it didn't, sooner or later a salt blizzard would come scudding over the wasteland and whip particles into your eyes, where they would take root and form crystals that grew until they filled your eye sockets.

That was how lemans became flamens, if their masters died while they were still in service, and if they rejected atheism, choosing instead to follow their masters into the flamenhood. They took pilgrimages of many days out into the salt. Returning with the salt crystals growing in their eyes, they were hailed as full-fledged Godsbrothers and Godsisters, possessed of the power to work miracles.

The salt symbolized the divine, the unknowable. The flamens' histories of the time before the Conversation Wars, when the whole world was an unmapped sprawl of barbarian kingdoms, showed that the salt had never lain farther than a few hundred leagues from the coasts of the six continents. Only the rivers of fresh water emerged from it unscathed. And it had never been explored, not even by the Wanderer, the first flamen, who had gone in sighted and come out blinded; so no one knew how large the continents really were. In terms of inhabitable country, Royalland was the largest and Domesdys the smallest, except for the Archipelago, where each island was either all salt or all soil, and people lived on fish.

The gods came from the salt. The myriad, nameless gods of wondrous appearances in the grandparents' tales—and the Delta City Incarnations, the Sage, the Mother, the Striver, the Maiden, the Heir. And the Divinarch. When they tired of living in Delta City, they returned home to Heaven, to have their places taken by others. Heaven lay in the depths of the gleaming, teeming wastelands: the abode of gods, the mecca of souls. But no one alive in 1352 had been there. Only two men had

ever gone there and returned. The Wanderer, and a thousand years later a disillusioned leman, Zeniph Antiprophet. Antiprophet was devout and generous-minded, and he was so pious that when his Godsister passed away, at the age of fifty-eight, he ran crazy with grief. He swore he would seek out heaven and reclaim her from the gods.

He didn't find her on the great barren tableau in the middle of Royalland, though he traveled up the Chrume, the great river of Royalland, and searched the salt for so many months that his death was deemed certain. But he did find Heaven. All children, even the most pious, knew the tales he had spouted when he came back down the Chrume. That the beings all Salt worshiped were not any more gods than he was. The gods themselves had told him this, he asserted; that was nonsense, of course. Humi would never have dreamed of falling for it. But many people did believe him. Including many young, impressionable lemans.

When Humi's grandparents were young, there had been three flamen in Nece town. Her great-great-grandparents had been married by a flamen who lived in the hamlet itself, in a round stone hut that was now the silo. Now only one flamen lived in Nece, and all the services that the others had provided were done by wandering flamen. These Godsbrothers and Godsisters had followed the example of those who, over the past hundred and fifty years, had uprooted themselves in an effort to tend to all the outlying habitations that had had flamen of their own but no longer did. To wander, they gave up their political positions of local government. The exchange was altruistic, but it had a downside. What with this, and the increasing frequency with which lemans relinquished the flamenhood to become lords and ladies, the flamenhood had lost its iron grip on much of the world. Now it had to vie undignifiedly with the atheist nobles for power. And it seemed set to lose more still, as the Divine Cycle wound to a close and the Divinarch grew more and more tired. A hundred and ninety was old for a god.

**H**umi and Beau sat in the dell for a long time, hugging each other. When the sun dipped toward the glittering horizon, they got up and walked home. Though the hamlet was only a couple of miles distant, a long arm of salt lay in the widest valley they would have to cross, and it was still too bright to venture across. Holding hands, they followed a goat path through the furze around its tip. Humi glanced down every now and then at the salt. Iridescent shrubs and flowers glittered red in the last of the light. Chitinous insect wings flashed.

Beau's face was set and his hand sweated in hers. But her own composure astonished her.

She could taste the difference in the air as they crested the last ridge. Less salty. Below, firelight flickered. The fields and outbuildings of the hamlet were arranged so that they formed a different but equally pleasing pattern from each hilltop: a flower, a star, a face. For centuries it had been slowly mutating. Whenever the Garden men planted a crop, they considered its aesthetic impact on the whole valley, often hesitating for days between, say, flat oats and the slightly darker ringers. They made frequent trips to the ridges to judge and rejudge. Humi usually felt a tingle of appreciation when she saw it all laid out below her—aesthetics was the one topic on which she could communicate with her father and uncles. But now, in the dark, she and Beau hurried down the hill.

The hexagonal courtyard of the hamlet lay right across the road to the salt. The Garden women flurried to and fro, transferring a meal from the inside pantry onto the trestle tables that stood in an oxshoe around the fire. Six chancleers hung spitted over the logs. Godsbrother Sensuality was ensconced in the only chair, halfway along the oxshoe. His Calvarese leman Miti sat in his lap, reporting the activity in a hushed flow of words. For a moment after Humi and Beau appeared, his voice was the only sound besides the hiss of the fire; then the women's tongues loosened again. But the tension didn't leave the air.

Beau's face drooped as he noticed it. But he said nothing. "Gent wants to settle with me about

my fowls,” he whispered, and strode off with his brother. Joy, Humi’s youngest aunt, sent her inside with a smack to change her dirty skirt. She had to look pretty for the flamen, though he could not see her. “Inside” was the Gardens’ side of the courtyard, as opposed to the oxen’s side, the kitchen, or the fowl’s. An unbelievably cramped four rooms. While the darkness and head-height rafters were comforting, no one could spend a day on the hillsides and not be stunned by the smell. She breathed shallowly as she fumbled her only dress on. When she came out, tugging her hair free of the neck, she went in search of her mother.

Faith was stirring a giant pot over the fire while Tici, Humi’s grandmother, turned the chanticleers. Faith clung jealously to the good looks that had made her a near choice for a ghost. Her hair was like a mass of leaves, her fur chestnut brown, tinged ruby by the flames. Humi took up a position at Faith’s side and locked her hands behind her back. “*My manipulative little murderess*”—*watch and see if she doesn’t call me that*, she thought. The scathing nickname was only half fair, for Humi had never tried to manipulate anyone. But the whole world would despise her as a murderess if they knew about the Awful Thing she had done when she was nine years old. She did not want to think about that. Why had she remembered that—“Mother?”

Faith glanced up. The familiar half-annoyed, half-scared look came over her face. “What?”

“Mother, I want to go with Beau.” The enormity of the thing hit her again even as she spoke the words. Her grandmother, who was deaf, turned the spit tranquilly. The fat dripped off the chanticleers; light spluttered up the far walls of the courtyard.

“You want to leave?” Faith said at last. “Why?”

It came out in lumps and spurts—the persuasive, logical reasons that she and Beau had dreamed up. Beau had convinced her, but she doubted her ability to convince Faith in turn. She twisted her fingers behind her back. “There’s no one else I can marry—” It wasn’t working. She knew it wasn’t.

Faith drew a deep breath, stirring the stew violently, mechanically. “I bore two daughters, Humi. Neither of them was beautiful, though of course I can’t say what Thani might have become. But I bore no daughter who wasn’t so much greater than me that she could have lived out her life here without going mad.”

“Mother? What do you mean?”

“You can go!” Faith stirred fiercely. “Now get away from me!”

Humi backed away. Eventually she bumped into a bench, where she collapsed and sat with knees drawn up, staring around at her family. Maybe they saw the look on her face, for not one of them enlisted her help for anything until the time came to sit down at table.

Faith took a seat a good way away from Humi, next to her friend Emish, a widow from Garden Vale, half a morning’s walk over the hills. She was staying at Beaulieu “to help with the harvest.” Humi could not look at them—she was still stunned. But she was aware of how they kept glancing at her over the fire pit.

Godsbrother Sensuality rose to his feet. Miti hopped down to stand beside him, and his voice grew suddenly audible: “... fresh-baked bread, chanticleers, and I think it’s a vegetable stew. The table is suitably decorated with small statuettes of the Divinarch.”

“That will do for now, Miti.” The flamen had a deep, unsweet voice. “Brothers and sisters, the gods thank you for your faith and your hospitality toward their servants. And especially tonight, they thank you for your gift to them. The flower of your children, Beauty Garden, to be preserved forever as a ghost.”

Humi realized that Beau’s mother, Mercy, was crying. She sat next to Humi with tears flooding down her face. Her husband, Perance, held her tightly, but she did not take her streaming eyes off the Godsbrother.

“The councillor to whom Beauty is to be given is an atheist lady,” said the flamen. He said it as casually as if he were saying Beau would be given to his spinster aunt. Not that flamen had spinster

aunts, Humi thought in a flash of illogic. The Gardens sucked in their breath in horror. An opponent of the flamenhood? It was as bad as if they had been told he would not be a ghost after all.

Beau himself, whose sole consolation, Humi knew, had been that his ghost would gratify a god, looked like a caricature of shock.

“Councillor Belstem Summer—surely even here you have heard of him?—plans to inaugurate his daughter, Aneisneida, in a seat on the Ellipse. She is replacing Godsister Purity, who died in an accident with her leman, leaving no successor. There will be great pomp. The ceremony will be decorated with the finest ghosts Salt can offer. Your son, Beauty, will be an example of the virtue which we flamens can still find in Salt.” Humi couldn’t believe that any of her family dared to raise their voices, but her uncle Cand spoke, choking on his indignation. “Godsbrother, why do the gods disgrace my nephew by giving him to one of the nobility? Why do they smile on the atheists?”

The flamen turned his blind head toward Cand’s voice. The crystals in his eye sockets took on a fanatical gleam. “The wish of the Divinarch is that Aneisneida be honored like any flamen who becomes a councillor. We do the gods’ will. Now be silent before I forsake your table and your hospitality, Godsman.”

Cand bowed his head. The food steamed, growing colder, while no one dared to move.

At last Godsbrother Sensuality rumbled, “May the gods take pleasure in the food we eat,” and sank into his chair. Thankfully, Cand’s wife, Prudence, leaned around him to carve a chanticleer. Humi mentally heaped the chattering voices on top of her head, waiting for her trembling to stop.

**A**fter the feast was cleared away, and the flamen established in the only “good” room in the courtyard, Faith and Emish volunteered to watch over the sheep. Admitting that Emish had to earn her keep if she was to stay at Beaulieu much longer, Humi’s father, Reng, let them go. They bobbed away in the darkness, the dogs leaping around them.

Larger salt animals tended to keep away from the human country, with one notable exception: the predators. These beasts with their rows of fangs, their talons, and their innocent, heart-shaped faces, had no matches for bloodthirstiness in the salt or out of it. And they had developed a taste for humans’ livestock—and whenever possible, humans themselves. “Guarding the sheep” had two traditional implications. One was that of the most dangerous work on the farm. The other was that of a lovers’ rendezvous. In this case, the latter applied.

Hours after Faith and Emish left, Humi’s eyes were still dry. She lay next to Tici in the backmost curtained-off section of the house, on their scratchy pallet under a feather quilt too hot for the season. Tici whuffled softly. A few feet away on another pallet, Joy and her husband, Uth, slept deeply after having coupled. Six-year-old Merce and their baby, Asure, breathed more quickly.

Overhead, a predator screamed. Humi sent the gods a quick prayer for any sheep that Faith and Emish might have missed when they gathered the flock into the fold. If once the predators got a whiff of their blood, they wouldn’t survive long.

But no predator could smell so delicate a scent as blood through the heavy odor of Beaulieu.

Humi knew it was the last time she would be wrapped in this thick, stuffy darkness, surrounded by people who cared about her. She made it last for as long as possible by keeping herself awake, seeing how many fingers it took her to weave braids in the frayed edge of the quilt. But the threads were short—she couldn’t get it any lower than two fingers, and those on her right hand.

## Chapter Two

The next morning, Godsbrother Sensuality worked a miracle. The wandering flamens who visited Beaulieu didn't by any means always repay their hosts with miracles: it was too taxing, not only for the flamens themselves but also for the gods.

Breakfast was cold meat and barley porridge, eaten in the courtyard. Over in the feed that Gent had scattered, the chancleers, quails, and pigeons which were no longer Beau's responsibility sang their shrill morning music. Beau sat directly across from Humi, looking like a lamb that knows it is mutton. He kept trying to catch her eye. She stared devoutly at the statuette of the Divinarch on the table in front of her. Her body felt chilly in the breeze. The sky was the hue of a chunk of glass shivered inside; the ridges reared bleak and brown against it. Her family finished eating and stood uncomfortably around the courtyard, gazing anywhere but at the Godsbrother, who still champed at his porridge. Miti's dark eyes dared anyone to stare.

Humi mustered her courage. "Godsbrother? My name is Humility." She got the syllables of her hated full name out as quickly as possible. "Godsbrother, has my mother spoken with you about me coming with Beau to Royalland?"

A dead silence fell. It seemed that even the birds of the mountain stopped singing. "Ah, yes," the Godsbrother said, pushing himself back from the table, wiping the fur around his lips. "A young woman loyal in your attachments, who will well be able to survive on your own. Hardworking, determined, imaginative. Observant of Dividay, respectful to your elders, well able to bear children. Useful around the house."

"Humi—" Reng came up behind her and clasped her shoulders possessively. "Daughter, what is this?"

Before she had to answer, a disturbance came from behind the oxhouse. All eyes turned toward it. Grim-faced, putting the dogs away from stained skirts, Faith and Emish came down the road from the salt.

"There's been a killing." Faith's voice carried thinly across the courtyard. "Right under our noses. Eight—*eight!*—of this year's lambs. The predators know they are tenderest, I swear, and pick them out."

Humi's father dropped his hands from her shoulders as he turned to find out the extent of the damage. She stepped back from the babble of questions, signaling Beau that they should go collect their belongings. Indoors, they wordlessly stuffed clothing into flaxen sacks. Humi listened to the splash of blood being scrubbed off hands in the dirty dishwater outside the door. Emish's soft voice described the massacre.

She looked up at Beau. "Why don't I care? I watched the lambs that're in those predators bellies being born. Why don't I care?"

He looked as though he hadn't slept a wink—glamorously hollow-eyed, desirably vulnerable. "Dunno."

Prudence's voice rose: "... they're in the house. Beau! Humi!"

All the family had formed a circle on the bony earth of the road. When Humi saw Godsbrother Sensuality take the center alone, she knew what was coming. Cand said respectfully, "We're sorry to ask this, Godsbrother. But those dead lambs mean the loss of this year's generation. Of course we'll be getting the—compensation—but we may starve first. We'd been reckoning on the little ewes—"

The Godsbrother cut him off curtly. "I understand." The Gardens bent their heads in attitudes of prayer. Silence fell, as profound as if the world had stopped. Humi had watched miracles before: she didn't expect to see anything beyond the way the crystals in the Godsbrother's eye sockets bulged a little, and the sweat started out on his skull. Minutes passed. Two roosters flew at each other over by the fowl house, and Prudence peeked from behind her fingers, obviously itching to flap her skirts at them.



Finally it was done. As the larger rooster, victorious, preened his blue neckfeathers, a shrill *ma-*ing floated from the high end of the valley.

The circle broke up. Laughing, adults and children craned upward to see. Eight little flecks of white on the bleak hillside, standing out like snowballs in summer. Humi sucked in her breath as she watched them straggle downhill. Miti put his arm around Sensuality—odd to see the child half-supporting the big man—and guided him to the permanently ajar gate. “Come on then, you two!”

Faith said, “Daughter.”

The three of them stood before her: her mother, her father, and Emish. There were wet splotches on Faith’s dress where she’d scrubbed off the blood, but she had taken time to scrape her hair back neatly. She hugged Humi tightly, kissing her forehead. Humi swallowed and clutched her, wanting desperately not ever to have to let go. When Reng joined the embrace, she felt that she couldn’t have been happier in Heaven. “Oh, Mother, Father, I don’t want ...”

“Yes, you do. My little girl. Oh, but I love you so much!” Faith whispered. Humi couldn’t name the catch in her voice—was it grief, or relief?

Reng pulled her aside. “I shall settle with your mother when you’re gone. She acted out of her place. You’re the only child I have left and that means a lot to a man—and you were always a good judge of the beauty of the crops.”

Those words helped Humi stay dry-eyed as her cousins and aunts and uncles and in-laws came up and embraced her. LittleASURE was the only one who threatened her self-control, chuckling at Humi’s solemnity. Beau, too, was running the gauntlet.

“Beauty, you couldn’t have done us more honor if you’d started your own hamlet.”

“You’ve made your aunt Faith happier than anyone else in the world could have.” (That, viciously, from Reng.)

“You’ll come back if you make your fortune, Humi, won’t you?” said a small voice.

Humi was walking backward along the road, Beau at her side. “Good-bye!” she called, waving her arms above her head.

“Good-bye,” Beau muttered. He whirled around and tramped beside her, head down. The breeze set wisps of hair dancing around Humi’s face and lifted the fur on her forearms. The flamen and Miti walked so fast that she had to skip backward to keep up with them. They were talking together as if they witnessed the sundering of families every day. Her family was no more than a collage on the long, low stone wall, spots of all shades of brown, the reverse of the eight miracle-born lambs on the hill above them.

**T**hey slept on the road. Miti carried a light knapsack which held all of his and the flamen’s earthly possessions; Beau and Humi’s flaxen sacks seemed heavier each morning. Five hamlets later, they reached Nece town. Humi and Beau had come a-fairing here every spring and autumn ever since they could remember. Summer Fair was only three sixdays off now, and the quiet little backwater was beginning to gear itself up. Before Humi was born, not only ale but also wine had flowed at festivals, and the craftsmen’s doorways had fluttered with bunting. But now the merriment had a somber edge to it. The Divine Cycle was ending. Black ribbons decorated the biceps of the children playing in the road, and the sleeves of the goodwives sweeping their steps. Black Divine Seals (little icons of the Throne) were tarred onto doors and windows. It was symbolic grief, but tinged with very real apprehension: traditionally, with the end of the Divine Cycle came upheavals. Nece citizens bobbed their heads to Sensuality and stared openly at Humi and Beau.

They departed along a country road the same afternoon. Humi and Beau craned their necks to see into the backyards of tanner, blacksmith, sculptor, cobbler, woodworker. Dust and steam puffed out from holelike doorways in the hill; on the bare ground outside, oxen switched their tails and

women gossiped. They marched through the last of the mountains and into the flatcountry.

All over, the harvest was being brought in. Nevertheless, the travelers always found accommodation, for the people here were as pious as saltsiders. They tended their sheep, oxen, goats, chanticleers, bantams, pullets, harvests, and children with religious stoicism. The little ones stared at Beau; the adults said that proximity to him was remuneration enough for everyone's board. When Humi told them that they were betrothed, they looked at her with barely hidden jealousy.

They were only three months on the road.

At the beginning of winter, they neared Port Taite. The little country road merged with a highway which led from Port Taite to Port Teligne, Domesdys' capital, in the north. They walked among carts and wains along the broad, dusty road raised above fields larger than any Humi had ever seen, toward the break in the cliffs and the incredible vista of black, sparkling sea.

The city lay below.

"This is *nothing*," said Miti in one of the rare moments when he condescended to speak to Humi and Beau. "Why, the population's no more than two thousand. You should see Port Teligne, or even better, Samaal." Miti had been born in Calvary, the blazing northern continent where everyone worked the metal mines the way Domesdians worked their fields. No doubt his early memories glamorized Samaal, Humi thought dismissively. How could there ever be more houses and people gathered together than there were here? "Or you should see Delta City."

The Port Taiteans were Domesdians, with fur and hair of a thousand shades of brown, yet they weren't country folk, and they didn't gape at Beau with unashamed awe as the hamleters had done. As Miti led them into the heart of town, Beau stared up, down, and around curiously. His apparent liveliness lifted a weight from Humi's shoulders. At least a dozen times on the journey, she'd caught him trying to wreck his beauty. Once she had come on him kneeling facedown in an oxtrough, silky white curls floating.

She knew she hadn't been paying enough attention to him. She should have been with him all the time. Instead she had been talking to the hamlet folk, finding out what they thought, what they considered beautiful.

Wonders such as coffee bars, couturiers' shops, an Icelandic bathhouse, and a curiosity shop slipped past. The black ribbons of mourning hung everywhere, twisting in a little breeze. Port Taite was a pious city. It was one of those iridescent early-winter days, disconcertingly cold. The sun shone brightly on ragged clothes and unwashed heads, on gaudy pictorial signs and the frilly coats of the well-to-do atheists, on the window boxes overflowing with winter-blooming flowers.

"*Hey, saltside kids! Get out of the street!*" Someone grabbed both of them by their jackets and shoved them back against a shopfront, just before a huge-wheeled carriage thundered through the spot where they'd been standing. "Sorry, Beauty!" the man said, abashed, as he saw Beau. "Couldn't see your face in the sun. Sorry."

"That's all right." Beau was dazed. Dust rose between them and the ox carts which still trundled placidly along the street. "What was that?"

"One of the young atheists. Watch, 'n'—" Another carriage hurled itself along the narrow street. This time Humi noticed the animals racing before it, attached not by a yoke but by reins that glowed red against their dark fur: draydogs, sleek hounds the size of cattle. "That's the fellow he was racing."

"Wait," said Beau, looking around in consternation. "Godsbrother Sensuality's gone."

Humi thought it a happy development. "We can find him later. Or he'll find us. He won't want to lose you."

Beau turned back to their rescuer. "Godsman ... did you see where that flamen and leman went, the ones that we were with? A heavy man with light brown fur, a Calvarese boy about so high ..."

"Godsbrother Sensuality!" The man slapped himself on the breast. "Don't tell me you are the ghost! Why, the town's abuzz with rumors about your coming. And you are everything they say." He

made a tiny bow.

“I—I—” Beau gasped.

Humi pulled his ear down. “He’s not telling the truth. If everyone knew about you, you would’ve been spotted. before now.”

“The flamen is taking a room on Finilar Street. That is common knowledge. I can lead you there.” The man started off along the crowded concourse. Beau beckoned Humi to follow. Annoyed, she caught up to him and whispered, “I don’t trust—”

“Nonsense! He knows who Sensuality is!”

But as they hurried along, the man eyed their spindlespun clothing speculatively. “Not much farther now ... The Silver Boat is the name of the inn Sensuality frequents. The owner puts him up for free.” He led them into narrower and narrower streets, where garbage moldered outside closed back doors. Humi walked carefully, wishing she had more than one set of eyes. Two cats flurrying from a window nearly stopped her heart.

Suddenly the man halted. “Here we are!”

“The back entrance?” Humi said sarcastically as she placed herself in front of Beau. The man wheeled around and plunged toward her. The knife in his fist glinted in the sun which came down the alley.

The world slowed down, like a scene viewed through glass. Humi whirled out of the way. Beau rolled away, grunting in astonishment. Eyes darting, grinning confidently, the man turned on her. As she wrenched aside, he thrust past her and lost his balance. Catching his arm, she was on top of him in the grit, her knee crushing his throat. Broken syllables of pleading came from him; but all she knew was a terrifying desire for justice, or was it gratification?

Blood trickled and pooled. Blood bubbled like red spit out of the man’s throat, soaking his collar.

The knife fell with a dull clatter. Humi stared in horror. Beau yanked her back, clamping his hand over her eyes. He muttered rhythmically as he dragged her away down the row of back doors, “You didn’t mean to. He would have killed us. He thought we were helpless. He thought we had money. You didn’t mean to—” over and over, till Humi shoved him away from her. They pelted on until they were exhausted. In the relative safety of a crowded thoroughfare, they examined each other for traces of the crime.

Luckily, not a drop of blood had stained their clothes or their fur, apart from Humi’s hands. Those were soon cleansed with spit and polish. She glanced around. Her whole body was trembling. “It was just here we lost the Godsbrother.”

Beau gazed at Humi for a long moment, and then crushed her to his chest, right there in the flow of people. His heart beat fast within his chest. “Humi, I have to thank you. That fellow would have killed me, too. Think how awful it would be to die on a pickpocket’s knife when I am destined to die as a ghost in Delta City!”

“Don’t speak of it! Don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t say it—and for Heaven’s sake don’t *thank* me—”

By taking one life she had saved two. Of course it was worth it.

*But once you start justifying taking human life, where do you stop?*

A cold breeze chilled her neck.

*I’ve killed. Again.*

She was nine; her grandfather, Old Cand, was fifty-five; he knew he was dying. She couldn’t see why the rest of her family wouldn’t admit it. They treated death as something to tiptoe round and euphemize, while Humi sat long hours with Cand and discussed what would happen to his body when he died, and how his soul would travel from Beaulieu to Heaven-in-the-salt. Eventually the old man brought their conversation round to the topic of poisons.

She could still smell the bitter pungency of the cup she had held to his lips. He had gulped

thirstily, eyes starting out of his fur. As Humi slipped away, stifling the panicky weeping which came from knowing—too late—that she had done an Awful Thing, Faith had spotted her. But by the time Faith found Cand, slumped half out of his bed, it was too late. And after that nothing was the same between mother and daughter. Now she had done it again—

A long shadow fell across their embrace. Beau pulled away. It was Godsbrother Sensuality.

“So my vagrants have found their way back. How was your outing?”

Another figure stood against the lead-paned window of the inn. As Beau stumbled through incoherent excuses, the figure swung, and Humi saw a tall, knife-faced woman in a flamen’s robe. A little boy hovered by her side; sunlight glowed deep in the crystals jutting over her cheeks.

Godsbrother Sensuality said with an air of satisfaction, “This is Godsister Decisiveness. She will take charge of you from now on, Beauty.”

Regardless of how they’d slept on the road, it would have been out of the question for Beau and Humi to share a bed tonight, though she’d badly wanted Beau beside her to comfort her. Instead she had Godsister Decisiveness. Before they blew out the candle, Humi saw that the flamen was flat-chested as a man, with two anomalous little flaps of fir. Thankfully, the mattress was hard enough that they didn’t roll together when they lay down.

When Decisiveness’s harsh breath had evened out, Humi lay awake on her back listening to the rowdiness downstairs. The wine served in an inn, Miti had informed her, was far more alcoholic than ale, and the pipes had other things in them besides tobacco.

*Look what the city has done to me, she thought, in a single afternoon.*

In the middle of the night, a nightmare of blood brought her bolt upright in bed, teeth chattering. A thin line of yellow under the door focused the blackness, turning the world the right way up. The sleepy, nightgowned silhouette of the flamen rose in front of it. Scarcely knowing where she was, Humi gave herself up to the cool hands pushing her back to the pillow. Decisiveness’s fingers drew away the tormenting sights that replayed endlessly in her mind. For the rest of the night she slept dreamlessly.

**T**hey ate breakfast in the inn’s dayroom, where sunlight shone dustily through leaded panes and the food tasted of silver; then they went down to the harbor. On the way, Humi noticed that Decisiveness had gained Sensuality’s subtle awareness of Beau’s whereabouts. The docks consisted of two quays jutting out into the bay. Since it was the windy season, dozens of ships clustered along and between them, so many abreast that in places you could have hopscotched from one quay to the other. Fishing clips rubbed shoulders with shorebound careaks and intercontinental clippers that were so top-heavy with their masts it was a wonder they didn’t topple over onto the smaller vessels. Embossed luggage and crates of imported goods lay in heaps outside the holds of these tall ships. The men and women tripping down the gangplanks sported ruffles and sequins that made Humi’s mouth water.

Sensuality guided his charges around the fishermen, who were unloading squirming, sharp-fanged netfuls of pickering, to a clipper whose figurehead was a mass of iron petals.

“The *Regal Flower*. Passage for four is booked. She sails with the tide.”

Several fishermen, their fur stiff with salt, were bawling at men unloading baggage from the *Flower*. “Wharf’s not wide enough for all of us!” Humi expected the lemans to use their unchildlike authority and reach up to touch the men, politely requesting that they lower their voices for the flamens’ comfort, but Miti and Little Cor merely glanced at each other and shuffled closer to the water. The wavelets knocking the sides of the ship were green-black. There was something sharp and wild about *this* salt. Overhead, terns wailed and dived.

“I shall regret you, Beauty,” said Sensuality. “But when you are a ghost, I shall come visit you in

the lady Aneisneida's apartments. And I shall see you with my own eyes in Heaven."

Miti's lucid dark eyes rested on Humi. Suddenly, she found herself hating the thought of his pilgrimage into the salt. If Sensuality lived till Miti was an adult, the flamen would choose a new child leman, sending Miti out into the world to make a life for himself; but if he died before the boy grew up, Miti would have the choice of flamenhood or atheism. To be a Godsbrother or a lord?

She knew which he would choose. His piety was pure and unquestioning.

"Good-bye," he said sweetly. If he knew what she'd been thinking, he didn't show it. Exemplifying the paradox of leman and child in one body, he hissed, "You'll never visit as many cities as *I* have, Humi! But just wait till you see Delta City! Then you'll know Port Taite is nothing more than a heap of rotting wood!—Come on, Godsbrother." They wound away down the pier between the thrashing silver mounds of fish.

Humi had expected nothing from the Godsbrother, but he might have been sorrier than *that* to leave Beau. After all, Beau was probably the greatest beauty he would ever come in contact with. Then she saw a thin black line of blood on Beau's cheek. And she understood. The flamen had *embraced* him—as Humi had never known a flamen to do—and one of the salt crystals had laid his cheek open.

The planks of the *Regal Flower's* deck were interwoven like threads in a piece of fabric. They gave under Humi's feet, sending her bouncing into the air with each step. This was a Domesdian ship, all made of wood, unlike the metal-hulled and -masted Calvarese clippers berthed alongside. A bristle-faced sailor directed them belowdecks. "Here and here. At yer service, Godsister."

Decisiveness listened to Cor describe the tiny, hatchlike doors. "Only two rooms for us. Well, the ship must be crowded with Domesdian nobility. There are not usually so many lords and ladies mincing around Port Taite's wharves as Cor has described today, I assure you. We shall repeat last night's sleeping arrangements."

Humi shot a worried glance at Beau's face. Could Cor stop Beau from trying to kill himself? Would the child recognize the signs of his suicidal state of mind in time? "Very well, Godsister."

The harbor was crowded and maneuvering difficult. The crew of the *Regal Flower* wouldn't let them upstairs again till the square-rigger had passed the cliffs at the bay's mouth. But then Humi and Beau hurried up to the aft rail.

Domesdys' coast had already spread out into one long vista of cliffs, topped with tufts of winter color. Humi stood beside him in silence, just watching, as the land sank lower and lower, until even the black hollow of Taite bay was lost under the glaring winter sky.