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The Sugar

by

Mary A. Turzillo

Claudia forced herself to remember: this creature had been a man yesterday. His wings were naked except for a dusting of seal-brown fur like the hair on a man's nude belly. When he settled at the edge of her ledge, she was astonished at the size of those wings. Capable of carrying a dog or a llama into the air, she was sure.

The weeds on the ledge hid his legs, but as he stalked nearer, they seemed deformed. He was upon her in a few strides, and now she saw his toes were cleverer and more articulated than any human's, evolved into intricate manipulating organs. Picking among the rocks, they looked stronger than human hands, capable of clinging to a branch or rock face.

Hands, on rear limbs? Yet his wings were also distorted hands, fingernails at the wingtips, tipping digits like the spokes of a wheel or the veins of a leaf, and tiny thumbnails. These upper thumbs and index fingers of these upper hands could be brought together, with effort, to bring berries or small insects caught in flight to the mouth.

He was so elongated, his legs seeming only sinews, hardly wider than her wrists,

his body only as thick as her leg. His entire mass seemed concentrated in those wings, which as yet half furled around his slim body.

His face was human enough, though his skull was elongated, his nose swept downward and combined with his upper lip into a beak. The nostrils were slits and he had long whiskers, almost catlike -- no, more like the whiskers of an Asian dragon. He had a pronounced overbite, his mouth more adapted to tearing than to chewing.

His eyes were more side-set than a normal man's, but still facing forward enough to permit binocular vision. He was a predator, she was sure.

But not a predator who would attack her. He cocked his head to one side and hopped over to her in his hand-over-hand gait.

Tomorrow he would be a man again, and would not remember being a creature of flight. Nor would he remember her.

She extended a hand and he preened his beak against it. His smell was strong and rich, the smell of rut. He would understand English, though his own language would be song. He had chosen this body, and he would have chosen a language, full-born in his brain, to go with.

She reminded herself with leaden regret that once his transformation was over, she must kill him.

He opened his strange beak and sang to her. Her body sizzled as if a million neurons fired. What was he trying to tell her? He might be introducing himself, he might be asking her how long he had to live, he might be making love to her. But her body responded, a low rapture both aesthetic and sexual.

If she had been who she pretended to be, a changeling on the cusp of otherness, she might accept his overture. She might encourage his advances, present herself to be fucked or even eaten. But she was elutriatrix, minion of the Purity. And he had been selected for extermination.

She shifted her weight and felt for the jewel gun. She would let him have his

day, his flight, his short life as a creature between human and angel. When he came to her as mortal, however, he would be marked with her gem, and she would know him to be delivered up for euthanasia.

He could not be allowed to exist after their transformative day of ecstasy and corruption. No changeling could be allowed to live.

What harm could it do to let him enjoy her? If not her, he would find another to embrace. She knew her own pleasure would equal his; the difference was that her pallid life would go on, she would remember, and most of all, she would not die.

She arranged her body on the warm rocks, cruciform with arms outstretched, ankles crossed, trembling to bend at the knee and part, opening her legs to him in anonymous passion.

He poised himself on those powerful hands before her, then opened his strange mouth and ululated a sentence that was neither human speech, or human music, nor bird call. She melted toward it, her legs weakening and tugging apart. His smell was overwhelming, would have been repulsive if she had not decided to let him enjoy her, and she him.

He placed one of the wing-hands one either side of her waist, and her desire maddened her, more so in her knowledge that she would kill him, and her guilt that she would use him this way.

With a surge, he opened his wings and wrapped them around her. She felt his legs insinuate around her thighs and his darkness and heat cocooned her like the shroud which had squeezed his mortality into the creature of fantasy.

Yet he must die. Yes, yes, fulfill him on his one living day, then!

Furtively, she pulled the jewel gun from her garter holster and slid it between her breasts, held to her by the tightness of her corset.

She felt his legs nimbly gather up her body, while the wings parted with a whoosh so powerful it swept her hair away from her neck. Enormous, they blotted

out the sky, shadow around her like sudden night. He rolled toward the edge of the cliff, and they were falling. She gave herself to desire and panic as the long, long dive continued and his hot cloaca, unfolding around his inner member, pressed against her. Would his blood dissolve her clothing? Indeed would she be acid-burned before this was over? She didn't care.

What was his changeling name? Would she have understood it, had he told her? Indeed, maybe in that courtship song, he had sung both his name and the name he gave her.

They fell, weightless and torn by wind, until he reached out his furred wings and slowed their plunge. He was flying now, and he turned her slowly in his legs so she could watch the earth. Still, he was hot, and his juices bled through her clothing, through the dryness of her skin. He tore at the waist of her trews.

She had not implanted the jewel yet. She could scarcely do so now; she would wait until they landed, drained, on the warm rocks below.

He pressed forward, and her back arched to receive him, her legs tightening in sexual tension. They were racing, they were flying, she and he, assassin and victim, she could only give him her joy and his.

Below was the slow arm of a crop-watering pipe, dragged by a llama. The corn was green in the circle serviced by it; elsewhere it was the pale gold of the dry earth. She saw houses, the double-axe maze of the parish where she and her husband lived, the silver solar collector atop the temple, carts drawn by dogs and camels.

None of this mattered. He had shredded her trews and bodice; he was naked and hot against her bare buttocks, only her corset still untorn. Without thinking, she groped between her breasts for the jewel gun

He swooped toward a ledge she knew from previous hunts. Didn't he see the rocks coming up to meet them? Terror bit through her her lust.

And his legs suddenly loosened. She was falling free, wind whipping her

shredded clothing and long hair.

She held her hands out to protect her skull, then at the last minute pulled her head in and struck the ground, tumbling and scraping her arms and bare thighs.

The impact knocked her breath out of her, and she rolled in panic, dimly aware that the shock of landing itself had triggered her climax.

Her breath came back, painful. She was aware of her clothing hanging in tatters around her hips, the heat of the rocks under her, the cloy of his caustic sweat and its sting still soaking her clothes. When she had come to her senses, she rolled to her elbow and watched his distant, zigzag flight.

Her treads and bodice were ruined. He had not given up his seed, at least to her. More to the point, she had failed to implant the jewel.

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When she awoke the next day curled beside Achille, familiar bleakness returned to her soul, she wondered what to do. Should she lie, claim she had implanted the jewel, but could not trace it to the man who had flown her? Achille stroked her back and she permitted herself tears, tears that only provoked him to endearments and reassurances.

"I was with him," she finally said. "But he didn't let me plant the jewel. I still have it in my corset."

"Flying with the lust-maddened isn't infidelity, Claudia. I would have done the same, if I were an elutriatrix."

She dried her tears angrily on the pillow case and wished she could recapture the fur wing's gift of ecstasy. Despite his words, she could tell Achille was jealous. His eyes were too bright, eager and hurt. But he had known what she wished to be when they married, and he had signed his consent when she formally took her vows.

"How could he fly?" Achille asked. "How could his wings be big enough to carry you both?"

"There is nothing natural about the changed," she muttered, turning her naked back to him. Not an invitation.

"Risking everything like this: is it worth it?" Achille trailed his fingers down her naked back and leaned into a kiss. But she shook off the shudder of desire; she knew it was an echo of her seduction by the fur wing, and she hated herself for feeling it. She heaved herself off the edge of the bed. Her trows and chemise lay on the carpet, torn and caked with secretions from the fur wing. She gathered them wearily, even her spark of anger extinguished, and stuffed them into the cold stove, meaning to burn them later.

*

She bathed and dressed, then went to the bully-shop to her job. She was behind in her accounts and took no lunch hour, nor tea break. After work, she went straight to Purity House, in the White Quarter, to submit her report to Mathride. They would discuss it over tea in celadon teacups. She would confess her mistake, Mathride would console her. It would be all right.

Mathride, wearing a Purity apron to protect her green silk batik, was waiting in the poppy garden. No celadon teapot was in evidence. She did not offer tea to Claudia. Matron Mathride was not pleased.

"Mathride -- "

"Give me the jewel back," Mathride said. "How could you have let him fool you? Now you'll have to find him without the jewel. I'm sorry, Claudia, but I can't say anything good about this affair."

Claudia sank onto a stone bench. "How did you find out about it?"

"My dear idiot, it's all over the city. Ophelie happened to see your flight. Abortive flight, I mean. Sundown came and she tried to mark him. He was the only one out yesterday. He tried to seduce her, too. She chased him all over Vallon-on-Sully sky, but dusk came, and she had to come back."

Claudia swallowed. "Please, Mathride, let me explain. I had no chance at all of implanting the jewel without surrendering to him. It's not forbidden. If he has to die, why not at least let him have the relish of his one illegal day?"

Mathride crossed her arms and challenged Claudia's gaze. "As a woman, I understand, dear. As an elutriatrix, I also understand. But the upper minions are not going to be so understanding. It's fine to fly with them, or rut with them, whatever. But you must catch them. My God, Claudia, right this minute he doesn't know himself what he's become."

Claudia was inconsolable. "Sometimes they remember having taken the sugar."

"But they never remember their day on the other side. Never. And if he takes it again -- "

"I know, I know. You think they stay in changeling form. Longer and longer. There's supposedly a herd of them in the hills north of Soukson. Sightings from balloon overflights. All that."

"Well, yes, all that. The rumored colony. I think it's true. All shapes and sizes. The flighted ones the worst."

"What should I do?"

"What should you do? You know what you should do. Turn yourself in formally. As your matron, I couldn't let this go unremarked even if I wanted. And you should submit voluntarily to discipline."

"How long, do you think?"

"I'd say a week, if you accept scourging in lieu of time. Which I would counsel. Corporal submission shows more contrition."

Claudia rose, suppressing an jolt of longing for the fire she had felt in the changeling's grasp. "I suppose, then, tonight. Get it over with."

*

The temple monitor Sybille, a sacred albina, listened to Claudia's plea and

concluded that she must submit to punishment. Claudia had allowed the Purity to be mocked; she'd failed to mark one of the changelings; she'd even allowed him to keep his seed so he could go on and entice another hunter, or worse, make changeling babies.

Things went badly. Monitor Sybille argued for a whole month of penance. Claudia would have to make up the time at the bully-shop, as her boss there wasn't sympathetic to the methods of the Purity, though the goals were pretty much shared by every sane person in the city. Moreover, the monitor recommended bleeding instead of mere scourging. Claudia was forced to live in the Purity's basement and report each evening after her supper of stone-bread, broth, and vitamins, to be tapped for blood. The blood was to be put out as bait for changelings, although if any were caught, nobody told Claudia about it.

Her head ached from fatigue, and her hands and feet were always cold. Her only reading was the training text for hunting, and she reread it so many times the words ceased to have meaning. The Purity draws out the soul of the changeling by killing the contaminated body which has tasted the sugar, she read. Once the sugar is savored, there is no path to lustration except for the distillation of the soul from the polluted body.

Whiteness is lack of color. So is blackness. The changelings are turned into something else, and they have their own perverted Purity. You must bring to the hunt a sense for the cloying of the defiled body. Only after the hunt, after the changeling has forgotten all about his corruption can the solvent be applied.

And that is, alas, always fatal.

At night, despite her weakness, she lay longing for Achille's big tender hands, his clever lips warming her torpor, playing her like an appassionata. She was cold. She had been cold most of her life. If occasionally her dreams turned to the moments before the fur wing had dropped her, she transmuted these into moments with Achille.

But she assured herself neither she nor Achille would ever take the sugar. Neither would change; they would need be no defensive amnesia. They were good people. Solid. Cool-headed.

She could escape from all this; she had only to go apostate, to end her allegiance to the Purity. Only a small portion of the city's educated people actually belonged to the Purity. Many believed the changelings were a threat, but few were willing to combat them. Civil police fought the illegal trade in sugar, but it was said to be manufactured from blackwort, an invasive weed. The method of its extraction was a guarded secret, known only to criminal elements. Only the Purity attempted to destroy the changelings themselves, by marking them when they were in their changed state, then hunting them down after they came back to mundane reality and had forgotten the ecstasy.

But the Purity was in her blood. It was her mission. It gave her the strength to live her otherwise gelid life.

She had seen a hunt go right, her very first, though she was only an observer. She had ridden deep into the wild country behind Mathride. Both were dressed in green hunting leathers, but only Mathride was armed. They had seen the horse -- a stallion with eyes like cunning flame. Natural animals, too, including wild ponies, ranged the changeling country, but Claudia recognized the human fire behind the eyes immediately. Mathride had climbed on the beast's back and it had vaulted -- no natural animal could jump like that -- over a high stone wall. Claudia ran up to the wall and tried to climb it, but by the time she was able to see over the top, Mathride was striding back through the brush, tucking her jewel gun back in her holster. The horse was standing looking after Mathride, as if puzzled.

Three days later, a higher minion of the Purity had arrested a lumbering giant of a carpenter, Emeus Petrarch. Petrarch denied memory of taking the sugar, or of any change, but his jewel shone in the light of the detector. His weeping common-law wife

had confessed that the day before the hunt had occurred, Petrarch had drunk gallons of water and bloated to half-again his size, then run out into the night. His appeal to be tried in civil court was, as customary, denied.

Petrarch, with the aid of two of his guild-brothers and his common-law wife, plotted an escape, but the Purity tried and convicted him, and he was lustrated with opal gas three days later. Mathride forced Claudia to watch.

"You have to know what you've pledged to do, pledged to cause. This man might have stolen a child to ride away on his back, might have trampled a young mother. But you can leave the Purity, Claudia, remember that. This is your choice."

Claudia kept her allegiance the Purity. Her own mother, with her gentle smiles and encouraging advice had disappeared when Claudia was ten. A changeling shaped like a kinnari, a smiling, deadly angel with wings sprouting from its rump, had been seen in the sky above their parish. Had her mother become a kinnari? Or had the kinnari used its succubus powers to lure her to death? Had the kinnari taken her mother for a flight above Soukson canyon, then dropped her from a fatal altitude? Claudia heard her father and aunts debate the issue endlessly. All Claudia knew is that her gentle, kind, wise mother never came back. Her remaining childhood was bleak and joyless.

Mathride was a pale and bloodless emulation of the mother Claudia eternally missed.

*

Monitor Sybille looked down from her judge's dais. A cuff of her stylish suit peeked from the sleeve of her white liturgical chasuble. She was ancient, her skin tanned and wrinkled from hundreds of hunts. Claudia wondered if someday, if she learned her lesson from this slip, she'd occupy Sybille's seat.

"I've decided to be lenient," said the monitor. "The sentence could go on for another week, but you've shown contrition. Also, we need to find the changeling that

suborned you. I'd recommend, by the way, not submitting again to sexual overtures from a changeling. It's a good way to get close enough to do the implant, but it would seem, young woman, you lose your common sense in the throes."

Claudia called home immediately, but Achille didn't answer. She'd had a few letters and calls from him -- visits were forbidden -- but he'd changed. Her brush with ecstasy had made her eager to start a family, but he changed the subject when she mentioned it.

A Purity novice, smooth-faced and blushing with embarrassment at contact with a jailbird, gave Claudia a ride to her home; she had left her cycle in storage, with orders to have it overhauled and painted dark red, a good color for the Purity.

The house was locked up, and she had to use a key she had hidden in the garden shed.

The furniture was gone.

No, not all the furniture. But the better living room suite, the one with scorpion silk upholstery, was missing, as were the stove and enamel cooler, both of which were almost new.

She didn't have to look hard for the note. It was on her writing desk.

Short. He hadn't even taken the time to write a long, impassioned wriggle-out-of-it note.

Claudia, my piety isn't a match for yours. We aren't a good match. No, it has nothing to do with sex with a changeling --

That angered her, because actually, she hadn't. She had merely started to have sex with the fur wing. An accepted ploy. The most secular citizen regarded it as a duty of the elutriatrix.

-- but everything to do with belonging to a sect so fanatic that you leave your husband, for over a month. You didn't have to submit to your precious Purity's disciplinary action. You could have explained that you have duties here that exempt a

woman from a jail sentence. It's just cold-blooded In fact, every time I think of it, it's more and more infuriating. Don't try to contact me. I've left half of everything, which seems fair.

He hadn't even signed it!

It was so typical of Achille: his passion all turned to jealousy.

Claudia had loved her husband, in fact, she had looked forward to seeing him, kissing him, stroking his soft, black beard. But now she felt furious. Just furious.

Underneath the letter was a pile of unpaid bills. She rummaged the desk for their bankbook. It wasn't there. Since most of their funds were from a handsome bounty she had won for tracking down an amnesiac changeling in another city, Achille's taking half was hardly fair. Not to speak of which, the rental on the cottage would be due -- no, she discovered, was overdue.

She felt like tracking him down and giving him the executionary coup.

*

Her accounts were in a shambles. She had no ready cash, a dozen creditors were dunning her, she didn't know if her job in the bully-shop was still hers. Achille had apparently taken no responsibilities for their mutual accounts while she was gone. And she felt friendless. Achille had taken their joint address book, but what did that matter? All their friends were couples. And none of them were particularly friendly to the Purity.

Fair weather friends. Shallow. How would they feel if a fleet of changelings descended on the city and took their children? It had happened, and as recently as five years ago. It was thought that the changelings in the mountains were children who had been abducted and dosed with the sugar so they remained in their changed state forever. Of course they would have no memory of mundane human life.

The only consolation a parent would have would be the speculation that changelings, if they could stay in their changed shape, were long-lived, maybe

immortal.

And did they reproduce? There had been a case -- actually it was somebody Claudia knew distantly -- of a woman impregnated during a hunt. The child had been born four months early, at home. It emerged like a bundle of sticks in a wet membrane. Immediately, it had unfolded to reveal opalescent compound eyes, spread the membranes of its wings, and flop heaving on the floor. There it lay pulsing and drying for no more than a minute. The husband and grandmother were so shocked they failed to close the window, and watched helplessly through the same window as the newborn fluttered away toward the westward mountains. Not that they would have tried to detain it anyway. The ones resembling Jurassic dragonflies often had stingers.

The mother of that changeling and her husband had died a few years after, leaving the grandmother, who had refused to present further testimony to the Purity. Since the Purity had no legal jurisdiction outside the White Quarter, the grandmother's statement about the child's birth was the only evidence that could ever help medical science understand how such a child could be born.

Oh, there had been others, but those were born in rural areas where you had to wonder if the parents had confabulated a tale to cover up infanticide.

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Claudia needed money fast. She called the bully-shop, and a secretary told her to come in Tuesday next, that they'd filled her position, but they might need a field worker.

Claudia winced. She'd worked in the field as a young girl; she'd gone door to door, collecting debts, intimidating miscreants, generally enforcing minor laws and correcting small infractions. She carried a pistol and a blade, usually a pugio, and when visiting particularly nasty violators, she had a partner, a giant red-haired mute who wore eight sharp fight-rings and could slash your cheek before you opened your

mouth. She much preferred the desk work, soliciting clients and doing intake on government requisitions.

Tuesday next. And this was Wednesday, so that gave her a week without pay. She hoped she herself wouldn't be visited by a bully-shop caseworker. She rummaged through the cupboards to find what Achille hadn't taken and discovered some India tea her mother had sent her, and a cache of chocolate bars. Achille must have missed those; he was a chocolate connoisseur. She made herself an odd lunch of tea and stale biscuits with chocolate. By the time she'd finished, her whole outlook on life was changed. She'd take on another mission from the Purity.

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Mathride embraced her and made her a sandwich of chutney and curried llama. "By God, you're thin, Claudia! I had no idea the Purity was so strict. Eat, eat. There's more where that came from."

Claudia had been prone to corpulence before the prison sentence, so she was not displeased by Mathride's words. Besides, the chocolate had revived her, but you can't live on stimulants alone.

"I'll come to the point, Mathride. Does the Purity still want me? Have I done enough penance for my misdeed?"

Mathride laughed. "My dear, of course. You know yourself now, I'm sure the Purity welcomes you back with open arms. As long as you understand -- "

"I hope so. My husband has abandoned me and my finances are a mess. I need money, Mathride."

Mathride bent forward to speak, her face full of compassion and decision.

Claudia stopped her before she could speak. "I don't need a loan, Mathride. I need real money. I want to go hunting again. But this time I want to go into the main country. The valley other side the mountain. To Soukson."

Mathride sat back. "You think you're free of temptation? There are other ploys

these creatures have to trick us, you know."

Claudia met her gaze. "It was an aberration. A miscalculation. I mistimed it; he dropped me before I expected."

"He may have felt your movements, read your muscles to tell him you have the jewel gun. That could happen again, Claudia. You mustn't improvise like that again. The minute you have contact, unholster and shoot."

"I didn't want to chance missing." Claudia knew in her heart she was lying to herself: she felt sympathy for the fur wing man, and she was aroused by his scent, his airborne strength, his heat.

Mathride filled Claudia's teacup and sat appraising her. "Claudia, you're very loyal. But I sometimes wonder if you aren't too headstrong for the hunt. There are other tasks in the Purity, you know."

"Please, Mathride! I made a mistake. I've had a month to think it over, to review my training."

Mathride rearranged her skirt and looked away from Claudia. "The training manual tells us much about theory, but we learn the mechanics of the hunt from experience."

"Please. I'll take any advice you give me."

Mathride narrowed her eyes and cocked her head. "Well, then, there is a hunt tonight. The moon phase is just right, and besides, we've heard that the sugar is being traded at low prices. The weak-willed may take their chances."

"And the adventurers."

"And adventurers. Claudia, always remember that the policeman has a bit of the criminal in his makeup; the predator can only understand his prey through the channel of his own fear. Cats are skittish because they understand the mouse's terror."

Claudia flushed. Was Mathride too aware of her aberrant impulses?

"Here, Claudia. Here's a map to the part of the territory we're monitoring. No

guarantee she'll show, but if she does, this particular one has a bounty on her head. She's appeared before, every month for over a year. We have no idea who she is in human form, but we think she's responsible for two stranglings."

"She penetrated the city?" Claudia's cheeks prickled with excitement.

"I'm afraid so. Two nonagenarians found with ribs crushed. Murder, yes, but not by a human murderer."

Claudia straightened her back. "How much is the bounty?"

"Ten thousand. But you understand how dangerous this changeling is. You'd be earning your ten thousand. They won't let an elutriatrix with dependents near this job, Claudia. It's very dangerous."

"But they'd trust me."

"I don't think you'd be tempted to indulge your baser desires with this one." She made the warding gesture. "Ugly."

"And female, you say."

"That, too. You understand, there's no guarantee she'll change tonight. We have no idea where she lives in her human form. She might even be related to the poor granny and grampa that were strangled, although changelings seldom descend to getting tangled in their human counterparts' affairs."

Claudia felt her blood beating hard and fast. "Is there any chance I could just kill her in her changeling form?"

"No, dear. You know the rules. And any weapon sufficiently powerful would be all too visible."

"I could -- "

"Claudia, I know you're trained and you're strong and cunning, but trust me, this one is too strong and smart. She was the one that broke Chandoir's neck, though we didn't let it out to journalists."

They sat silent, Mathride expectant, Claudia breathless. She would prevail. She

could not be killed or maimed. Nothing like that would happen to her.

Nothing.

Mathride cocked her head. "Shall I draw up the commission?"

Claudia nodded slowly, excitement banging in her throat.

If Mathride had any further reservations, Claudia was far too inflamed to notice.

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A brilliant clear day, shadows of morning fleeing before the rising sun over the easterly mountains. Birds wheeled above, a cliff swallow harrying a gray-wing hawk. Tender weeds, drenched with dew, sprouted amid rock jumbles. Claudia, shivering, walked downward into the valley, looking back to make sure she could identify the anvil-shaped boulder behind which she'd hidden her pack and her empty tea bottle. Her prey today was land-bound; no chance it would see them from the sky.

She had heard of the smell of snakes, and disbelieved she would recognize it. But only fifteen minutes down the trail, she smelled it, and her heart raced.

A minute later, she almost botched her adventure irreparably by clambering over a tree trunk in the trail. It was an odd tree, the bark green with moss on all sides, not just where it had faced north. She stopped herself just short of straddling it.

It raised itself like a stretching cat and contracted, rolled, shifted with frightening speed.

Claudia was staring at the arched back of the serpent.

She dropped and rolled aside, avoiding the flicking tongue. The thing swept its head back and forth, scanning for prey or predator. Yet, what predator could capture it? It was three times as long as Claudia was tall, and probably outweighed her.

For a horrible moment, Claudia and the snake made eye contact. Claudia braced herself for attack, but none came. The snake's eyes might be very different from human eyes, adapted for movement, or averted vision.

Claudia retreated into a shadow. She had bathed meticulously that morning and

smearred deodorant lotion all over her skin. But the snake might still smell her or feel her vibrations. She watched as the thing roused itself and flicked its tongue over the ground where she had been. Despite her precautions, it probably sensed her traces with its sensitive tongue. And it would feel her heat.

She certainly smelled it. Rank, dusty, insistently female. Like a nest of farm snakes huddled against winter.

Perhaps satisfied that Claudia had fled, the snake arched and raised its head. For a better view? If it were just a huge snake, no.

But this was a snake which had been a woman twelve hours ago, and would be a woman again. Who knew what monstrous senses it might have? Claudia, frozen in the shadow of the boulder behind she had taken refuge, stared at its face.

Ugly, Mathride had called it. Yet it also had a freakish dignity. What woman had this been? The face was flattened at the forehead; the pupils slit in flame-colored irides, and the mouth enormous, flexible, double-hinged, to accommodate prey wider than its body. Its scales above glittered in the sun like sequins of peridot, and underneath of onyx or tarnished steel. But it had crimson lips, and the swept lines of human eyebrows. Its gaze darted about with intelligence.

It was coiling about boulders, rolling its belly against the wet weeds, and flicking its tongue.

Claudia suddenly felt her inexperience. A woman like Mathride had shot upwards of a hundred changelings, while Claudia had a few dozen precious tags to her credit. But what made Claudia superior as elutriatrix was her ability to read the ungoverned desires that led humans to take the sugar. What would the snake woman want, up here in changeling country? The fur wing had lusted, and Claudia had tried to take advantage of that lust.

This woman-snake had dosed herself with the sugar -- though she would deny it tomorrow, not even remember it -- out of lust. More than lust. An insatiable desire to

crush and envelope. An unquenchable anger at everything that was Other, everything that had not become her own.

In her own life, this woman probably suffered silently as she saw the world shared, as she had to give up things, desire everything, from baubles to control over the lives of her children, husband, friends, enemies. She might suppress her rapacity, be a good citizen. Until she found herself, one long spring evening, with a palm full of forbidden sugar.

Who had given her the sugar? It didn't matter. Claudia's job was to tag her with the jewel gun and escape alive. In human form, the snake-woman would be easy to track down and execute. Claudia wouldn't even have to be present; the jewel would be proof enough.

The snake raised its enormous head and regarded Claudia.

Her head. Once forced to look into the eyes, Claudia thought, her: a person. Front-set, like a human's: predator eyes. Claudia knew this creature had a human brain. A snake, though possessed of quite adequate eyesight, uses its eyes relatively little. The distortion of the skull to make the eyes so unsnake-like were what made this creature so ugly. Snakes are not ugly to those who understand economy of function. Those human eyes betrayed that economy.

Claudia forced herself to confront the changeling. "What is your name?" Occasionally, a changeling would tell. It made gathering the changeling in its later form, back in the city, so much easier.

The snake made no sound. Claudia knew snakes had no vocal cords, hissing being their only sound. Most "heard" through vibrations. But this wasn't really a snake; it was some woman's platonic ideal of a snake, embodying the impulse to hug and swallow.

It was useless to run. The snake felt her, and no doubt saw her, too. Its enormous coils could push against the rocks and fling its body at Claudia more swiftly

than Claudia could even blink. She had made a mistake by approaching its territory so carelessly. She was a dead woman unless she thought of something.

Claudia saw the snake's head rear back just the slightest. It was going to strike. At the last minute, Claudia threw herself to one side and at the same time fired the jewel gun.

The jewel hit the snake in its open mouth. Had her lucky hit had lodged in the Jacobson's organ? The snake shook its massive head, whipping back and forth like a bucking stallion. Claudia snatched up a rock and threw it at the snake's mouth. But she misjudged its throes and missed.

The snake rolled on the ground, tail lashing ferociously. Claudia dropped to her side and hugged a boulder for shelter. The snake, even deprived of its Jacobson's organ, knew where she was, and struck forward. It wrapped a loop around her legs, and with its coils seethed up to her waist.

The face, that unnatural face, hung, like a cauldron pink with bloody milk, in front of her eyes. The venom fangs were brilliant, ivory and sharp.

Claudia's left arm was cinched numb, but with her right she grasped the gun and bashed at the dagger-tooth near her cheek.

The snake recoiled and slackened.

Claudia, inflamed now by terror, whipped the gun back and forth, hammering its fangs.

The snake, concerned for its own safety now more than with consuming Claudia, uncoiled and retreated, and when it let loose her legs, she stumbled upright and ran pell-mell.

No cave would protect her. No tree or ledge would be too high for the snake to climb. Her mount was three miles down the trail, and she did not stop for her water or her pack.

Only when she was throwing her leg over the mule did she realize she'd

dropped the jewel-gun.

*

Mathride clapped her cup down on the tea table and pressed a silk kerchief to her forehead. "They won't give you the bounty, dear. Not until the human counterpart of the changeling turns up."

"Any leads yet?"

"Not really. The greater minions are worried about the gun, too."

Claudia frowned. "The changelings can't use it for anything. It's just a marking tool."

"They could examine it, work out how to avoid being tagged."

"Be serious. They only stay in changeling form for a day. We don't even know if they retain human memories in changeling form."

"That's been the theory, that they lose memory both ways. But they're clever. And you know, some of them may stay as changelings."

"You're not going to cite that polemic about a thousand changelings for every one we see."

Mathride rose and started pacing. "Who knows? They're awfully clever for creatures with short memories. And people disappear all the time, never to be seen again. Suppose they've found some way to stay crossed over?"

"What way? People who disappear, aren't they almost always victims? Don't we find their poisoned or strangled bodies in ditches and lakes?"

Mathride sat down again and looked Claudia in the eye. "Some upstream in the Purity have been experimenting with the sugar."

"How do they get it? It's -- "

"It's extracted from *Salvia cabala*. Blackwort. Yes, there's a trick to refining the alkaloid, and yes, it's illegal to cultivate blackwort, but my dear Claudia, the weed grows wild. Fields and fields of it. Farmers burn the fields, but it comes back. Llamas

and goats eat it and go into convulsions. If you milk an animal and give the milk to a child, that child has hallucinations for weeks, nightmares maybe for life. And maybe those children are specially susceptible to the sugar. Maybe they crave it, and when somebody offers -- "

"You think people go out and try to recruit changelings?"

"Of course, dear. And the Purity -- not one of the upper minions, the head herself -- has an idea for you."

Claudia knew what was coming.

"You're well known as an elutriatrix, in the city. But outlying farm villages -- well, it would be interesting to see who's pushing the stuff."

"You think there's a profit motive?"

Mathride shrugged.

Claudia said, "It can't be profitable. We kill too many, plus they don't remember taking it."

"Who knows? Maybe there's some other incentive." She leaned forward and grabbed a hank of Claudia's hair. "Your face isn't very distinctive -- am I destroying your self-pride? What I'm saying is, you could cut your hair and work as a farm hand. Ask questions. Give it three weeks, I'll bet you'll learn something."

Claudia felt the beginnings of pique rise in her throat. "I don't have either the skills or the strength to hoe or plow."

"This is harvest season, Claudia. The time that blackwort reaches its peak and dies back. The time most changelings cross over. We want you to gather information."

Claudia sat fuming.

Mathride got up to leave, then looked back at Claudia. "Oh, and we think the snake-woman you tagged may be in Puy Leveque. That's where we're sending you, my dear. Two for the price of one. Find her, get your bounty. Find who's feeding our people the sugar, get glory and fame. Claudia, go. Take your chance." She bent and

clasped Claudia's hand. "This will be good for you."

*

And it was. Claudia let her house go and sold her remaining furniture. She hadn't earned the bounty for the snake woman -- yet -- but she was given expense money, and so she took up residence in the small village of Puy Leveque. She considered masquerading as a boy, but in the end simply let her short hair emphasize the childlike persona she chose. She claimed she was the distant cousin of people who had once owned the old Argate farm. She was looking for work; had been a city girl and would need training.

She was hired at the inn as chambermaid.

It was ideal. The other two women who worked there were gossips, and inside a week, she knew all the business of everybody in the town.

They were burning fields of blackwort, and everybody had odd dreams. Claudia dreamt of huge warm membranous wings enfolding her, then claws in her back, then flying above the church, the town, the fields, all the bright blazing earth.

In the dreams, she flew with an unseen companion and promised to keep his secrets.

At the beginning of the second week, as Claudia was at her afternoon tea break, a gaunt woman with luminous green eyes passed through the kitchen. The woman was elegantly dressed, but had a bad cough.

"Who is that?" she asked Lana, the older gossipy maid.

"That's the boss's mistress, Athenzi Proudnon," Lana said sharply. "Don't stare at her; she's sensitive about her position here."

"Shouldn't be," said Belle, the other maid. "Her folks -- the Proudnon is from the suburbs -- is moneyed, and she don't need to dance attendance on an innkeeper, one that seldom shows his face. Too good for him, my thought."

Claudia averted her eyes, but when Miss Proudnon got up from her table in the

tea room, it was too much of a temptation. She had to follow the gaunt woman out of the dining room and into the kitchen garden. There was a glow about her, and not a healthy glow. Claudia regretted leaving the jewel detector under her pillow, but she was sure Athenzi Proudhon was the snake woman.

Did Athenzi Proudhon realize her cough was because the jewel, invisible to normal human eyes, was stuck in her throat? Claudia quickly cut a bouquet of late roses and found the woman walking in the front garden.

"Miss Proudhon, the management asked us to give you these. May I take them to your room?" Claudia hadn't figured what she'd say when "the management" contradicted her story, but she'd deal with that when time came.

Miss Proudhon smiled and held out her hands for the bouquet. Claudia almost shouted when she saw the broken teeth, but instead just smiled and offered a ribbon from her pocket to tie the roses up.

"Thank you," said the Proudhon woman. Her voice was gravel and distant thunder. Vocal chords torn. She buried her nose in one of the roses, then pulled away. "I seem to have lost my sense of smell. Beautiful, though."

"May I -- "

"No, no need. I was going up anyway. I'll just get a vase from the glass room."

A leaf of blackwort had somehow come entangled in the bouquet. Miss Proudhon looked at it blankly, then flicked it off and it fluttered to the pathway gravel.

Claudia curtseyed, turned, and ran.

*

That night the fumes were thick, giving an odor like incense to the entire world. It was impossible to eat, because every flavor was defeated by the sweet acrid blackwort. Claudia was afraid of the black wings awaiting her beyond sleep's threshold, so she went walking in the kitchen garden. The moon was bright despite the smoke from burning fields, and it cast black shadows of everything there: herbs, pear

and hazelnut trees, even the last roses. The roses were black in the dark-and-light of moonlight.

Claudia had the detector. She also had a blinding crystal and a stiletto with which she could, if the moment was right, stun and then dispatch Miss Proudhon. There would be no difficulty; the minute it happened, the Purity would extract her and the changeling snake-woman from the village, and it would all be over. Claudia would be, for a time at least, rich.

But there was the other assignment, to find out how the sugar was produced and forced upon yearning but innocent people -- like the woman Athenzi Proudhon had been before she was corrupted.

Should she dispatch the snake-woman now, freeing her soul from the evil of the sugar and the change? Or should she merely verify that she had the right person, identify the jewel caught in the woman's throat?

Whichever, it would be best to know whether she had, indeed, identified her quarry.

So, she crept quietly up the stairs, blinding crystal in her pocket, holding the detector in front of her. The detector's handle pulsed with the closeness of the jewel, harder and harder. Claudia had been with others hunting down changelings, but she had never been the one to carry the detector. Its pulse intoxicated her, like the beat of sensuous music, like the insistent rock of sex.

Perhaps it was the pervasive smoke of the blackwort.

At the head of the stairs, she stopped. The signal was coming from the Lily room, the second best suite. Claudia stopped for a moment to consider. Miss Proudhon might not be alone. Indeed, it was best to leave the actual execution for another time. She'd learn more about the production of blackwort and sugar.

Besides, she had never stabbed a real person, only sacks of grain and butchered swine, when she had been in training in the White School.

But music came from behind Miss Proudhon' door and strange, colored shadows flashed in rays from the crack under the door. Something odd was going on. Claudia pressed her ear to the door, in an agony of fear that she would be discovered and have to use the stiletto immediately.

The door swung open, knocking her to her knees.

She looked up into a face she had seen before, except then it was elongated, the skull made lighter by the change of phenotype. He heaved her to her feet, then threw her to the floor inside, knocking the breath out of her. The blinding crystal fell out of her pocket and rolled away.

She struggled to breath, and looked up into curious, human eyes.

When she had seen that face before, it had been between enormous wings.

*

"I followed you here," he was saying. "Foolish, I know. You could kill, if I let you. No -- don't get up. This gun's a real one: it's loaded with lead, not jewels. Your stiletto won't be much good against that, will it?" He crushed the blinding crystal under his heel.

"The jewel," she said. "How do you have the jewel, when I didn't get a chance to shoot you in the changeling country?"

"I don't know anything about that. I don't remember being a changeling, you realize that. Nonetheless, someone has planted a jewel here, an invisible jewel. In a while, I expect you'll shine your detector on it, and it will be all too visible. I don't know. But I do know this: I do not deserve to be hounded and killed."

"You don't remember," Claudia said reasonably. "But sin is sin, remembered or not."

"No. I went to bed one night and awoke two days later, ravaged with hunger and thirst, almost half my body weight gone. It took two weeks for me to walk again unaided. I did not do this to myself."

She breathed in, half-expecting the ruttish smell she'd sensed when he had flown with her. But there was only the acrid smoke of blackwort. Sugar in the making.

He wasn't the one who had the jewel.

"Where is Athenzi Proudhon?" she asked. She was the authority here. He had no right, gun or no.

He shrugged, not even bothering to look at her.

"Please," she said. "I am not going to kill you. I'm supposed to find Athenzi Proudhon. The woman who was a snake on the other side."

A hand landed on her shoulder.

She shrieked and looked round. It was the Proudhon woman, and she had woven one of the roses into her coronet braid. In the presence of the detector, the jewel in her throat glowed so bright there would have been no need for a lamp in the room. Claudia turned her head away from the brightness.

"We could shoot you," rasped Proudhon. "But we'd rather you knew how we came to find each other, and you."

Claudia straightened her back like a school girl, and listened.

*

"My name is Benedict, Benedict Uzerche," the man began. "I was a surveyor in the area south of the White Quarter. You'll find, by the way, that many of your victims come from around the very quarter where the Purity reigns supreme. I awoke one morning to discover that I'd been a victim of the sugar. Yes, supposedly we have no memory, but the illness that struck me had many elements that made me wonder. How had I lost so much weight in one day and night, for example?"

Proudhon voice was deep and raspy, but she interjected, "In my case, it was the broken teeth. The missing day, and the broken teeth. My lover, the innkeeper, said I'd gone off on a mysterious errand. He found me in that bed -- " she motioned to the high, sumptuous bed " the day after, with a throat injury somebody -- you? -- gave

me."

"Humanity is evolving," said Benedict. "We are its first steps beyond the static form. The Purity knows this. They themselves collect the blackwort and extract its alkaloids. They themselves distribute the sugar. And none need ask. It is done at the hand of the matriarchs of the Purity."

"I had hoped to reach that echelon," Claudia said, more to herself than to them. The stiletto's handle was slippery with sweat in her hand. She wanted to drop it. She did not want to hear what these two said.

"You won't reach it," Benedict said shortly. "You're their tool."

"But why?" she said, turning on Proudhon. "Why would they kill, if you are innocent?"

The two were silent. Then Benedict stretched out his hand and showed her the dark webbing, still present. "Because they call us imperfect."

"And we never have enough of the sugar to stay on the other side."

"But they are burning the fields!" Claudia said. "Surely there is enough to keep you both there, you can return again and again, you could stay -- "

Proudhon and Benedict shook their heads. "The Purity guards it carefully. Under their reign, the fields are burned. A farmer who refuses -- and who would refuse, when they claim the changelings kill old men and steal children? -- a farmer who refuses loses his land. There is only enough sugar synthesized for the occasional visitor. The occasional experiment."

"Not all come back, though," Claudia pointed out. "Do they kill those that don't return?"

"Some," rasped Proudhon, "escape. We think -- we don't know -- but we think that there are fields of blackwort on the other side. And changelings who remember enough to be able to purify it."

Claudia tried to absorb this. She turned over in her mind that these were

criminals, that they trafficked in the sugar and meant to kill her so they could go on.

"You're lying," she whispered.

Benedict shrugged and steadied the aim of the gun at her. "We don't care if you believe us. Your Mathride is as innocent as you. But the albino harpy, Sybille -- do you know what they use your blood for?"

"For bait," she whispered.

Benedict shook his head. "One step in the synthesis of the sugar is to anneal it to human blood. Those who take the sugar purified with your blood -- and there will be many of them -- will have some faint redolence of your desire."

"Desire," she echoed.

"They will be, in one way, your children," Proudnon rasped. The jewel in her throat glowed so bright Claudia squinted, wishing she could turn off the detector.

"You are lying." But she was beginning to believe. It was the smoke, and the presence of corrupted souls.

"We have to kill you. There is no choice," murmured Benedict. The fur wing man.

Proudnon and Benedict looked at her with great sadness. Her attention flagged, her mental powers sapped by smoke and doubt. Proudnon snatched the stiletto, then placed its point beneath Claudia's left breast.

"No." She suddenly saw a way out. "No. Do you have any of the sugar? I will be your spy. I will not come back from the other side, even when I change to my human form."

Benedict said, "It doesn't work that way, Claudia."

"You know my name."

"I learned everything about you, your thoughts, everything in the other country. I knew your name. It is part of evolving past being human."

Claudia sat up tall and proud and looked at Proudnon. "I'm sorry I shot you,

Athenzi. We were both governed by hunger. My hunger was for glory, for vengeance, for -- for a hundred things that had to do with making myself right with the top hats of the Purity. And with anger at my husband for abandoning me when I was in prison. And to feel passion, to burn with the joy I felt when -- but no. Your hunger - I don't know what it is, but I felt it. I respect that. I ask you not to kill me."

Proudhon turned away. "You injured me. I don't care about your motives." But tears welled in the dark eyes.

To Benedict, she said, "I flew with you in an act of love and desire. We were one in that. I don't care that we didn't know each other; we were creatures abandoned to yearning. To passion."

Benedict looked at her, but the gun did not waver.

She had been a fool. They were the clever ones.

"Please," she begged, and didn't know if she believed or not. She needed time. If she agreed with them, she would have time to escape. "I will take your sugar. I'll be a criminal, like you. What else do you want from me?"

Proudhon's eyes were hard and unforgiving. So were Benedict's.

*

She awoke with a mouth dry as a kiln and a head roaring chaos. Her eyes felt seared shut. She felt baked, cooked, burned by thirst. Water was dribbling onto her chin, and she made a weak attempt to tear her parched lips apart and capture it.

"Open," said someone, "that's right. That's a brave girl. Oh - pen."

The voice sounded like Achille's. But Achille was gone, betrayed her. It was a man, but who --

"It's me. Achille. Don't try to open your eyes just yet." Something icy and soothing wet her lashes and seeped between her lids. "Open your mouth, just a smitch."

She couldn't get her lips apart. But fingers probed and wetness dribbled, her

throat afire --

"Swallow, Claudia. Try swallowing."

She tried, but her throat felt like a tunnel of ash. "It hurts," she tried to say, but no sound came from her mouth.

Her eyes. The brightness hurt them, but she had to see where she was --

A strange room, very domestic. She could see an abstract painting, all red clouds and dusty swirls over Achille's shoulder. It had been his when they married. She must be in Achille's house. His new house, where she had never been before.

Her hands fumbled for the cup he was holding to her lips, but fell away. Too weak. Too dry and weak.

He tipped the cup up and she drank eagerly until he took it away.

"That fever will rise again if you drink too fast." He got up and she watched as he crossed over to a dressing table -- a piece of furniture from their old house -- where the pitcher of water set. "Can you talk?"

She made a greater effort, and suddenly she could. "Achille, what happened? How did I get here? You left me, and here I am in your new house."

He came and dropped into a chair beside the bed, then looked searchingly into her face. "That's what I'd like to know. A group of hunters -- not the Purity, ordinary farmers out to shoot hawks -- found you in the outcountry. Near Soukson."

"And brought me here? I don't understand. How did they find you?"

He gave a long-suffering sigh. "They didn't. They assumed you'd been injured in a hunt, so they took you to the Purity, where you were recognized. Mathride collected you and brought you here. Good thing it was Mathride, too."

"Why? I wasn't hunting for changelings as monsters, just one human who had changed and then changed back. At least, I don't think -- "

"Mathride didn't think you'd been hunting, either. Claudia, you'd lost almost a third of your body weight in a period of two days. There's only one way that happens.

But the fever -- "

She tried to raise herself on the pillow. "Achille, I was not a changeling. I didn't take the sugar and go over."

He looked at her, a cynical smile on his face. "Nobody has to know. I'll pretend I don't know. But you need to hide until you look more fit."

Claudia sank back onto the pillow. Her eyes were too dry to weep, and presently they closed again, and she slept.

When she awoke, Achille was dripping cold water into her mouth again. She shook away his hand and, with major effort to get her dry tongue around the words, said, "That letter you wrote. You took half of the money, half of our household things."

He looked away. "That was a mistake. You know I'm a hothead."

Even taking a deep breath made her wince, as if her lungs were scorched. As if she had been screaming. "I need to talk to Mathride."

He cast her a hooded glance. "Mathride can't come here. It's going to look suspicious enough as it is. You have to get plumped out enough so nobody suspects what happened."

"What do you think happened?" she asked harshly. She didn't trust Achille. He had changed from a lover to a nurse -- or captor.

He wandered to the window, hands in his pockets, and gazed out at a dry garden, autumn stalks presaging long barren cold. "When we first married, I listened to all your talk about the Purity. I even read some of the texts, although half the time they contradicted themselves and made no sense. I think what happened is you changed. I realize you don't remember. That's part of it, isn't it?"

She thought about this. Could the two changelings in human form have forced her to take the sugar? Had she taken it voluntarily?

What had she become?

He continued, "You became something much lighter than you are in your

human form. You lost a good portion of your body mass. I've read witness accounts. The extra mass boils away, like a steam or mist. Relatives standing near the changeling have been scalded by it. But when you return to human form, what happens? The extra volume just isn't there. If the process were entirely natural, you'd die. But it isn't. It's thaumaturgical, and it's possible to live, just barely, if, when you change back, you drink and drink and drink."

She tried to sit up. "I'd remember. Surely I'd remember. Maybe not the change, but if I'd taken the sugar, I'd remember it."

He crossed to the table and poured her another glass of water. This time crushed blossoms floated in it. Lobelia? Hydrangea? "Drink up. You look like a twist of baker's parchment."

It tasted bitter, and good. She drank until the petals clung to her lips, then held the glass out for more.

Instead, he grasped her under her arms and pulled her to a standing position. "Can you walk? Do you want to see what I'm seeing?"

Haltingly, she shuffled to a wall where he'd hung an old mirror. She recognized it from their old home. It was framed in painted glass, the border made to picture lily pads and dragonflies, the mirror itself the pond, standing vertical in defiance of common sense. She looked into the wavery mirror and saw the pinched face of an old woman. The hand she brought to her mouth in shock was a claw.

"Drink," Achille said.

*

Mathride came two days later.

"Of course you're innocent," Mathride said. "I'll even believe it. I wish I could have you mesmerized, though. Sometimes the worst ones remember what they became, under the mesmerist's spell."

The worst ones? Mathride pretended to think her innocent, but compared her to

one of the worst? She was stronger now, and had had time to think. Moreover, Achille had brought her some of the Purity's texts, leathery thick volumes full of contradictions and sad truth.

*

"They caught the one who seduced you," said Achille several days later.

"I don't want to see it," Claudia said.

"I think you should be there. He's denying it, of course, but another elutriatrix shot him and the jewel is lodged in his heart."

"That's -- convincing. Did they try him yet? In a Purity court, or civil?"

"Civil. It's faster. In fact, it's over already." Achille's forehead wrinkled as he squinted at her. "I don't understand why the jewel didn't kill him. Lodged in his heart."

Claudia was brushing her hair, which had grown blonder since her ordeal, in front of the dragonfly mirror. "Silly, that's easy. The jewel is thaumaturgic. It can produce very minor effects in this world, or on the other side, but its main effect is producing light only the pure can see.

Mathride entered the room. "You look fine. Put a scarf on your head, and a vizard. If you're recognized, say you've reconciled with Achille."

"Can't you come with me?"

Mathride looked away. "We'll talk later."

*

Executions were in a roundabout at the end of Rue Clev, which divided the White Quarter from the rest of the city. A crowd had gathered, and scarlet ropes kept them from the iron cages in which Proudhon and Benedict were held.

Athenzi Proudhon was the first to go. A man -- Claudia assumed it was her innkeeper lover -- stood by her, holding her hand through the cage bars. At once point, Athenzi put the hand to her cheek and the innkeeper leaned his head against the cage bars. He drew away again and wiped his face of tears.

Claudia looked away from the spectacle and noticed a woman whose face would have been pretty save for the grim hatred she radiated. She was staring at the two, Proudhon and the innkeeper. Her gaze was icy and Claudia felt she was keeping herself in check not to leap out and claw at the lovers.

If that woman ever took the sugar -- and who knows, maybe she had, or would soon -- she would be a tiger.

An officer of the Purity -- Claudia didn't recognize her -- peeled the innkeeper's fingers from the cage bars and led him away. He shrouded his anguish with a black kerchief.

Benedict was in the other cage.

Achille took her arm and tried to lead her away, but she stood rooted to the spot. Benedict stared at her with a mixture of resignation and something else -- hatred? Yearning?

As the crowd's attention was drawn to Proudhon's elutriation, Claudia worked her way closer to Benedict's cage. He looked thinner. Thin enough to have been through the change to winged creature and back again?

She had been to elutriations before; she didn't need to watch what happened to Proudhon.

The leather cover descended. The crowd made a single gasping sound as the grenade of elutriating gas was inserted through a flap on the side. The woman's death would be quiet, no pain. Some convicts tried to hold their breath, tried to avoid the gas, but in the end, they would suck in their death, their execution. Some perhaps at that moment wished they had shrunk away from the sugar as fearfully as they did now from the gas.

The crowd jostled back, again making a soughing sound, as if they constituted one animal. How many miscreants were in that crowd, learning to be vigilant against their desire for flight, or lust, or gluttonous ingestion? That was the point of the public

executions.

But Claudia had locked eyes with Benedict. He was alone. His family, if he had one, had either been barred from the ceremony or had voluntarily absented themselves, unable to bear the sight of his death.

Behind her, the crowd was intent on Athenzi's final drama. A man screamed.

Benedict spoke to her. "Claudia."

Her skin prickled.

"You were a thing of fire," he said. "I remember that."

"Come away," Achille hissed. "He's mad. He will drag you with him, his guilt, his depravity!"

But Benedict paid him no mind. "We let you have the sugar, all of it, and watched as you consumed your own flesh with your heat. Athenzi and I watched as your body began to seethe. It boiled, Claudia, your flesh was incandescent."

"I don't believe you," said Claudia, but she felt the burning he spoke of in her blood.

"We watched," Benedict continued. "Steam arose from your body as you shook yourself and stood erect. And you changed."

"Claudia!" Achille shouted in her ear. "Come away! He's lying!"

It it were true, Claudia was guilty as well. She had taken the sugar voluntarily, even if she had forgotten.

Achille grabbed her arms and tried to pull her back, away from Benedict in his cage. But she pulled away, then stood, transfixed.

"My God, they'll have you," Achille said. As if afraid she would change at that very moment and tear his heart from his breast, he gave her arm one last furious shake, then turned and walked swiftly away.

"You were all robed in feathers, feathers that were your hair and skin, feathers of flame. Your eyes were hot, like blazing ingots," Benedict went on. "When you tried to

stand, Athenzi and I were afraid to look at you. But you were beautiful. And you screamed. Just one note, like a thousand trumpets."

Claudia spoke in a husky voice. "I don't believe you. Human flesh cannot become fire."

"You were fire, though." Benedict's voice was steady and dreamlike. Someone -- perhaps the Purity, or perhaps a friend -- had perhaps given him something to calm him for the elutriation. "You were tall and your face was human, like your own face, but too bright and fierce to look upon. Your form was human, except that you had enormous, flaming wings instead of arms. And feathers of fire."

"The Purity never saw a creature like that in the other country."

"The Purity doesn't see everything. They don't see the best changelings, the ones who are most successful. Who range far and evade their hunts."

"I don't remember -- " Then she bit her lip.

Benedict laughed sadly. "You took enough sugar for two people. Athenzi and I had found each other because I was tracking you. I had suspected my change, because my friends saw me before and after. You were the hunter who did not plant her jewel that day."

"How did you know -- ?"

"Elutriatrices may be suborned, Claudia. They have friends on both sides."

"Who?"

"Nobody you know. An elutriatrix who was tempted, let us say. Research and espionage have their dangers. Athenzi and I had found each other and suspected we were changelings. We went to Puy Leveque because it was rumored that someone there refined the sugar. And don't ask who."

"You are telling me this to seduce me."

He laughed again. "Claudia, you are already seduced. But listen. You struck the gun from my hand -- that was brave of you, and stupid -- and snatched up the sugar. I

don't know why you ate it; you could have taken it as evidence so we could be tried."

Claudia threw off her self-doubt and hissed, "I wish I had been the one who caught you. I would never take sugar, even to escape -- "

"Taking enough sugar for two made you extraordinary. Your body burned itself from flesh into energy. You rose and saw that you could not stand at full height inside the room. So you went to the window and with your burning hands -- "

"No! You are lying!"

" -- with blazing hands melted the window glass, slid through and fell a few feet before you caught an updraft and soared away. We didn't see you again."

"Your kind killed my mother."

He was silent. The crowd had finished shouting and Claudia could hear their feet swarming toward Benedict's cage. And toward her. She stepped back.

Benedict raised his voice over the sounds of the approaching crowd. "Is your mother dead?"

The executioners from the Purity approached. The leather enclosure over Benedict's cage swung as they tested the ropes holding it above him. One of the Purity -- they were masked, and Claudia didn't recognize her -- prepared the canisters. The enclosure dropped, and she had only the memory of Benedict's eyes watching her, calm with some drug. And with knowledge.

She felt a touch on her arm, turned and found Achille had come back. Had he listened? He seemed cautious, as if she might even now combust and fly, blasting him to the ground or branding him.

What would she now? Would she find sugar and eat it?

What would she be?

