

# DELTA CITY: PART II of A GARDEN OF SALT

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First Published by the Penguin Group  
Copyright 1996 by Felicity Savage

Digital Edition by Knights Hill Publishing, June 2011

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## Chapter One: The Redhead

**G**ete and his father returned to Sarberra behind the rest of the fleet. The sun was half sunk in the ruby glitter of the sea. They tied their boat, to its crag, slung the catch on their backs, and started up the path that wound between hillocks of gorse and heather.

Gannelets winged their way home. High overhead, Gete saw the batlike shadow of an early-rising predator. The village clung to the eastern slope of the island, its stone huts glowed pink in the sunset. Dusk was a relief to eyes that had squinted at the black sparkle of the sea all day, searching for the little disturbances that indicated shoals of surface-feeding swordfish. As they entered the village, Gete and Da avoided waddling geese, bone-thin cats, and dirty, sleepy toddlers. Something was not as usual ... Gete had it! An evening as still and sweet-smelling as this, anyone with a minute to call his own should be taking the air, puffing on heather-stem pipes, mending clothes, repairing friendships.

“Da,” he started, but before his weary brain could find the, right words, Da had gone ahead down the dark gangway between their home and the Silverfins’.

Gete closed his mouth, plunked the net of barely moving fish he carried in the cold-box out back, and went into the kitchen.

A fug of smoke filled the room. Women and children swarmed, twittering. Gete sensed an air of macabre excitement at someone else's misfortune. But everyone who mattered was here; who could that be? The men sat around the hearth, discoursing with slightly more animation than usual. Heavy boots, heavy smocks, heavy faces.

Nights, Gete generally took his place on the edge of the circle—it wasn't worth offending his elders by going off on his own, might give them the wrong impression, what with him being a redhead and all they'd be quick to think he had a chip on his shoulder; didn't make sense, but that was the way of the world. Amazing to think it wasn't that long ago he'd been drooling with happiness, *one of the men at last*, drop-jawed like an idiot as he swiveled his face from speaker to speaker.

He'd heard all the conversations there were to have, now—four-hands times each, maybe five-hands. Now while the men talked, his thoughts went to Heaven. It lay on the nearby salt island of Faraxa. He had never been there, but everything Desti said about it made it sound more fascinating. Desti said he'd take Gete there as soon as his *serbalim* gave him permission. Nebulous, cranky beings! Desti wouldn't dream of going against their orders, even though he resented them. They did not like his coming to Sarberra, although they had not expressly forbidden it. Could they really be as sagacious as he painted them?

Desti himself was so ordinary. Smiling and equable, always ready to help caulk a hull or quiet a crying child. Gete's mother insisted on mending his tattered tunic and breeches for him, not seeing that the holes were *decoration*, like the fish and birds she embroidered on her own family's festival smocks.

But back when Desti first started visiting Sarberra, he had been much stranger than he was now, more violent. It had taken him several months just to get used to working in sunlight.

What kind of village could Heaven be, to support such impractical behavior? Gete wondered. Or was it so inhospitable that the gods *had* to indulge in impracticalities, just to keep their heads straight?

Gete wondered so much about Heaven that he knew it could not be good for him. Like right now. Standing here with his mouth open, letting his thoughts drift! Anchor out, boy!

He sidled through the gathering and located Da just as he pushed between two younger fishermen and plopped himself down in the circle. His stool screeched at its misfortune. The smell of sea salt hung around the men like smoke: it permeated their coarse white fur and their hair. Gete breathed deeply, gripping Da's fish-scale-splotched shoulders. He winked at Tience and Rag and Imp and Tim, who all stood behind their own fathers. "I should na say he'll last the night," Godsman Stickleback pronounced with certainty. "Did ye na see the fella's face? He looked ninety and he could not be more than sixty."

"Na," Old Godsman Flamefish interrupted, with the privilege of age. Power gleamed in his cataract-filled eyes. "Na sixty at all, not at all. Old, that man is! Old! Eighty is more like, it ..."

"Na," Godsman Sharquetooth said. "He is not more than fifty-five. Fifty-eight at the outside!"

Gete could feel the tension in his father's shoulders. Da was physically restraining himself from interrupting the exchange. Not even the pigments and gaudy rags he donned for the children's amusement at festival time could make Teous Gullfeather a figure of fun. At times Gete had tried hard, inside his own head, to make Da look pompous; but he just could not do it.

Da cut in respectfully, "Who is this man? What has passed?"

"Eh?" Old Flamefish turned their way, head poking out like a sea turtle's. "Ah, Teous Gullfeather! Tis a flamen who has come! Godsbrother ..."

"Transcendence," someone supplied.

“Tis so. Has the summer fever, he do, and he’s dying. Divinarch preserve us. His leman rowed him from Letherra all by herself. She’s na so old, neither, poor little scrap, and does he die, she must take his place here and now ... we will be responsible ...”

Gete kissed the top of Da’s head, then turned away to see what there was to eat. A flamen was a flamen—even if it seemed strange, almost blasphemous, for one to be doing such an ordinary thing as dying. You’d think he would rejuvenate himself with a miracle. But everything flamens and lemans did was strange—they were far harder to understand than the one god that Gete knew. Wasn’t that odd! Gete caught his mother’s eye. She disengaged herself from the chattering flock of women and he hugged her in greeting. Her body felt small in his arms; his chin touched the top of her head. He pointed at the cooking hearth. “Eh?”

“How is it ye’re so skinny my son, when all ye think of is food?” She pulled his head down so that she could kiss his cheek. “It’d be disrespectful to lay things out till the flamen’s gone, poor man, but ye might as well have some stew. No telling how long he’ll cling to this world, and ‘twont be as tasty tomorrow. Desti’s watching it.”

Desti was not only stirring the big turtle-shell pot but minding several babies. His silvery-white wings as tattered as his shirt, buzzed behind his shoulders so fast that Gete was worried. Once, Desti had opened his wings too suddenly and taken a small child’s finger off. After that he had been more careful. This absentmindedness meant he was really upset. “What’s wrong wit ye?” Gete asked in between mouthfuls of stew that he gulped without chewing.

“He keeps asking to see me. Your Mother Brownfern hasn’t let anyone know. But I can hear him through the wall.”

Gete couldn’t hear anything over the noise of voices and spattering flames, but he knew Desti had faculties that were more than human.

“I’ve never seen one of them before.” Desti cursed in his own language and yanked a little Sharquetooth girl out of the hearth. “*Haugthirre* child! How does he know I’m here? I stayed out of sight! Should I go in to see him, or would that just be throwing oil on a fire? He won’t lie *still!*”

Gete served himself seconds and began to eat. *So* good. Salt and fresh fish. Coriander and other herbs from his mother’s garden. Autumn was the best time for herbs. He wished all the world would clear out; after a hard day on the water, a man deserved peace and quiet—

“You stupid *haugthirre hymainn!* Mannerless!” Desti cuffed Gete on the back of the head, so hard that Gete dropped the bowl on a child, who squealed. Gete’s teeth knocked together on the spoon and he swallowed a chip, the shock made him lose his balance. His head smashed into the stone wall. Stars exploded between his temples. Growling, he struggled back, ready to fetch Desti a proper one, when the god grabbed his wrists with one hand and his shoulder with the other, holding him immobile. “I’m sorry! I always *forget!*” And Desti was kissing him on his forehead, his cheeks, he was always so contrite—

“And you *oughter* be!” Gete struggled away. “Gods’ blood, what’s the matter with you?”

Before the god could answer, the door to the inner room swung open and everyone in the kitchen turned. A half-naked, scraggy, white-headed apparition staggered out on the arm of a blond-furred girl. His head swung ponderously. All the noise in the room drained into silence as he stumbled toward Desti, muttering. Desti sprang to his feet and flattened himself against the wall, fingers seeking the cracks as if he were trying to find a door handle. The girl—the leman—had tear paths on the fur of her cheeks. “Lord ...” the flamen sighed, coming on. “Lord god ...”

Mother Brownfern burst out of the inner room. “Gods brother!” At once reverent and righteously scandalized at her patient’s behavior, she grabbed the flamen’s arm and dug her heels in.

“Please, Transcendence!” The leman had a thin, young voice. “Please lie down. There’s no god here.” Fiercely, she gestured at Desti to get out. The translucent lids of Desti’s huge silvery eyes flickered up and down. He didn’t move.

“How dare you lie to me, leman!” the flamen shouted. His voice boomed like a horn. “I feel him! You cannot know how I feel him! He is like a shining sun on my blindness!” *Gods*, Gete thought.

Belatedly, a couple of women jumped up to help maneuver the flamen backwards. The men hitched themselves around on their stools, mouths dropping open, heads swiveling. After a painfully undignified struggle, the Godsbrother was hauled back once more into the inner room.

Desti’s fingers closed on Gete’s wrist in an unbreakable grip. “I have to see him.” Gete cringed under the eyes of everyone in the room as Desti pulled him toward the inner door. “He can’t possibly see me. It’s a myth. I must find out. We are not gods, we never have been! That is what the *serbalim* say!” He pulled Gete through the rude plank door of the bedroom, and as it closed behind them, hot smoky firelight gave way to steamy darkness, and the smell of smoke and stew gave way to the pungent smell of boiled herbs. Gamesfoot, to draw out the fever. It didn’t seem to be working. Gete’s nostrils flared as he detected the smell of death. The leman and Mother Brownfern were kneeling on either side of the pallet, holding the Godsbrother down: they seemed frozen in place, their pale faces turned toward Gete and Desti.

“Lord,” muttered the Godsbrother, and he shook them off like unwanted garments. Struggling to his knees, he lowered his forehead to the goatskin coverlet. “My lord god, instruct me. Am I obeying your wishes by continuing in the Archipelago? Or must I return to Delta City? The Divinarch has issued a call to all of us to return. But I feel that I am needed here. But I no longer hear you so clearly in my heart as I did.” He stopped, breathing heavily. “On this island alone, two children lie sick. There is a blight on the mountain flax. These rocks were never meant to support humanity! I am *needed* here! Lord god, what must I do?”

“I’m not a *serbali*,” Desti said. “I’m not even a *mainraui*. I’m inferior. I’m *wrchbrethre*. Why are you asking me?” His wings quivered. His voice rose. “All I know is Fresh Spring Heaven and Sarberra! I know nothing of you arid your cities and Divinarches!”

The leman sobbed. Gete staggered back out of reach of Desti’s wings. “Lord god!” the flamen begged. “Please ...” He had been sinking deeper and deeper into his prostration as he spoke. Now his head turned so that all his weight rested on one cheek. He let out a whuffling sigh.

Panic gripped Gete. How much worse luck could there be than to see a flamen dying? He reached for Desti’s arm. “Let’s get out of here. Mother Brownfern’ll say you did it. Anything to shift the blame. Dry old bitch—”

Desti swung around. Pale furless face, strained unseeing silver eyes. Then he pulled away and vanished into thin air.

**I**t hurt Thani almost more than his actual death that when the Sarberrans laid his corpse out, Transcendence’s mouth settled slowly into a smile. The heat in the inner room of the hut made him stiffen fast, and as rictus set in, his smile became more pronounced. He had been gaunt when he died, and now the skin of the corpse tightened over the skull so that it looked almost as though he were laughing; gloating cruelly over the desolation in which he had abandoned her.

Grief numbed her to the core, so that she fumbled for words to thank the islanders for their hospitality. Gone. He was gone. Out of determination to complete her duties as a leman—not out of any sense of obligation to the cadaver—she watched over him all night, resisting the Archipelagans’ efforts to coax her away, refusing their offers to take her place. What did they know about her flamen? Transcendence had hated these islands. You’d never have known it, watching him bend his white head to listen to the fishermen’s wives and children, spend energy he didn’t have to work miracles for them; but than again, he had had nothing against the Archipelagans themselves. They were just a procession of hungry mouths, injured limbs, and blighted crops, like any other people. What Transcendence hated was the dazzling heat, the everlasting smell of fish, the hours

they spent sailing from island to island, the breeze that never let up so that after a while it felt like a sandstorm in your face; no, it couldn't have been more different from their beloved Calvarese deserts!

Calvary. At night as they walked the vast empty spaces, stars glittered like the gods' embroidery on the black sky, and Thani scuffed trails in the sand with her feet, and Transcendence's tolling voice instructed her in the stories and religious parables which she would eventually need to pursue their calling.

After their nightmarish stay in Delta City, she had been sure Transcendence would take her back to Calvary. She had done her duty—hadn't she? What more did he want?

But her prophecy had changed the direction of both their lives as utterly as a bend in the bank of a stream. Now that Thani had killed a god. Although it hadn't felt as if *she* were doing it: it wasn't her bringing the knife down, stabbing him again and again, cutting him to bits where he lay in his pool of white innocent blood ... Now that she had done that, even were they to go back to Calvary, it would not be the same. That was what Transcendence had said, closing the subject forever, as they stood on the deck of *K'Fier Diamondback*, while Thani watched Delta City vanish over the horizon.

Three years, and she had shrugged off her bitterness. The decisions and responsibilities of itinerancy left no time for it. She pleaded with Transcendence to go slower, to spare himself. But he obeyed the guidance in his heart, even to the extent of ignoring the call for all flamens to return to Delta City and make obeisance to their new Divinarch—a god who had replaced Thani's very own sister (killed her, they said). Humi, that ambitious and exotic sibling from whom Thani had felt so alienated the last time they met. Even when they were children Thani had not loved her sister, but Humi's memory was disproportionately prominent in her thoughts as she and Transcendence sailed deeper and deeper into the North Reach.

The seas grew stranger: fully half the islands revealed themselves as monumental jewels set in the water, glittering, warning the traveler not to approach any closer if he valued his eyes. Salt islands. Heavens. As they passed them, the sea seemed to rise and fall without moving, like black dunes.

The North Reach islanders clucked at Thani for doing "man's" work; they used Transcendence as a glorified mid-wife. Most of them had only seen a flamen once, perhaps twice before. Some of them did not even know that the Old One, the seventeenth Divinarch, had died! They had never heard of Thani's sister, or the new Divinarch, the master- f the Hands.

Transcendence's body had weakened. His mind, lucid as ever, had chafed against the limitations of the husk that housed it.

Thani rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes. The candle sputtered. Surely the night must end!

*Overtaxed, summer fever, susceptible—*

But the fever had not killed him. Wretchedly, she knew *she* had killed him. Four years ago, when she prophesied. That day, they were caught. From then on, their decline had been as inevitable as if they were caught in a river pouring into a gorge and over a cliff.

The murder of a god. It had changed the whole world. Thani's sister had saved Thani and Transcendence from execution for their crime; still, as Delta City shrank in the distance, Thani had been violently on edge, expecting to be killed at any moment, the way she had killed the Heir to the Divinarchy.

But the gods had known they did not have to lift a finger. The Archipelago would do their work for them.

Sails swelled whitely, grew, billowing across the North Reach. Darkness pulsed. She was in a hot, smelly room in a little hut on an island, but it felt like Purgatory. Every time the seal's fat candle flickered, the corpse's face looked more like a skull. And Thani had a better view of the life ahead of her: a life as limited as death.

She leaned back, resting her head against the wall. Scent of rancid fat and raw-tanned leather. For once, her fair, short hair was tangle-free; the stones caught it up in little fans, as if she were underwater. Her scalp ached as if it were sewn together patchwork with a dozen seams. She stared into the kinetic shadows of the roof.

**H**arrima was too small to support predators—a mere peak of salt rising out of the water. Godsman Gullfeather and his redheaded son ferried Than there in their stinking fishing boat, with that inexplicable god perching on the bowsprit to watch out for a cove. The Gullfeathers young and old had to tie rags over their eyes and she had to squint through her lashes, but the god's eyes could tolerate the rainbow glare of the salt with ease.

She felt like crying. She wiped her nose on her sleeve.

There was *Faith*, her and Transcendence's sailboat. Another boy of the village had brought it to Harrima. He stood waiting on the shore. In silence, the Gullfeathers helped Thani out. The god looked at her with distrust not unmixed with fear. She refused to meet his eyes as she climbed to the shore. The other boy took her place in the Gullfeathers' boat and the redhead cast off. Soon they were gone.

*Faith* bobbed on the swell, a little brown shell tied to a formation that overhung the cove.

She hated that boat!

Her eyes were already starting to hurt. It was time.

She turned on her heel and started up the mountain. She no longer bothered to squint. Soon she found a flat place where she could rest and wait.

The delirium took her after two days without food or water.

*Sand ridges gleam rosy in the dawn. A small tent is pitched in the gray shadows, in a dry valley between dunes. The child crouches behind a pile of rocks above it, on the western slope. She has risen early to watch the kangaroo rats drinking dew off the cacti. They lick and hop and lick as the line of day sinks down the hill, hastening to get their fill before the sun burns the desert to bone.*

Garment by garment, Thani shucked her clothes. They were nothing but a nuisance to her now. Her fur was darker on her torso and legs, which had seldom seen the Calvarese sun; her breasts were the tawny brown hue she'd been all over as a child.

When she surfaced from another whirlpool of dreams, she knew taking off her clothes had done no good. If there was one thing the Archipelago shared with Calvary, it was heat. In Delta City it was hot too, she remembered confusedly as the sun hammered her into the salt. Royalland's was a sticky heat, soupy with the reek of the marshes. Calvary was dry. Here, the sun was merciless, like a cudgel embedded with broken glass. It came *through* the formations just as it would through dirty windows, so that there was no shade anywhere. It burned her to lie down, but she could not even think about standing up. She lay in the open, breathing, just breathing. She could not smell anything. The inside of her nose was baked. Would the wind never rise? Was it true she had once *dreaded* the storm that would take her vision?

*Another morning, another resting place, and wild juniper bushes scramble up the hill. A clear spring runs down into the olive green hollow. Here, beehive huts cluster, stone soap bubbles which have not burst or multiplied for two thousand years. Black-furred children rush outdoors, tweeting to each other. Another child stands with her father lover Godsbrother on top of one of the surrounding hills, looking down at the oasis then smiling up at him: she is pleased with herself. She timed their approach so that they should arrive here just at dawn. But of course he cannot see it—*

A cool breath of wind touched her. Memory ripped to shreds and blew away, like a sail tearing loose from its shrouds. She groaned. As the sun sank beneath the sea, the formations began to creak in the rising wind, and the dusk gave her strength. She struggled to her feet and began to climb the slope.

Particles of salt borne in the whirling gusts scoured her body. Salt briars cut her feet. Branches snagged her naked limbs. Her fur was sticky with blood when she finally reached the top of the mountain.

The blizzard raced so thickly over the bald crest that she could see nothing. Sobbing, laughing, bleeding, lightheaded, she danced. She stumbled, fell, got up again, a pale embodiment of the storm, battering herself farther and farther toward numbness. When the pain reached a certain intensity, she stepped to one side and looked at herself. A black-splotched piebald specter with jerking limbs, making herself a fool for no one to see.

*Horrendous!* said that self, who had stepped aside. *You look as though you're having a seizure!*

Then the pain got worse again and dragged her back to herself. Particles invaded her eye sockets, like swarms of angry bees. Tears spilled down her cheeks. The wind howled in delight.

Another gust swirled into her eyes. She winced, in the way one does when stubbing a toe that has gone to sleep. She could not feel anything.

Later she went even farther away.

## Chapter Two: Diving Below

“*Delighted* that you could come!”

*Serbalu* Sugar Bird stood on tiptoe to look into Hope's face, beaming. “Everyone has been asking after you! You never come home anymore!”

Sugar Bird wore no face paint, to show off her porcelain-smooth, coral-colored skin. But her panniered gown, the latest Rimmear fashion crushed her figure into an hourglass, forcing her chest up into the semblance of a bosom.

Hope embraced her, then complimented her on her fetching choker of white stones.

“Straight from the jewel shops of Veretry!” Sugar Bird said proudly. “Moonstones! I'm disappointed that my dear little Uali has gone over into the service of the dictator, of course, but since he has chosen to waste his potential in human country, it is just as well that he has the wherewithal to send me souvenirs.”

*Broken Bird and Bronze Water* would not look too kindly if they heard that. “It's stunning, Sugar!”

It was almost certainly quartz not moonstones. Behind Hope the receiving line lengthened, *serbalim* chattering louder in an attempt to broadcast their impatience, flittering their fans. Hope stepped past Sugar Bird, her tulle skirts bouncing around her ankles. “Shall we sit together at dinner, Sugar?” It was rude even to ask, considering that Sugar was hostess, but Hope was the celebrity here, more so than Broken Bird and Bronze Water (*if* they had come). She might as well make the best of it.

Sugar Bird clicked her tongue with mock impatience. “I have already placed you on my left hand, darling! Naturally!”

“You're such a dear!” Hope kept her voice light as she said, “You'll have to tell me all about your new little Foundling.”

“You have never even *seen* him?” Sugar Bird made a glittery moue at the next *auchresh* in line. “We should make the Maiden promise to attend at least one ball a month, shouldn't we? One is in danger of forgetting that she is a Divingian at all!”

Bronze and Broken Bird traveled all year, *teth'ing* from Heaven to Heaven with scarcely a holdover; they had started to become something of a fixture. Hope had heard it said (in a whisper, of course) that before you missed them, there they were again. It was affectionate chaffing—the *auchresh* world trusted and respected Bird and Bronze—but Hope was a novelty. She hardly ever, as

Sugar had observed, found time to return to the salt anymore. She was more *wrbrethre* than any *iu* had ever been. Even Bird and Bronze's sincerest supporters fell silent when she entered a room—not on purpose, just to stare at her. It was wearying.

There was no longer a prohibition on venturing into human country. But while the political impasse of Pati's fiery dictatorship and Broken Bird and Bronze Water's disarmingly coolheaded influence over the *serbalim* lasted, none was needed. Hope *lived* in human country. But unlike Pati and his Hands, she was welcome back in Heaven whenever she wanted to come. (No *serbali* could refuse to receive the Divinarch when he made his infrequent sallies into the salt; but those visits, replete with marching musicians and corps of Hands, were looked upon more as traveling freak shows than honest efforts to improve diplomatic relations.)

They still called her the Maiden. They still looked at her out of the sides of their eyes. Now she knew how the Incarnations had used to feel in Delta City, in the old days.

She stood between two rows of blank-faced, white-tuniced *triccilim*. She took a deep breath and moved in among the circulating *auchresh*. Everyone greeted her as a familiar. Her cheeks were covered with kisses. Garishly made-up *keres* beamed at her, exaggerating every nod so that their *wrillim* jangled loudly enough to be heard over the roar of conversation. *Iuim*, few in number, pushed their way through their entourages of males to hug and squeal over Hope. Some of the males, too, were cynosures of attention: garbed in the mesh hose with floor-length coattails that had become all the rage, they affected a remote, blasé manner. She felt most kindly toward these.

*Auchresh* society had started to originate its own fashions. It had to. There were no human fashions anymore. But the *auchresh* styles were no more practical than those the Deltan couture houses had used to come up with, and Hope did not think them very flattering.

Two *keres* were waiting for her to notice them. Power! What were their names—"Wonderful to see you again, Pink Claw!" she exclaimed. "Honored, Stami!"

They bobbed their heads and retreated. She looked around for the next wave. There was none. She must have greeted just about everyone who was someone. The lower- status guests—mostly *keres* her own age—stood nervously at a distance, clattering their jewelry. Somewhere a fountain played. Voices thundered through the hall. The musicians were sawing away with all their might to make themselves heard.

One strove so hard for delicacy here, didn't one? But delicacy was a thing of daylight. Detailed embroidery. Landscaped gardens with bees buzzing over rosebushes. Night blunted all fine points, it blurred filigreed whorls of meaning, it blended multiple layers of tact. Night evoked vivid colors, exaggerated forms, outré behavior.

Yet one strove ... with a determination which was, itself, essentially *auchresh* ... for delicacy.

The gong boomed hollowly. Hope envisioned supper. Waiters clad in white to the chin—fearfully impractical. Dishes hidden by smoky glass covers, so that one must guess at what one was going to have to stomach. Witty small talk with strangers.

And no one to hold responsible for the whole hilarious satire. No one at all.

Except, perhaps, Bronze Water and Broken Bird.

She quelled a surge of anger.

*They had better be able to explain themselves!*

*They had better have come!*

One of Pati's more foppish personal Hands, Eyrie, had sworn they were going to be at Sugar Bird's tonight. But Hope had not seen nor heard a whisper of them. And if Eyrie had been wrong she would not know, because she could not ask. She was not officially in communication with the *er-serbalim*, and she had no contacts in Divaring Below to do legwork for her. Even here, she was sealed off from the salt.

The tide of *auchresh* surged slowly in the direction of the dining hall. Claws, hands, *urthriccim*



caught her sleeves. “Maiden? I heard that Sugar Bird has roast salt quails for the first course!”

She curved her lips into an urbane smile and worked her way across the flow to the edge of the foyer. Ribbed, transparent walls soared up into a geodesic vault. From the outside, she remembered, the mansion resembled a bloated water porcupine rising from the lake. But on the inside, the ridges provided welcome excuses for little alcoves tucked between them. She chose one swathed in pale blue curtains. Mercifully, it was empty. She sank down with a sigh of relief on the frugetsfur cushions, and lit a pipe. The *serbalim*, influenced by Bird and Bronze, frowned on tobacco as a human vice. As she smoked, her wings trembled behind the cushioned seat.

*Why did I ever build the Folly?*

*No! For pity's sake don't start on that now!*

She rubbed a scratchy lace sleeve across her eyes. She had to go sit on Sugar Bird's left hand and catch up on the gossip. If she didn't, Sugar would think she had left the ball without warning, and she would have to do exactly that because otherwise things would be so awkward. And when would she have her next chance to talk to Broken and Bronze? She could not foresee any time when their paths might cross again.

The blue frugetsfur was seductively soft.

Never before in her long life had she stood alone in the world's eye, without someone whom she could love and look to for direction. Once it had been Pati. Even while they were parted, in the last days of Humi's Divine Cycle, while Hope tried vainly to graft herself back onto the world of Diving Below, it had been Pati. Right up until he seized the Throne.

But she could no longer tolerate him. All she had now was the Folly. And her secrets. She was chained with secrets. Promises she had made, and the principles she could not discard in order to break those promises. Chains.

If only she could take these brittle costume balls seriously, it would be some small release! Then maybe she could relearn the art of the essential, sweaty socializing that followed. Maybe she could raise a ...

She could plainly hear the fountain tinkling. The music had stopped.

With the tip of one golden finger, she ground out her pipe. The hot ash sent waves of pain up her arm. She got up, left the alcove, and went to find the dining hall. When she got there, their voices crashed over her like a wave. They had not yet started the soup.

**“I hope** you have something to say for yourselves!” She rested her hip on the back of a chair and dug her toe talons into the rug. “You're not helping relations between Pati and the *serbalim*! As long as our people are persuaded that humans are inferior creatures we cannot gain by associating with, they won't take anything the *kere* who has proclaimed himself Divinarch over human country says seriously. They refuse even to listen to him. He is humiliated. If he breaks his ties with the salt altogether, it will be all your fault.”

“A breakdown in communications is inevitable, I am afraid, Hope.” Broken Bird's voice was gentle. “Pati's extremism has placed him on one side of a gulf which I am afraid we must recognize, for better or worse.”

Hope sighed in exasperation. Broken Bird perched on the rim of the gold tub in which Bronze Water reclined, massaging the loose skin of his scalp. A scent of peonies rose in the steam. The parlor was chaotic with *teth*’ing boxes that disgorged outfits suitable for every Heaven, from a rural Eithilindre “family” to cosmopolitan Rimmear. The luxury of this guest suite infuriated Hope. Eyrie's information was good, as she had discovered by systematically exploring the mansion (all the other guests had either fallen asleep, *teth*’d home, or reeled off in pairs and threes to continue their revels in private; as far as Sugar Bird knew, Hope had gone home too) but hardly anyone in the

household knew the *er-serbalim* were here. This was a rest stop for them, courtesy of Sugar Bird's *irissi* Tree Seed, a man as reserved as Sugar was gregarious, who took no part in her balls and *sociales*. Hope felt she might like Tree Seed, if she ever talked to him.

"Why haven't you contacted me, at least?" she said to Broken Bird. "That would have done *something* toward repairing the breakdown of communications! And surely, quite apart from that, I had a right to know that you planned to foment unrest in the Heavens."

"Unrest?" Bronze twisted up to see her, frowning through the steam, "The Heavens are far calmer than they were before Pati's coup."

"*Schism*, then. Young *keres* are slipping off in droves to follow Pati. Your rationales don't satisfy them. Before long the *serbalim* will have to react to the loss of their *tricilim* and Foundlings. They can't turn a blind eye forever."

Broken Bird gripped the rim of the tub with her feet and said in a bright, mean voice, "It will never reach that point, because Pati can't last. When the humans vanquish him, peace will return."

"If the humans ever controlled human country—which I think impossible—that still wouldn't be real peace! It would be only a facsimile!" Hope moderated her voice with difficulty. Daylight crept around the edges of the heavy tapestry drapes over the window. She was on a human schedule, like the Hands, and right now she had been awake for twenty-four hours, not counting the hours gained in her *teth* to Divaring Below. Tiredness and frustration shortened her temper. "In telling the *auchresh* to maroon ourselves in the salt, the way we were before the Wanderer, you're ignoring the last fourteen centuries of history! You claim the word *god* no longer applies to us. You tell *auchresh* not to think of themselves as gods because the word springs from our relations with humanity. But you must see that in advocating the pure, uncorrupted *auchresh* way of life, you're assuming that there is an *auchresh* way of life. And what I've seen tonight persuades me finally that there is not."

She had them both watching her *now*.

"You say our race has stopped developing." Broken Bird opened her mouth, but Hope hurried on. "I know, that has been the conventional wisdom for thousands of years. And we do have our biological limitations. But we take pride in our intelligence, and rightly, for once one of us is civilized, he can learn anything. And we've been soaking up changes from humanity for thirteen centuries. Even as we gave them knowledge, they gave it back, altered. We're *not* a static race, just differently structured from the humans, and if you call the way of life we have here in Divaring Below ecstatic and eternal, then you're wrong. It's no more than a parody of Deltan society before the fall, enacted in darkness."

Bronze rose out of the water like a mountain draped in satin. Broken Bird sprang off his shoulders, flying through the air to land on her feet. She picked up the wet hem of her dress and scrutinized it. "Oh, Hope," she murmured, gazing sadly at the broderie verenaise, "are you trying to say the conclusions Golden Antelope drew about our race were *wrong*?"

"I am! He was a madman!"

"I quite agree. He believed we were inferior to the humans. Bronze and I take the far better considered view that we are *superior*." She pulled her dress off over her head and minced toward Hope, presenting her back to her. Bronze Water towed himself, his back to the women. Hope helped Broken Bird out of her false-ribs and the moss-green petticoat underneath. The small *iu* walked over to a trunk, stopping on the way to pat Bronze on the back, and pulled a loose salt-flax dress over her head.

"*This* must have come from human country," Hope said, holding up the beribboned petticoat.

"It was a present from little Humility Garden." Broken Bird leaned against Bronze Water. He caressed her with fat sheeny fingers. Hope tried to recall if they had used to express affection so openly. "We used to like her, didn't we, Bronze? We helped her find her feet. Of all the lords and ladies Pati put an end to, she is the only one I would bring back from the dead, if I could. So you see

I do not like to throw the petticoat away.”

Hope wondered what Broken Bird would say if she knew Humi was not dead. She would probably be scandalized, and see that matters were put to rights immediately. “Hypocrisy is an easy trap to fall into,” she said pointedly.

“You are too impatient, Hope!” Bronze said. “You were ever so.” He had dressed in breeches and a dark purple tunic that disguised his paunch. The paunch had enlarged significantly since the last time she saw him; yet he was still not laughable, he possessed a kind of dynamism that gave her the idea that unlike Broken Bird, he meant everything he said. “Nonetheless I have a soft spot for you, Maiden. Let us untangle this tangle.” He indicated a scroll-armed couch and quirked an eyebrow at her. Warily, Hope perched on its arm. Bronze Water climbed heavily onto the couch and squatted up so that their eyes were on a level. “Golden Antelope,” he enunciated, “was a madman.”

“I’m glad we agree on something.”

“He glorified in failure. He was ready to sacrifice both human and *auchresh* lives indiscriminately to attain his goal. His goal *was* the wanton sacrifice of lives. Thank the Power, the Divine Balance swung in our favor, not his, and now I feel there is no danger of upheaval within the salt. I cannot say the same for human country.”

“Pati has it well under control.”

“But the balance between the races is still delicate. That is what we must work on. We must actively craft a peace that can devolve into an isolationism agreed to by both *auchresh* and humans. That’s what Broken Bird and I are doing.”

“Lulling us into complacency?” Hope muttered. She sat up straight and said more loudly, “But you deal only with the *serbalim*. What an incentive to schism! Aren’t you *aware* of the lower classes of *auchresh*?”

“One has status,” Bronze said. “One must speak to ears attuned to one’s voice.”

“And that’s not even the point.” She stood up. Daylight came in strongly around the drapes, washing the taper flames out. Soon the sun would rise. As she paced, anger pumped through her veins. “The point is that you are *wrong*. There must be change. It can come peacefully, or violently, but we can’t return to what we were! Oh, Power, I can’t go over it again. I can’t make you understand.” She slumped against the wall. Daylight flooded along it into her eyes. She was momentarily blind. And they were touching her, their arms slipping around her in that uniquely innocent *auchresh* gesture of comfort. Their body heat warmed her. She felt she had come to a place of safety. She knew that was not the case, “Dear,” Broken Bird murmured, “don’t you understand? Pati does not represent humanity! There is no *need* for us to deal with him!”

And Bronze, gently: “Hope, sweetheart, are you *really* an unbiased observer? Think. Pati was your *irissi*. Then your *elpechi*. Now—I don’t know what you are to each other. But however things stand, you are not so close as you were. You don’t have to tell us. We can see it. It seems to me as if you must feel some .... bitterness. Might *that* not be what’s making you obsessed with his role in this?”

He was right. She was a female. And weak. And Pati had been all in all to her.

“No!” She thrust them away. “How much lower can you sink without admitting it to yourselves? We are all *wrechrethre*. Pati is an *auchresh* of our times—an example even you will end up following whether you like it or not.”

“Hope.”

The scent of peonies was cloying. She stepped back against the curtains. “I don’t know when we’ll meet again. If you want to find me—have someone describe the Folly. Nobody will notice if you come. Status doesn’t show on the outside, you know. Not in the city.”

She *teth*’d away from their protests.

The thrum of Delta City soaked into her skin. Her forearm fell over her face. She lay crumpled on the floor as if there were nothing inside her clothes. It was later in the day in Delta City, of

course, a golden midsummer morning. Sun came hotly through the glass. This was her cupola. It gave the Folly a faintly ludicrous silhouette: an upward-thrusting fountain topped by a pimple. None of her servants were allowed up here, even to clean.

Her forearm cast a welcome weight of shade over her eyes. She stared into the deep ocher color, the honeycomb pattern of fine lines. Her skin seemed to ripple like the surface of a stream.

She would sleep for a while. Perhaps later she would go visit Humi. It was always good to be reminded that there was someone in a worse fix than yourself. She could tell Humi for certain, this time, that Broken Bird and Bronze Water thought she was dead. And as usual, she would have to refrain from mentioning Arity. The temptation was always there. But Hope knew better than to say anything, now that Humi seemed to be getting over him. Hope had felt such a rush of relief when Humi finally raised the question of a recoup. Not least because it proved she was consigning her love to the past, focusing on other things. It was better that she forget Arity. They could never meet. And Arity was no longer the *auchresh* he had been. The last time Hope had seen him he had slung his arm around the ugly young *kere* beside him and told her to go away.

The ceiling rippled. She stood up, gasping in the cool shadows of the roof.

### Chapter Three: A Slow Night in Heaven

“Eights,” Sual said to the hustler, grinning with stained fangs. His right hand drifted over the knife at his thigh. “Saw it come up eights. You can’t cheat me, *hymanni*-fucker. I got friends.”

Arity hoped Su wasn’t relying on him to prove that claim. He had no heart for a fight. The stars glowed brilliantly over the chasm, shining on the broad stone windowsills of the lamplit tavern. Sitting in the eastern window, his bad leg dangling into the chasm, Arity could not help thinking. As a rule, he tried to avoid that activity. *Khabh* helped. Transparent distilled *ruik*s blood, it numbed the brain and ruined the body—much the same thing alcohol did for humans. But tonight the glass felt so heavy he thought it might fall from his fingers.

He took a swig and glanced at the stage. The entertainment had not got any better since he and Su came in. A young *ghauthi kere* was making overtures to a chained predator, trying to arouse its sheathed penis. Later on the *auchresh* and the animal would couple, the haughthule raking the boy’s shoulders with clipped talons, the boy screaming with pain as he was split in this self-abasing acknowledgment of his parentage.

It held the audience spellbound. It had shocked Arity too, the first few times he saw it, but that was a couple of years ago. Nothing had changed since, except the sizes and shapes of the participants. This was a small *haughthule*, no more than Foundling-size, snapping dispiritedly at its handler. The sickly green hue of its wings was probably due to its having been kept out of fresh air too long. Its cupid’s-bow mouth drooped at the corner, and as the long lashes fluttered. Arity swore he saw tears in its eyes.

But predators did not cry, or at least that was the common wisdom, and Arity would rather not get close enough to find out the truth.

He felt restless tonight. News had filtered down to this honeycomb of streets, this cesspit he called home, where the dregs of Rimmear washed to and fro: news of a new predator in Rimmear, this one a man. The Divinarch was coming. With pomp and splendor and free *khabh* for all of Heaven’s hungry poor, he was coming to discuss some matter or other of failed communications with the serbalim. It was quite a momentous occasion. Peach Branch, a fat fuzzy-headed *serbali* whom Arity had seen once from a distance, had issued a proclamation. Moreover, the Divinarch was bringing a fully fledged retinue of Hands: to the *auchresh* among whom Arity drifted, *they* were the

most interesting part. Even low status *firim* had heard tales of the *wrcbrethrim*. They spoke of them with mixed awe and contempt.

But Arity himself could not stop thinking about the Divinarch.

A shard of his other life, the life he did not think about. Poking painfully through.

(Sometimes Delta City and all in it seemed only to have been figments of an encroaching insanity which had rushed near and enswarmed him in a dripping cloud, while he was injured maybe, tormenting him with false tastes of happiness before he woke to the unsubtle world.)

On the stage the *haugthule* yowled, a long shriek of misery. The boy scrambled backward, terrified out of his pretense of boredom. Laughter rippled from nearby tables.

Arity gulped the rest of his drink, grateful to have his thoughts interrupted. He touched Sual's yellow hair. "Let's get out of here."

Su did not hear. Su was gambling with heart and soul and complete concentration. Su, or Unusual Day, was the best distraction Arity had found from memories, with his laughing eyes and his darting tongue and childish questions. Did Arity really love him? Was the root of the chasm made of glass, or was the sky a picture painted on it? Sual had never tried to climb higher in the city than the highest bridge. But ignorance breeds a superficial worldliness that impresses the overly refined, and when Arity was new and naked from his illness, he had been completely taken in. Now he knew the truth, it was too much bother to redefine their relationship. Not that it ever had been defined, in words. Su was a good lover: he found Arity's scars erotic. Also the thorns.

Arity slid down and pressed his face against Su's shoulder. "Hustlers be a Power-damned sight stupider at the Blue Skybird," he said to Su, by way of an opening, and also to flatter this hustler, who was looking dangerous on the other side of the table. "Let's go." He had discovered that he badly wanted to leave before the show started in earnest.

"*Haugthirre* hasn't said I don't owe him no *denear* yet." Under his ragged, billowy shirt, Su was as rigid as the back of his chair. Eyes locked, he and the hustler stared each other down. Rudimentary wings poked high behind their heads, like hackles, like—memories tweaked at Arity's mind. Cats in an alley—

"I said, I want to *go*," he said loudly, jerking Su up.

Caught off guard, Su stumbled out of his chair, twisting and fighting to keep his eyes locked with the hustler's. After a minute he gave a hiss of despair and threw himself ahead of Arity. Arity staggered on his bad leg. "Damn *idiot* cripple boy." Su reached around and shoved him in the back, right where he must know the worst scar was, because several thorns grew out of it, poking holes in the weave of Arity's shirt. "Find us somewhere that *haugthirre* cheat won't find me, then!"

"Is it that serious?" Arity's heart sank: Su was a tricky business proposition at the best of times. Given even partial access to Arity's supply of *denear*, he went wild.

Sin laughed. "All I'm sayin is, the dear old Skybird won't save us this time. We're too hot. Less get over to other side an lay hands on Nifi and Red Sedge. Safety in numbers, an that."

They passed through a curtain of swinging himmisfur strips into a chilly, smoke-free passage. Servingmen, naked like overgrown versions of the Foundlings employed by taverns on the top tier, hurried along with pots of *kbath*. The passage hiccupped Arity and Su out into the street. Starlight swam down between the eaves of the buildings that teetered over the street. No one was about. Arity thought he heard a disturbance behind in the tavern, and wheeled, awkwardly.

Su plucked at him. "Less go. I mean it: I swore em too damn much. I was sure I had that last roll cornered."

"I got it downtier if you want to pay," Arity said. He might as well use Hope's money, if she was determined to give it to him. Better that than get murdered when some *kuiros* found out about his riches.

"Nah. We'll lose em, come on."

They took off uphill at a lope. All of Rimmear's streets sloped upward to the bridges. The Laughing Haughthule Tavern received starlight only because it was on the edge of the chasm; the rest of the tier was buried black under a league and a half of city. Arity felt Rimmear looming like a cliff behind him, humming.

Footsteps echoed on the slick salt in a side alley.

Su glanced sideways and said "Shit." He grabbed Arity's arm, pulling him faster. Sweat broke out on Arity's temples, The thorns stopped him from wiping at it.

Behind them there was a shattering crash. This time Arity could not help spinning in Su's grip. He could see nothing around the corner, but he heard shouts trumpeting like bugles. Most of those with dirty work to do here did it as cleanly as possible, in private: this gave the streets a speciously safe, quiet feel, when in fact anyone who looked like a country boy would not last three corners. Only occasionally did violence spill into the open. Arity cursed the noise for giving the footsteps a chance to work their way around ahead. "Leave me here—" he panted, as much out of a need to stop running as anything else. "You'll out distance em."

"He'll take it outta you."

"We're only *ghauthjijim*."

"But he's a *haughthule*. Come on—"

Ahead of them, the bridge swooped upward like a pale ribbon. They dashed out onto the rusty, ringing expanse. One decrepit guardrail stood up from the edge like a row of spines. The smelly wind of the chasm gusted dangerously from all the points of the compass. The other bridges, above and below, crisscrossing, joining, curved around this bridge in a celestial network that might aeons ago have been crafted to replace the constellations with something better designed. All the bridges were close to empty. *Slow night*.

But here you could tell nothing from the looks of things, just as you could tell everything from the way things looked.

At an intersection, a fat blue-skinned *auchresh* welled up in front of them.

"Shit!" Su yelled.

An ancient, stinking *iu* and her escort of *keres* was waddling along behind Su and Arity. Su nearly knocked them off the bridge as he dashed back the way they had come. Arity muttered an apology to the old woman as he followed. The scars in his sides were cutting him in half. He could not keep up.

"*Ailoa ... !*" a voice hailed them from the bridge above. " 'Ello, nameless low-status! Impoverished cheat! I take it out o your *skin*!" The hustler from the Laughing Haughthule swung over the guardrail of the bridge some thirty feet above and plummeted down to their bridge. The flexible metal dropped when he hit, then snapped back, tossing Arity into the air. The old *iu*, who by now had reached the downslope, gave a croaking screech. Arity struggled to get to his feet. As the blue-skinned *kuiros* pelted past him, almost casually he brought a fist the size of a small dog into the back of Arity's head. "Cripple," Arity heard him say, and then the world cascaded slowly apart in a waterfall of white.

**T**here was a fire on the east side of the chasm. The Laughing Haughthule Tavern was burning. The flammable salt insulation under its tiles flared yellow and blue. People were screaming and climbing out on the windowsills. Somebody dropped off, down, down, writhing like a spider. Arity thought groggily that he should really go do something about the deaths. Help. Something. Yes.

That was the kind of thing that had got him half killed in Delta City, wasn't it? His scruples. A heart, an actual heart! Sin for an *auchresh*! In Delta City, the only thing that had saved his face was the Heir's arrogance, which had kept him aloof and incomprehensible, as much to himself as to

others. Now his scruples were negated by his powerlessness. Almost always, but not quite often enough.

So he'd reshaped the Heir's arrogance. Remade the cage into armor. Dull, patchwork stuff, let him blend in nicely while keeping him clean and dry inside, like a snail in a garbage heap.

Hadn't done him much good against that *kuiros's* fist though, had it?

One of his legs was hanging off the edge of the bridge. With an effort, he locked an elbow around the stump of a guardrail and pulled himself to safety. He flopped back, shuddering with the effort. Stars filled his eyes. Stars pooled in his brain. An old *auchresh* plodded past, grumbling to himself about corpses on his bridge again. Undoubtedly he had a knife. Arity held still until the muttering died away. Then he steeled himself to get up.

And above him wings flapped, leathery, tired. The wind died around him, blocked off. Claws chinked on metal.

*Auchresh* could not fly.

It was a predator. Possibly the one from the Laughing Haughthule. It squatted in front of him, running the chain through its wicked little claws, wondering whether Arity was good to eat. It picked its nose. It cocked its head on one side like a winged green Foundling.

Arity shrank back, weaker even than when the leman's knife had bit into his body, when he had felt his blood rushing out of him. This was the living ghost of his ancestors. This was shame alive. He reached carefully for his knife.

Yet there was the fascination that brought countless *auchresh* back to the Laughing Haughthule and taverns like it night after night after night, to turn glasses of *kbath* in their hands and stare at the stage, and it held him immobile.

The predator darted its head at him and bit him on the shoulder.

He yelled and struck out with his knife.

It flinched back, snorted through its nostrils, and lifted into the night.

On the edge of the chasm, the tavern subsided into white-hot ashes.

After painstakingly knotting his tunic around his bitten shoulder, Arity got up and shuffled down the bridge. He smelled Sual before he reached him. The hustler and his friends had emptied their bladders on his body. Also they had done worse things. No doubt these particular mutilations were their signature, and they meant the body to stand as some sort of monument to their prowess. Mutilation was a new trend that the *kuirim* had picked up from tales of Delta City which were only just now reaching them. Arity thought it hubristic, and he hated it as he hated all things that reminded him of the city. And for once, he could do something about it. Panting, he heaved the body into the chasm. Let it choke the river along with the rest of Rimmear's waste.

He supposed he should be sorrier for Sual. But they had only been *ghauthijim*. He stretched, feeling each puckered scar on his torso bite deep. How marvelous that he was not compelled to grieve.

He dragged himself home.

Home was a rickety building on the bottommost tier. The skylights were splattered with muck thrown down from the city but at least there *were* skylights. He paid enough for them. The curtains that one hooked over them during the day were rolled up, thick with salt dust. He never unrolled them. He laid clean clothes on the bed, then stripped off the soiled ones in a method perfected by time and practice, ignoring the ache in his shoulder, eyes shut so that he would not have to see himself before he got the other garments on.

The dawn brightened overhead as he cooked supper. The sunlight in the salt was so remorseless that it would cook your food for you, especially when it came through the flawed panes of glass salt

that passed for windows here, but Arity was used to his little stove. Su had won it from the proprietor of a cookhouse for him. He felt a pang only when, unthinking, he laid two plates on the floor.

He finished the food in a daze. Then he lay on his bed, watching the square of cloudy sunlight creep across the floor. The room looked as bright and flat as a chord on an out-of-tune *farader*, but uglier. Every time he drifted part way into sleep, his heart would thud, and he struggled to open his eyes, desperate to escape the images of bat wings and mindless gold eyes, and clawed hands playing with a broken chain.

When he finally did sleep, of course, there was Pati.