

Solidarity by Walter John Williams

A Novella

"Solidarity" features Sula/Gredel, the protagonist first introduced in "Margaux" (*_Asimov's_*, May 2003), and takes place in the same future as the author's novels *_The Praxis_*, *_The Sundering_*, and the forthcoming *_Conventions of War_* (Harper Torch). Familiarity with any of the previous works is not necessary for enjoyment of this riveting story.

Sula dressed in fine Riverside low style for her meeting with Casimir. A bright tight-waisted jacket with fractal patterns, overhung by the wide, floppy collar of her blouse. Pants belled out around platform shoes. Cheap colorful plastic or ceramic jewelry. A tall velvet hat, crushed just so, with one side of the brim held up by a gold pin with an artificial diamond the size of a walnut.

"I don't like this," Macnamara said.

Sula peered at herself in the mirror, flipped her fingers through her dyed black hair.

"I wish there were other choices," she said, "but there aren't."

"My lady -- " he began.

She turned to him.

"I'm going," she said. "We need allies."

And, because he was under military discipline, he said nothing more, just glowered in his petulant way.

The neighborhood known as Riverside was still, and the pavement radiated the heat of the day as if it were exhaling a long, hot breath. Between bars of light, the long shadows of buildings striped the street like prison bars. She saw no sign of Naxid or police patrols.

The Cat Street club was nearly deserted, inhabited only by a few people knocking back drinks on their way home from, or on their way to, their work. The hostess said that Casimir wasn't in yet. Sula sat at a back table and ordered sparkling water and transformed the table top into a video screen so that she could watch a news program, the usual expressionless Daimong announcer with the usual bland tidings, all about the happy, contented people of many species who worked productively and happily under their new Naxid overlords.

She didn't see Casimir arrive: there was only the hostess coming to her and saying that he was in. The hostess escorted Sula to the back of the club, up a staircase of black iron, and to a door glossy with polished black ceramic. Sula looked at her reflection in the door's lustrous surface and adjusted the tilt of her hat.

The next room featured a pair of Torminel guards, fierce in their gray fur and white fangs, and Sula concluded that Casimir must be nervous. Lamey had never gone around with guards, not until the very end, when the Legion of Diligence was after him.

The guards patted Sula down -- she had left her pistol at home -- and scanned her with a matte-black polycarbon wand intended to detect any listening devices. Then they waved her through another polished door to Casimir in his suite.

The suite was large and decorated in black and white, from the diamond-shaped floor tiles to the onyx pillars that supported a series of white marble Romanesque arches, impressive but non-structural, intended purely for decoration. The chairs featured cushions so soft they might tempt a sitter to sprawl. There was a video wall that enabled Casimir to watch the interior of the club, and several different scenes played there in silence. Sula saw that one of the cameras was focused on the table she'd just left.

"Were you watching me?" she asked.

"I hadn't seen you around," Casimir said. "I was curious."

He had come around his desk to greet her. He was a plain-featured young man a few years older than Sula, with longish dark hair combed across his forehead and tangled down his collar behind. He wore a charcoal-gray velvet jacket over a purple silk shirt, with gleaming black boots beneath fashionably wide-bottomed trousers. His hands were long and pale and delicate, with fragile-seeming wrists; the hands were posed self-consciously in front of his chest, the fingers tangled in a kind of knot. His voice was surprisingly deep and full of gravel, like a sudden flood over stony land.

She felt the heat of his dark eyes and knew at once that danger smoldered there, possibly for Sula, possibly for himself, possibly for the whole world. Possibly he himself didn't know; he would strike out at first one, then the other, as the mood struck him.

Sula felt a chord of danger chime deep in her nerves, and it was all she could do to keep her blood from thundering an answer.

"I'm new," she said. "I came down from the ring a few months ago, before they blew it up."

"Are you looking for work?" He tilted his head and affected to consider her. "For someone as attractive as you, I suppose something could be found."

"I already have work," Sula said. "What I'd like is steady pay." She took from an inner pocket of her vest a pair of identity cards, and offered them.

"What's this?" Casimir approached and took the cards. His eyes widened as he saw his own picture on both cards, each of which identified him as "Michael Saltillo."

"One's the primary identity," Sula said, "and the other's the special card that gets you up to the High City."

Casimir frowned, took the cards back to his desk, and held them up to the light. "Good work," he said. "Did you do these?"

"The government did them," Sula said. "They're genuine."

He pursed his lips and nodded. "You work in the Records Office?"

"No," Sula lied. "But I know someone who does."

He gave her a heavy-lidded look. "You'll have to tell me who that is."

Sula shook her head. "No. I can't."

He glided toward her. Menace flowed off him like an inky rain. "I'll need that name," he said.

She looked up at him and willed her muscles not to tremble beneath the tide of adrenaline that flooded her veins. "First," Sula said, speaking softly to keep a tremor from her voice, "she wouldn't work with

you. Second -- "

"I'm_ very persuasive,"_ Casimir said. The deep, grating words seemed to rise from the earth. His humid breath warmed her cheek.

"Second," Sula continued, calmly as she could, "she doesn't live in Zanshaa, and if you turn up on her doorstep she'll call the police and turn you in. You don't have any protection where she is, no leverage at all."

A muscle pulsed in one half-lowered eyelid: Casimir didn't like being contradicted. Sula prepared herself for violence and wondered how she would deal with the Torminel.

"I don't believe I got your name," Casimir said.

She looked into the half-lidded eyes. "Gredel," she said.

He turned, took a step away, then swung back and with an abrupt motion thrust out the identity cards.

"Take these," he said. "I'm not going to have them off someone I don't know. I could be killed for having them in my office."

Sula made certain her fingers weren't trembling before she took the cards. "You'll need them sooner or later," she said, "the way things are going under the Naxids."

She could see that he didn't like hearing that, either. He turned again and walked to the far side of his desk and stood there with his head down, his long fingers tidying papers.

"There's nothing I can do about the Naxids," he said.

"You can kill them," Sula said, "before they kill you."

He kept his eyes on his papers, but a smile touched his lips. "There are a lot more Naxids than there are of me."

"Start at the top and work your way down," Sula advised. "Sooner or later you'll reach equilibrium."

The smile still played about his lips. "You're quite the provocateur, aren't you?" he said.

"It's fifty for primary ID. Two hundred for the special pass to the High City."

He looked up at her in surprise. "_Two_ hundred?"

"Most people won't need it. But the ones who'll need it will really need it."

His lips gave a sardonic twist. "Who would want to go to the High City now?"

"People who want to work for Naxids. Or steal from Naxids. Or kill Naxids." She smiled. "Actually, that last category gets the cards free."

He turned his head slightly to hide a grin. "You're a pistol, aren't you?"

Sula said nothing. Casimir stood for a moment in thought, then suddenly threw himself into his chair in a whoof of deflating cushions and surprised hydraulics. He put his feet on his desk, one gleaming boot crossed over the other.

"Can I see you again?" he said.

"To do what? Talk business? We can talk business _now_."

"Business, certainly," he said with a nod. "But I was thinking we could mainly entertain ourselves."

"Do you still think I'm a provocateur?"

He grinned and shook his head. "The police under the Naxids don't have to bother with evidence anymore. Provocateurs are looking for work like everyone else."

"Yes," Sula said.

He blinked. "Yes what?"

"Yes. You can see me."

His grin broadened. He had even teeth, brilliantly white. His dentist was to be congratulated.

"I'll give you my comm code. Set your display to receive."

They activated their sleeve displays, and Sula broadcast her electronic address. It was one she'd created strictly for this meeting, along with another of what were proving to be a dizzying series of false identities.

"See you then." Sula walked for the door, then stopped. "By the way," she said. "I'm also in the delivery business. If you need something moved from one place to another, let me know." She permitted herself a smile. "We have very good documents," she said. "We can move things wherever you need them."

She left, then, before glee got the better of her.

Once outside on the hot, dark streets, she used evasion procedures to make certain she wasn't followed home.

Casimir called after midnight. Sula groped her way from her bed to where she'd hung her blouse and told the sleeve to answer.

The chameleon fabric showed Casimir with a slapdash grin pasted to his face. There was blaring music in the background and the sound of laughter.

"Hey Gredel!" he said. "Come have some fun!"

Sula swiped sleep from her eyes. "I'm asleep. Call me tomorrow."

"Wake up! It's still early!"

"I work for a living! Call me tomorrow!"

As she told the sleeve to end her transmission and made her way back to the bed, she decided that she'd done a good job setting the hook.

* * * *

The next day she had deliveries in the High City, the cocoa and tobacco and coffee that Sula had spent her modest fortune acquiring when she found out that Zanshaa's ring was going to be destroyed, and that there wouldn't be imports of anything for a long time. At each stop she talked to business owners and employees, a task which came under the heading of "intelligence gathering" even though there was no one left to report the intelligence _to_ -- all her superiors had been captured and tortured to death, their

torments broadcast live to the planet as a lesson to anyone tempted by the idea of loyalty to the old regime. Sula survived by way of bombing her own apartment as the Naxid police crashed down the door, and then used her back door into the Records Office computer to give herself and her team clean identities.

Sula returned to her apartment weary and sweat-stained. Gredel's comm unit showed that Casimir had logged three calls asking her out for the night. She took a long, delicious bath in lilac-scented water while considering an answer, then picked up the comm, turned off the camera button that would transmit her image, then returned the last call.

"Why not?" she said at the sullen face that answered. "Unless you've made other plans, of course."

The sulky look vanished as Casimir peered into his sleeve display in failed search for an image. "Is this Gredel?" he asked. "Why can't I see you?"

"I'm in the tub."

A sly look crossed his features. "I could use a wash myself. How about I join you?"

"I'll meet you at the club," Sula said. "Just tell me what time."

He told her. Sula would have time to luxuriate in her bath for a while longer and then to nap for a couple of hours before joining him.

"How should I dress?" Sula asked.

"What you're wearing now is fine."

"Ha ha. Will I be all right in the sort of thing I wore last night?"

"Yes. That'll do."

"See you then."

She ended the call, then ordered the hot water tap to open. The bathroom audio pickup wasn't reliable and she had to lean forward to open the tap manually. As the hot water raced from the tap and the steam rose, she sank into the tub and closed her eyes. She allowed herself to slowly relax, to let the scent of lilacs rise in her senses.

The day had started well. She thought it would only get better.

* * * *

Sula adjusted her jacket as she gazed out the window of the apartment she shared with Macnamara and Spence, the two members of her team. Because of electricity shortages, only every third street lamp was lit. Most businesses were closed, and those remaining open had turned off their signs. The last of the street vendors were closing their stalls or driving away in their little three-wheeled vehicles with their business packed on the back. The near-blackout imposed by the Naxids -- not to mention the hostage-taking, and the roundups that took place in public areas -- had severely impacted their business, and there weren't enough people on the streets after dark to keep them at their work.

"I should be with you," Macnamara argued. He was a tall young man, a bushy-haired recruit who had been the star of the Fleet's combat course. He was from a mountain village on a backwater planet, and war was his way of seeing the worlds.

"You should be with me on a _date?_" Sula laughed.

Macnamara pushed out his lips like a pouting child. "You know what he is, my lady," he said. "It's not safe."

Sula fluffed her black-dyed hair with her fingers. "He's a necessary evil. I know how to deal with him."

Macnamara made a scornful sound in his throat. Sula looked at Spence, who sat on the sofa and was doing her best to look as if she weren't hearing this.

Shawna Spence was a petty officer and an engineer and good at things like bombs, though her chief contribution to the war effort so far was to blow up her own apartment.

"Can it, Macnamara," she said.

Macnamara ignored her and spoke to Sula. "He's a criminal. He may be a killer for all you know."

He probably hasn't killed nearly as many people as I have, Sula thought_. _She remembered five Naxid ships turning to sheets of brilliant white eye-piercing light at Magaria.

She turned from the window and faced him. "Say that you want to start a business," she said, "and you don't have the money. What do you do?"

Macnamara's face filled with suspicion, as if he knew Sula was luring him into a trap. "Go to my clan head," he said.

"And if your clan head won't help you?" Sula asked.

"I go to someone in his patron clan," Macnamara said. "A Peer or somebody."

Sula nodded. "What if the Peer's nephew is engaged in the same business and doesn't want the competition?"

Macnamara made the pouting face again. "I wouldn't go to Casimir, that's for sure."

"Maybe you wouldn't. But a lot of people _do_ go to people like Casimir, and they get their business started, and Casimir offers protection against retaliation by the Peer's nephew and his clan. And in return Casimir gets fifty or a hundred percent interest on his money and a client who will maybe do him other favors."

Macnamara looked as if he'd bitten into a lemon. "And if they don't pay the hundred percent interest they get killed."

Sula considered this. "Probably not," she judged, "unless they try to cheat Casimir in some way. Most likely Casimir just takes over the business and every minim of assets and hands the business over to another client to run, leaving the borrower on the streets and loaded with debt." As Macnamara looked about to protest again, Sula held out her hands. "I'm not saying he's a pillar of virtue. He's in it for the money and the power. He hurts people, I'm sure. But in a system like ours, where the Peers have all the money and all the law on their side, people like the Riverside Clique are necessary."

"I don't get it," Macnamara said. "You're a Peer yourself, but you talk against the Peers."

"Oh." She shrugged. "There are Peers who make Casimir look like a blundering amateur."

The late Lord and Lady Sula, for two.

She told the video wall to turn on its camera and examined herself in its screen. She put on the crumpled velvet hat and adjusted it to the proper angle.

There. That was raffish enough, if you ignored the searching, critical look in the eyes.

"I'm going with you," Macnamara insisted. "The streets aren't safe."

Sula sighed and decided she might as well concede. "Very well," she said. "You can follow me to the club a hundred paces behind, but once I go in the door I don't want to see you for the rest of the evening."

"Yes," he said, and then added, "my lady."

She wondered if Macnamara's protectiveness was actually possessiveness, if there was something emotional or sexual in the way he related to her.

She supposed there was. There was with most men in her experience, so why not Macnamara?

Sula hoped she wouldn't have to get stern with him.

He followed her like an obedient, heavily armed ghost down the darkened streets to the Cat Street club. Yellow light spilled out from the doors, along with music and laughter and the taste of tobacco. She cast a look over her shoulder at Macnamara, one that warned him to come no further, and then she hopped up the step onto the black-and-silver tiles and swept through the doors, giving a nod to the two bouncers.

Casimir waited in his office, along with two others. He wore an iron-gray silk shirt with a standing collar that wrapped his throat with layers of dark material and gave a proud jut to his chin, heavy boots that gleamed, and an ankle-length coat of some soft black material inset with little triangular mirrors. In one pale, long-fingered hand he carried an ebony walking stick that came up to his breastbone and was topped by a silver claw that held a globe of rock crystal.

Casimir laughed and gave an elaborate bow as she entered. The walking stick added to the odd courtly effect. Sula looked at his outfit and hesitated.

"Very original," she decided.

"Chesko," Casimir said. "This time next year, she's going to be dressing everybody." He turned to his two companions. "These are Julien and Veronika. They'll be joining us tonight, if you don't mind." Julien was a younger man with a pointed face, and Veronika was a tinkly blonde who wore brocade and an anklet with stones that glittered.

Interesting, Sula thought, for Casimir to include another couple. Perhaps it was to put her at ease, to assure her that she wouldn't be at close quarters with some predator all night.

"Pleased to meet you," she said. "I'm Gredel."

Casimir gave two snaps of his fingers and a tiled panel slid open in the wall, revealing a well-equipped bar, bottles full of amber, green, and crimson liquids in curiously shaped bottles. "Shall we start with drinks before supper?" he asked.

"I don't drink," Sula said, "but the rest of you go ahead."

Casimir was brought up short on the way to the bar. "Is there anything else you'd like? Hashish or -- "

"Sparkling water will be fine," Sula said.

Casimir hesitated again. "Right," he said finally, and handed her a cut-crystal glass that he'd filled from a silver spigot.

He mixed drinks for himself and the others, and everyone sat on the broad, oversoft chairs. Sula tried not to oversplay.

The discussion was about music, songwriters and musicians that Sula didn't know. Casimir told the room to play various audio selections. He liked his music jagged, with angry overtones.

"What do you like?" Julien asked Sula.

"Derivoo," she said.

Veronika gave a little giggle. Julien made a face. "Too intellectual for me," he said.

"It's not intellectual at all," Sula protested. "It's pure emotion."

"It's all about death," Veronika said.

"Why shouldn't it be?" Sula said. "Death is the universal constant. All people suffer and die. Derivoo doesn't try to hide that."

There was a moment of silence in which Sula realized that the inevitability of misery and death was perhaps not the most appropriate topic to bring up on first acquaintance with this group; and then she looked at Casimir and saw a glimmer of wicked amusement in his dark eyes. He seized his walking stick and rose.

"Let's go. Take your drinks if you haven't finished them."

Casimir's huge Victory limousine was shaped like a pumpkin seed and painted and upholstered in no less than eleven shades of apricot. The two Torminel guards sat in front, their huge, night-adapted eyes perfectly at home on the darkened streets. The restaurant was paneled in old, dark wood, the linen was crisp and close-woven, and the fixtures were brass that gleamed finely in the subdued light. Through an elaborate, carved wooden screen, Sula could see another dining room with a few Lai-own sitting in the special chairs that cradled their long breastbones.

Casimir suggested items from the menu, and the elderly waitron, whose stolid, disapproving old face suggested he had seen many like Casimir come and go over the long years, suggested others. Sula followed one of Casimir's suggestions, and found her ostrich steak tender and full of savor, and the krek-tubers, mashed with bits of truffle, slightly oily but full of complex flavors that lingered long on her palate.

Casimir and Julien ordered elaborate drinks, a variety of starters, and a broad selection of desserts, and competed with each other for throwing money away. Half of what they ordered was never eaten or drunk. Julien was exuberant and brash, and Casimir displayed sparks of sardonic wit. Veronika popped her wide eyes open like a perpetually astonished child and giggled a great deal.

From the restaurant they motored to a club, a place atop a tall building in Grandview, the neighborhood where Sula had once lived until she had to blow up her apartment with a group of Naxid police inside. The broad granite dome of the Great Refuge, the highest point of the High City, brooded down on them through the tall glass walls above the bar. Casimir and Julien flung more money away on drinks and tips to waitrons, bartenders, and musicians. If the Naxid occupation was hurting their business, it wasn't

showing.

Sula knew she was supposed to be impressed by this. But even years ago, when she was Lamey's girl, she hadn't been impressed by the money that he and his crowd threw away. She knew too well where the money came from.

She was more impressed by Casimir once he took her onto the dance floor. His long-fingered hands embraced her gently, but behind the gentleness she sensed the solidity of muscle and bone and mass, the calculation of his mind. His attention in the dance was entirely on her, his somber dark eyes intense as they gazed into her face while his body reacted to her weight and motion.

_This one thinks! _she thought in surprise.

That might make things easy or make them hard. At any rate it made the calculation more difficult.

"Where are you from?" he asked her after they'd sat down. "How come I haven't seen you before?" Julien and Veronika were still on the dance floor, Veronika swirling with expert grace around Julien's clumsy enthusiasm.

"I lived on the ring," Sula said. "Before they blew it up."

"What did you do there?"

She looked at him and felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. "I was a math teacher," she said, a story that might account for some of her odd store of knowledge.

His eyes widened. "Give me a math problem and try me," Sula urged, but he didn't reply. She began to develop the feeling her phony occupation might have shocked him.

"When I was in school," he said, "I didn't have math teachers like you."

"You didn't think teachers go to clubs?" Sula said.

A slow thought crossed his face. He leaned closer, and his eyes narrowed. "What I don't understand," he said, "is why, when you're from the ring, you talk like you've spent your life in Riverside."

Sula's nerves sang a warning. She laughed. "Did I say I've spent my whole life on the ring?" she asked. "I don't think so."

"I could check your documents," his eyes hardening, "but of course you sell false documents, so that wouldn't help."

The tension between them was like a coiled serpent ready to strike. She raised an eyebrow. "You still think I'm a provocateur?" she asked. "I haven't asked you to do a single illegal thing all night."

One index finger tapped a slow rhythm on the matte surface of the table before them. "I think you're dangerous," he said.

Sula looked at him and held his gaze. "You're right," she said.

Casimir gave a huff of breath and drew back. Cushions of aesa leather received him. "Why don't you drink?" he asked.

"I grew up around drunks," she said. "I don't want to be like that, not ever."

Which was true, and perhaps Casimir sensed it, because he nodded. "And you lived in Riverside."

"I lived in Zanshaa City till my parents were executed."

His glance was sharp. "For what?"

She shrugged. "For lots of things, I guess. I was little, and I didn't ask."

He cast an uneasy look at the dancers. "My father was executed, too. Strangled."

Sula nodded. "I thought you knew what I meant when I talked about derivoo."

"I knew." Eyes still scanning the dance floor. "But I still think derivoo's depressing."

She found a grin spreading across her face. "We should dance now."

"Yes." His grin answered hers. "We should."

They danced till they were both breathless, and then Casimir moved the party to another club, in the Hotel of Many Blessings, where there was more dancing, more drinking, more money spread around. After which Casimir said they should take a breather, and he took them into an elevator lined with what looked like mother-of-pearl, and bade it rise to the penthouse.

The door opened to Casimir's thumbprint. The room was swathed in shiny draperies, and the furniture was low and comfortable. A table was laid with a cold supper, meats and cheeses and flat wroncho bread, pickles, chutneys, elaborate tarts and cakes, and bottles lying in a tray of shaved ice. It had obviously been intended all along that the evening end here.

Sula put together an open-faced sandwich -- nice Vigo plates, she noticed, a clean modern design -- then began to rehearse her exit. Surely it was not coincidental that a pair of bedrooms were very handy.

I've got to work in the morning. It certainly sounded more plausible than _I've got to go organize a counter-rebellion._

Casimir put his walking stick in a rack that had probably been made for it specially and reached for a pair of small packages, each with glossy wrapping and a brilliant scarlet ribbon. He presented one each to Sula and Veronika.

"With thanks for a wonderful evening."

The gift proved to be perfume, a crystal bottle containing Sengra, made with the musk of the rare and reclusive ataubas tree-crawlers of Paycahp. The small vial in her hand might have set Casimir back twenty zeniths or more -- probably more, since Sengra was exactly the sort of thing that wouldn't be coming down from orbit for years, not with the ring gone.

Veronika opened her package and popped her eyes wide -- that gesture was going to look silly on her when she was fifty -- and gave a squeal of delight. Sula opted for a more moderate response and kissed Casimir's cheek.

There was the sting of stubble against her lips. He looked at her with calculation. There was a very male scent to him.

Sula was about to bring up the work she had to do in the morning when there was a chime from Casimir's sleeve display. He gave a scowl of annoyance and answered.

"Casimir," came a strange voice. "We've got a situation."

"Wait," Casimir said. He left the room and closed the door behind him. Sula munched a pickle while the others waited in silence.

Casimir returned with the scowl still firm on his face. He was without a trace of apology as he looked at Sula and Veronika and said, "Sorry, but the evening's over. Something's come up."

Veronika pouted and reached for her jacket. Casimir reached for Sula's arm to draw her to the door. She looked at him. "What's just happened?"

Casimir gave her an impatient, insolent look -- it was none of her business, after all -- then thought better of it and shrugged. "Not what's happened, but what's going to happen in a few hours. The Naxids are declaring food rationing."

"They're _what?_" Sula's first reaction was outrage. Casimir opened the door for her, and she hesitated there, thinking. Casimir quivered with impatience. "Congratulations," she said finally. "The Naxids have just made you very rich."

"I'll call you," he said.

"I'll be rich, too," Sula said. "Ration cards will cost you a hundred apiece."

"A _hundred?_" For a moment it was Casimir's turn to be outraged.

"Think about it," Sula said. "Think how much they'll be worth to you."

They held each other's eyes for a moment, and then both broke into laughter. "We'll talk price later," Casimir said, and he hustled her into the vestibule along with Veronika, who showed Sula a five-zenith coin.

"Julien gave it to me for the cab," she said triumphantly. "And we get to keep the change!"

"You'd better hope the cab _has_ change for a fiver," Sula said, and Veronika thought for a moment.

"We'll get change in the lobby."

A Daimong night clerk gave them change, and Veronika's nose wrinkled at the smell. On the way to her apartment Sula learned that Veronika was a former model and now an occasional club hostess.

"I'm an unemployed math teacher," Sula said.

Veronika's eyes went wide. "Wow," she said.

After letting Veronika off, Sula had the Torminel driver take her within two streets of the Riverside apartment, after which she walked the distance to the building by the light of the stars. Overhead the broken arcs of the ring were a line of black against the faintly glowing sky. Outside the apartment she gazed up for a long moment until she discerned the pale gleam of the white ceramic pot in the front window. It was in the position that meant "someone is in the apartment and it is safe."

The lock on the building's front door, the one that read her fingerprint, worked only erratically, but this time she caught it by surprise and the door opened. She went up the stair, then used her key on the apartment lock.

Macnamara was asleep on the couch, with a pair of pistols on the table in front of him, along with a

grenade.

"Hi, dad," Sula said as he blinked awake. "Junior brought me home safe, just like he said he would."

Macnamara looked embarrassed. Sula gave him a grin.

"What were you planning on doing with a _grenade_?" she asked.

Macnamara didn't reply. Sula took off her jacket and called up the computer that resided in the desk.

"I've got work to do," Sula said. "You'd better get some sleep, because I've got a job for you first thing in the morning."

"What's that?" He rose from the couch, scratching his sleep-tousled hair.

"The market opens at 07:27, right?"

"Yes."

Sula sat herself at the desk. "I need you to buy as much food as you can carry. Canned, dried, bottled, freeze-dried. Get the biggest sack of flour they have, and another sack of beans. Condensed milk would be good. Get Spence to help you carry it all."

"What's going on?" Macnamara was bewildered.

"Food rationing."

"_What_?" Sula could hear the outrage in Macnamara's voice as she called up a text program.

"Two reasons for it I can think of," Sula said. "First, issuing everyone with a ration card will be a way of re-processing every ID on the planet ... help them weed out troublemakers and saboteurs. Second..." She held up one hand and made the universal gesture of tossing a coin in her palm. "Artificial scarcities are going to make some Naxids very, very rich."

"Damn them," Macnamara breathed.

"_We'll_ do very well," Sula pointed out. "We'll quadruple our prices on everything on the ration -- you don't suppose they'd be good enough to ration _tobacco,_ would you? -- and we'll make a fortune."

"Damn them," Macnamara said again.

Sula gave him a pointed look. "Good night," she said. "Dad."

He flushed and shambled to bed. Sula turned to her work.

"What if they ration _alcohol?_" she said aloud as the thought struck her. There would be stills in half the bathrooms in Zanshaa, processing potatoes, taswa peels, apple cores, whatever they could find.

She accessed the Records Office computer -- her back door was the legacy of an earlier job processing refugees from the ring, before she'd volunteered to get herself killed leading partisan forces -- and checked the protocols for acquiring ration cards. Given her level of access, they should be easy enough to subvert.

And then she had another thought. Thus far her group had been selling her own property out of the back of a truck, a business that was irregular but legal. But once the ration came into effect, selling cocoa and coffee off the ration would be against the law. The team wouldn't just be participating in informal

economic activity, they'd be committing a _crime._

People who committed crimes needed protection. Casimir was going to be more necessary than ever.

"_Damn_ it," she said.

* * * *

Macnamara failed to procure a large stash of food. Police were already in force at the market, and foodsellers had been told not to sell large quantities. Macnamara wisely decided to avoid attracting attention and bought only quantities that might be considered reasonable for a family of three.

The announcement of rationing had been made while Sula slept and the food marts were packed. Tobacco had not been included, but Sula couldn't hope for everything. Citizens were given twenty days to report to their local police station in order to apply for a ration card. The reason given by the government for the imposition of rationing was the destruction of the ring and the decline in food imports.

The news also announced that certain well-established Naxid clans, out of pure civic spirit, had agreed to spare the government expense, and would instead use their own means to manage the planet's food supplies. The Jagirin clan, whose head had been temporary interior minister during the changeover from the old government to the new, the Ummir clan, whose head happened to be the Minister of Police, the Ushgays, the Kulukrafs ... people who, even if some of them hadn't been with the rebellion from the beginning, clearly found it in their interest to support it now.

The Naxids, Sula thought, had just created a whole new class of target.

Naxids were placed in every police station to monitor the process of acquiring ration cards, and the Naxids wore the black uniform of the Legion of Diligence, the organization that investigated crimes against the Praxis. All members of the Legion had been evacuated from Zanshaa before the arrival of the Naxid fleet, so apparently the new government had re-formed the Legion, probably with personnel from the Naxid police.

Another class of target, Sula thought.

* * * *

A shimmering layer of afternoon heat stretched across the pavement like a layer of molasses, thick enough to distort the colorful canopies and displays of the Textile Market that set up in Sula's street every five days. Early in the morning, vendors motored up with their trailers or their three-wheelers with the sheds built onto the back, and at dawn hour the sheds opened, canopies went up, and the merchandise went on sale. After sunset, as the heat began to dissipate and the purple shadows crept between the stalls, the vendors would break down their displays and motor away, to set up the next day in another part of the city.

As Sula passed, vendors called her attention to cheap women's clothing, baby clothes, shoes, stockings, scarves, and inexpensive toys for children. There were bolts of fabric, foils of music and entertainment, sun lotion and sun hats, and items -- unseasonable in the heat -- alleged to be knit from the fleece of Yormak cattle, and sold at a surprisingly low price.

Despite the heat, the market was thronged. Tired and hot, Sula elbowed her way impatiently through the crowd to her doorstep. She entered the building, then heard the chime of a hand comm through her apartment door and made haste to enter. She snatched up the comm from the table and answered, panting.

Casimir surveyed her from the display. She could watch his eyes travel insolently over her image as far as the frame would permit.

"Too bad," he said. "I was hoping to catch you in the bath again."

"Better luck next time." Sula switched on the room coolers and somewhere in the building a tired compressor began to wheeze, and faint currents of air began to stir. She dropped into a chair, and holding the comm in one hand she began to loosen her boots with the other.

"I want to see you tonight," Casimir said. "I'll pick you up at 21:01, all right?"

"Why don't I meet you at the club?"

"Nothing happens at the club that early." He frowned. "Don't you want me to know where you live?"

"I don't have a place of my own," Sula lied cheerfully. "I sort of bounce between friends."

"Well." Grudgingly. "I'll see you at the club, then."

She had time to bathe, get a bite to eat, and work for a while on the accounts of her delivery company. Then she checked the Records Office computer for Casimir's friend Julien, and discovered that he was the son of Sergius Bakshi.

Sergius was someone she'd heard of as the head of the Riverside Clique. She hadn't realized that he'd cheated the executioner long enough to have a grown son.

Sula left the apartment, negotiated the crowds at the Textile Market, then ducked down a sunblasted side street, trying to keep on the shady side. The heat still took her breath away. She made another turn, then entered the delightfully cool air of a block-shaped storage building built in the shadow of the even larger Riverside Crematorium. She showed her false ID to the Cree at the desk, then took the elevator upstairs and opened one of Team 491's storage caches. There she opened one of the cases, withdrew a small item, and pocketed it.

Casimir waited by his car in front of the Cat Street club with an impatient scowl on his face and his walking stick in his hand. He wore a soft white shirt covered with minutely stitched braid. As she appeared, he stabbed the door button, and the glossy apricot-colored door rolled up into the car roof. "I _hate_ being kept waiting," he growled in his deep voice, and took her arm roughly to stuff her into the passenger compartment.

This too, Sula remembered, was what it was like to be a clique member's girlfriend.

Sula settled herself on apricot-colored plush across from Julien and Veronika, the latter in fluttery garb and a cloud of Sengra. Casimir thudded into the seat next to her and rolled down the door; Sula called up the chronometer on her sleeve display.

"I'm three minutes early," she said primly, in what she trusted was a math teacher's voice. "I'm sorry if I spoiled your evening."

Casimir gave an unsociable grunt. Veronika popped her blue eyes wide and said, "The boys are taking us shopping!"

Sula remembered that part about being a cliqueman's girlfriend, too.

"Where?" she said.

"It's a surprise," Julien said, and slid open the door on the vehicle's bar. "Anyone want something to drink?"

The Torminel behind the controls slipped the car smoothly from the curb on its six tires. Sula had a Citrine Fling while the rest drank Kyowan. The vehicle passed through Grandview to the Petty Mount, a district in the shadow of the High City, beneath the Couch of Eternity where the ashes of the Shaa masters waited in their niches for the end of time. The area was lively, filled with boutiques, bars, cafes, and eccentric shops that sold folk crafts or antiques or old jewelry. Sula saw Cree and Lai-own on the streets as well as Terrans.

The car pulled to a smooth stop before a shop called Raiment by Chesko, and the apricot-colored doors rolled open. They stepped from the vehicle and were greeted at the door by a female Daimong whose gray body was wrapped in a kind of satin sheath that looked strangely attractive on her angular body with its matchstick arms. In a chiming voice she greeted Casimir by name.

"Gredel, this is Miss Chesko," Casimir told Sula in a voice that suggested both her importance and his own.

"Pleased to meet you," Sula said.

The shop was a three-level fantasy filled with sumptuous fabrics in brilliant colors, all set against neutral-colored walls of a translucent resinous substance that let in the fading light of the sun. Gossamer Cree music floated tastefully in the air.

A Daimong who designed clothes for Terrans was something new in Sula's experience. The shop must have had excellent air circulation, or Chesko wore something that suppressed the odor of her rotting flesh, because Sula didn't scent her even once.

Casimir's mood changed the instant he entered the shop. He walked from one rack to the next and heaved out clothing for Sula or Veronika to try on. He held garments critically to the light and ran his hands over the glossy, rich fabrics. Veronika's were soft and bright and shimmered; Sula's were satiny and tended to the darker shades, with light accents in the form of a scarf, lapel, or collar.

He's dressing me as a woman of mystery, Sula thought.

His antennae were really rather acute.

His tastes were fairly good as well, Sula thought as she looked at herself in the full-length video display. She found that she enjoyed herself playing model, displaying one rich garment after another. Casimir offered informed comment as Sula changed outfits, twitched the clothing to a better drape, and sorted the clothing into piles of yeses, maybes, rejects. Chesko made respectful suggestions in her bell-like tones. Shop assistants ran back and forth with mountains of clothing in their arms.

It hadn't been like this with Lamey, Sula remembered. When he walked into a shop with Gredel, the assistants knew to bring out their flashiest, most expensive clothing, and he'd buy them with a wave of his hand and a pocket of cash.

Casimir wasn't doing this to impress anyone, or at least not in the way Lamey had. He was demonstrating his taste, not his power and money.

"You should have Chesko's job," she told him.

"Maybe. I seem to have got the wrong training, though."

"Your mama didn't give you enough dolls to play with when you were growing up," Julien said. He sat in a chair in a corner, out of everyone's way. He had a tolerant smile on his pointed face and a glass of mig brandy, brought by the staff, in one hand.

"I'm hungry," Julien said after an hour and a half.

Casimir looked a little put out, but he shrugged and then looked again through the piles of clothing, making a final sorting. Julien rose from his chair, put down his glass, and addressed one of the assistants.

"_That_ pile," he said. "Total it up."

Veronika gave a whoop of joy and ran to embrace him. "Better add this," Casimir said, adding a vest to the yes pile. He picked up an embroidered jacket from another heap and held it out to Sula. "What do you think of this?" he said. "Should I add it to your pile?"

Sula considered the jacket. "I think you should pick out the single very nicest thing out of the stack and give it to me."

His dark eyes flashed, and his gravel voice was suddenly full of anger. "You don't want my presents?" he asked.

Sula was aware that Veronika was staring at her as if she were insane.

"I'll take _a_ present," Sula said. "You don't know me well enough to buy me a whole wardrobe."

For a moment she sensed thwarted rage boiling off of him, and then after a moment he thought about it and decided to be amused. His mouth twisted in a tight-lipped smile. "Very well," he said. He considered the pile for a moment, then reached in and pulled out a suit, velvet black, with satin braid and silver beadwork on the lapels and down the sides of the loose trousers.

"Will this do?" he said.

"It's very nice. Thank you." Sula noted that it wasn't the most expensive item in the pile, and that fact pleased her. If he wasn't buying her expensive trash, it probably meant he didn't think she was trash, either.

"Will you wear it tonight?" He hesitated, then looked at Chesko. "It didn't need fitting, did it?"

"No, sir." Her pale, expressionless Daimong face, set in a permanent caricature of wide-eyed alarm, gave no sign of disappointment in losing sales worth hundreds of zeniths.

"Happy to," Sula said. She took the suit to the changing room, changed, and looked at herself in the old-fashioned silver-backed mirrors. The suit probably _was_ the nicest thing in the pile.

Her old clothes were wrapped in a package, and she stepped out to a look of appreciation from Julien, and the more critical gaze of Casimir. He gestured with a finger as if stirring a pot.

"Turn around," he said.

She made a pirouette, and he nodded, more to himself than to anyone else. "That works," he said. The deep voice sounded pleased.

"Can we eat now?" Julien asked.

Outside, the white marble of the Couch of Eternity glowed in twilight. The streets exhaled summer heat

into the sky like an overtaxed athlete panting at the end of his run.

They ate in a cafe, a place of bright red-and-white tiles and shiny chrome. The cafe was crowded and noisy, as if people wanted to pack in as much food and good times as possible before rationing began. Casimir and Julien were in a lighthearted mood, chattering and laughing, but every so often Sula caught Casimir looking at her with a thoughtful expression, as if he was approving his choice of outfit.

He had made her into something he admired.

Afterward they went to a bar, equally crowded, with a live band and dancing. The other night Casimir had danced with a kind of gravity, but now he was exuberant, laughing as he led her into athletic kicks, spins, and twirls. Before, he had been pleasing himself with a show of his power and control, but now it was as if he wanted all Zanshaa to share his joy.

He was taking me for granted the other night, Sula thought. _Now he's not._

It was well past midnight when they left the bar. Outside, in the starlit darkness, a pair of strange colossi moved in the night. Leather creaked. A strange barnyard smell floated to Sula's nostrils.

Casimir gave a laugh. "Right," he said. "Get in."

He launched himself into some kind of box that, dimly perceived, seemed to float above the street. There was a creak, a shuffle, more barnyard smell. His long pale hand appeared out of the night.

"Come on," he said.

Sula took the hand and let him draw her forward. A step, a box, a seat. She seated herself next to him before she understood where she was, and amazement flooded her.

"Is this a pai-car carriage?" she asked.

"That's right!" Casimir let a laugh float off into the night. "We hired a pair for tonight." He thumped the leather-padded rim of the cockpit and called to the driver. "Let's go!"

There was a hiss from the driver, a flap of reins, and the carriage lurched into movement. The vehicle was pulled by a pai-car, a tall flightless bird, a carnivorous, unintelligent cousin to the Lai-own driver that perched on the front of the carriage. There were two big silver alloy wheels, ornamented with cutouts, and a boat-shaped car made out of leather, boiled, treated, sculpted, and ornamented with bright metal badges. Mounted on either side were some cell-powered lamps, not very powerful, which the driver now switched on.

The car swayed down off the Petty Mount and into the flat cityscape below. Sula relaxed against Casimir's shoulder. Darkened buildings loomed up on either side like valley walls. The slap of the pai-car's feet and its huffing breath echoed off the structures on either side. There seemed to be no other traffic at all, nothing but the limousine, with its Torminel guards, that followed them at a distance, the driver's huge nocturnal eyes able to navigate perfectly well by starlight.

"Is this legal?" Sula wondered.

Casimir's bright white teeth flashed in the starlight. "Of course not. These carriages aren't permitted outside the parks."

"You don't expect police?"

Casimir's grin broadened. "The police are bogged down processing millions of ration card applications. The streets are ours for the next month."

Veronika's laughter tinkled through the night. Sula heard the slap of another pair of feet, and saw the savage saw-toothed face of another pai-car loom up on the left, followed soon by the driver and Julien and Veronika. Julien leaned out of the carriage, hands waving drunkenly in the air. "A hundred says I beat you to Medicine Street!"

Sula felt Casimir's body grow taut as Julien's face vanished into the gloom ahead. He called to the driver: "Faster!" The driver gave a hiss and a flap of the reins. The carriage creaked and swayed as the pace increased.

Veronika's laughter taunted them from ahead. Casimir growled and leaned forward. "Faster!" he called. Sula's nerves tingled to the awareness of danger.

A few lights shone high in office buildings where the staff were cleaning. A rare functioning street lamp revealed two Torminel, in the brown uniforms of the civil service, in an apparent argument. The two fell silent and stared with their large eyes as the carriages raced past, their silver wheels a blur.

The side-lamps of Julien's carriage ahead loomed closer. "Faster!" Casimir called, and he turned to Sula, a laugh rumbling from deep in his chest. Sula felt an answering grin tear at her lips. _This is mad,_ she thought. _Absolutely mad._

She heard Julien's voice calling for greater speed. The wheels threw up sparks as they skidded through a turn. Sula was thrown against Casimir. He put an arm around her protectively.

"Faster!"

Veronika's laughter tinkled from ahead, closer this time. Casimir ducked left and right, peering around the driver for a better view of the carriage they were pursuing. They passed through an intersection and both carriages glared white in the startled headlamps of a huge street-cleaning machine. Sula blinked the dazzle from her eyes. The night air was cool on her cheeks. She could feel her heart beating high in her throat.

Sula heard Julien curse as they drew even. Then they were in another turn, metal wheels sliding, and Julien's carriage loomed close as it skidded toward them. Their driver was forced into a wider turn to avoid collision, and Julien pulled ahead.

"Damn!" Casimir jumped from his seat and leaped to join the driver on the box. One pale hand dug in a pocket. "Twenty zeniths if you beat him!" he called, and slapped a coin down on the box. Twenty zeniths would buy the coach, the pai-car, and the driver twice over.

The driver responded with a frantic hiss. The pai-car seemed to have caught the fey mood of the passengers and gave a determined cry as it accelerated.

The road narrowed as it crossed a canal, and Casimir's coach was on the heels of Julien's as they crossed the bridge. Sula caught a whiff of sour canal water, heard the startled exclamation of someone on the quay, and then the coach hit a bump and Sula was tossed in the car like a pea in a bottle. Then they were in another turn, and Sula was pressed to one side, the leather bending slightly under her weight.

She gave a laugh at the realization that her whole life's adventure could end here, that she could die in a ridiculous carriage accident or find herself under arrest, that her work -- the war against the Naxids, her team, her many identities -- all could be destroyed in a reckless, demented instant....

Serve me right, she thought.

The labored breathing of the pai-car echoed between the buildings. "Twenty more!" Casimir slapped another coin on the box.

The carriage swayed alongside that of Julien. He was standing in the car, urging his driver on, but his pai-car looked dead in its harness. Then there was a sudden glare of headlights, the clatter of a vehicle collision alarm, and Julien's driver gave an urgent tug on the reins, cutting his bird's speed and swerving behind Casimir's carriage to avoid collision with a taxi taking home a singing chorus of Cree.

Sula heard Julien's yelp of protest. Casimir laughed in triumph as the singers disappeared in their wake.

They had passed through the silent business district and into a more lively area of Grandevue. Sula saw people on the street, cabs parked by the curb waiting for customers. Ahead she saw an intersection, a traffic signal flashing a command to stop.

"Keep going!" Casimir cried, and slapped down another coin. The driver gave Casimir a wild, gold-eyed stare, but obeyed.

Sula heard a rumble ahead, saw a white light. The traffic signal blazed in the darkness. Her heart leaped into her throat.

The carriage dashed into the intersection. Casimir's laughter rang in her ears. There was a brilliant white light, a blaring collision alarm, the screech of tires. Sula threw her arms protectively over her head as the pai-car gave a wail of terror.

The edge of the carriage bit Sula's ribs as the vehicle was slammed sideways. A side-lamp exploded into bits of flying crystal. One large silver wheel went bounding down the road ahead of the truck that had torn it away, and the carriage fell heavily onto the torn axle. Sparks arced in the night as the panicked bird tried to drag the tilted carriage from the scene.

The axle grated near Sula's ear. She blinked into the night just in time to see Casimir lose his balance on the box and fall toward her, arms thrashing in air. She made a desperate lunge for the high side of the coach and managed to avoid being crushed as he fell heavily onto the seat.

Clinging to the high side of the coach, she turned to him. Casimir was helpless with laughter, a deep bass sound that echoed the grinding of the axle on pavement. Sula allowed herself to slide down the seat onto him, wrapped him in her arms, and stopped his laughter with a kiss.

The panting pai-car came to a halt. Sula heard its snarls of frustration as it turned in the traces and tried to savage the driver with its razor teeth, then heard the driver expertly divert its striking head with slaps. She could hear the truck reversing, the other pai-car padding to a halt, the sound of running footsteps as people ran to the scene.

She could hear Casimir's heart pounding in his chest.

"I conceive that no one is injured," said the burbling voice of a Cree.

This time it was Sula who was helpless with laughter. She and Casimir crawled from the wreckage of the carriage just as the apricot-colored limousine rolled silently to a stop, the Torminel guards appearing in time to prevent a very angry Daimong truck driver from bludgeoning someone. Julien and Casimir passed around enough money to leave everyone happy, the carriage drivers in particular, and then the party piled into the limousine for the ride to the Hotel of Many Blessings.

Sula sat in Casimir's lap and kissed him for the entire ride.

Sula insisted on taking a shower before joining him in bed. Then she insisted that he take a shower, too.

"We could have showered _together_," Casimir grumbled.

"You could use a shave, too," Sula pointed out.

He returned to bed, showered and shaved and scented with taswa-blossom soap...

"Hey!" he said in surprise. "You're really a blonde!"

She gave a slow laugh. "That's the least of my mysteries."

An hour or so later, Sula decided to play a card or two, and told the room light to go on. Casimir gave a start and shielded his eyes. Sula crawled out of bed and looked for the package that held the clothing she'd worn at the beginning of the evening.

"Gredel, what are you _doing?_" Casimir complained.

"I have something to show you." Sula dug in an inner pocket and removed the item she'd taken from the storage locker earlier in the evening. She opened the slim plastic case and showed Casimir her Fleet ID.

"I'm Caroline, Lady Sula," she said. "I'm here fighting the Naxids."

There was a moment of silence. Casimir squeezed his eyes shut for a long moment, as if in disbelief, and then opened them.

"Shit," he said.

Sula smiled at him.

"I guess you know me well enough to buy me a new wardrobe, if you still want to."

* * * *

The meeting with Julien's father, Sergius Bakshi, occurred three days after the madcap carriage race, on an afternoon dark with racing clouds. Sula dressed for the meeting with care. In order that she look more like the person in the Fleet ID, she left off her contact lenses and bought a shoulder-length wig in her natural shade of blonde. She wore a military-style jacket in a tone of green that wasn't quite the viridian of a Fleet uniform, but which she hoped suggested it. She brought Macnamara as an aide, or perhaps a bodyguard, and bought him a similar jacket. She reminded herself to walk with the straight-backed, braced posture of the Fleet officer and not the less formal slouch she'd adopted as Gredel.

She wore a pistol stuck down her waistband in back. Macnamara had a sidearm in a shoulder holster.

These were less for defense than to shoot themselves, or each other, in the event things went wrong.

There was a lot of shooting going on these days. The Naxids had shot sixty-odd people in retaliation for the firebombing of a Motor Patrol vehicle in the Old Third, and then they'd gone into the Old Third and shot about a dozen people at random.

The meeting took place in a private club called Silk Winds on the second floor of an office building in a Lai-own neighborhood. Casimir met her on the pavement out front, dressed in his long coat and carrying his walking stick. His eyes went wide as he saw her, and then he grinned and gave one of his elaborate bows. From his bent position he looked up at her.

"You still don't look much like a math teacher," he said.

"Good thing then," she said, in her drawling Peer voice. His eyebrows lifted in surprise, and he straightened.

"Now _that's_ not the voice I heard in bed the other night."

From over her shoulder Sula heard Macnamara's intake of breath. Great, Sula thought, now she'd have a scandalized and sulking team member.

"Don't be vulgar," she admonished, still in her Peer voice.

Casimir bowed again. "Apologies, my lady."

He led her into the building. The lobby was cavernous, brilliant with polished copper, and featured a twice-life-size bronze statue of a Lai-own holding, for some allegorical reason beyond Sula's comprehension, a large tetrahedron. Uniformed Lai-own security guards in blue jackets and tall pointed shakos gave them searching looks, but did not approach. A moving stair took Sula to the second floor and to the polished copper door of the club, on which had been placed a card informing them that the club had been closed for a private function.

Casimir swung the door open and led Sula and Macnamara into the shadow-filled club. Faint sunlight from the darkened sky gleamed fitfully off copper fittings and polished wood. Lai-own security -- this time without the silly hats -- appeared from the gloom and checked everyone very thoroughly for listening devices. They found the sidearms but didn't touch them. Apparently they discounted the possibility that Sula and her party might be assassins.

Casimir, adjusting his long coat after the search, led them to a back room. He knocked on a nondescript door.

Sula smoothed the lapel of her jacket and straightened her shoulders and reminded herself to act like a senior fleet commander inspecting a motley group of dock workers. She couldn't give orders to these people: she had to use a different kind of authority. Being a Peer and a Fleet officer were the only cards she had left to play. She had to be the embodiment of the Fleet and the legitimate government and the whole body of Peers, and she would have to carry them all along through sheer weight of her own expectation.

Julien opened the door, and his eyes went wide when he saw Sula. Suddenly nervous, he backed hastily from the door.

Sula walked into the room, her spine straight, hands clasped behind her. I _own_ this room, she told herself, but then she saw the eyes of her audience and her heart gave a lurch.

Two Terrans, a Lai-own, and a Daimong sat in the shadowy, dark-paneled room, facing her from behind a table that looked like a slab of pavement torn from the street. Nature had made the Daimong expressionless but the others were so blank-faced that they might have all been carved from the same block of granite.

She heard Macnamara stamp to a halt behind her right shoulder, a welcome support. Casimir stepped around them and stood to one side of the room.

"Gentlemen," he said, and again made his elaborate bow. "May I present Lieutenant the Lady Sula."

"I'm Sergius Bakshi," said one of the Terrans. He looked nothing like his son Julien: he had a round face

and a razor-cut mustache and the round, unfeeling eyes of a great predator fish. He turned to the Lai-own. "This is Am Tan-dau, who has very kindly arranged for us to meet here."

Tan-dau did not look kindly. He slumped in the padded chair that cradled his keel-like breastbone, his bright, fashionable clothes wrinkled on him as they might on a sack of feathers. His skin was dull, and nictating membranes were half-deployed across his eyes. He looked a hundred years old, but Sula could tell from the dark feathery hair on each side of his head that he was still young.

Bakshi continued. "These are friends who may be interested in any proposition you may have for us." He nodded at the Terran. "This is Mister Patel." A young man with glossy hair that curled over the back of his collar, Patel didn't even blink in response when Sula offered him a small nod.

The Daimong's name was Sagas.

Sula knew, through Casimir, that the four were a kind of informal commission that regulated illegal activities on this end of Zanshaa City. Bakshi's word carried the most weight, if only because he'd managed to reach middle age without being killed.

"Gentlemen," Sula drawled in her Peer voice. "May I present my aide, Mister Macnamara."

Four pairs of eyes flicked to Macnamara, then back to Sula. Her mouth was suddenly dry, and she resisted the impulse to clear her throat.

Bakshi folded large, doughy hands on the table in front of him and spoke. "What may we do for you, Lady Sula?"

Sula's answer was swift. "Help me kill Naxids."

Even that request, which Sula hoped might startle them a little, failed to provoke a reaction.

Bakshi deliberately folded his hands on the table before him. His eyes never left hers. "Assuming for the sake of argument that this is remotely possible," he said, "why should we agree to attack a group so formidable that even the Fleet has failed to defeat them?"

Sula looked down at him. If he wanted a staring contest, she thought, then she'd give him one.

"The Fleet isn't done with the Naxids," she said. "Not by a long shot. I don't know whether you have the means to verify this or not, but I know that even now the Fleet is raiding deep into Naxid territory. The Fleet is ripping the guts out of the rebellion while the Naxid force is stuck here guarding the capital."

Bakshi gave a subtle movement of his shoulders that might have been a strangled shrug. "Possibly," he said. "But that doesn't alter the fact that the Naxids are _here._"

"How do we know?" Tan-dau's voice was a mumble. "How do we know that she is not sent by the Naxids to provoke us?"

It was difficult to be certain to whom Tan-dau addressed the question, but Sula decided to intercept it. "I killed a couple of thousand Naxids at Magaria," Sula said. "You may remember that I received a decoration for it. I don't think they'd let me switch sides even if I wanted to."

"Lady Sula is supposed to be dead," Tan-dau said, to no one in particular.

"Well." Sula permitted herself a slight smile. "You know how accurate the Naxids have been about everything else."

"How do we know she is the real..." Tan-dau's sentence drifted away before he could finish it. Sula waited until it was clear that no more words were coming, and then answered.

"You can't know," Sula said. She brought her Fleet ID out of her jacket. "You're welcome to examine my identification, but of course the Naxids could have faked it. But I think you know..." She gazed at them all in turn. "...if the Naxids wanted to target you, they wouldn't need me. They've declared martial law; they'd just send their people after you, and no one would ever see you alive again."

They absorbed this in expressionless silence. "Why then," Bakshi said finally, "should we act so as to bring this upon us?"

Sula'd had three days to prepare what came next. She had to restrain herself from babbling it out all at once, to urge herself to remain calm, and to make her points slowly and with proper emphasis.

"You want to be on the winning side, for one thing," she said. "That brings its own rewards. Second, the secret government is prepared to offer pardons and amnesties for anyone who aids us."

It was like talking to a blank wall. She wanted to stride about, to gesture, to declaim, all in desperate hope of getting at least one of the group to show some response. But she forced herself to be still, to keep her hands clasped behind her, to stand in an attitude of superiority. She had to project command and authority: if she showed weakness she was finished.

"What," said Sagas, speaking for the first time in his beautiful chiming Daimong voice, "makes you think that we need pardons and amnesties?"

"A pardon," Sula said, "means that any investigations, any complaints, any inquiries, any proceedings come to a complete and permanent end. Not only for yourself, but for any of your friends, clients, and associates who may wish to aid the government. You may not need any amnesties yourself, but perhaps some of your friends aren't so lucky."

She scanned her audience again. Once again, no response.

"My last point," she said, "is that you are all prominent, successful individuals. People know your names. You have earned the respect of the population, and people are wary of your power. But you're not loved_."

For the first time she'd managed to provoke a response. Surprise widened Bakshi's pupils, and even the expressionless Sagas gave a jerk of his head.

"If you lead the fight against the Naxids, you'll be heroes," Sula said. "Maybe for the first time, people will think of you as agents of virtue. You'll be loved, because everyone will see you on the right side, standing between them and the Naxids."

Patel gave a sudden laugh. "Fight the Naxids for love!" he said. "That's a _good_ one! I'm _for_ it!" He slapped the table with a hand, and looked up at Sula with his teeth flashing in a broad grin. "I'm with you, my lady! For love, and for no other reason!"

Sula ventured a glance at Casimir. He gave her an wry, amused look, not quite encouragement but not dispirited either.

Bakshi gave an impatient motion of his hand, and Patel fell silent, his hilarity gone in an instant and leaving a hollow silence behind.

"What exactly," Bakshi began, "would the secret government want us to do..." Chill irony entered his

voice. "...for the people's love."

"There are cells of resisters forming all over the city," Sula said, "but they have no way to communicate or coordinate with each other." Again, she looked at them all in turn. "You _already_ have a paramilitary structure. You _already_ have means of communication that the government doesn't control. What we'd like you to do is to coordinate these groups. Pass information up the chain of command, pass orders downward, make certain equipment gets where it's needed ... that sort of thing."

There was another moment of silence. Then Bakshi extruded one index finger from a big, pale hand and tapped the table. In a man so silent and restrained, the gesture seemed as dramatic as a pistol shot. "I should like to know one thing," Bakshi said. "Lord Governor Pahn-ko has been captured and executed. Who is it, exactly, who runs the secret government?"

Sula clenched her teeth to avoid a wail of despair. This was the one question she'd dreaded.

She had decided that she could lie to anyone else as circumstances demanded, but that she would never lie to the people at the table before her. The consequences of lying to them were simply too dire.

"I am the senior officer remaining," Sula said.

Surprise widened Patel's eyes. His mouth dropped open, but he didn't say anything. Tan-dau gave Bakshi a sidelong glance.

"You are a lieutenant," Bakshi said, "and young, and recently promoted at that."

"That is true," Sula said. She could feel sweat collecting under the blonde wig. "But I am also a Peer of ancient name, and a noted killer of Naxids."

"It seems to me," Tan-dau said, again seeming to address no one in particular, "that she wishes us to organize and fight her war for her. I wonder what it is that _she_ will contribute?"

Defiant despair rose in Sula. "My training, my name, and my skill at killing Naxids," she answered.

Bakshi looked at her. "I'm sure your skill and courage are up to the task," he said. "But of course you are a soldier." He looked at the folk on either side of him, and spread his hands. "We, on the other hand, are men of commerce and of peace. We have our businesses and our families to consider. If we join your resistance to the Naxids, we put all we have worked for in jeopardy."

Sula opened her mouth to speak, but Bakshi held up a hand for silence. "You have assured us that the loyalist Fleet will return and that Zanshaa will be freed from Naxid rule. If that is the case, there is no need for an army here on the ground. But if you are wrong, and the Naxids aren't driven out, then any resisters here in the capital are doomed." He gave a slow shake of his head. "We wish you the best, but I don't understand why we should involve ourselves. The risk is too great."

Another heavy silence rose. Sula, a leaden hopelessness beating through her veins, looked at the others. "Do you all agree?" she asked.

Tan-dau and Sagas said nothing. Patel gave a rueful grin. "Sorry the love thing didn't work out, princess," he said. "It could have been fun."

"The Naxids are already nibbling at your businesses," Sula said. "When rationing starts and you go into the food business, you'll be competing directly with the clans the Naxids have set in power. It's then that you'll be challenging them directly, and they'll have to destroy you."

Bakshi gave her another of his dead-eyed looks. "What makes you think we'll involve ourselves in illegal foodstuffs?"

"A market in illegal foodstuffs is inevitable," Sula said. "If you don't put yourselves at the head of it, you'll lose control to the people who do."

There was another long silence. Bakshi spread his hands. "There's nothing we can do, my lady." He turned to Casimir and gave him a deliberate stone-eyed look. "Our associates can do nothing, either."

"Of course not, Sergius," Casimir murmured.

Sula looked down her nose at them each in turn, but none offered anything more. Her hands clenched behind her back, the nails scoring her palms. She wanted to offer more arguments, weaker ones even, but she knew it would be useless and did not.

"I thank you then, for agreeing to hear me," she said, and turned to Tan-dau. "I appreciate your offering this place for the meeting."

"Fortune attend you, my lady," Tan-dau said formally.

Fortune was precisely what had just deserted her. She gave a brisk military nod to the room in general and made a proper military turn.

Macnamara anticipated her and stepped to the rear of the room, holding the door for her. She marched out with her shoulders still squared, her blonde head high.

Bastards, she thought.

There was a thud behind as Macnamara tried to close the door just as Casimir tried to exit. Macnamara glared at Casimir as he shouldered his way out and fell into step alongside Sula.

"That went better than I'd expected," he said.

She gave him a look. "I don't need irony right now."

"Not irony," he said pleasantly. "That could have gone a _lot_ worse."

"I don't see how."

"Oh, I knew they wouldn't agree with you this time around. But they listened to you. You gave them things to think about. Everything you said will be a part of their calculations from now on." He looked at her, amused appreciation glittering in his eyes. "You're damned impressive, I must say. Standing there all alone staring at those people as if they'd just come up from the sewer smelling of shit." He shook his head. "And I have no idea how you do that thing with your voice. I could have sworn when I met you that you were born in Riverside."

"There's a reason I got picked for this job," Sula said.

There was a moment of silence as they all negotiated the front door of the club. This time, at least, Macnamara didn't try to slam the door on Casimir. Score one, she thought, for civility.

The delay at the door gave Julien time to catch up. He caught his breath in the copper-plated corridor outside, then turned to Sula. "Sorry about that," he said. "Better luck next time, hey?"

"I'm sure you did your best," Sula said. It was all she could do not to snarl.

"Tan-dau got wounded in an assassination attempt last year, and he's not game for new adventures," Julien said. "Sagas isn't a Daimong to take chances. And Pops," he gave a rueful smile, and shook his head, "Pops didn't get where he is by sticking his neck out."

"And Patel?" Sula asked.

Julien laughed. "He'd have followed you, you heard him. He'd like to fight the Naxids just for the love, like he said. But the commission's rulings are always unanimous, and he had to fall in line."

They descended the moving stairs. Sula marched to the doors and walked out onto the street. The pavement was wet, and a fresh smell was in the air: there had been a brief storm while she was conducting her interview.

"Where's a cab rank?" Sula asked.

"Around the corner," said Julien, pointing. He hesitated. "Say -- I'm sorry about today, you know. I'd like to make it up to you."

Can you raise an army? Sula thought savagely. But she turned to Julien and said, "That would be very nice."

"Tomorrow night?" Julien said. "Come to my restaurant for dinner? It's called Two Sticks, and it's off Harmony Square. The cook's a Cree and he's brilliant."

Sula had to wonder if the Cree chef thought it was his own restaurant, not Julien's, but this was no time to ask questions of that kind. She agreed to join Julien for dinner at 24:01.

"Shall I pick you up?" Casimir said. "Or are you still in transit from one place to another?"

"I'm _always_ in transit," Sula lied, "and now you know why. I'll meet you at the club."

"Care to go out tonight?"

Sula decided she was too angry to play a cliqueman's girl tonight. "Not tonight," she said. "I've got to assassinate a judge."

Casimir was taken aback. "Good luck with that," he said.

She kissed him. "See you tomorrow."

She walked with Macnamara to the cab rank and got a cab. He sat next to Sula in the seat, arms crossed, staring straight forward. One muscle in his jaw worked continually.

"So what's _your_ problem?" Sula demanded.

"Nothing," he said. "My lady."

"Good!" she said. "Because if there's anything I don't need, it's _more fucking problems._"

They sat in stony silence. Sula had the cab let her off two streets from her apartment. Rain had started again, and she had to sprint, her jacket pulled over her head.

Inside she tossed the wet wig onto the back of her chair and combed her short, dyed hair. She considered checking the news, but decided against it, knowing the news would only further irritate her. She settled for a long bath instead.

After her bath she wrapped herself in a robe and went to the front room. The rain was still pouring down. For a long moment she watched the beads of water that snaked down the window.

While watching the water an idea occurred to her.

"Ah hah," she said. The idea seemed an attractive one. She examined it carefully, probing it with her mind like a tongue examining the gap left by a missing tooth.

The idea began to seem better and better. She got a fresh piece of paper and a pen and outlined it, along with all possible ramifications.

There wasn't a problem that she could see. Nor a way it could be traced to her.

She destroyed the paper, leaving no evidence of her scheme. She looked at her right thumb, the thick pad of scar tissue where her print had once been.

It was very important that she not leave her fingerprints on this one.

* * * *

In the morning she made deliveries with Spence and Macnamara. Macnamara was a little stiff but at least he wasn't sulking too visibly.

In the afternoon she went to the Petty Mount for a shopping expedition, and wore the result to meet Casimir at the Cat Street club. She was late, and as she approached the club with her large shoulder bag banging her hip with every stride, she found Casimir pacing the pavement next to the apricot-colored car. He was scowling down at the ground, his coat floating behind him like a cloak.

He looked up at her, and relief flooded his face. Then he saw how she was dressed, in a long coat, black covered with shiny six-pointed parti-colored stars, like a rainbow snowfall.

"You got a coat like mine," he said, surprised.

"Yes. We need to talk."

"We can talk in the car." He stepped toward the car door.

"No. I need more privacy than that. Let's try your office."

Petulance tugged at his lip. "We're already late."

"Julien will be all right. His chef is brilliant."

He nodded as if he understood this remark and followed her through the club. There were few patrons at this early hour, mostly quiet drinkers at the bar or workers who hadn't managed to get home in time for dinner.

Sula bounded up the metal stairs leading to Casimir's office. "How did the judge thing go?" he asked.

Sula had to search her mind to recall the story that, in her annoyance, she'd told him the day before.

"Postponed," she said.

He let her into his office. "Is that what you need to talk about? Because even though Sergius said I wasn't supposed to help you, there are a few things I can do that Sergius doesn't need to know about. Because -- oh, damn."

They had entered his office, the spotless black-and-white room, and Sula had thrown her bag on a sofa and opened her coat to reveal that she wore nothing underneath it but stockings and her shoes.

"Damn." Casimir repeated. His eyes traveled over her. "Damn, you're beautiful."

"Don't just stand there," Sula said.

It was the first time she had set out to please a man so totally and for so long. She moved Casimir over the room from one piece of furniture to the other. She took full advantage of the large, oversoft chairs. She used lips and tongue and fingertips, skin and scent, whispers and laughter. There was something whorish about it, she supposed, though her own violent, mercifully brief encounter with whoring had been far more sordid and unpleasant than this.

She kept Casimir busy for an hour and a half, until the chiming of his comm grew far too insistent. He rose from one of the sofas, where he was sprawled with Sula on top of him, and made his way to his desk.

"Audio only," he told the comm. "Answer. Yes, what is it?"

"Julien's arrested," said an unknown voice.

Sula sat up, an expression of concern on her face.

"When?" Casimir barked. "Where?"

"A few minutes ago, at the Two Sticks. He was there with Veronika."

Calculation burned in Casimir's gaze. "Was it the police, or the Fleet?"

The voice shifted to a higher, more urgent register. "It was the _Legion._ They took _everybody_."

Casimir stared intently at the far wall as if it held a puzzle he needed badly to put together. Sula rose and quietly walked to where her large shoulder bag waited. She opened it and began to withdraw clothing.

"Does Sergius know?" Casimir asked.

"He's not at his office. That's the only number I have for him."

"Right. Thanks. I'll call him myself."

Casimir knew he couldn't get away with a call to Sergius that had the video suppressed, so he put on a shirt and combed his hair. He spoke in low tones and Sula heard little of what was said. She finished dressing, took a pistol from her bag, and stuck it in her waistband behind her back.

Casimir finished his phone call. He looked at her with somber eyes.

"You'd better make yourself scarce," Sula said. "They might be going after all of you."

"That's what Sergius told me," he said.

"Or maybe," Sula's eyes narrowed, "they're after _you,_ and they went to the Two Sticks thinking you'd be there."

"Or they might be after _you,_" Casimir said, "and Julien and I are both incidental."

"That hadn't occurred to me," she said.

Casimir began to draw on his clothing. "This looks bad," he said. "But maybe you'll get what you want."

She looked at him.

"War," he explained, "between us and the Naxids."

"That_ had_ occurred to me," she said.

It had occurred to her the previous night, in fact, while she gazed at raindrops coursing down the window. Which was why, that morning, she'd gone to a public comm unit. She wore a worker's coveralls and the blonde wig and a wide-brimmed hat pulled down over her face, and she'd taken the hat off her head and put it over the unit's camera before she manually punched in the code that would connect her to the Legion of Diligence informer line.

"I want to give some information," she said. "An anarchist cell is meeting tonight in a restaurant called the Two Sticks, off Harmony Square. They are planning sabotage. The meeting is set for twenty-four and one, in a private room. Don't tell the local police, because they're corrupt and would warn the saboteurs."

She'd used the Earth accent that had once amused Caro Sula. She walked away from the comm without removing her hat from the camera pickup.

She must have been convincing because Julien was now under arrest.

"How shall I contact you?" Sula asked Casimir.

He adjusted his trousers, then gave her a code.

Sula nodded. "Got it."

He gave her a quizzical look. "You don't need to write it down?"

"I compose a mental algorithm that will allow me to remember the number," she said. "It's what I do with everyone's numbers."

He blinked. "Clever trick," he said.

She kissed him. "Yes," she said. "A very clever trick."

* * * *

The next day the Naxids went berserk. Someone with a rifle went onto a building overlooking the Axtattle Parkway, the main highway that connected Zanshaa City with the Naxids' landing field at Wi-hun. The sniper waited for a convoy of Naxid vehicles to go by, then shot the driver of the first vehicle. Because the vehicles were using the automated lanes, the vehicle cruised on under computer control with a dead driver behind the controls. Then the sniper shot the next driver, and the next.

By the time the Naxids got things sorted out at least eight Naxids were dead, and more wounded. By way of retaliation they decided to shoot fifty-one hostages for every dead Naxid. Sula had no idea how they decided on fifty-one.

Casimir, who heard the news before anyone else, called Sula shortly after dawn to tell her to stay off the streets, and she spent the day in the apartment with a book of mathematical puzzles. Casimir called again after nightfall. "Can we meet?" he asked.

"Is it safe to go out?"

"The police have finished rounding up new hostages to replace the ones they shot today, and they're back to processing ration cards. But just in case I'll send a car."

She told him to pick her up at the local train stop. The car was a dark Hunhao sedan with one of the Torminel bodyguards at the controls. He took her to a small residential street on the edge of a Cree neighborhood -- she saw Cree males on the streets exercising their quadruped females, who bounded about them like large puppies.

Casimir was in the apartment of a smiling, elderly couple who apparently did very well for themselves renting out their spare room as a safe house. The room was spacious and comfortable, with flower pots on the window sills, fringed throw rugs, the scent of potpourri, family pictures on the walls, and a macrame border around the wall video. The remains of Casimir's dinner sat on a tray along with a half-empty bottle of sparkling wine.

Sula kissed him hello, and put her arms around him. His flesh was warm. His cologne had a pleasant earthy scent.

"I think we've got a false alarm," Casimir said. "The Legion doesn't seem to be after me. Or Sergius, or anyone but Julien. There haven't been any raids. No inquiries. Nobody's been seen doing surveillance."

"That may change if Julien talks," Sula said.

Casimir drew back. His face hardened. It was as if she'd just challenged the manhood of the whole Riverside Clique.

"Julien won't talk," he said. "He's a good boy."

"You don't know what they're going to do to him. The Naxids are serious. We can't count on anything."

Casimir's lips gave a scornful twitch. "Julien grew up with Sergius Bakshi beating the crap out of him twice a week -- and not for any reason, either, just for the sheer hell of it. You think Julien's going to be scared of the Naxids after _that_?"

Sula considered Sergius Bakshi's dead predator eyes and large pale listless hands and thought that Casimir had a point.

"So they won't get a confession from Julien. There's still Veronika."

Casimir shook his head. "Veronika doesn't know anything." He gave her a pointed look. "She doesn't know about _you._"

"But she knows Julien was expecting the two of us for dinner. And the Naxids will have seen that Julien was sitting at a table set for four."

Casimir shrugged. "They'll have my name and half of yours. They'll have a file on me and nothing on you. You're not in any danger."

"It's not me I'm worried about," Sula said.

He looked at her for a moment, then softened. "I'm being careful," he said in a subdued voice. He glanced around at the room. "I'm here, aren't I? In this little room, running my criminal empire by remote control."

Sula grinned at him. He grinned back. "Would you like something to eat or drink?" he asked.

"Whatever kind of soft drink they have would be fine."

He carried out his dinner tray. Sula toured the room, tidied a few of Casimir's belongings that had been carelessly laid down, then took off her shoes and sat on the floor. Casimir returned with two bottles of Citrine Fling. He seemed surprised to find Sula on the floor but joined her without comment. He handed her a bottle and touched it with his own. The resinous material made a light thud rather than a crystal ringing sound. He made a face.

"Here's to our exciting evening," he said.

"We'll have to make all the excitement ourselves," Sula said.

His eyes glittered. "Absolutely." He took a sip of his drink, then gave her a reflective look. "I know even less about Lady Sula than I do about Gredel."

She looked at him. "What do you want to know?"

There was a troubled look in his eye. "That story about your parents being executed. I suppose that was something that you said to get close to me."

Sula shook her head. "My parents were executed when I was young. Flayed."

He was surprised. "Really?"

"You can look it up if you want to. I'm in the military because it's the only job I'm permitted."

"But you're still a Peer."

"Yes. But as Peers go, I'm poor. All the family's wealth and property were confiscated." She looked at him. "You've probably got scads more money than I do."

And, she thought, _you're not the first high-class criminal I've slept with, either._

Casimir was even more surprised. "I've never met a whole lot of Peers, but you always get the impression they're rolling in it."

"I'd like to have enough to roll in." She laughed, took a sip of her Fling. "Tell me. If they don't find Julien guilty of anything, what happens to him?"

"The Legion? They'll try to scare the piss out of him, then let him go."

Sula considered this. "Are the Naxids letting _anyone_ go at all? Or does everyone they pick up for any reason join the hostage population in the lockups?"

He looked at her and ran a pensive thumb down his jaw. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Plus he could be hostage for his father's good behavior."

Casimir was thoughtful.

"Where would they send him?" Sula asked.

"Anywhere. The Blue Hatches, the Reservoir. Any jail or police station." He frowned. "Certain police stations he could walk right out of."

"Let's hope he gets sent to one of those, then."

"Yes. Let's."

His eyes were troubled.

Good, she thought. There were certain thoughts she wanted him to dwell on for a while.

* * * *

The next afternoon Sula was in the High City selling cocoa and gathering intelligence. When she returned to Riverside she received a call from Casimir telling her that Julien had been cleared of suspicion by the Legion of Diligence, but that he was remaining in custody as a hostage. "He's in the Reservoir Prison, damn it," Casimir said. "There's no way we can get him out of there."

Calculations shimmered through Sula's mind. "Let me think about that," she said.

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Should we get together and talk?"

There were certain things one shouldn't say over a comm, and they were skating right along the edge.

"Not yet," Sula said. "I've got some research to do first."

She spent some time in public databases, researching the intricacies of the Zanshaa legal system, and more time with back numbers of the _Forensic Register,_ the publication of the Zanshaa Legal Association. More time was spent seeing who in the _Register_ had left Zanshaa with the old government and who hadn't.

Having gathered her data, Sula called Casimir and told him she needed him to set up a meeting with Sergius.

* * * *

Since Sergius and Casimir had resumed their normal lives after the Legion had released Julien to the prison system, Sula was taken to meet Sergius in his office, on the second floor of an unremarkable building in the heart of Riverside.

She and Casimir passed through an anteroom of flunkies and hulking guards, all of whom she regarded with patrician hauteur, and into Sergius's own office, where Sergius rose to greet her. The office was as unremarkable as the building, with scuffed floors and secondhand furniture and the musty smell of things that had been left lying too long in corners.

People with real power, Sula thought, didn't need to show it.

Sergius took her hand, and though the touch of his big hand was light she could sense the restrained power in his grip.

"What may I do for you, Lady Sula?" he asked.

"Nothing right now," Sula said. "Instead, I hope to be of service to you."

The ruthless eyes flicked to Casimir, who returned an expression meant to convey that he knew. Sergius returned his attention to Sula.

"I appreciate your thinking of me," he said. "Please sit down."

At least, Sula thought, she got to sit down this time. Sergius began to move behind his desk again.

"I believe I can get Julien out of the Reservoir," Sula said.

Sergius stopped, then turned his round head toward her. For the first time she saw emotion in his dark eyes, a glimpse into a black void of deep-seated desire that seemed all the more frightening in a man who normally seemed bereft of emotion.

He wanted his son back. Whether Sergius desired Julien's return because he loved his son, or because his son was a mere possession that some caprice of fate had taken from him, it was clear that the deep, burning hunger was there, a need as clear and primal and rapacious as a hungry panther for his dinner.

Sergius looked at her for a long moment, the need burning in his eyes, and then he recovered himself, straightened, and sat in his shabby chair. By the time he clasped his big pale hands on the desk in front of him, his face had again gone blank.

"That's interesting," he said.

Sula sat deliberately in one of the two seats set before the desk. "I want you to understand that I can't set Julien at liberty," she said. "I believe I can get him transferred to the holding cells at the Riverside police station, or to any other place that suits you. You'll have to get him out of there yourself.

"I'll also provide official identification for Julien that will allow him to move freely, but of course -- " Here she looked into the unreadable eyes. "He'll be a fugitive until the Naxids are removed from power."

Sergius held her gaze for a moment, then nodded.

"How may I repay you for this favor?" he asked.

Sula suppressed a smile. She had her list well prepared.

"The secret government maintains a business enterprise used to transfer munitions and the like from one place to another. It's operating under the cover of a food distribution service. Since food distribution is about to become illegal, I'd like to be able to operate this enterprise under your protection, and without the usual fees."

Sula wondered if she was imagining the hint of a smile that played about Sergius Bakshi's lips. "Agreed," he said.

"I would also like ten Naxids to die."

One eyebrow gave a twitch. "Ten?"

"Ten, and of a certain quality. Naxids in the Patrol, the Fleet, or the Legion, all of officer grade; or civil servants with ranks of CN6 or higher. And it must be clear that they've been murdered -- they can't seem to die in accidents."

His voice was cold. "You wish this done when?"

"It's not a precondition. The Naxids may die within any reasonable amount of time, after Julien is released."

Sergius seemed to thaw a little. "You will provoke the Naxids into one massacre after another."

She gave a little shrug and tried to match with her own the glossy inhumanity of the other's eyes.

"That is incidental," she said.

Sergius gave an amused, twisted little smile. It was as out of place on his round immobile face as a bray of laughter.

"I'll agree to this," he said. "But I want it clear that I'll pick the targets."

"Certainly," Sula said.

"Anything else?"

"I'd like an extraction team on hand, just in case my project doesn't go well. I don't expect we'll need them, though."

"Extraction team?" Sergius's lips formed the unaccustomed syllables, and then his face relaxed into the face he probably wore at home, a face that was still, in truth, frightening enough.

"I suppose you'd better tell me about this plan of yours," he said.

* * * *

There were three sets of people who had the authority to move prisoners from one location to another. There was the prison bureaucracy itself, which housed the prisoners, shuttled them to and from interrogations and trials, and made use of their labor in numberless factories and agricultural communes. All those with the authority to sign off on prisoner transfers now consisted entirely of Naxids. Sergius apparently hadn't yet gotten any of these on his payroll, otherwise Julien would have been shifted out of the Reservoir by now.

The second group consisted of Judges of the High Court and of Final Appeal, but all these had been evacuated before the Naxid fleet arrived. The new administration had replaced them all with Naxids.

The third group were Judges of Interrogation. It was not a prestigious posting, and some had been evacuated and some hadn't. Apparently Sergius didn't have any of these in his pocket, either.

Lady Mitsuko Inada was one of those who hadn't left Zanshaa. She lived in Green Park, a quiet, wealthy enclave on the west side of the city. The district had none of the ostentation or flamboyant architecture of the High City -- probably none of the houses had more than fifteen or sixteen rooms. Those buildings still occupied by their owners tried to radiate a comfortable air of wealth and security, but were undermined by the untended gardens and shuttered windows of the neighboring buildings, abandoned by their owners who had fled, either to another star system or, failing that, to the country.

Lady Mitsuko's dwelling was on the west side of the Park, the least expensive and least fashionable. It was built of gray fieldstone, with a green alloy roof, an onion dome of greenish copper, and two ennobling sets of chimney pots. The garden in front was mossy and frondy, with ponds and fountains. There were willows in the back, which suggested more ponds there.

Peers constituted about two percent of the empire's population, and as a class controlled more than ninety percent of its wealth. But there was immense variation within the order of Peers, ranging from individuals who controlled the wealth of entire systems to those who lived in genuine poverty. Lady Mitsuko was on the lower end of the scale. Her job didn't entitle her to an evacuation, and neither did her status within the Inada clan.

All Peers, even the poor ones, were guaranteed an education and jobs in the Fleet, civil service, or bar. It was possible that Lady Mitsuko had worked herself up to her current status from somewhere lower.

Sula rather hoped she had. If Lady Mitsuko had a degree of social insecurity, it might work well for

Sula's plans.

Macnamara drove Sula to the curb before the house. He was dressed in a dark suit and brimless cap, and looked like a professional driver. He opened Sula's door from the outside, and helped her out with a hand gloved in Devajjo leather.

"Wait," she told him, though of course she knew he would wait, because that was the plan.

Neither of them were looking at the van that cruised along the far side of the park, packed with heavily armed Riverside Clique gunmen.

Sula straightened her shoulders -- she was Fleet again, in her blonde wig -- and marched up the walk and over the ornamental bridge to the house door. With gloved fingers -- no fingerprints -- she reached for the grotesque ornamental bronze head near the door and touched the shiny spot that would announce a visitor to anyone inside the house, then removed her uniform cap from under her arm and put it on her head. She now wore her full dress uniform of viridian green, with her lieutenant's shoulder boards, glossy shoes, and her medals.

Her sidearm was a weight against one hip.

To avoid being overconspicuous, she wore over her shoulders a nondescript overcoat, which she removed as soon as she heard footsteps in the hall. She held it over the pistol and its holster.

The singing tension in her nerves kept her back straight, her chin high. She had to remember that she was a Peer. Not a Peer looking down her nose at cliquemen, but a Peer interacting with another of her class.

That had always been the hardest, to pretend that she was born to this.

A female servant opened the door, a middle-aged Terran. She wasn't in livery, but in neat, subdued civilian clothes.

Lady Mitsuko, Sula concluded, possessed little in the way of social pretension.

Sula walked past the surprised servant and into the hallway. The walls had been plastered beige, with little works of art in ornate frames, and her shoes clacked on deep gray tile.

"Lady Caroline to see Lady Mitsuko, please," she said, and took off her cap.

The maidservant closed the door and held out her hands for the cap and overcoat. Sula looked at her. "Go along, now," she said.

The servant looked doubtful, then gave a little bow and trotted into the interior of the house. Sula examined herself in a hall mirror of polished nickel asteroid material, adjusted the tilt of one of her medals, and waited.

Lady Mitsuko appeared, walking quickly. She was younger than Sula had expected, in her earlier thirties, and very tall. Her body was angular and she had a thin slash of a mouth and a determined jaw that suggested that, as a Judge of Interrogation, she was disinclined to let prisoners get away with much. Her dark hair was worn long and caught in a tail behind, and she wore casual clothes. She dabbed with a napkin at a food spot on her blouse.

"Lady Caroline?" she said. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was just giving the twins their supper." She held out her hand, but there was a puzzled frown on her face as she tried to work out whether or not she had seen Sula before.

Sula startled Lady Mitsuko by bracing in salute, her chin high. "Lady Magistrate," she said. "I come on official business. Is there somewhere we may speak privately?"

Lady Mitsuko stopped, her hand still outheld. "Yes," she said. "Certainly."

She took Sula to her office, a small room that still had the slight aroma of the varnish used on the light-colored shelves and furniture of natural wood.

"Will you take a seat, my lady?" Mitsuko said as she closed the door. "Shall I call for refreshment?"

"That won't be necessary," Sula said. "I won't be here long." She stood before a chair but didn't sit, and waited to speak until Lady Mitsuko stepped behind her desk.

"You have my name slightly wrong," Sula said. "I'm not Lady Caroline, but rather Caroline, Lady Sula."

Lady Mitsuko's eyes darted suddenly to Sula, and then she froze with one hand on the back of her office chair. Her mouth parted slightly with surprise.

"Do you recognize me?" Sula prompted.

"I ... don't know." Mitsuko pronounced the words as if they belonged to a foreign language.

Sula reached into a pocket and produced her Fleet ID. "You may examine my identification if you wish," she said. "I'm on a mission for the secret government."

Lady Mitsuko pressed the napkin to her heart. The other hand reached for Sula's identification.

"The secret government..." she said softly, as if to herself.

She sank slowly into her chair, her eyes on Sula's ID. Sula sat and placed her overcoat and hat in her lap. She waited for Lady Mitsuko's eyes to lift from the ID, and spoke.

"We require your cooperation," she said.

Lady Mitsuko slowly extended her arm and held out Sula's identification.

"What do you -- what does the secret government want?" she asked.

Sula leaned forward and took her ID. "The government requires you to transfer twelve hostages from the Reservoir Prison to the holding cells at the Riverside police station. I have a list ready -- will you set your comm to receive?"

Speaking slowly, as if in a daze, Lady Mitsuko readied her desk comm. Sula triggered her sleeve display to send the names of Julien, Veronika, nine prisoners chosen at random from the official posted list of hostages, and -- just because she was feeling mischievous when she made the list -- the Two Sticks' Cree cook.

"We expect the order to be sent tomorrow," Sula said. She cleared her throat in a businesslike way. "I am authorized to say that after the return of the legitimate government, your loyalty will be rewarded. On the other hand, if the prisoner transfer does not take place, you will be assassinated."

Mitsuko's look was scandalized. She stared at Sula for a blank second, and then she seemed to notice for the first time the holstered pistol at Sula's hip. Her eyes jumped away, and then she made a visible effort to collect herself.

"What reason shall I give for the transfer?" she said.

"Whatever seems best to you. Perhaps they need to be interrogated in regard to certain crimes. I'm sure you can come up with a good reason." Sula rose from her chair. "I shan't keep you," she said.

And best regards to the twins. Sula considered adding that, a clear malicious threat to the children, but decided it was unnecessary.

She rather thought that she and Lady Mitsuko had reached an understanding.

Mitsuko escorted her to the door. Her movements were still a bit disconnected, as if her nervous system hadn't quite caught up with events. At least she didn't look as if she'd panic and run for the comm as soon as the door had closed behind Sula's back.

Sula threw the overcoat over her shoulders. "Allow me to wish you a good evening, Lady Magistrate," she said.

"Um -- good evening, Lady Sula," said Lady Mitsuko.

Macnamara waited in the car, and leaped out to open the door as soon as Sula appeared. She tried not to run over the ornamental bridge and down the path, and instead managed a brisk, military clip.

The car hummed away from the curb as fast as its four electric engines permitted, and made the first possible turn. By the time the vehicle had gone two streets, Sula had squirmed out of her military tunic and silver-braided trousers. The blouse she'd worn beneath the tunic was suitable as casual summer wear, and she jammed her legs into a pair of bright summery pantaloons. The military kit and the blonde wig went into a laundry bag. The holster shifted to the small of Sula's back.

The van carrying the extraction team roared up behind, and both vehicles pulled to a stop: Sula and Macnamara transferred to the van, along with the laundry bag. Another driver hopped into the car -- he would drive the car to the parking stand of the local train, where it could be retrieved at leisure.

As Sula jumped through the van's clamshell door, she saw the extraction team, Spence, Casimir, and four burly men from Julien's crew, all bulky with armor and with weapons in their laps. Another pair sat behind the windscreen in front. The interior of the van was blue with tobacco smoke. Laughter burst from her at their grim look.

"Put the guns away," she said. "We won't be needing them."

Triumph blazed through her. She pulled Macnamara into the van, and then because there were no more seats dropped onto Casimir's lap. As the door hummed shut and the van pulled away, Sula put her arms around Casimir's neck and kissed him.

Sergius and the whole Riverside Clique couldn't have managed what she'd just done. They could have sniffed around the halls of justice for someone to bribe, and probably already had without success; but none of them could have convinced a Peer and a judge to sign a transfer order of her own free will. If they'd approached Lady Mitsuko, she would have brushed them off; if they'd threatened her, she would have ordered their arrest.

It took a Peer to unlock a Peer's cooperation -- and not with a bribe, but with an appeal to legitimacy and class solidarity.

Casimir's lips were warm, his breath sweet. Macnamara, without a seat, crouched on the floor behind the driver and looked anywhere but at Sula sitting on Casimir's lap. The cliquemen nudged each other and

grinned. Spence watched with frank interest.

The driver kept off the limited-access expressways and onto the smaller streets where he had options. Even so he managed to get stuck in traffic. The van inched forward as the minutes ticked by, and then the driver cursed.

"Damn! Roadblock ahead!"

In an instant Sula was off Casimir's lap and peering forward. Ahead she could see Naxids in the black-and-yellow uniforms of the Motor Patrol. Their four-legged bodies snaked eerily from side to side as they moved up and down the line of vehicles, peering at the drivers. One vehicle was stopped while the Patrol rummaged through its cargo compartment. The van was on a one-way street, its two lanes choked with traffic: it was impossible to turn around.

Sula's heart was thundering in her chest as it never had when confronting Sergius or Lady Mitsuko. Ideas flung themselves at her mind, and burst from her lips in not-quite-complete sentences.

"Place to park?" she said urgently. "Garage? Pretend to make a delivery?"

The answer was no. Parking was illegal, there was no garage to turn into, and all the businesses on the street were closed at this hour.

Casimir's shoulder clashed with hers as he came forward to scan the scene before them. "How many?"

"I can see seven," Sula said. "My guess is that there are two or three more we can't see from here. Say ten." She pointed ahead, to an open-topped vehicle run partly up onto the sidewalk, with a machine gun mounted on the top and a Naxid standing behind it, the sun gleaming off his black beaded scales.

"Macnamara," she said. "That gun's your target."

Macnamara had been one of the best shots on the training course, and his task was critical. The gunner didn't even have to touch his weapon: all he had to do was put the reticule of his targeting system onto the van and press the go button: the gun itself would handle the rest, and riddle the vehicle with a couple of thousand rounds. The gunner had to be taken out first.

And then the driver of the vehicle, because he could operate the gun from his own station.

A spare rifle had been brought for Sula, and she reached for it. There was no spare suit of armor and she felt the sudden hollow in her chest where the bullets would lodge.

"We've got two police coming down the line toward us. One on either side. You two -- " She indicated the driver and the other man in the front of the van, "You'll pop them right at the start. The rest of us will exit the rear of the vehicle -- Macnamara first, to give him time to set up on the gunner. The rest of you keep advancing -- you're as well-armed as the Patrol, and you've got surprise. If things don't work out, we'll split up into small groups -- Macnamara and Spence, you're with me. We'll hijack vehicles in nearby streets and get out as well as we can."

Her mouth was dry by the time she finished, and she licked her lips with a sandpaper tongue. Casimir was grinning at her.

"Nice plan," he said.

Total fuckup, she thought, but gave what she hoped was an encouraging nod. She crouched on the rubberized floor of the van and readied her rifle.

"Better turn the transponder on," Casimir said, and the driver gave a start, then gave a code phrase to the van's comm unit.

Every vehicle in the empire was wired to report its location at regular intervals to a central data store. The cliquemen's van had been altered so as to make this an option rather than a requirement, and the function had been turned off while the van was on its mission to Green Park. An unresponsive vehicle, however, was bound to be suspicious in the eyes of the Patrol.

"Good thought," Sula breathed.

"Here they come." Casimir ducked down behind the seat. He gave Sula a glance -- his cheeks were flushed with color, and his eyes glittered like diamonds. His grin was brilliant.

Sula felt her heart surge in response. She answered his grin, and then she felt that wasn't enough. She lunged across the distance between them and kissed him hard.

Live or die, she thought. Whatever came, she was ready.

"They're pinging us," the driver growled. One of the Patrol had raised a hand comm and activated the transponder.

The van coasted forward for a few seconds, then halted. Sula heard the front windows whining open to make it easier to shoot the police on either side.

The van had a throat-tickling odor of tobacco and terror. From her position on the floor she could see the driver holding a pistol alongside his seat. His knuckles were white on the grip. Her heart sped like a turbine in her chest. Tactical patterns played themselves out in her mind.

She heard the footfalls of one of the Patrol, walking close. She kept her eyes on the driver's pistol. The second it moved, she would act.

Then the driver gave a startled grunt, and the van surged forward. The knuckles relaxed on the pistol.

"She waved us through," the driver said.

There was a moment of disbelieving silence, and then Sula heard the rustle and shift of ten tense, frightened, heavily armed people all relaxing at once.

The van accelerated. Sula let the breath sigh slowly from her lungs, and put her rifle carefully down on the floor of the vehicle. She turned to the others and saw at least six cigarettes being lit. Then she laughed and sat heavily on the floor.

Casimir turned to her, his expression filled with a kind of savage wonder. "That was lucky," he said.

Sula didn't answer. She only looked at him, at the pulse throbbing in his neck, the slight glisten of sweat at the base of his throat, the fine mad glitter in his eyes. She had never wanted anything so much.

"Lucky," he said again.

She didn't touch Casimir till they reached Riverside, when the van pulled up outside the Hotel of Many Blessings. Careful not to touch him, she followed him out of the van -- the others would store the weapons -- and then went with him to his suite, keeping half a pace apart on the elevator.

He turned to her, and she reached forward and tore open his shirt so that she could lick the burning adrenaline from his skin.

His frenzy equaled hers. Their blood smoked with the excitement of shared danger, and the only way to relieve the heat was to spend it on each other.

They laughed. They shrieked. They snarled ... They tumbled over each other like lion cubs, claws only half-sheathed. They pressed skin to skin so hard that it seemed as if they were trying to climb into one another.

The fury spent itself some time after midnight. Casimir called room service for something to eat. Sula craved chocolate, but there was none to be had. For a brief moment she considered breaking into her own warehouse to satisfy her hunger.

"For once," he said, as he cut his omelet with a fork and slid half of it onto Sula's plate, "for once you didn't sound like you came from Riverside."

"Yes?" Sula raised an eyebrow.

"And you didn't sound like Lady Sula either. You had some other accent, one I'd never heard before."

"It's an accent I'll use only with you," Sula said.

The accent of the Fabs, on Spannan. The voice of Gredel.

* * * *

Lady Mitsuko signed the transfer order that morning. Transport wasn't arranged till the afternoon, so Julien and the other eleven arrived at the Riverside station late in the afternoon, about six.

Sergius Bakshi had a long-standing arrangement with the captain of the Riverside station. Julien's freedom cost two hundred zeniths. Veronika cost fifty, and the Cree cook a mere fifteen.

Julien would have been on his way by seven, but it was necessary to wait for the Naxid supervisor, the one who approved all the ration cards, to leave.

Still suffering from his interrogation, Julien limped to liberty, on the night that the Naxids announced that the Committee to Save the Praxis, their own government, was already on its way from Naxas to take up residence in the High City of Zanshaa. A new Convocation would be assembled, composed both of Naxids and other races, to be the supreme governing body of their empire.

"Here's hoping we can give them a hot landing," Sula said. She was among the guests at Sergius's welcome-home dinner, along with Julien's mother, a tall, gaunt woman, forbidding as a statue, who burst into tears at the sight of him.

Veronika was not present. Interrogation had broken a cheekbone and the orbit of one eye: Julien had called a surgeon, and in the meantime had provided painkillers.

"_I'll_ give them a welcome," Julien said grimly, through lips that had been bruised and cut. "I'll rip the bastards to bits."

Sula looked across the table at Sergius, and silently mimed the word "ten" at him. He smiled at her, and when he looked at Julien the smile turned hard.

"Ten," he said. "Why stop there?"

Sula smiled. At last she had her army. Her own team of three plus a tough, disciplined order of killers who had decided -- after a proper show of resistance -- to be loved.