

Margaux by Walter Jon Williams

Walter Jon Williams's last work published in Asimov's was "Argonautica" (October 1999). Since then, he's won a Nebula award for short fiction, and appeared on The New York Times bestseller list. His next novel, *The Praxis*, will be out from Avon in October.

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"Hey Earthgirl! I got someone for you to meet!"

Stoney was excited. He was almost always excited. He was one of Lamey's lieutenants, a boy who hijacked cargo that came over the sea to Maranic Port and sold it through Lamey's outlets in the Fabs. Stoney wore soft felt boots and a puffy padded jacket with rows of tiny little metal chimes that rang when he moved, and a hard round plastic hat without a brim, the clothes that all Lamey's linkboys wore when they wanted to be noticed.

Gredel came into the room on Lamey's arm. He had dressed her in a gown of short-haired kantaran leather set off with collar and cuffs of white satin, big clunky white ceramic jewelry inlaid with gold, shiny little plastic boots with nubby surfaces and tall heels. The height of fashion, at least as far as the Fabs were concerned.

Lamey liked shopping for Gredel. He took her to the stores and bought her a new outfit two or three times each week.

Lamey had earned his name because he once had a defect that made him walk with a limp. It was something he'd had fixed as soon as he had the money, and when Gredel first met him, he glided along like a prince, putting each foot down with deliberate, exaggerated care, as if he were walking on rice paper and didn't want to tear it. Lamey was only twenty-five years old in Shaa measure, but already he ran a set of linkboys, and had linkages of his own that eventually ran up to some of the Peers responsible for running places like the Fabs. He had millions, all in cash stashed in various places, and three apartments, and half a dozen small stores through which he moved the material acquired by his crews.

He also had a seventeen-year-old girlfriend called Earthgirl.

Lamey had offered to set her up in an apartment, but Gredel still lived with Nelda, the woman who had mostly raised her since Gredel's mother had been sentenced to serve on the agrarian communes. Gredel wasn't sure why she stayed. Maybe it was because Gredel hoped she could protect Nelda against Antony, her husband—Gredel's earliest memories were of cowering in the dark while Antony raged outside the door, bellowing and smashing furniture. Or maybe Gredel stayed because once she moved into a place that Lamey bought her, she'd have to spend all her time there waiting for him to come see her. She wouldn't be able to leave for fear that he'd come by and find her gone and get angry; and she couldn't have her friends visit because they might be there when Lamey turned up and that would probably make him mad, too.

That was the kind of life Gredel's mother Ava had always led, waiting in some apartment somewhere for some man to turn up. That's why Ava had never been able to see her daughter when she wanted to. Gredel's father had apparently been caught at something, but it had been Ava who had paid for it, and Gredel's father who had skipped town. Gredel had seen him maybe twice since then.

Gredel wanted a different life for herself. She had no idea how to get it, but she was paying attention, and maybe some day she'd learn.

Gredel still attended school. Every afternoon, when Gredel left her school, she'd find Lamey in his car

waiting for her, Lamey or one of his boys who would take Gredel to wherever Lamey was waiting.

Gredel's attending school was something Lamey found amusing. "I'm going around with a schoolgirl," he'd laugh, and sometimes he'd remind her to do her schoolwork when he had to leave with his boys on some errand or other. Not that he left her much time for schoolwork. Her grades had plunged to the point where she would probably get kicked out of school before she graduated.

Tonight, the eve of the Festival of Spring, Lamey had taken Gredel to a party at Panda's place. Panda was another of Lamey's linkboys, and he worked on the distribution end. He'd pointed Stoney and his crew at a warehouse full of wine imported from Cavado and pharmaceuticals awaiting shipment to a Fleet hospital on Spannan's ring. The imported wine was proving difficult to sell, there not being much of a market in the Fabs for something so select; but the pharmaceuticals were moving fast through Panda's outlets and everyone was in the mood to celebrate.

"Come on, Earthgirl!" Stoney urged. "You've got to meet her!"

A warning hummed through Gredel's nerves as she saw everyone at the party looking at her with eyes that glittered from more than whatever they'd been consuming earlier in the evening. There was an anticipation there in those eyes Gredel didn't like. So she dropped Lamey's arm and straightened—because she didn't want these people to see her afraid—and she walked to where Stoney waited.

"Earthgirl!" Stoney said. "This is Caro!" He was practically jumping up and down with excitement, and instead of looking where Stoney was pointing, Gredel just gave Stoney a long, cool glance, because he was just so outrageous this way.

When she turned her head, her first thought was, She's beautiful. And then the full impact of the other girl's face struck her.

"Ah. Ha," she said.

Caro looked at her with a ragged grin. She had long golden hair and green eyes and skin smooth as butter-cream, flawless....

"It's your twin!" Stoney almost shouted. "Your secret twin sister!"

Gredel gaped while everyone laughed, but Caro just looked at her and said, "Are you really from Earth?"

"No," Gredel said. "I'm from here."

"Help me build this pyramid."

Gredel shrugged. "Why not?" she said.

Caro wore a short dress and a battered jacket with black metal buckles and boots that came up past her knees—expensive stuff. She stood by the dining table carefully building a pyramid of crystal wine glasses. "I saw this done once," she said. "You pour the wine into the one glass on the top, and when it overflows it fills all the others. If you do it right, you fill all the glasses and you don't spill a drop."

Caro spoke with a kind of drawl, like Peers or rich people did when they made speeches or announcements on video.

"We're going to make a mess," Gredel predicted.

“That's all right, too,” Caro shrugged.

When the pyramid was completed, Caro got Stoney to start opening bottles. It was the wine his crew had stolen from the warehouse in Maranic Port, and it was a kind of bright silver in color, and filled the glasses like liquid mercury.

Caro tried to pour carefully, but, as Gredel predicted, she made a terrible mess, the precious wine bubbling across the tabletop and over onto the carpet. Caro seemed to find this funny. At length, all the glasses were brimming full, and she put down the bottle and called everyone over to drink. They took glasses and cheered and drank. Laughter and clinking glasses rang in the air. The glasses were so full that the carpet got another bath.

Caro took one glass for herself and pushed another into Gredel's hand, then took a second glass for herself and led Gredel to the sofa. Gredel sipped cautiously at the wine—there was something subtle and indefinable about the taste, something that made her think of the park in spring, the way the trees and flowers had a delicate freshness to them. She'd never tasted any wine like it before.

The taste was more seductive than she wanted anything with alcohol to be. She didn't take a second sip.

“So,” Caro said, “are we related?”

“I don't think so,” Gredel said.

Caro swallowed half the contents of a glass in one go. “Your dad was never on Zanshaa? I can almost guarantee my dad was never here.”

“I get my looks from my Ma, and she's never been anywhere,” Gredel said. Then, surprised, “You're from Zanshaa?”

Caro gave a little twitch of her lips, followed by a shrug. Interpreting this as a yes, Gredel asked,

“What do your parents do?”

“They got executed,” Caro said.

Gredel hesitated. “I'm sorry,” she said. Caro's parents were linked, obviously. No wonder she was hanging with this crowd.

“Me, too.” Caro said it with a brave little laugh, but she gulped down the remains of the wine in her first glass, then took a sip from the second. She looked up at Gredel.

“You heard of them maybe? The Sula family?”

Gredel tried to think of any of the linkages with that name, but couldn't. “Sorry, no,” she said.

“That's all right,” Caro said. “The Sulas were big on Zanshaa, but out here in the provinces they wouldn't mean much.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why do they call you Earthgirl?”

Gredel put on her Earth accent. “Because I can talk like I'm from Earth, darling. I do the voice.”

Caro laughed. She finished her second glass of wine, then got two more from the pyramid and drank them, then reached for Gredel's. “You going to drink that?”

“I don't drink much.”

“Why not?”

Gredel hesitated. “I don't like being drunk.”

Caro shrugged. “That's fair.” She drank Gredel's glass, then put it with the others on the side table. “I don't like being drunk,” she said, as if she were making up her mind right then. “But I don't dislike it either. What I don't like,” she said carefully, “is standing still. Not moving. Not changing. I get bored fast, and I don't like quiet.”

“In that case, you've come to the right place,” Gredel said.

Her nose is more pointed, Gredel thought. And her chin is different. She doesn't look like me, not really.

I bet I'd look good in that jacket, though.

“So do you live around here someplace?” Gredel asked.

Caro shook her head. “Maranic Town.”

“I wish I lived in Maranic.”

Caro looked at her in surprise. “Why?”

“Because it's ... not here.”

“Maranic is a hole. It's not something to wish for. If you're going to wish, wish for Zanshaa. Or Sandamar. Or Esley.”

“Have you been to those places?” Gredel asked. She almost hoped the answer was no, because she knew she'd never get anywhere like that, that maybe she'd get to Maranic Town, if she was lucky.

“I was there when I was little,” Caro said.

“I wish I lived in Byzantium,” Gredel said.

Caro gave her a look again. “Where's that?”

“Earth. Terra.”

“Terra's a hole,” Caro said.

“I'd still like to go there.”

“It's probably better than Maranic Town,” Caro decided.

Someone programmed some dance music, and Lamey came to dance with Gredel. A few years ago, he hadn't been able to walk right, but now he was a good dancer, and Gredel enjoyed dancing with him, responding to his changing moods in the fast dances, molding her body to his when the beat slowed down.

Caro also danced with one boy or another, but Gredel saw that she couldn't dance at all, just bounced up and down while her partner maneuvered her around.

After a while, Lamey went to talk business with Ibrahim, one of his boys who thought he knew someone in Maranic who could distribute the stolen wine, and Gredel found herself on the couch with Caro again.

“Your nose is different,” Caro said.

“I know.”

“But you're prettier than I am.”

This was the opposite of what Gredel had been thinking. People were always telling her she was beautiful, and she had to believe they saw her that way, but when she looked in the mirror she saw nothing but a vast collection of flaws.

A girl shrieked in another room, and there was a crash of glass. Suddenly Caro's mood changed completely: she glared toward the other room as if she hated everyone there.

“Time to change the music,” she said. She dug in her pocket and pulled out a med injector. She looked at the display, dialed a number, and put the injector to her throat, over the carotid. Little flashes of alarm pulsed through Gredel.

“What's in there?” she asked.

“What do you care?” Caro snarled. Her eyes snapped green sparks.

She pressed the trigger, and, an instant later, the fury faded, and a drowsy smile came to Caro's lips. “Now that's better,” she said. “Panda's got the real goods, all right.”

“Tell me about Zanshaa,” Gredel said.

Caro lazily shook her head. “No. Nothing but bad memories there.”

“Then tell me about Esley.”

“Sure. What I can remember.”

Caro talked about Esley's black granite peaks, with a white spindrift of snow continually blowing off them in the high perpetual wind, and the shaggy Yormak who lived there, tending their equally shaggy cattle. She described glaciers pouring in ageless slow motion down mountain valleys, high meadows covered with fragrant star flowers, chill lakes so clear that you could see all the way to the bottom.

“Of course, I was only at that mountain resort for a few weeks,” Caro added. “The rest of the planet might be burning desert for all I know.”

Lamey came back for more dancing, and when Gredel returned to the sofa Caro was unconscious, the med injector in her hand. She seemed to be breathing all right, though, lying asleep with a smile on her face. After a while, Panda came over and tried to grope her, but Gredel slapped his hands away.

“What's your problem?” he asked.

“Don't mess with my sister when she's passed out,” Gredel told him. He laughed, not exactly in a nice way, but he withdrew.

Caro was still asleep when the party ended. Gredel made Lamey help her carry Caro to his car, and then got him to drive to Maranic Town to her apartment. “What if she doesn't wake up long enough to tell us where it is?” Lamey complained.

“Whatever she took will wear off sooner or later.”

“What if it's next week?” But he drove off anyway, heading for Maranic, while Gredel sat with Caro in the back seat and tried to wake her up. Caro woke long enough to murmur the fact that she lived in the Volta Apartments. Lamey got lost on the way there, and wandered into a Torminel neighborhood. The nocturnal Torminel were in the middle of their active cycle, and Lamey got angry at the way they stared at him with their huge eyes as he wandered their streets.

Lamey was furious by the time he found the apartment building. He opened the passenger door and practically dragged Caro out of the car onto the sidewalk. Gredel scrambled out of the car and tried to get one of Caro's arms over her shoulders so she could help Caro get to her feet.

A doorman came scrambling out of the building. “Has something happened to Lady Sula?” he demanded.

Lamey looked at him in surprise. The doorman stared at Gredel, then at Caro, astonished by the resemblance. But Gredel looked at Caro.

Lady Sula? Gredel thought.

Her twin was a Peer.

Ah, she thought. Ha.

* * *

Lady Sula?

She wasn't even Lady Caro, she was Lady Sula. She wasn't just any Peer, she was head of the whole Sula clan.

Lamey's fury faded away quickly—it did that, came and went with lightning speed—and he picked Caro up in his arms and carried her to the elevator while the doorman fussed around him. When they arrived on the top floor, the doorman opened Caro's apartment, and Lamey walked in as if he paid the rent himself and carried Caro to her bedroom. There he put Caro down on her bed, and had Gredel draw off the tall boots while Lamey covered her with a comforter.

Gredel had never admired Lamey so much as at that moment. He behaved with a strange delicacy, as if he were a Peer himself, some lord commander of the Fleet cleaning up after a confidential mission.

The doorman wouldn't let them stay. On the way out, Gredel saw that Caro's apartment was a terrible mess, with clothes in piles and the tables covered with glasses, bottles, and dirty dishes.

“I want you to come back here tomorrow,” Lamey said as he started the car. “I want you to become Caro Sula's best friend.”

Gredel fully intended this, but she wondered why Lamey's thoughts echoed her own. “Why?”

“Peers are rich,” Lamey said simply. “Maybe we can get some of that and maybe we can't. But even more than the money, Peers are also the keys to things, and maybe Caro can open some doors for us. Even if it's just the door to her bank account, it's worth a try.”

* * *

It was very, very late, almost dawn, but Lamey wanted to take Gredel to one of his apartments. There they had a brisk five minutes' sex, hardly worth taking off her clothes for as far as Gredel was concerned,

and then Lamey took Gredel home.

As soon as she walked in the door, she knew Antony was back—he'd been gone for four months, working in another town, and Gredel had got used to walking in the door without fear. Now the apartment smelled different, a blend of beer and tobacco and human male and fear. Gredel took off her boots at the door so she wouldn't wake him, and crept in silence to her bed. Despite the hour, she lay awake for some time, thinking of keys and doors opening.

Lamey didn't know what he wanted from Caro, not quite. He was operating on an instinct that told him Caro could be useful, give him connections, links that would move him upward in the Fabs. Gredel had much the same intuition where Caro was concerned, but she wanted Caro for other things. Gredel didn't want to stay in the Fabs. Caro might show her how to do that, how to behave, perhaps, or how to dress, how to move up, and maybe not just out of the Fabs but off Spannan altogether, loft out of the ring station on a tail of fire to Esley or Zanshaa or Earth, to a glittering life that she felt hovering around her, a kind of potential waiting to be born, but that she couldn't quite imagine.

She woke just before noon and put on her robe to shower and use the toilet. The sounds of the Spring Festival zephyrball game blared from the front room, where Antony was watching the video. Gredel finished her business in the bathroom and went back into her room to dress. When she finished putting on her clothes and her makeup, she brushed her hair for a long time, delaying the moment when she would leave her sanctum to face Antony, but when she realized what she was doing, she got angry at herself and put the brush down, then put her money in the pocket of her jacket and walked through the door.

Antony sat on the sagging old sofa watching the game on the video wall. The remains of a sandwich sat on a plate next to him. He was a man of average height but built powerfully, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest and long arms with big hands. He looked like a slab on legs. Iron-grey hair fringed his bald head, and his eyes were tiny and set in a permanent suspicious glare.

He wasn't drinking, Gredel saw, and felt some of her tension ease.

“Hi, Antony,” she said as she walked for the apartment door.

He looked at her with his glaring black eyes. “Where you going dressed like that?”

“To see a friend.”

“The friend who bought you those clothes?”

“No. Someone else.” She made herself stop walking and face him.

His lips twitched in a sneer. “Nelda says you're whoring now for some linkboy. Just like your mother.”

Anger flamed along Gredel's veins, but she clamped it down and said, “I've never whored. Never. Not once.”

“Not for money, maybe,” Antony said. “But look at those clothes on you. And that jewelry.” Gredel felt herself flush. Antony returned his attention to the game. “Better you sell that tail of yours for money,” he muttered. “Then you could contribute to your upkeep around here.”

So you could steal it, Gredel thought, but didn't say it. She headed for the door, and just before it swung shut behind her, she heard Antony's parting shot. “You better not take out that implant! You get pregnant, you're out of this place! I'm not looking after another kid that isn't my own!”

Like he'd ever looked after any kid.

Gredel left the building with her fists clenched and a blaze of fury kindled in her eyes. Kids playing in the front hall took one look at her and got out of her way.

It wasn't until the train was halfway to Maranic Town that the anger finally ebbed to a normal background buzz, and Gredel began to wonder if Caro would be at home, if she would even remember meeting her the previous night.

Gredel found the Volta Apartments quickly now that she knew where it was. The doorman—it was a different doorman this time—opened the door for her and showed her right to the elevator. Clearly he thought she was Caro. “Thank you,” Gredel smiled, trying to drawl out the words the way a Peer would.

She had to knock loudly, several times, before Caro came to the door. Caro was still in her short dress from the previous night, and tights, and bare feet. Her hair was disordered, and there was a smear of mascara on one cheek. Her slitted eyes opened wide as she saw Gredel at the door.

“Earthgirl,” she said. “Hi.”

“The doorman thought I was you. I came over to see if you were all right.”

Caro opened the door and flapped her arms, as if to say, I am as you see me. “Come in,” she said, and turned to walk toward the kitchen.

The apartment was still a mess, and the air smelled stale. Caro went to the sink in the little kitchen and poured herself a glass of water.

“My mouth tastes like cheese,” she said. “The kind with the veins in it. I hate that kind of cheese.”

She drank her water while Gredel walked around the apartment. She felt strangely reluctant to touch anything, as if it was a fantasy that might dissolve if she put a finger on it.

“So,” she said finally. “You want to go and do something?”

Caro finished her water and put down her glass on a counter already covered with dirty glasses. “I need some coffee first,” she said. “Would you mind going to the café on the corner and getting some for me while I change?”

“What about the coffee maker?” Gredel asked.

Caro blinked at the machine as if she were seeing it for the first time. “I don't know how to work it,” she said.

“I'll show you.”

“I never learned how to do kitchen stuff,” Caro said, as she made way for Gredel in the kitchen. “Till I came here, we always had servants. I had servants here, but I called the last one a cow and threw her out.”

“What's a cow?” Gredel asked.

“They're ugly and fat and stupid. Like Berthe when I fired her.”

Gredel found coffee in a cupboard and began preparing the coffee maker. “Do you eat cows, or what?” she asked.

“Yeah, they give meat. And milk, too.”

“We have vashes for that. And zieges. And swine and bison, but they only give meat.”

Gredel made coffee for them both. Caro took her cup into the bathroom with her, and after a while, Gredel heard the shower start to run. She sipped her coffee as she wandered around the apartment—the rooms were nice, but not that nice, Lamey had places just as good, though not in such an exclusive building as this. There was a view of the Iola River two streets away, but it wasn't that nice a view, there were buildings in the way, and the window glass was dirty.

Then, because she couldn't stand the mess any longer, Gredel began to pick up the scattered clothes and fold them. She finished that and was putting the dirty dishes in the washer when Caro appeared, dressed casually in soft wool pantaloons, a high-necked blouse, and a little vest with gold buttons and lots of pockets slashed one on top of the other. Caro looked around in surprise.

“You cleaned up!”

“A little.”

“You didn't have to do that.”

“I didn't have anything else to do.” Gredel came into the front room. She looked down at one of the piles of clothing, put her hand down on the soft pile of a sweater she had just folded and placed neatly on the back of a sofa. “You have some nice things,” she said.

“That's from Yormak cattle. They have wonderful wool.” She eyed Gredel's clothing. “What you're wearing, that's—that's all right.”

“Lamey bought it for me.”

Caro laughed. “Might have known a man picked that.”

What's wrong with it? Gredel wanted to ask. It was what everyone was wearing, only top quality. These weren't clothes hijacked at Maranic Port, they were bought in a store.

Caro took Gredel's arm. “Let's get some breakfast,” she said, “and then I'll take you shopping.”

The doorman stared comically as Caro and Gredel stepped out of the elevator. Caro introduced Gredel as her twin sister Margaux from Earth, and Gredel greeted the doorman in her Earth accent. The doorman bowed deeply as they swept out.

An hour later, in the restaurant, Gredel was surprised when Caro asked her to pay for their meal. “My allowance comes first of the month,” she said. “And this month's money supply is gone. This café won't run a tab for me.”

“Weren't we going shopping?”

Caro grinned. “Clothes I can buy on credit.”

They went to one of the arcades where exclusive shops sheltered under a long series of graceful arches of polymerous resin, the arches translucent but grown in different colors, so that the vaulted ceiling of each glowed with subtle tones that merged and flowed and blended. Caro introduced Gredel as her sister, and laughed when Gredel used her Earth accent. Gredel was called Lady Margaux and surrounded by swarms of clerks and floorwalkers, and she was both surprised and flattered by the attention. This is what it was like to be a Peer.

If she'd been merely Gredel, the staff would have been there all right, but following her around to make sure she didn't steal.

The arcades didn't serve just Terrans, so there were Torminel there, and Naxids, and some pleasure-loving Cree who wandered through the shops burbling in their musical voices. It was unusual for Gredel to see so many non-humans in one place, since she rarely had any reason to leave the Terran parts of the Fabs. But the Peers, Gredel concluded, were almost a species of their own. They had more in common with each other than they had with other folk.

Caro bought an outfit for herself and two for Gredel, first a luxurious gown with a cape so long it dragged on the floor, and next a pajama-like lounging outfit. Gredel had no idea where she would ever wear such things. Caro nodded at the lounging suit. "Made of worm spit," she said.

"Sorry?" Gredel said, startled.

"Worm spit. They call it 'silk.'"

Gredel had heard of silk, and she touched the fabric with a new respect. "Do you think it came from Earth?" she asked.

"I doubt it." Dismissively. "Earth's a hole. My mother was there on government service, and she told me."

Caro bought everything on credit. Gredel noticed that she signed only Sula, leaving out her first name and the honorific Lady. She seemed to carry a tab on every store in the arcade. When Gredel thanked her for the presents, Caro said, "You can pay me back by buying dinner."

"I don't think I can afford that," Gredel said doubtfully.

Caro laughed. "Guess we better learn to eat worm spit," she said.

Gredel was intrigued by the way everyone lined up to give Caro credit. "They know I'm good for it," Caro explained. "They know I'll have the money eventually."

"When?"

"When I'm twenty-two. That's when the funds mature." She laughed again. "But those people still won't get paid. I'll be off the planet by then, in the Fleet, and they can chase me through space if they like."

Gredel was intrigued by this, too. There tended to be serious consequences in the Fabs for people who didn't pay their debts. Maybe this, too, was different for Peers.

"So this is money your parents left you?" Gredel asked.

Caro looked dubious. "I'm not sure. My parents were caught in some kind of scheme to swindle government suppliers out of a lot of money, and they lost everything—estates, money—" She tapped her neck significantly. "Everything. I got sent to live with Jacob Biswas in Blue Lakes." This was an exclusive area outside of Maranic Town. "The Biswas clan were clients of the Sulas, and Dad got Biswas the job of Assistant Port Administrator here. I'm not sure if the money is something Dad got to him, or whether it came from my dad's clients or friends, but it's in a bank on Spannan's Ring, and the interest comes to me here every month."

"You don't live with Biswas anymore, though. Did he leave Spannan?"

“No, he's still here. But he got divorced and remarried, and the new wife and I didn't get along—we were fighting every day, and poor old Jacob couldn't take it any more, so he got me the place in the Volta until it was time for me to join the Fleet.”

Caro went on to explain that her family was forbidden to be in the civil service for three generations, both as punishment for what her parents had done and to minimize the chance to steal. But as a Peer, she had an automatic ticket to one of the Fleet academies, and so it had been planned for her to go there.

“I don't know,” Caro said, shaking her head. “I can't see myself in the Fleet. Taking orders, wearing uniforms ... under all that discipline. I think I'd go crazy in ten days.”

The Fleet, Gredel thought. The Fleet could carry you away from Spannan, through the wormhole gates to the brilliant worlds beyond. Zanshaa, Esley, Earth ... the vision was dazzling. For that, she could put up with uniforms.

“I'd do it in a second,” Gredel said.

Caro gave her a look. “Why?”

Gredel thought she may as well emphasize the practical advantages. “You get food and a place to sleep. Medical and dental care. And they pay you for it.”

Caro gave a disdainful snort. “You do it, then.”

“I would if I could.”

Caro made a disgusted noise. “So why don't you? You could enlist.”

“They wouldn't let me. My mother has a criminal record.”

The Fleet had their pick of recruits: there were plenty of people who wanted those three free meals per day. They checked the background of everyone who applied.

Unless, Gredel thought, someone she knew could pull strings. A Peer, say.

They took a taxi back to Caro's apartment, but when the driver started to pull up to the curb, Caro ducked into the back seat, pulled a bewildered Gredel down atop her, and shouted at the driver to keep going.

“What's the matter?” Gredel asked.

“A collector. Someone come to get money from me. The doorman usually chases them off, but this one's really persistent.”

Apparently, living on credit wasn't as convenient as Caro let on.

The driver let them off in the alley behind the apartment building. There was a loading dock there, and Caro's codes opened the door. There were little motorized carts in the entryway, for use when people moved in furniture or other heavy belongings.

They took the freight elevator to Caro's floor and looked for something to eat. There wasn't much, just biscuits and an old piece of cheese. “Have you got food at your place?” Caro asked.

Gredel hesitated. Her reluctance was profound. “Food,” she said, “but we've got Antony, too.”

“And who's that?”

Gredel told her. Caro's disgusted look returned. “He comes near me,” she said, “I'll kick him in the balls.”

“That wouldn't stop him for long,” Gredel said, and shivered. “He'd still slap your face off.”

“We'll see.” Caro's lip curled again, defiant.

“I'm serious. You don't want to get Antony mad. I bet even Lamey's boys would have a hard time with him.”

Caro shook her head. “This is crazy,” she laughed. “You know anyone who could buy us some food?”

“Well. There's Lamey.”

“He's your boyfriend, right? The tall one?”

“He carried you up here last night.”

“So I already owe him,” Caro laughed. “Will he mind if I mooch dinner off him? I'll pay him back, first of the month.”

Gredel called Lamey on her phone, and he was amused by their dilemma and said he'd be there soon.

“So tell me about Lamey,” Caro said while they waited.

So Gredel told Caro about Lamey's business. “He's linked, you know? He knows people, and he moves stuff around. From the Port, from other places. Makes it available to people at good prices. When people can't get loans, he loans them money.”

“Aren't the clans' patrons supposed to do that?”

“Sometimes they will. But, you know, those mid-level clans, they're in a lot of businesses themselves, or their friends and allies are. So they're not going to loan money for someone to go into competition with them. And once the new businesses start, they have to be protected, you know, against the people who are already in that business, so Lamey and his people do that, too.”

“It's the Peers who are supposed to protect people,” Caro said.

“Caro,” Gredel said, “you're the first Peer I've ever seen outside of a video. Peers don't come to places like the Fabs.”

Caro gave a cynical grin. “So Lamey just does good things, right? He's never hurt anybody, he just helps people.”

Gredel hesitated. They were entering the area of things she tried not to think about. She thought about the boy Moseley, the dreadful dull squelching thud as Lamey's boot went into him. The way her own head rang after Lamey slapped her that time.

“Sure,” she said finally, “he's hurt people. People who stole from him, mostly. But he's really not bad,” she added quickly, “he's not one of the violent ones, he's smart. He uses his intelligence.”

“Uh-huh,” Caro said. “So has he used his... intelligence ... on you?”

Gredel felt herself flush. “A few times,” she said quickly. “He's got a temper. But he's always sweet when he cools down, and buys me things.”

“Uh-huh,” Caro said.

Gredel tried not to bristle at Caro's attitude. Hitting was what boyfriends did, it was normal; the point was whether they felt sorry afterward.

“Do you love him?” Caro asked.

Gredel hesitated again. “Maybe,” she said.

“I hope at least he's good in bed.”

Gredel shrugged. “He's all right.” Sex seemed to be expected of her, because she was thought to be beautiful and because she went with older boys who had money. For all that it had never been as pleasurable as she'd been led to expect, it was nevertheless pleasurable enough so that she never really wanted to quit.

“Lamey's too young to be good in bed,” Caro declared. “You need an older man to show you what sex is really about.” Her eyes sparkled, and she gave a diabolical giggle. “Like my Sergei. He was really the best! He showed me everything about sex.”

Gredel blinked. “Who was Sergei?”

“Remember I told you that Jake Biswas remarried? Well, his wife's sister was married to Sergei. He and I met at the wedding and fell for each other—we were always sneaking away to be together. That's what all the fighting in the family was about. That's why I had to move to Maranic Town.”

“How much older was he?”

“In his forties somewhere.”

Black, instant hatred descended on Gredel. She could have torn Sergei to ribbons with her nails, with her teeth.

“That's sick,” she said. “That man is disgusting!”

Caro gave a cynical laugh. “I wouldn't talk if I were you,” she said. “How old is Lamey? What kind of scenes does he get you into?”

Gredel felt as if Caro's words had slapped her across the face. Caro gave her a smirk.

“Right,” she said. “We're models of stability and mental health, we are.”

Gredel decided to change the subject.

Caro's mood had sweetened by the time Lamey turned up. She thanked him for taking her home the previous night, and took them both to a restaurant so exclusive that Caro had to give a thumbprint in order to enter. There were no real dinners on the menu, just a variety of small plates that everyone at the table shared. Gredel had never heard of some of the ingredients. Some of the dishes were wonderful, some weren't. Some were simply incomprehensible.

Caro and Lamey got along well, to Gredel's relief. Caro filled the air with vivacious talk, and Lamey joked and deferred to her. Toward the end of the meal he remembered something, and reached into his

pocket. Gredel's nerves tingled as she recognized a med injector.

“Panda asked me if you wanted any more of the endorphin,” Lamey said.

“I don't have any money, remember?” Caro said.

Lamey gave an elaborate shrug. “I'll put it on your tab.”

Don't, Gredel wanted to shout.

But Caro gave a pleased, catlike smile, and reached for the injector in Lamey's hand.

* * *

Gredel and Caro spent a lot of time together after that. Partly because Lamey wanted it, but also because Gredel found that she liked Caro, and she liked learning from her. She studied how Caro dressed, how she talked, how she moved. And Caro enjoyed dressing Gredel up like one of her dolls, and teaching her to walk and talk as if she were Lady Margaux, the sister of a Peer. Gredel worked on her accent till her speech was a letter-perfect imitation of Caro's. Caro couldn't do voices the way Gredel could, and Gredel's Earthgirl voice always made her laugh.

Gredel was learning the things that might get her out of the Fabs.

Caro enjoyed teaching her. Maybe, Gredel thought, this was because Caro really didn't have much to do. She'd left school, because she was a Peer and would get into the academy whether she had good marks or not, and she didn't seem to have any friends in Maranic Town. Sometimes friends from Blue Lakes came to visit her—usually a pack of girls all at once—but all their talk was about people and events in their school, and Gredel could tell that Caro got bored with that fast.

“I wish Sergei would call,” Caro said. But Sergei never did. And Caro refused to call Sergei. “It's his move, not mine,” she said, her eyes turning hard.

Caro got bored easily. And that was dangerous, because when Caro got bored, she wanted to change the music. Sometimes that meant shopping or going to a club, but it could also mean drinking a couple of bottles of wine or a bottle of brandy, or firing endorphin or Benzedrine into her carotid from the med injector, or sometimes all of the above. It was the endorphins she liked best, though.

The drugs weren't illegal, but the supply was controlled in various ways, and they were expensive. The black market provided pharmaceuticals at more reasonable prices, and without a paper or money trail. The drugs the linkboys sold weren't just for fun, either: Nelda got Gredel black market antivirals when she was sick, and fast-healers once when she broke her leg, and saved herself the expense of supporting a doctor and a pharmacy.

When Caro changed the music, she became a spiky, half-feral creature, a tangled ligature of taut-strung nerves and overpowering impulse. She would careen from one scene to the next, from party to club to bar, having a frenzied good time one minute, spitting out vicious insults at perfect strangers the next.

At the first of the month, Gredel urged Caro to pay Lamey what she owed him. Caro just shrugged, but Gredel insisted. “This isn't like the debts you run up at the boutique.”

Caro gave Gredel a narrow-eyed look that made her nervous, because she recognized it as the prelude to fury. “What do you mean?”

“When you don't pay Lamey, things happen.”

“Like what.” Contemptuously.

“Like—” Gredel hesitated. “Like what happened to Moseley.”

Her stomach turned over at the memory. “Moseley ran a couple of Lamey's stores, you know, where he sells the stuff he gets. And Lamey found out that Moseley was skimming the profits. So—” She remembered the way Lamey screamed at Moseley, the way his boys held Moseley while Lamey smashed him in the face and body. The way that Lamey kept kicking him even after Moseley fell unconscious to the floor, the thuds of the boots going home.

“So what happened to Moseley?” Caro asked.

“I think he died.” Gredel spoke the words past the knot in her throat. “The boys won't talk to me about it. No one ever saw him again. Panda runs those stores now.”

“And Lamey would do that to me?” Caro asked. It clearly took effort to wrap her mind around the idea of being vulnerable to someone like Lamey.

Gredel hesitated again. “Maybe you just shouldn't give him the chance. He's unpredictable.”

“Fine,” Caro said. “Give him the money then.”

Caro went to her computer and gave Gredel a credit chit for the money, which Gredel then carried to Lamey. He gave the plastic tab a bemused look—he was in a cash-only business—and then asked Gredel to take it back to Caro and have it cashed. When Gredel returned to Caro's apartment the next day, Caro was hung over and didn't want to be bothered, so she gave Gredel the codes to her cash account.

It was as easy as that.

Gredel looked at the deposit made the previous day and took a breath. Eight hundred forty zeniths, enough to keep Nelda and her assortment of children for a year, with enough left over for Antony to get drunk every night. And Caro got this every month.

Gredel started looking after Caro's money, seeing that at least some of the creditors were appeased, that there was food in the kitchen. She cleaned the place, too, tidied the clothes Caro scattered everywhere, saw that the laundry was sent out, and, when it returned, was put away. Caro was amused by it all. “When I'm in the Fleet, you can join, too,” she said. “I'll make you a servant or something.”

Hope burned in Gredel's heart. “I hope so,” she said. “But you'll have to pull some strings to get me in—I mean, with my mother's record and everything.”

“I'll get you in,” Caro assured.

Lamey was disappointed when Gredel told him about Caro's finances. “Eight hundred forty,” he muttered, “it's hardly worth stealing.” He rolled onto his back in the bed—they were in one of his apartments—and frowned at the ceiling.

“People have been killed for a lot less than that,” Gredel said. “For the price of a bottle of cheap wine.”

Lamey's blue eyes gave her a sharp look. “I'm not talking about killing anybody,” he said. “I'm just saying it's not worth getting killed over, because that's what's likely to happen if you steal from a Peer. It won't be worth trying until she's twenty-two, when she gets the whole inheritance, and by then she'll be in the Fleet.” He sighed. “I wish she were in the Fleet now, assigned to the Port. We might be able to make use

of her, get some Fleet supplies.”

“I don't want to steal from her,” Gredel said.

Lamey fingered his chin thoughtfully and went on as if he hadn't heard. “What you do, see, is get a bank account in her name, but with your thumbprint. Then you transfer Caro's money over to your account, and from there you turn it into cash and walk off into the night.” He smiled. “Should be easy.”

“I thought you said it wasn't worth it,” Gredel said.

“Not for eight hundred it isn't,” Lamey said. He gave a laugh. “I'm just trying to work out a way of getting my investment back.”

Gredel was relieved that Lamey wasn't really intending to steal Caro's money. She didn't want to be a thief, and she especially didn't want to steal from a friend like Caro.

“She doesn't seem to have any useful contacts here.” Lamey continued thinking aloud. “Find out about these Biswas people. They might be good for something.”

Gredel agreed. The request seemed harmless enough.

Gredel spent most of her nights away from Nelda's now, either with Lamey or sleeping at Caro's place. That was good, because things at Nelda's were grim. Antony looked as if he were settling in for a long stay. He was sick, something about his liver, and he couldn't get work. Sometimes Nelda had fresh bruises or cuts on her face. Sometimes the other kids did. And sometimes when Gredel came home at night Antony was there, passed out on the sofa, a bottle of gin in his hand. She took off her shoes and walked past him quietly, glaring her hatred as she passed him, and she would think how easy it would be to hurt Antony then, to pick up the bottle and smash Antony in the face with it, smash him until he couldn't hurt anyone ever again.

Once Gredel came home and found Nelda in tears. Antony had slapped her around and taken the rent money, for the second time in a row. “We're going to be evicted,” Nelda whispered hoarsely. “They're going to throw us all out.”

“No they're not,” Gredel said firmly. She went to Lamey and explained the situation and begged him for the money. “I'll never ask you for anything ever again,” she promised.

Lamey listened thoughtfully, then reached into his wallet and handed her a hundred-zenith note. “This take care of it?” he asked.

Gredel reached for the note, hesitated. “More than enough,” she said. “I don't want to take that much.”

Lamey took her hand and put the note into it. His blue eyes looked into hers. “Take it and welcome,” he said. “Buy yourself something nice with the rest.”

Gratitude flooded Gredel's eyes. Tears fell down her cheeks. “Thank you,” she said. “I know I don't deserve it.”

“Of course you do,” Lamey said. “You deserve the best, Earthgirl.” He kissed her, his lips coming away salty. “Now you take this to the building agent, right? You don't give it to Nelda, because she might give it away again.”

“I'll do that right away,” Gredel said.

“And—” His eyes turned solemn. “Does Antony need taking care of? Or need encouragement to leave? You know what I mean.”

Gredel shrank from the idea. “No,” she said. “No—he won't stay long.”

“You remember it's an option, right?” She made herself nod in answer.

Gredel took the money to the agent, a scowling little woman who had an office in the building and who smelled of cabbage and onions. She insisted on a receipt for the two months' rent, which the woman gave grudgingly, and as Gredel walked away she thought about Lamey and how this meant Lamey loved her.

Too bad he's going to die. The thought formed in her mind unbidden.

The worst part was that she knew it was true.

People like Lamey didn't survive for long. There weren't many old linkboys—that's why they weren't called linkmen. Sooner or later they were caught and killed. And the people they loved—their wives, their lovers, their children—paid as well, with a term on the labor farms like Ava, or with their own execution.

The point was reinforced a few days later, when Stoney was caught hijacking a cargo of fuel cells in Maranic Port. His trial was over two weeks later, and he was executed the next week. Because stealing private property was a crime against common law, not against the Praxis that governed the empire, he wasn't subjected to the tortures reserved for those who transgressed against the ultimate law, but simply strapped into a chair and garroted.

The execution was broadcast on the video channel reserved for punishments, and Lamey made his boys watch it. “To make them more careful,” he said simply.

Gredel didn't watch. She went to Caro's instead and surprised herself by helping Caro drink a bottle of wine. Caro was delighted at this lapse on Gredel's part, and was her most charming all night, thanking Gredel effusively for everything Gredel had done for her. Gredel left with the wine singing in her veins. She had rarely felt so good.

The euphoria lasted until she entered Nelda's apartment. Antony was in full cry. A chair lay in pieces on the floor and Nelda had a cut above her eye that wept red tears across her face. Gredel froze in the door as she came in, and then tried to slip toward her room without attracting Antony's attention.

No such luck. Antony lunged toward her, grabbed her blouse by its shoulder. She felt the fabric tear. “Where's the money?” Antony shouted. “Where's the money you get by selling your tail?”

Gredel held out her pocketbook in trembling hands. “Here!” she said. “Take it!”

It was clear enough what was going on, it was Antony Scenario Number One. He needed cash for a drink, and he'd already taken everything Nelda had.

Antony grabbed the pocketbook, poured coins into his hand. Gredel could smell the juniper scent of the gin reeking off his pores. He looked at the coins dumbly, then threw the pocketbook to the floor and put the money in his pocket.

“I'm going to put you on the street myself, right now,” he said, and seized her wrist in one huge hand. “I can get more money for you than this.”

“No!” Gredel filled with terror, tried to pull away.

Anger blazed in Antony's eyes. He drew back his other hand.

Gredel felt the impact not on her flesh but in her bones. Her teeth snapped together and her heels went out from under her and she sat on the floor.

Then Nelda was there, screaming, her hands clutching Antony's forearm as she tried to keep him from hitting Gredel again. “Don't hit the child!” she wailed.

“Stupid bitch!” Antony growled, and turned to punch Nelda in the face. “Don't ever step between me and her again!”

Turning his back was Antony's big mistake. Anger blazed in Gredel, an all-consuming blowtorch annihilating fury that sent her lunging for the nearest weapon, a furniture leg that had been broken off when Antony had smashed a chair in order to underscore one of his rhetorical points. Gredel kicked off her heels and rose to her feet and swung the chair leg two-handed for Antony's head.

Nelda gaped at her, her mouth an O, and wailed again. Antony took this as a warning and started to turn, but it was too late. The wooden chair leg caught him in the temple, and he fell to one knee. The chair leg, which was made of compressed dedger fiber, had broken raggedly, and the splintery end gouged his flesh.

Gredel gave a shriek powered by seventeen years of pure, suppressed hatred, and swung again. There was a solid crack as the chair leg connected with Antony's bald skull, and the big man dropped to the floor like a bag of rocks. Gredel dropped her knees onto his barrel chest and swung again and again. She remembered the sound that Lamey's boots made going into Moseley and wanted badly to make those sounds come from Antony. The ragged end of the chair leg tore long ribbons out of Antony's flesh. Blood splashed the floor and walls.

She only stopped when Nelda wrapped Gredel's arms with her own and hauled her off Antony. Gredel turned to swing at Nelda, and only stopped when she saw the older woman's tears.

Antony was making a bubbling sound as he breathed. A slow river of blood poured out of his mouth onto the floor. “What do we do?” Nelda wailed as she turned little helpless circles on the floor. “What do we do?”

Gredel knew the answer to the question perfectly well. She got her phone out of her pocketbook and went to her room and called Lamey. He was there in twenty minutes with Panda and three other boys. He looked at the wrecked room, at Antony lying on the floor, at Gredel standing over the man with the bloody chair leg in her hand.

“What do you want done?” he asked Gredel. “We could put him on a train, I suppose. Or in the river.”

“No!” Nelda jumped between Antony and Lamey. Tears brimmed from her eyes as she turned to Gredel. “Put him on the train. Please, honey, please.”

“On the train,” Gredel repeated to Lamey.

“We'll wake him up long enough to tell him not to come back,” Lamey said. He and his boys picked up Antony's heavy body and dragged it toward the door.

“Where's the freight elevator?” Lamey asked.

“I’ll show you.” Gredel went with them to the elevator. The tenants were working people who went to bed at a reasonable hour, and the building was silent at night and the halls empty. Lamey’s boys panted for breath as they hauled the heavy, inert carcass with its heavy bones and solid muscle. They reached the freight elevator doors, and the boys dumped Antony on the floor while they caught their breath.

“Lamey,” Gredel said.

Lamey looked at her. “Yes?”

She looked up at him, into his accepting blue eyes.

“Put him in the river,” she said. “Just make sure he doesn’t come up.”

Lamey looked at her, a strange silent sympathy in his eyes, and he put his arm around her and kissed her cheek. “I’ll make it all right for you,” he said.

No you won’t, she thought, but you’ll make it better.

The next morning, Nelda threw her out. She looked at Gredel from beneath the slab of grey healing plaster she’d pasted over the cut in her forehead, and she said, “I just can’t have you here anymore. I just can’t.”

For a moment of blank terror, Gredel wondered if Antony’s body had come bobbing up under Old Iola Bridge, but soon Gredel realized that wasn’t the problem. The previous evening had put Nelda in a position of having to decide who she loved more, Antony or Gredel. She’d picked Antony, unaware that he was no longer an option.

Gredel went to her mother’s, and Ava’s objections died the moment she saw the bruise on Gredel’s cheek. Gredel told her the story of what had happened—not being stupid, she left out what she’d asked Lamey to do—and Ava hugged her and told her she was proud of her. She worked with cosmetics for a long time to hide the damage.

And then she took Gredel to Maranic Town, to Bonifacio’s, for ice cream.

* * *

Ava and Lamey and Panda helped carry Gredel’s belongings to Ava’s place, arms and boxes full of the clothing Lamey and Caro had bought her, the blouses and pants and frocks and coats and capes and hats and shoes and jewelry, all the stuff that had long ago overflowed the closets in her room at Nelda’s, that was for the most part lying in neat piles on the old, worn carpet.

Panda was highly impressed by the tidiness of it. “You’ve got a system here,” he said.

Ava was in a better situation than usual. Her man was married and visited only at regularly scheduled intervals, and he didn’t mind if she spent her free time with family or friends. But Ava didn’t have many friends—her previous men hadn’t really let her have any—and so she was delighted to spend time with her daughter.

Lamey was disappointed that Gredel didn’t want to move into one of his apartments. “I need my Ma right now,” Gredel told him, and that seemed to satisfy him.

I don’t want to live with someone who’s going to be killed soon. That was what she thought to herself. But she wondered if she was obliged to live with the boy who had killed for her.

Caro was disappointed as well. “You could have moved in with me!” she said.

Shimmering delight sang in Gredel's mind. “You wouldn't mind?”

“No!” Caro was enthusiastic. “We could be sisters! We could shop and go out—have fun.”

For days, Gredel basked in the warm attentions of Caro and her mother. She spent almost all her time with one or the other, enough so that Lamey began to get jealous, or at least to pretend that he was jealous—Lamey was sometimes hard to read that way. “Caro's kidnapped you,” he half-joked over the phone. “I'm going to have to send the boys to fetch you back.”

Gredel began to spend nights with Caro, the nights when Ava was with her man. There was a lot of room in the big bed. She found that Caro didn't so much go to sleep as put herself into a coma: she loaded endorphins into the med injector and gave herself one dose after another until unconsciousness claimed her. Gredel was horrified.

“Why do you do it?” she asked one night, as Caro reached for the injector.

Caro gave her a glare. “Because I like it,” she snarled. “I can't sleep without it.”

Gredel shrank away from Caro's look. She didn't want Caro to rip into her the way she ripped into other people.

One night, Lamey took them both to a party. “I've got to take Caro out, too,” he told Gredel “Otherwise I'd never see you.”

The reason for the party was that Lamey had put up a loan for a restaurant and club, and the people hadn't made a go of it, so he'd foreclosed and taken the place over. He'd inherited a stockroom of liquor and a walk-in refrigerator full of food, decided it might as well not go to waste, and invited nearly everyone he knew. He paid the staff on for one more night and let all his guests know the food and drinks were free.

“We'll have fun tonight,” he said, “and tomorrow I'll start looking for somebody to manage the place.”

It was the last great party Gredel had with Lamey and his crew. The big room was filled with food and music and people having a good time. Laughter rang from the club's rusted, reinforced iron ceiling, which was not an attempt at decor but a reminder of the fact that the floor above had once been braced to support heavy machinery. Though Gredel didn't have anything to drink she still got high simply from being around so many people who were soaking up the good times along with the free liquor. Gredel's mind whirled as she danced, whirled like her body spinning along the dance floor in response to Lamey's smooth, perfect, elegant motion. He leaned close and spoke into her ear.

“Come and live with me, Earthgirl.”

She shook her head, smiled. “Not yet.”

“I want to marry you. Have babies with you.”

A shiver of pleasure sang up Gredel's spine. She had no reply, only put her arms around Lamey's neck and rested her head on his shoulder.

Gredel didn't know quite how she deserved to be so loved. Lamey, Caro, her mother, each of them filling a dreadful hollowness inside her, a hollowness she hadn't realized was there until it was filled with warmth and tenderness.

Lamey danced with Caro as well, or rather guided her around the dance floor while she did the jumping-up-and-down thing she did instead of dancing. Caro was having a good time. She drank only a couple of bottles of wine over the course of the night, which for her was modest, and the rest of the time danced with Lamey or members of his crew. As they left the club, she kissed Lamey extravagantly to thank him for inviting her. Lamey put an arm around both Caro and Gredel.

“I just like to show my beautiful sisters a good time,” he said.

He and Gredel took Caro to the Volta Apartments, after which they intended to drive back to the Fabs to spend the dawn in one of Lamey's apartments. But Caro lingered in the car, leaning forward out of the back seat to prop her head and shoulders between Lamey and Gredel. They all talked and laughed, and the doorman hovered in the Volta vestibule, waiting for the moment to let Lady Sula past the doors. Finally, Lamey said it was time to go.

“Save yourself that drive back to the Fabs,” Caro said. “You two can use my bed. I can sleep on the sofa.”

Lamey gave her a look. “I hate to put a beautiful woman out of her bed.”

Caro gave a sharp, sudden laugh, then turned to kiss Gredel on the cheek. “That depends on Gredel.”

Ah. Ha, Gredel thought, surprised and not surprised.

Lamey, it seems, was looking for a return on his investment. Gredel thought a moment, then shrugged.

“I don't mind,” she said.

So Lamey took Gredel and Caro up to the apartment and made love to them both. Gredel watched her boyfriend's pale butt jigging up and down over Caro and wondered why this scene didn't bother her.

Because I don't love him, she decided. If I loved him, this would matter.

And then she thought, Maybe Caro loves him. Maybe Caro would want to stay with Lamey in the Fabs, and Gredel could take Caro's place in the academy and go to Earth.

Maybe that would be the solution that would leave everyone happy.

* * *

Caro apologized the next day, after Lamey left. “I was awful last night,” she said. “I don't know what you must think of me.”

“It was all right,” Gredel said. She was folding Caro's clothes and putting them away. Cleaning up after the orgy, she thought.

“I'm such a slut sometimes,” Caro said. “You must think I'm trying to steal Lamey away from you.”

“I'm not thinking that.”

Caro trotted up behind Gredel and put her arms around her. She leaned her head against Gredel's shoulder, and put on the lisping voice of a penitent little girl. “Do you forgive me?”

“Yes,” Gredel said. “Of course.”

Suddenly, Caro was all energy. She skipped around the room, bounding around Gredel as Gredel folded

her clothes. "I'll make it up to you!" Caro proclaimed. "I'll take you anywhere you want today! What would you like? Shopping?"

Gredel considered the offer. It wasn't as if she needed new things—she was beginning to feel a little oppressed by all her possessions—but, on the other hand, she enjoyed Caro's pleasure in purchasing them. But then another idea struck her.

"Godfrey's," she said.

Caro's eyes glittered. "Oh yes."

It was a glorious day—summer was coming on, and warm breezes flowed through the louvered windows on the private rooms at Godfrey's, breezes that wafted floral perfume over Gredel's skin. She and Caro started with a steam bath, then a facial, a lotion wrap, a massage that stretched all the way from the scalp to the toes. Afterward they lay on couches, talking and giggling, caressed by the breezes and drinking fruit juice as smiling young women gave them manicures and pedicures.

Every square inch of Gredel's skin seemed flushed with summer, with life. Back at the Volta, Caro dressed Gredel in one of her own outfits, the expensive fabrics gliding over nerve-tingling, butter-smooth flesh. When Lamey came to pick them up, Caro put Gredel's hand in Lamey's, and guided them both toward the door.

"Have a lovely night," she said.

"Aren't you coming with us?" Lamey asked.

Caro only shook her head and laughed. Her green eyes looked into Gredel's—Gredel saw amusement there, and secrets that Lamey would never share.

Caro steered them into the hall and closed the door behind them. Lamey paused a moment, looking back.

"Is Caro all right?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Gredel said. "Now let's go find a place to dance."

She felt as if she were floating, moving across the floor so lightly that she almost danced on her way to the elevator. It occurred to her that she was happy, that happiness had never been hers before but now she had it.

All it took was getting Antony out of the picture.

* * *

The first crack in Gredel's happiness occurred two afternoons later, when Gredel arrived at the Volta late due to a blockage on the train tracks from the Fabs. Gredel let herself in, and found Caro snoring on her bed. Caro was dressed to go out, but she must have gotten bored waiting for Gredel to turn up, because there was an empty wine bottle on the floor and the med injector near her right hand.

Gredel called Caro, then shook her. There was no response at all. Caro was pale, her flesh cool and faintly bluish.

Another long, grating snore shredded the air. Gredel felt her heart turn over at the pure insistence of the sound. She seized the med injector and checked the contents: endorphin analogue, something called

Phenyldorphan-Zed.

Caro began another snore, and then the sound simply rattled to a halt. Her breathing had simply stopped. Terror roared through Gredel's veins.

She had never dealt with an overdose, but there was a certain amount of oral legend on the subject that circulated through the Fabs. One of the fixes involved filling the victim's pants with ice, she remembered. Ice on the genitals was supposed to wake you right up. Or was that just for men?

Gredel straddled Caro and slapped her hard across the face. Her own nerves leaped at the sound, but Caro gave a start, her eyelids coming partway open, and she gasped in air.

Gredel slapped her again. Caro gasped again and coughed, and her lids opened all the way. Her eyes were eerie, blank convexities of green jasper, the pupils so shrunk they could barely be seen.

"What—" Caro said. "What are you—?"

"You've got to get up." Gredel slid off the bed and pulled Caro by the arm. "You've got to get up and walk around with me, right?"

Caro gave a lazy laugh. "What is—what—"

"Stand up now!"

Gredel managed to haul Caro upright. Caro found her feet with difficulty, and Gredel got Caro's arm around her shoulders and began to drag Caro over the floor. Caro laughed again. "Music!" she snorted. "We need music if we're going to dance!"

This struck her as so amusing that she almost doubled over with laughter, but Gredel pulled her upright and began moving her again. She got Caro into the front room and began marching in circles around the sofa.

"You're funny, Earthgirl," Caro said. "Funny, funny." Laughter kept bubbling out of her throat. Gredel's shoulders ached with Caro's weight.

"Help me, Caro," she ordered.

"Funny funny. Funny Earthgirl."

When she couldn't hold Caro up any more, Gredel dumped her on the sofa and went to the kitchen to get the coffee maker started. Then she returned to the front room and found Caro asleep again. She slapped Caro twice, and Caro opened her eyes.

"Yes, Sergei," she said. "You do that. You do that all you want."

"You've got to get up, Caro."

"Why wouldn't you talk to me?" Caro asked. There were tears in her eyes. Gredel pulled her to her feet and began walking with her again.

"I called you," Caro said as they walked. "I couldn't stand it anymore and I called you and you wouldn't talk to me. Your secretary said you were out but I knew he was lying from the way he said it."

It was three or four hours before Gredel's fear began to ebb. Caro was able to walk on her own, and her conversation was almost normal, if a little subdued. Gredel left her sitting on the sofa with a cup of coffee

and went into the bedroom. She took the med injector, and two others she found in the bedroom and another in the bathroom, plus the cartridges of Phenyldorphan-Zed and every other drug cartridge she could find, and she hid them under some towels in the bathroom so that she could carry them out later, when Caro wasn't looking. She wanted to get rid of the liquor, too, but that would be too obvious. Maybe she could pour most of it down the sink when she had the chance.

“You stopped breathing,” Gredel told Caro later. “You've got to stop using, Caro.”

Caro nodded over her cup of coffee. Her pupils had expanded a bit, and her eyes were almost normal-looking. “I've been letting it get out of hand.”

“I was never so frightened in my life. You've just got to stop.”

“I'll be good,” Caro said.

Gredel was sleeping over three nights later, when Caro produced a med injector before bed and held it to her neck. Gredel reached out in sudden terror and yanked the injector away.

“Caro! You said you'd stop!”

Caro smiled, gave an apologetic laugh. “It's all right,” she said. “I was depressed the other day, over something that happened. I let it get out of hand. But I'm not depressed any more.” She tugged the injector against Gredel's fingers. “Let go,” she said. “I'll be all right.”

“Don't,” Gredel begged.

Caro laughingly detached Gredel's fingers from the injector, then held it to her neck and pressed the trigger. She laughed while Gredel felt a fist tightening on her insides.

“See?” Caro said. “Nothing wrong here.”

Gredel talked to Lamey about it the next day. “Just tell Panda to stop selling to her,” she said.

“What good would that do?” Lamey said. “She had sources before she ever met any of us. And if she wanted, she could just go into a pharmacy and pay full price.”

Anxiety sang along Gredel's nerves. She would just have to be very careful, and watch Caro to make sure there weren't any more accidents.

* * *

Gredel's happiness ended shortly after, on the first hot afternoon of summer. Gredel and Caro returned from the arcades tired and sweating, and Caro flung her purchases down on the sofa and announced she was going to take a long, cool bath. On her way to the bathroom, Caro took a bottle of chilled wine from the kitchen, opened it, offered some to Gredel, who declined, then carried the bottle and a glass into the bathroom with her.

The sound of running water came distantly to the front room. Gredel helped herself to a papaya fizz, and, for lack of anything else to do turned on the video wall.

There was a drama about the Fleet, except that all the actors striving to put down the mutiny were Naxids. All their acting was in the way their beaded scales shifted color, and Gredel didn't understand any of it. The Fleet setting reminded her of Caro's academy appointment, though, and Gredel shifted to the data channel and looked up the requirements for the Cheng Ho academy, which the Sulas

traditionally attended.

By the time Caro came padding out in her dressing gown, Gredel was full of information. “You’d better find a tailor, Caro,” she said. “Look at the uniforms you’ve got to get made.” The video wall paged through one picture after another. “Dress, undress,” Gredel itemized. “Ship coveralls, planetary fatigues, formal dinner dress, parade dress—just look at that hat! And Cheng Ho’s in a temperate zone, so you’ve got greatcoats and jackboots for winter, plus uniforms for any sport you decide to do, and a ton of other gear. Dinner settings!—in case you give a formal dinner, your clan crest optional.”

Caro blinked and looked at the screen as if she were having trouble focusing on it all. “What are you talking about?” she said.

“When you go to the Cheng Ho academy. Do you know who Cheng Ho was, by the way? I looked it up. He—”

“Stop babbling.” Gredel looked at Caro in surprise. Caro’s lips were set in a disdainful twist. “I’m not going to any stupid academy,” she said. “So just forget about all that, all right?”

Gredel stared at her. “But you have to,” she said. “It’s your career, the only one you’re allowed to have.”

Caro gave a little hiss of contempt. “What do I need a career for? I’m doing fine as I am.”

It was a hot day and Gredel was tired and had not had a rest or a bath or a drink, and she blundered right through the warning signals Caro was flying, the signs that she’d not only had her bottle of wine in the bath, but taken something else as well, something that kinked and spiked her nerves and brought her temper sizzling.

“We planned it,” Gredel insisted. “You’re going into the Fleet, and I’ll be your orderly. And we can both get off the planet and—”

“I don’t want to hear this useless crap!” Caro screamed. Her shriek was so loud that it stunned Gredel into silence and set her heart beating louder than Caro’s angry words. Caro advanced on Gredel, green fury flashing from her eyes. “You think I’d go into the Fleet? The Fleet, just for you? Who do you think you are?”

Caro stood over Gredel. Her arms windmilled as if they were throwing rocks at Gredel’s face. “You drag your ass all over this apartment!” she raged. “You—you wear my clothes! You’re in my bank accounts all the time—where’s my money, hey! My money!”

“I never took your money!” Gredel gasped. “Not a cent! I never—”

“Liar!” Caro’s hand lashed out, and the slap sounded louder than a gunshot. Gredel stared at her, too overwhelmed by surprise to raise a hand to her stinging cheek. Caro screamed on.

“I see you everywhere—everywhere in my life! You tell me what to do, how much to spend—I don’t even have any friends anymore! They’re all your friends!” She reached for the shopping bags that held their purchases and hurled them at Gredel. Gredel warded them off, but when they bounced to the floor, Caro just picked them up and threw them again, so finally Gredel just snatched them out of the air and let them pile in her lap, a crumpled heap of expensive tailored fabrics and hand-worked leather.

“Take your crap and get out of here!” Caro cried. She grabbed one of Gredel’s arms and hauled her off the sofa. Gredel clutched the packages to her with her other arm, but several spilled as Caro shoved her to the door. “I never want to see you again! Get out! Get out! Get out!”

The door slammed behind her. Gredel stood in the corridor with a package clutched to her breast as if it were a child. Inside the apartment, she could hear Caro throwing things.

She didn't know what to do. Her impulse was to open the door—she knew the codes—to go into the apartment and try to calm Caro and explain herself.

I didn't take the money, she protested. I didn't ask for anything.

Something hit the door hard enough so that it jumped in its frame.

Not the Fleet. The thought seemed to steal the strength from her limbs. Her head spun. I have to stay here now. On Spannan, in the Fabs. I have to....

What about tomorrow? a part of her cringed. She and Caro had made plans to go to a new boutique in the morning. Were they going or not?

The absurdity of the question struck home and sudden rage possessed her, rage at her own imbecility. She should have known better than to press Caro on the question, not when she was in this mood.

She went to her mother's apartment and put the packages away. Ava wasn't home. Anger and despair battled in her mind. She called Lamey and let him send someone to pick her up, then let him divert her for the rest of the evening.

In the morning, she went to the Volta at the time she had planned with Caro. There was a traffic jam in the lobby—a family was moving into the building, and their belongings were piled onto several motorized carts, each with the Volta's gilt blazon, that jammed the lobby waiting for elevators. Gredel greeted the doorman in her Peer voice, and he called her “Lady Sula” and put her alone into the next elevator.

She hesitated at the door to Caro's apartment. She knew she was groveling, and knew as well that she didn't deserve to grovel.

But this was her only hope. What choice did she have?

She knocked, and when there wasn't an answer she knocked again. She heard a shuffling step inside and then Caro opened the door and blinked at her groggily through disordered strands of hair. She was dressed as Gredel had last seen her, bare feet, naked under her dressing gown.

“Why didn't you just come in?” Caro said. She left the door open and withdrew into the apartment. Gredel followed, her heart pulsing sickly in her chest.

There were several bottles lying on tables, and Gredel recognized the juniper reek that oozed from Caro's pores. “I feel awful,” Caro said. “I had too much last night.”

Doesn't she remember? Gredel wondered. Or is she just pretending?

Caro reached for the gin bottle and the neck of the bottle clattered against a tumbler as she poured herself two fingers' worth. “Let me get myself together,” Caro said, and drank.

A thought struck Gredel with the force of revelation.

She's just a drunk, she thought. Just another damn drunk.

Caro put the tumbler down, wiped her mouth, gave a hoarse laugh. “Now we can have some fun,” she said.

“Yes,” Gredel said. “Let's go.”

She had begun to think it might never be fun again.

* * *

Perhaps it was then that Gredel began to hate Caro, or perhaps the incident only released hatred and resentment that had simmered, denied, for some time. But now Gredel could scarcely spend an hour with Caro without finding new fuel for anger. Caro's carelessness made Gredel clench her teeth, and her laughter grated on Gredel's nerves. The empty days that Caro shared with Gredel, the pointless drifting from boutique to restaurant to club, now made Gredel want to shriek. Gredel deeply resented tidying up after Caro even as she did it. Caro's surging moods, the sudden shifts from laughter to fury to sullen withdrawal, brought Gredel's own temper near the breaking point. Even Caro's affection and her impulsive generosity began to seem trying. Why is she making all this fuss over me? Gredel thought. What's she after?

But Gredel managed to keep her thoughts to herself, and, at times, she caught herself enjoying Caro's company, caught herself in a moment of pure enjoyment or unfeigned laughter. And then she wondered how this could be genuine as well as the other, the delight and the hatred coexisting in her skull.

It was like her so-called beauty, she thought. Her alleged beauty was what most people reacted to; but it wasn't her self. She managed to have an inner existence, thoughts and hopes entirely her own, apart from the shell that was her appearance. But it was the shell that people saw, it was the shell that most people spoke to, hated, envied, or desired. The Gredel that interacted with Caro was another kind of shell, a kind of machine she'd built for the purpose, built without intending to. It wasn't any less genuine for being a machine, but it wasn't her self.

Her self hated Caro. She knew that now.

If Caro detected any of Gredel's inner turmoil, she gave no sign. In any case, she was rarely in a condition to be very observant. Her alcohol consumption had increased as she shifted from wine to hard liquor. When she wanted to get drunk, she wanted the drunk instantly, the way she wanted everything, and hard liquor got her there quicker. The ups and downs increased as well, and the spikes and valleys that were her behavior. She was banned from one of her expensive restaurants for talking loudly, and singing, and hurling a plate at the waiter who asked her to be more quiet. She was thrown out of a club for attacking a woman in the ladies' room. Gredel never found out what the fight was about, but for days afterward Caro proudly sported the black eye she'd got from the bouncer's fist.

For the most part, Gredel managed to avoid Caro's anger. She learned the warning signs, and she'd also learned how to manipulate Caro's moods. She could change Caro's music, or at least shift the focus of Caro's growing anger from herself to someone else.

Despite her feelings, she was now in Caro's company more than ever. Lamey was in hiding. She had first found out about it when he sent Panda to pick her up at Caro's apartment instead of coming himself. Panda drove her to the Fabs, but not to a human neighborhood: instead he took her into a building inhabited by Lyones. A family of the giant flightless birds stared at her as she waited in the lobby for the elevator. There was an acrid, ammonia smell in the air.

Lamey was in a small apartment on the top floor, with a pair of his guards and a Lyone. The avian shifted from one foot to the other as Gredel entered. Lamey seemed nervous. He didn't say anything to Gredel, just gave a quick jerk of his chin to indicate that they should go into the back room.

The room was thick with the heat of summer. The ammonia smell was very strong. Lamey steered Gredel

to the bed. She sat, but Lamey was unable to be still: he paced back and forth in the narrow range permitted by the small room. His smooth, elegant walk had developed hitches and stutters, uncertainties that marred his normal grace.

“I’m sorry about this,” he said. “But something’s happened.”

“Is the Patrol looking for you?”

“I don’t know.” His mouth gave a little twitch. “Bourdelle was arrested yesterday. It was the Legion of Diligence who arrested him, not the Patrol, so that means they’ve got him for something serious, something he could be executed for. We’ve got word that he’s bargaining with the prefect’s office.” His mouth twitched again. Linkboys did not bargain with the prefect, they were expected to go to their punishment with their mouths shut.

“We don’t know what he’s going to offer them,” Lamey went on. “But he’s just a link up from me, and he could be selling me or any of the boys.” He paused in his pacing, rubbed his chin. Sweat shone on his forehead. “I’m going to make sure it’s not me,” he said.

“I understand,” Gredel said.

Lamey looked at her. His blue eyes were feverish. “From now on, you can’t call me. I can’t call you. We can’t be seen in public together. If I want you, I’ll send someone for you at Caro’s.”

Gredel looked up at him. “But—” she began, then, “When?”

“When I want you,” he said insistently. “I don’t know when. You’ll just have to be there when I need you.”

“Yes,” Gredel said. Her mind whirled. “I’ll be there.”

He sat next to her on the bed and took her by the shoulders. “I missed you, Earthgirl,” he said. “I really need you now.”

She kissed him. His skin felt feverish. She could taste the fear on him. Lamey’s unsteady fingers began to fumble with the buttons of her blouse. You’re going to die soon, she thought.

Unless, of course, it was Gredel who paid the penalty instead, the way Ava had paid for the sins of her man.

Gredel had to start looking out for herself, before it was too late.

* * *

When Gredel left Lamey, he gave her two hundred zeniths in cash. “I can’t buy you things right now, Earthgirl,” he explained. “But buy yourself something nice for me, all right?”

Gredel remembered Antony’s claim that she whored for money. It was no longer an accusation she could deny.

One of Lamey’s boys drove Gredel from the rendezvous to her mother’s building. Gredel took the stairs instead of the elevator because it gave her time to think. By the time she got to her mother’s door, she had the beginnings of an idea.

But first she had to tell her mother about Lamey, and why she had to move in with Caro. “Of course, honey,” Ava said. She took Gredel’s hands and pressed them. “Of course you’ve got to go.”

Loyalty to her man was what Ava knew, Gredel thought. She had been arrested and sentenced to years in the country for a man she'd hardly ever seen again. She'd spent her life sitting alone amid expensive decor, waiting for one man or another to show up. She was beautiful, but in the bright summer light Gredel could see the first cracks in her mother's façade, the faint lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth that the years would only broaden. When the beauty faded, the men would fade, too.

Ava had cast her lot with beauty and with men, neither of which would last. If Gredel remained with Lamey, or with some other linkboy, she would be following Ava's path.

The next morning, Gredel took a pair of bags to Caro's place and let herself in. Caro was asleep, so far gone in torpor that she didn't wake when Gredel padded into the bedroom and took her wallet with its identification. Gredel slipped out again and went to a bank, where she opened an account in the name of Caroline, Lady Sula, and deposited three-quarters of what Lamey had given her.

When asked for a thumbprint, she gave her own.

* * *

When Gredel returned from the bank, she found Caro groping with a shivering hand for her first cup of coffee. After Caro took the coffee to the bathroom for the long bath that would soak away the stale alcohol from her pores, Gredel replaced Caro's wallet, then opened the computer link and transferred some of Caro's money, ten zeniths only, to her new account, just to make certain that it worked.

It worked fine.

I have just done a criminal act, she thought. A criminal act that can be traced to me.

Whatever she may have done before, it hadn't been this.

After Caro's bath, she and Gredel went to a café for breakfast, and Gredel told her about Lamey being on the run and she asked if she could move in with Caro so that he would be able to send for her. Caro was thrilled. She had never heard of anything so romantic in her life.

Romantic? Gredel thought. It was sordid beyond belief.

But Caro hadn't been in the sultry little room in the Lyone quarter, the smell of ammonia in her nostrils while Lamey's sweat rained down on her. Let her keep her illusions.

"Thank you," she said. But she knew that once she was with Caro, it wouldn't be long before Caro would grow bored with her, or impatient, or angry. Whatever Gredel was going to do, it would have to be soon.

"I don't know how often Lamey's going to send for me," she said. "But I hope it's not on your birthday. I'd like you and I to celebrate that together."

The scowl on Caro's face was immediate, and predictable. "Birthday? My birthday was last winter." The scowl deepened. "That was the last time Sergei and I were together."

"Birthday?" Gredel said, in her Earth accent. "I meant Earthday, darling." And when Caro's scowl began to look dangerous, she added quickly, "Your birthday in Earth years. I do the math, see, it's a kind of game. And your Earthday is next week—you'll be fifteen." Gredel smiled. "The same age as me, I turned fifteen Earth years just before I met you."

It wasn't true, not exactly—Caro's Earthday was in three months—but Gredel knew that Caro would

never do the math. Might not even know how to do it.

There was so much Caro didn't know. The knowledge brought a kind of savage pleasure to Gredel's mind. Caro didn't know anything, didn't even know that her best friend hated her. She didn't know that Gredel had stolen her money and her identity only an hour ago, and could do it again whenever she wanted.

The days went by and were even pleasurable in a strange, disconnected way. Gredel thought she finally understood what it was like to be Caro, to have nothing that attached her to anything, to have long hours to fill and nothing to fill them with but whatever impulse drifted into her mind. Gredel felt that way herself—mentally, at least, she was cutting her own ties free, all of them, floating free of everything she'd known.

To save herself trouble, Gredel exerted herself to please Caro, and Caro responded. Caro's mood was sunny, and she laughed and joked and dressed Gredel like a doll, as she always had. Behind her pleasing mask, Gredel despised Caro for being so easily manipulated. You're so stupid, she thought.

But pleasing Gredel brought trouble of its own, because when Lamey's boy called for her, Gredel was standing in the rain, in a Torminel neighborhood, trying to buy Caro a cartridge of endorphin analog—with Lamey's businesses in eclipse, she could no longer get the stuff from Panda.

When Gredel finally connected with her ride and got to the place where Lamey was hiding—he was back in the Terran Fabs, at least—he had been waiting for hours, and his patience was gone. He got her alone in the bedroom and slapped her around for a while, telling her it was her fault, that she had to know that she had to be where he could find her when he needed her.

Gredel lay on her back on the bed, letting him do what he wanted, and she thought, This is going to be my whole life if I don't get out of here. She looked at the pistol Lamey had waiting on the bedside table for whoever he thought might kick down the door, and she thought about grabbing the pistol and blowing Lamey's brains out. Or her own brains. Or just walking into the street with the pistol and blowing out brains at random.

No, she thought. Stick to the plan.

Lamey gave her five hundred zeniths afterward. Maybe that was an apology.

Sitting in the car later, with her bruised cheek swelling and the money crumpled in her hand and Lamey's slime still drooling down her thigh, she thought about calling the Legion of Diligence and letting them know where Lamey was hiding. But, instead, she told the boy to take her to a pharmacy near Caro's place.

She walked inside and found a box of plasters that would soak up the bruises, and she took it to the drug counter in the back. The older woman behind the counter looked at her face with knowing sympathy. “Anything else, honey?”

“Yes,” Gredel said. “Two vials of Phenyldorphin-Zed.”

She was required to sign the Narcotics Book for the endorphin analog, and the name she scrawled was Sula.

* * *

Caro was outraged by Gredel's bruises. “Lamey comes round here again, I'll kick him in the balls!” she said. “I'll hit him with a chair!”

“Forget about it,” Gredel said wearily. She didn't want demonstrations of loyalty from Caro right now. Her feelings were confused enough: she didn't want to start having to like Caro all over again.

Caro pulled Gredel into the bedroom and cleaned her face, and then she cut the plasters to fit Gredel's face and applied them. She did a good enough job at sopping up the bruises and swelling so that the next day, when the plasters were removed, the bruises had mostly disappeared, leaving behind some faint discoloration, easily covered with cosmetics. Her whole face hurt, though, and so did her ribs and her solar plexus where Lamey had hit her.

Caro brought Gredel breakfast from the café and hovered around her until Gredel wanted to shriek.

If you want to help, she thought at Caro, take your appointment to the academy and get us both out of here.

But Caro didn't answer the mental command. And her solicitude faded by afternoon, when she opened the day's first bottle. It was vodka flavored with bison grass, which explained the strange fusil-oil overtones Gredel had scented on Caro's skin the last few days. By mid-afternoon, Caro had consumed most of the bottle and fallen asleep on the couch.

Gredel felt a small, chill triumph at this. It was good to be reminded why she hated her friend.

Next day was Caro's phony Earthday. Last chance, Gredel thought at her. Last chance to mention the academy. But the word never passed Caro's lips.

“I want to pay you back for everything you've done,” Gredel said. “Your Earthday is on me.” She put her arm around Caro.

“I've got everything planned,” she said.

* * *

They started at Godfrey's for the full treatment, massage, facial, hair, the lot. Then lunch at a brass-railed bistro south of the arcades, bubbling grilled cheese on rare vashe roast and crusty bread, with a salad of marinated dedger flowers. To Caro's surprise, Gredel called for a bottle of wine, and poured some of it into her own glass.

“You're drinking,” Caro said, delighted. “What's got into you?”

“I want to toast your Earthday,” Gredel said.

Being drunk might make it easier, she thought.

Gredel kept refilling Caro's glass while sipping at her own, and so the first bottle went. Gredel took Caro to the arcades then, and bought her a summer dress of silk patterned with rhompé birds and jennifer flowers, a jacket shimmering with gold and green sequins, matching Caro's hair and eyes, and two pairs of shoes. She bought outfits for herself as well.

After taking their treasures to Caro's place, where Caro had a few shots of the bison vodka, they went to dinner at one of Caro's exclusive dining clubs. Caro hadn't been thrown out of this club yet, but the maitre d' was on guard enough to sit them well away from everyone else. Caro ordered cocktails and two bottles of wine and after-dinner drinks. Gredel's head spun even after the careful sips she'd been taking; she couldn't imagine what Caro must be feeling. Caro needed a jolt of benzedrine to get to the dance club Gredel had put next on the agenda, though she had no trouble keeping her feet once she got there.

After dancing awhile Gredel said she was tired, and they brushed off the male admirers they'd collected and took a taxi home.

Gredel showered while Caro headed for the bison vodka again. The benzedrine had given her a lot of energy that she put into finishing the bottle. Gredel changed into the silk lounging suit Caro had bought her on their first day together, and she put the two vials of endorphin analog into a pocket.

Caro was on the couch where Gredel had left her. Her eyes were bright, but when she spoke to Gredel her words were slurred.

"I have one more present," Gredel said. She reached into her pocket and held out the two vials. "I think this is a kind you like. I really wasn't sure."

Caro laughed. "You take care of me all day, and now you help me to sleep!" She reached across and put her arms around Gredel. "You're my best sister, Earthgirl." In Caro's embrace, Gredel could smell bison grass and sweat and perfume all mingled, and she tried to keep a firm grip on her hatred even as her heart turned over in her chest.

Caro unloaded her med injector and put in one of the vials of Phenylmorphin-Zed and used it right away. Her eyelids fluttered as the endorphin flooded her brain. "Oh nice," she murmured. "Such a good sister." She gave herself another dose a few minutes later. She spoke a few soft words but her voice kept floating away. She gave herself a third dose and fell asleep, her golden hair fallen across her face as she lay on the pillow.

Gredel took the injector from Caro's limp fingers. She reached out and brushed the hair from Caro's face.

"Want some more?" she asked. "Want some more, sister Caro?"

Caro gave a little indistinct murmur. Her lips curled up in a smile. When Gredel fired another dose into her carotid the smile broadened, and she shrugged herself into the sofa pillows like a happy puppy.

Gredel turned from her and reached for Caro's portable computer console. She called up Caro's banking files, and prepared a form closing Caro's bank account and transferring its contents to the account Gredel had set up. Then she prepared another message to Caro's trust account on Spannan's ring, instructing any further payments to be sent to the new account as well.

"Caro," Gredel said. "Caro, I need your thumbprint here, all right?"

She stroked Caro awake, and managed to get her to lean over the console long enough to press her thumb, twice, to the reader. Then Gredel handed the injector to Caro and watched her give herself another dose.

Now I'm really a criminal, she thought. She had left a trail of data that pointed straight to herself.

But even so, she could not bring herself to completely commit to this course of action. She left herself a way out. Caro has to want it, she thought. I won't give her any more if she says no.

Caro sighed, settled herself more deeply into the pillows. "Would you like some more?" Gredel asked.

"Mmm," Caro said, and smiled.

Gredel took the injector from her hand and gave her another dose.

After a while, she exhausted the first vial and started on the second. With each dose, she shook Caro a little and asked if she wanted more. Caro would sigh, or laugh, or murmur, but never said no. Gredel triggered dose after dose.

After the second vial was exhausted, the snoring started, Caro's breath heaving itself past the palate, the lungs pumping hard, sometimes with a kind of wrench. Gredel remembered the sound from when Caro had given herself too much endorphin, and the memory caused her to leap from the sofa and walk very fast around the apartment, rubbing her arms to fight her sudden chill.

The snoring went on. Gredel very much needed something to do, so she went into the kitchen and made coffee. And then the snoring stopped.

Ice shuddered along Gredel's nerves. She went to the kitchen door and stared out into the front room, at the tumbled golden hair that hung off the end of the couch. It's over, she thought.

And then Caro's head rolled, and Gredel's heart froze as she saw Caro's hand come up and comb the hair with her fingers. There was a gurgling snort, and the snoring resumed.

Gredel stood in the door as cold terror pulsed through her veins. But she told herself, No, it can't be long now.

And then, suddenly, she couldn't stand still any longer, and she walked swiftly around the apartment, straightening and tidying. The new clothes went into the closet, the shoes on their racks, the empty bottle in the trash. Wherever she went, the snores pursued her. Sometimes they stopped for a few paralyzing seconds, but then resumed.

Abruptly, Gredel couldn't bear being in the apartment, and she put on a pair of shoes and went to the freight elevator and took it to the basement, where she went in search of one of the motorized carts they used to move luggage and furniture. There were a great many objects in the basement, things that had been discarded or forgotten about, and Gredel found some strong dedger-fiber rope and an old compressor, a piece of solid bronzework heavy enough to anchor a fair-sized boat.

Gredel put these in the cart and pushed it to the elevator. As she approached Sula's doors, she could hear Caro's snores through the enameled steel. Gredel's fingers trembled as she pressed codes into the lock.

Caro was still on the couch, her breath still fighting its way past her throat. Gredel cast an urgent glance at the clock. There weren't many hours of darkness left, and darkness was required for what happened next.

Gredel sat at Caro's feet and hugged a pillow to her chest and watched her breathe. Caro's skin was pale and looked clammy. "Please," Gredel begged under her breath. "Please die now. Please." But Caro wouldn't die. Her breaths grated on and on, until Gredel began to hate them with a bitter resentment. This was so typical, she thought. Caro couldn't even die without getting it all wrong.

Gredel looked at the wall clock, and it stared back at her like the barrel of a gun. Come dawn, she thought, the gun goes off. Or she could sit in the apartment all day with a corpse, and that was a thought she couldn't face.

Again Caro's breath hung suspended, and Gredel felt her own breath cease for the long moment of suspense. Then Caro dragged in another long rattling gasp, and Gredel felt her heart sink. She knew that her tools had betrayed her. She would have to finish this herself.

All anger was gone by now, all hatred, all emotion except a sick weariness, a desire to get it over. The pillow was already held to her chest, a warm comfort in the room filled only with Caro's racking, tormented snores.

She cast one last look at Caro, thought Please die at her one more time, but Caro didn't respond any more than she had ever responded to any of Gredel's other wishes.

Gredel suddenly lunged across the sofa, her body moving without any conscious command, the movement seeming to come from pure instinct. She pressed the pillow over Caro's face and put her weight on it.

Please die, she thought.

Caro hardly fought at all. Her body twisted on the couch, and both her hands came up, but the hands didn't fight, they just fell across Gredel's back in a kind of halfhearted embrace.

Gredel would have felt better if Caro had fought. It would have given her hatred something to fasten onto.

Instead, she felt, through the closeness of their bodies, the urgent kick-kick-kick of Caro's diaphragm as it tried to draw in air, the kick repeated over and over again. Fast, then slow, then fast. Caro's feet shivered. Gredel could feel Caro's hands trembling as they lay on her back. Tears spilled from Gredel's eyes.

The kicking stopped. The trembling stopped.

Gredel leaned on the pillow a while longer just to make sure. The pillow was wet with tears. When she finally took the pillow away, the pale, cold thing beneath seemed to bear no resemblance to Caro at all.

Caro was weight now, not a person. That made what followed a lot easier.

Handling a limp body was much more difficult than Gredel had ever imagined. By the time she got it onto the cart, she was panting for breath and her eyes stung with sweat. She covered Caro with a bed sheet, and she added some empty suitcases to the cart as well. She took the cart to the freight elevator, then left by the loading dock at the back of the building.

"I am Caroline, Lady Sula," she rehearsed her story. "I'm moving to a new place because my lover beat me." She would have the identification to prove her claim, and what remained of the bruises, and the suitcases plain to see alongside the covered objects that weren't so plain.

Gredel didn't need to use her story. The streets were deserted as she walked downslope alongside the humming cart, down to the Iola River.

The roads ran high above the river on either side, with ramps that descended to the darkened riverside quay below. Gredel rode the cart down the ramp to the river's edge. This was the good part of Maranic Town and there were no houseboats here, no beggars, no homeless, and—at this hour—no fishermen. The only encounters Gredel feared were lovers sheltering under the bridges, but by now it was so late that even the lovers had gone home.

It was as hard getting Caro off the cart as it had been getting her on it, but once she went into the river, tied to the compressor, the dark waters closed over her with barely a ripple. In a video drama Caro would have floated a while, poignantly, saying goodbye to the world, but there was none of that here, just the silent dark submersion and ripples that died swiftly in the current.

Caro had never been one for protracted goodbyes.

Gredel walked alongside the cart back to the Volta. A few cars slowed to look at her, but moved on.

In the apartment, she tried to sleep, but Caro's scent filled the bed, and sleep was impossible there. Caro had died on the sofa and Gredel didn't want to go near it. She caught a few hours' fitful rest on a chair, and then the woman called Caroline Sula rose and began her day.

The first thing she did was send in the confirmation of her appointment to the Chang Ho Academy.

* * *

The first day she packed two suitcases and took them to Maranic Port and the ground-effect ferry that took her across the Krassow Sea to Vidalia. From there, she took the express train up the Hayakh Escarpment to the Quaylah Plateau, where high altitude moderated the subtropical heat of the Equatorial Continent. The planet's antimatter ring arced almost directly overhead.

Paysec was a winter resort, and the snowfall wouldn't begin here until the monsoon shifted to the northeast, so she found good rates for a small apartment in Lus'trel, and took it for two months. She bought some clothes, not the extravagant garments she would have found in Maranic Town's arcades, but practical country clothes, and boots for walking. She found a tailor and he began to assemble the extensive wardrobe she would need for the academy.

She didn't want Lady Sula's disappearance from Maranic Town to cause any official disturbance, so she sent a message to Caro's official guardian, Jacob Biswas, telling him that she found Maranic too distracting and had come to Lus'trel in order to concentrate on academic preparation for the Academy. She told him she was giving up the Maranic apartment, and that he could collect anything she'd left there.

Because she didn't trust her impersonation of Caro with someone who knew her well, she didn't use video, she typed the message and sent it print only.

Biswas called back almost immediately, but she didn't take his call or any of the other calls that followed. She replied with print messages to the effect that she was sorry she'd been out when he called, but she was spending a lot of time in the library cramming.

That wasn't far from the truth. Requirements for the service academies were posted on the computer net, and most of the courses were available in video files, and she knew she was deeply deficient in almost every subject. She worked hard.

She only answered one call, when she happened to be home, was able to listen to the answerware, and realized that the caller was Sergei. She answered and called him every filthy name she could think of, and, once her initial anger was a little spent, she began to choose words more carefully, flaying him alive with one choice phrase after another. By the end, he was weeping, loud gulping honks that grated over the speakers.

Serve him right, she thought.

Lamey had her worried more than Sergei or Jacob Biswas. Every day she half-expected Lamey to bust down the door and demand that she produce Earthgirl. He never turned up.

On her final day on Spannan, Biswas insisted on meeting her, with other members of his family, at the skyhook. She cut her hair severely short, wore Cheng Ho undress uniform, and virtually plated her face with cosmetics. If she looked to Biswas like a different girl, no wonder.

He was kind and warm and asked no questions. He told her she looked very grown up, and he was proud of her. She thanked him for his kindness and for looking after her. She hugged him and the daughters he'd brought with him.

His wife, Sergei's sister, had the sense to stay away.

Later, as the skyhook carried her to Spannan's ring and its steady acceleration pressed her into her seat, she realized it was Caro's Earthday, the real one.

The anniversary that Caro would never see.