

Sisters of the Beanathar

Science Fiction from a Rogue Asteroid

Coira Clarke must literally give an arm to save her life,
but can she trust the mysterious snake healers, and what else
will it cost her?

by Charlotte Henley Babb

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Snake Healers

Coria Clarke sat in the healers' outer pod, bracing herself against the agony in her left arm. The cut wasn't that bad, no more than a lucky scrape from a depth dweller's blade that had connected before its owner died.

But it burned like the Core itself, worse than any infection she'd ever seen, burning the flesh black and moving up her arm almost as she watched. The service medics just shook their heads and suggested she get her affairs in order. Coria didn't give up that easily. She'd nosed around every contact she had, from The Man to the old Klecovan who ran the Full Plate on L3. They all said the Beanathar were her only hope.

At least the place was clean, not the smoky, reeking, voodoo lair she'd expected. She could hear the panesang dripping out its hypnotic music somewhere behind the exam pod.

Nobody would talk to her about how the Snake healers worked, but they all said she couldn't last without their treatment. Finally a green-scaled hand beckoned her to enter the exam pod. Coria steadied herself on her feet before she rose. Even to a healer she would not betray weakness.

The Beanath gestured towards a chair. She said nothing. The humanoid part of her body was only about five feet tall, but her reptile tail coiled underneath her, eight or more feet of green-scaled muscle and bone. Coria had heard that the Beanathar trained as warriors or bodyguards could launch a venomous strike from twelve feet away. She didn't want to know if healers had the same ability.

Coria sat down and the chair adjusted to her body weight and length. Coria did not release her arm. The Beanath passed her hands over Coria, reading her aura. She took the arm gently and laid it on the armrest. Though the Beanath's movements were gentle and slow, Coria nearly cried aloud with the pain. It had gotten worse in the minutes she had sat, waiting.

“It must come off,” hissed the Beanath, her forked tongue flickering briefly over Coria’s arm. “But you can survive if you accept treatment.”

“Cut off my arm? No.” Coria tried to sit up, but found that her center of gravity had moved. The healer held her in place with one finger on her chest.

“Then you die, perhaps a week, perhaps less. When the poison reaches your heart, you will break your ribs in convulsive pain.” The Beanath’s face was impassive, her eyes dark green with a vertical slit that narrowed as she inspected Coria’s arm again. She held Coria’s wrist and flicked her tongue again, several times.

The pain phased out as her hand went limp. Coria did not dispute the Beanath. While they were not trusted implicitly, not one had ever been known to lie. Would Coria give her left arm to live?

Yes.

“How much do I lose? All of it?”

“With immediate surgery, you can save the section above the elbow. In five hours, we will have to take the shoulder as well. This has been neglected far too long as it is.” The Beanath settled back on her tail. “What do you offer in payment?”

“I have credits, of course. How much?” Coria had squirreled away credits that even The Man didn’t know about. Cold, hard credits were a girl’s best buddy.

“What sort of prosthesis will you require?”

“I would like a hand that works. What, you can’t regrow one?”

“This poison makes regeneration impossible. For a mere five megacreds you can have a stump. This guarantees that you will not die from the poison and that you will be immune to it. In your line of work, however, I would think that a stump would not be an asset.”

“How do you know my line of work?”

I know that you are Coria Clarke, that you work at Wendell Crimson’s as a bartender, and that you are affiliated with The Man, which is how you found your way to me. I have my contacts as

well.” The Beanath smiled. Her fangs were recessed, but she had enough other teeth to make the smile threatening.

Whatever the Beanath had done to make the pain go away was wearing off. Coria was not one to put off making a decision in any case. “Tell me what my options are. I would like to be as versatile as possible.”

“I will prepare for the surgery while you discuss your options with my associate.” She undulated out of the exam pod.

Coria tried again to get out of the chair, but found that it would not release her. She also felt a bit groggy, probably from the pain, which began to reach above her elbow like lava in her veins. If time was of the essence, she wished the associate would get its tail back in the pod, now.

A Chelovitsa waddled in with its feathers ruffled around its tool apron. With its crest a bright shade of orange over its yellow body, it was probably male, but Coria didn’t ask. Behind it was a cart of body parts, some humanoid, some mechanical and some that looked like a teenager’s wet dream: shiny metals, bright plastalloy, and some merely skin, scales or fur.

It took a look at Coria’s arm and trilled a long whistle. “Bad shape. Cut soon?” Its voice whistled out of its throat like some bad analog recording. This Chelovitsa had no bedside manner. They didn’t actually speak, but could learn to mimic speech sounds. Their birdsongs were very complex, and they were usually chatty, but not this one.

It held out a metal arm, smooth and shiny, like a jewelry display. The arm was about the right size but Coria shook her head. “I need one that will work, not some useless piece of jewelry.”

The Chelovitsa raised its crest and fluffed out its feathers, insulted. “All complete articulate!”

“Will it stand up to bitch-slapping a Saurian?”

The Chelovitsa’s eyes narrowed as it jerked the arm away. “No say want weapon!” It selected another arm, one that would have fit a good size Modajai, with a rocky skin texture to match. It handed the arm to Coria, who almost dropped it. It snatched the arm

back, cradling it a bit before returning it to the cart. “No stock. Must build special. Cost more.”

“How much is the silver one?”

The Chelovitsa cocked its head and stared off beyond Coria, possibly listening to some kind of communicator, or maybe just counting on its three-toed, clawed feet.

“You not have creds.” It turned to go.

Disarmed

The Chelovitsa strapped her shoulders down and her thighs, and put a strap around her forehead. “Fear break chair hold. Strap stay. You safe.”

The Beanath floated her hands over Coria’s body again, sending a tingling energy that made Coria both very aware and unable to move. She felt the slightest tingle in her mind, learning that the Beanath’s name was Heart of the Core, Heart for short, and the Chelovitsa was called Sceawk.

Telepathy was how they communicated!

“Yes,” Heart said. She picked up Coria’s limp, numb arm and applied a tourniquet. “I am going to bite you again. Do not get upset. You may want not to look. The venom will coagulate your blood until I can remove the diseased part. Then we will attach the prosthesis and grow it to your nervous system.”

“Do it,” Coria said. She decided to watch. They would have killed her by now if that was what they wanted. The Halsan side of her mind was much calmer than the Human part, but she was used to putting it aside until she had time to process its emotions.

Sceawk handed Heart a vial of greenish powder, which she sniffed. Immediately she bit into Coria’s wrist with both fangs dripping. Even with the drugs and the mind-touch hypnosis, Coria responded. She fought the panic, forced herself to breathe and stared hard at the procedure.

In a moment, Heart had removed her arm with something that looked like a tubing cutter, leaving a clean stump and not a drop of blood. Sceawk held the prosthesis up to the stump, adjusting it for fit. When she was satisfied, she gave it to Heart.

Sceawk opened a vial of gray powder and poured it on the end of the prosthesis. Heart clamped the metal arm to Coria’s stump and removed the tourniquet. She held her hands around the wound and began a whispering chant. Sceawk punched a handheld control,

aiming it at the prosthesis. Again through the drug, Coria could feel the itch of bio-link nanobots flowing in her upper arm.

“Move your first finger,” Heart said. “Don’t look! Move your finger.”

Although Coria could see the purplish, severed stump of her arm lying dead in the cart, she thought of moving her finger and felt it move, a phantom of the real thing.

“Now the second. Now the third. And the fourth. Stick out your thumb.”

At each command, Coria felt her hand coming more to life, tingling as if it was regaining blood circulation.

“Make a fist. Squeeze hard.”

“Now spread your hand as wide as you can.”

That hurt, but Coria did as she was told. She rolled her wrist and twisted her forearm, all as she saw the metal cylinder lying inert in the arm of the chair.

She looked away from the prosthesis and studied the healers. Heart seemed to be deep in trance, and Sceawk focused on the controller. She had not felt the mind touch again, but sensed that they were doing something they did not usually do, that they were spending much mental and physical energy on the surgery. She began to wonder if her original injury had been an accident at all. Why would she be so important? And if she were, why would they allow her into their society? What did they need her for?

The Beanath opened her eyes and stared at Coria. Coria stared back, pulling her Human emotion to the surface to help her focus, bringing up a red rush of anger. The Beanath smiled, and the pain of the surgery hit Coria all in one flash. She strained against the chair and gritted her teeth to keep from screaming. Her prosthesis lifted off the chair arm, as it was not strapped down.

“It works. You have done well,” Heart said. “Now if you will allow me to enter your mind again, I will control the pain and help you to sleep while the nanobots complete the nerve connections.”

Coria nodded, not trusting herself to open her mouth to speak without screaming.

Again Heart stared into Coria's eyes, moving her hands a few inches above her body. The pain subsided, slowly, like water evaporating from her body after a mist shower. Coria breathed deeply, making her body relax from its arching tension. She remembered her childhood training and worked through each phase, allowing Heart to see her thoughts, at least on the surface. She released the pain as she released her tension.

Finally, Coria sagged back into the chair. Sceawk fashioned a sling for her new arm, which appeared to be a plastalloy cast.

"Not use this cycle," she said. "Come next. More train."

"Drink plenty of fluids, no stimulants," Heart said. "Eat protein, plain toufood or even meat if you can. Come here tomorrow, and we will discuss attachments and how to use them."

"And the initiation training?"

"We will escort you." Heart nodded to Sceawk who released Coria. Heart assisted Coria in getting out of the chair. She slithered along beside Coria as she wobbled out of the exam pod. "You may tell The Man any of what we have told you, not that he will believe you. When there is need for secrecy, you will know."

"Be careful." Sceawk said. Her trilling sounded more like Human speech.

"You did well," Heart said. "You will make an excellent priestess."

Coria made a shallow bow. "Thank you for saving my life. When the time comes, I will return the favor if I can."

Heart returned the bow. "I understand your sense of honor. It is what saved you."

They had reached the Spiral Three Tube. Heart returned to the healer pod, and Coria made her way to the Full Bowl at L3. If she had to eat toufood, she was going to get the best. And Granny Claws would likely know what kind of fluid would be less than stimulating but better than water.

Then it would be time to find The Man and threaten to kill him.

Initiation

Coria Clarke flexed her left arm in balance with the right, making precision moves that caused the aiming light to describe intricate arcs on the walls of her pod. The prosthesis on what was left of her left arm was heavier than her right arm, and it was taking a lot of practice to keep herself in balance while she practiced the dance moves that would be required during the ritual.

The dance was intricate and not designed for a person with feet instead of a ten-foot reptilian tail. The Sisters had modified her steps and even created a solo part for her. Everything they did was music and dance and art: always a performance. She wondered if they ever let their hair down—not that they had hair on their scaly skulls.

She was used to using the prosthesis at work, tending bar at the Starview Lounge. She could balance a tray of drinks or stir the most delicate tinimar to the satisfaction of the most fastidious customer, even better than she had done with her flesh arm. Her new arm was very responsive. She had even begun to feel some tactile sensations from its surface due to the bio-link nanobots that the Chelovitsa had used to attach it.

She stepped and turned on the ball of her foot, swinging her prosthesis around for momentum, making the rotations that would have been her wrist and hand mimicking a snake's head. It was a beautiful movement when Heart of the Core did it, but her arm only made light dance on the wall. Again she felt the difference, the exclusion. First she was Halsan/Human, now a non-Beanathar dedicant.

Coria had to give the Beanathar credit, though, and not just because they could crack her accounts, even her most well-hidden accounts. Every training session she had attended had brought her another attachment for the prosthesis. Sceawk seemed to delight in developing them.

She had projectile weapons, injectile weapons, power tools, even a cache of nanobots and an interface with built-in programs for drilling, comsys cracking and brute force bio-linking. What she did not have after eight ten cycles of training was a mission or an understanding of exactly what the Sisters of the Beanathar wanted from her.

They had sent her on no missions, had not asked for any information, even if she'd known something they didn't. She could not imagine why they would trust her, not being one of them, not being in an important position. She did overhear gossip in the bar, she did talk to The Man occasionally, but to no great purpose. None of it made any sense.

While the Beanathar had never been known to lie, they were not known for open and aboveboard negotiations either. But they had her caught in a net that supported her as much as it held her captive; she was in too deep not to play along. The Man had pumped her for information, and she had told him everything she knew, but it amounted to nothing.

Dripping with sweat, Coria wiped her face and went to her water pod to take a shower. She could shut down the prosthesis with a thought, closing it to keep the inner workings dry, although it seemed impervious to anything it had been exposed to so far.

She felt very alone. The Man just wanted her to spy on the Beanathar, as no one knew much about them. The Beanathar wanted her to spy on The Man and Core knew who else. She didn't like being between the Stone and Nothing, and that was where they both had her.

Ritual

Coria was blindfolded as Heart led her down the spiral tube to the place of initiation. She could hear Heart's scales scraping softly against the smooth rock and Sceawk's claws clicking. She extended her aura out as far as she dared, as they had taught her, but she felt no other presence until they entered a large open space, thick and musky with smells of smudging incense, anxious bodies, steam, sweat, and probably some kind of psychotropic.

A panesang played on her right, great streams of water flowing across its catch basins as well as tiny fountains and trickles, which made a most ethereal music. She had grown to like it during her training rehearsals, as it put her almost immediately into a light trance state, one that enhanced her awareness, but kept her emotional responses in check until she needed them. When Heart stopped, the trio was nearly in the center of the great pod, judging from echolocation. Sceawk removed Coria's blindfold, brushing her face with her feathered fingertips.

A glance told Coria that she had about twenty fellow initiates, mostly Beanathar, but one other Human, a pair of gray-banded Chelovitsas and a golden-skinned Velantran. All recruited, she supposed, as she had been, although none of them had her obvious mechanical enhancements. But why? How many spies did they need? Surely their secrets would be spread across the Galaxy with so many outsiders let in.

If the outsiders survived to tell the tale.

Heart and Sceawk began to strip Coria of her jumpsuit. They had not told her what to expect except for the dance, but she did not resist. It would not be the first time she'd been naked in public, and there was no one who would likely be that interested anyway. Her sponsors passed their hands and feathers over her body, clearing her aura. They draped a veil of translucent fabric over her body, just as each of the other initiates was being prepared. The veil draped to her

feet and just skimmed her fingertips. It would not get in the way of her dance steps.

Coria's veil was a pale, shimmery green, while the others were in shades from lavender to deep blue: symbolic of the water of emotions, the flow of energy into the psychic centers. Coria had always been a quick study, even if she didn't see the point of what she was being taught. It was better to learn to parrot a bunch of nonsense than to have her prosthesis removed—abruptly, and without anesthetic.

Heart and Sceawk faced Coria, staring into her eyes. She could not focus on both, so she gazed back at Heart. A whispery thought came into her mind. “When the time comes, reach for us with your mind. We will be here.”

All the sponsors withdrew from the center circle. The music on the panesang changed as attendants changed the water flow and moved the basins. It became more tinkling, as monotonous drops fell at different intervals of time and timbre.

A drop that fell onto a gong made a deep reverberation that started the pattern that Coria had learned for the dance. Without any signal, she began her steps. The dance would take her around the circle. She hoped the other initiates were doing the same. She hated to dance with folk who had two left feet, if only metaphorical, and who had no rhythm.

As the dancers moved in a serpentine spiral, priestesses gathered around the edges of the large cavern. The smell grew stronger with musk as the dancers undulated towards the center that opened down to allow a colored mist to escape. Coria first thought that they would be forced into its depths, but in moment, she saw a dais rise from the floor. It supported a pillow on which reclined the largest, most fearsome Beanath she had ever seen. She was glad she had practiced her dance until she did it in her sleep, or she would have stopped dead in her tracks, disrupting the whole pageant.

This Beanath was at least sixteen feet long, and probably eight feet in diameter at her hip. Her cloacal opening was not covered, as Heart's always was. It was opening and closing in

rhythm with the music, its wet depths exposed. Her head was covered with something that moved, snakelike, an ancient medusa in the center of the spiral of dancers, each one dancing ever closer to her.

Coria knew that the last position of the dance left her neck and shoulders exposed as she lay back across her heels. She began to get an idea of what the Beanath Monarch would do. She pulled her mind back into the dance, because it was too late to change her mind now; too much lava had flowed behind her to go back up that shaft.

She whirled and made the sight on her prosthesis describe infinity on the walls of the pod, intricate patterns that were reflected from glazed tiles on the walls and sparkled in the water in the panesang. One by one the dancers spiraled into the center and knelt, facing away from the Beanath Monarch. The panesang had started to run faster, and the dancers breathed in time with the music, their chests heaving under their veils.

Too quickly it was Coria's turn to whirl in place and sink to her knees, first stretching her arms ahead of her and her rear end toward the queen, then raising up and leaning back, her back rigid and her arms balanced at her breasts. She leaned back so far that her head rested on the dais. She waited for the end of the dance, when the panesang become deathly quiet.

A hissing noise came from the priestesses who watched the ritual, partly an affirmation of the dance well done, but something more. The sound built into a force field as the priestesses began to clap their hands in a slow rhythm. Coria could see the Queen moving slowly from her pillow, but she could not see what she was doing. Someone screamed, and the hissing increased in volume. The panesang chimed in, keeping only a rhythm like a heartbeat in every pentatone, soft high drops, tinny middle drops, and rattling deep drops as water dripped on metal basins.

In her turn as the tension increased, the Beanath slithered over Coria's head, her opening on one side, and her fanged mouth on the other. Coria had never smelled anything like that, but her humanoid side wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. The

queen put her hands on Coria's shoulders, holding her down, and struck, sinking her fangs deep into Coria's neck, going right through the veil.

Transmutation

Coria's back arched further. This was poison, deadly and administered deeply. She had at most, minutes to react. She fought the panic that raced through her, speeding the poison to her brain and heart. They had trained her for this, even though they didn't tell her why she must stay in this position and go deeply into trance.

She thought of Sceawk and Heart, reaching out for their minds, for the answer to what to do. She called to them from her own heart, from her own body and mind, as she felt the venom burning through her veins. Her whole body burned like it was being covered with lava. But she breathed deeply and kept her mind steady.

"Yes," Heart breathed, "go deep into trance."

Coria could hear her words like a voice in her head. Coria made herself breathe deep in the rhythm of the music. She relaxed her back and her limbs, and she spoke mentally to the healer pair, "Help me."

She could hear Heart's voice speaking and Sceawk's trills, but she saw a vision of red fire becoming a green liquid, refreshing and life-giving. Coria focused on the flowing green fluid that ran through glass tubing and from there into her veins, quenching the fire and healing her body where the venom had seared it. As each minutes passed, she heard more voices in her mind, voices that encouraged her, like hands holding hers, stroking her as they would a female in egg-laying.

Next to her, someone screamed, but she put that from her mind. She had no antidote to the venom, and would not know how to use it if she had it.

"You cannot help her," Sceawk trilled. "She must do it herself, and if she cannot, we will put her out of her pain quickly."

"Listen to all of us. Use our energy," Heart said.

As Coria reached out to her healers, she began to see the whole community, the names and the energy signatures of each priestess, including the giant Monarch, who in this energy space seemed only like an old human woman, one who cried for her great-grandchildren who were dying in the circle. She saw the heart connection of Heart and Sceawk, the bond that the Chelovitsa needed to survive provided by the Circle. She heard the mental cries of her sister initiates, and called out to them, in her mind or by her voice, she did not know.

“Use their energy. Change the poison! Change it in your mind!”

The Beanath beside her stopped writhing and lay limp below the dark purple veil she wore. One by one, the voices of the initiates joined the Circle, encouraging the others, or dropped out, never to be heard again. In an hour, all the initiates were Sisters of the Beanathar.

Or they were dead.

Keening started in the Circle around the dais, lamenting their lost protégés, keening for the loss of life, wailing in release of grief and banishment of the spirits of the dead to the Beryl. The dais raised further, the columns supporting it set apart to reveal a chamber of lava below.

Each dead initiate was taken by her supporters, her throat cut and her now blackened blood caught in a bowl. The body was wrapped carefully in the veil, like a child in the egg, and then dropped into the lake of fire below.

The blood in each bowl, four of them, was poured together into a large chalice. The sponsors of each initiate put a finger in the bowl, first touching the middle of their foreheads, then licking the blood with their forked tongues. The new sisters, raised to their feet and braced by their supporters, did the same, and then the chalice was passed among all the circle. What was left was drunk by the Queen herself, writhing against the poison she had herself injected into the initiates.

All the priestesses wailed and moaned, hissed and clapped themselves into a trance, sending energy through each other and to their Queen, to help her and them transmute the venom.

At the Monarch's signal, all sound stopped, and the cavernous pod echoed with silence. No one moved, not a finger, not the tip of a tail nor the fluff of a feather.

"My daughters," came the words from the mind of the Monarch, "my new daughters and those who have survived the ritual yet another time. We are here together. Let us remember our Mother, she who leads us and guides us, never leaving us alone as we are never far from our sisters. We have returned to Her our sisters who could not stay with us this time. May they be blessed and return soon to us, strong in the ways of the Circle."

The Monarch continued, after another minutes of silence. "Let us now name our new sisters, so that we can share with them our knowledge and ways, while we share with them our meat."

Each team of sponsors led the new sister to the front of the dais where the Monarch, Likes to Laugh, could inspect them as their veils were removed. The Queen spoke a name to each one aloud, in the hissing speech of the Beanathar, but each sister heard it in her own head.

Coria's new name was Gives More Than Was Taken. She inclined her head in acknowledgement.

Monarch Laugh did laugh, her fangs retracted and her tongue wriggling like a worm. "Your spirit is very strong, Gives More. No one has ever offered energy to someone else while she herself was not out of danger. We are honored to have you as our sister."

"I too am honored, Great Grandmother." Coria said, in her mother's native Halsan tongue, using the honorific for the eldest female in the tribe. "May I have permission to list myself in your lineage under these two who have brought me here?"

"Yes. Now go eat, and prepare yourself for your first assignment. There is much to be done, and you will be our ears and eyes in places we cannot go unnoticed."

"As you wish," Coria said.

She knew the Queen's heart, as she did Heart's and Sceawk's. She would never be alone again, and while she would never repay them what they had given her, she would never be obligated to another again.

Odd Man Out

Coria Clarke dropped to L4 and made her way along the spiral tunnel to the entrance to the public temple of the Sisterhood. It was open to the public, but almost no one ever entered without explicit invitation. Two warrior Beanathar kept guard at each side of the temple opening, a simple round hole in the native rock with serpentine inscriptions for decoration. A statue of three Beanathar, a healer, a dancer and a warrior, stood inside, just past the opening. It took a bit of courage to pass the guards and face the statue.

Inside were various curtained openings, some lighted and others dark. Smoky incense added to the mystery of the place. Beyond the statue on a platform were a group of dancers, perhaps a class as no one seemed to be watching except the musicians who played wind, string and percussion instruments Coria had never seen before. The music was hypnotic, as was the dance. She forced herself to look away from the dance to find the pod where Heart of the Core and Sceawk would continue her training. She passed several Beanathar, all about 3 meters long, but in various colors and mode of dress. Each nodded to her and sent her a mental greeting: *Sister Gives More than was Taken.*

Coria had learned to pick up their names as she passed: Beryl Scales, Speaks with Many Voices, Bites First then Asks. As yet Coria had seen no males, but she supposed that they were kept in some kind of harem or stud farm, whether managed or enslaved, she did not know. She saw Sceawk's crest emerge from behind a curtain. She wondered again why a Chelovitsa would pair with an Beanath — Chelovitsas always had pair-mates. But Sceawk's mind was too different from the Beanath's for Coria to read, or it was not open to her. Yet he would mind-speak with her when he wished.

A little mystery keeps things interesting, Coria thought, ruefully.

Then you must be completely engrossed, Heart thought back, with the warmth of emotion that accompanied a smile.

That her thoughts were like loud conversation to the Beanathar still embarrassed Coria. She pushed the dark curtain aside and entered the pod. It held only lounges for her and Heart, and a roost for Sceawk. Heart was coiled on one lounge, her upper body draped in a silky yellow shawl.

You'll learn. Perhaps today. Heart's thoughts carried a smile. The best thing about the mind-speak was that the emotions carried through the thoughts had to be genuine. The Beanathar were known for telling the truth, even if not the whole truth. How could they lie to each other?

False-telling is easy enough if you believe what you are thinking, Sceawk added. It nodded to her, raising its crest in salute. *All sentients are capable of it if they are capable of deceiving themselves.*

Coria sat down on the lounge and curled her legs under her. About two meters long, a meter wide and less than half a meter off the floor, the lounges had one arm and a back which slanted down to meet the foot of the other end. A Beanath could coil or stretch out, dangling her tail over the side while she rested her humanoid body on the arm. This one was very soft, with a suede leather covering. Coria didn't ask what kind of leather or if was synthetic.

"Clear your mind, Sister, as you have learned to do," Heart said. "Do not concern yourself for the animals whose skins made up the covering of your lounge. They did not suffer in their life or death."

Coria took a deep breath and drained the thoughts from her mind into her body and into the floor. Grounding, Heart called it. Coria stared ahead, practicing seeing what was around her without analyzing it.

Well done. Now close your eyes and wait for our next question. Sceawk's mental voice had a different texture than Heart's.

Coria let the thought pass on without considering it. As she closed her eyes, she heard sounds of someone slithering by. The

sound stopped. Coria felt that someone had joined them in the pod, although she could not hear anything. She stopped herself from asking, even mentally, but continued to listen. She resisted the urge to look.

She felt a mental touch from Heart, as if Heart had put her hand on the back of Coria's head. Then Coria knew that four beings were in the room. She could almost see the shapes of them, shadowy figures modeled in the fuzzy gray of her mind's eye...herself, Sceawk, Heart and another Beanath, one she had not met, smaller and different.

Open your eyes, Sister Gives More. The thought-voice was male, young, almost like the kid who bused tables at the bar, except without the edge of long-term distrust, fear and working the angles. His name was Plays Deep.

Brother or Sister?

Coria opened her eyes but held onto the psychic vision she had of the room, looking at Plays Deep's face, but taking in all the detail around him that she could. He was brown with geometric markings, not as large as Heart, perhaps not fully grown, but with serious eyes in a face full of mischief. He wore a tunic that closed beneath his waist, covering his genitals. Coria did not look down.

Excellent! Sceawk did not smile, as its beak did not allow for that expression, but the others did, with that wide but closed-lip grin of predators who do not show their teeth, a sign of friendliness.

Heart nodded. *Brother Plays Deep is an adept of trance. He is quite young, but he has the gift. He is in training, much as you are, to teach what he knows.*

"Wh..." Coria started to ask, the control of her thoughts and curiosity taking away from her control of her speech. Embarrassed, she tried again. *What is the need for trance? How is it used?*

You remember the trance state of the initiation? Heart asked.

Yes. Coria had never experienced that level of belonging to the group, but while she seemed to be treated as one of the Sisterhood, the feeling had faded.

It was necessary for you to be in mental contact with the Sisters for you to survive. Heart explained. *Now you learn how to transmit messages across the planet.*

We are here to protect you. Sceawk added some ruffling of feathers to its thoughts, *and to guide Plays Deep. When you are to report to us, you will need to go into deep trance because you will not always be able to come to us.*

Coria pushed a stab of fear from her mind. *Have to close your mind to be open-minded.* She blushed again, looked at the floor. She had always been able to think what she would, whether or not she expressed her thoughts. Now she felt stripped, vulnerable, helpless.

Yes, Sister Gives More... Coria, Plays Deep sent her a warm, hugging thought as well as his smile. *We have many minds, all with doors we learn to open and close. All of us have to learn this, even we "gifted" ones.* He pulled the edge of his tunic away from his neck to show Coria the scars of fang marks, the ones that matched Coria's.

So do I call you Brother or Sister? Coria's upbringing did not include a male who could enter the women's inner circle. All of them laughed aloud, the noise startling after the quiet thoughts. They weren't laughing at her, though they found her unstated assumptions about the differences between male and female funny.

Sceawk's trills in particular were so piercing that another Sister, one of the warrior guards, jerked the curtain aside to see what caused the ruckus. She clamped off her thoughts as soon as she saw Coria, but the emotional content slipped out as an odor. Some Beanathar were not happy about having out-species as sisters—or brothers.

Thank you for that teaching, Sister. Plays Deep bowed to her. *I will strive to be a true brother as well as a sister to you. Call me Plays...or call me Deep, but call me!* His double entendre came across as well as the joke.

Coria met his eyes. They were all mischief this time, as much as any teenage human male.

Some jokes do cross cultural lines. Sceawk commented. It preened, settling all his feathers into their normal immaculate state as he settled his mind. It too raised its crest to her by way of bow. *Though heart-fastened to Heart, I too am your sibling—though neither brother nor sister.*

Coria felt too many emotions to trust herself to speak or to think. She thought she had asked a stupid question, one they had taken as a joke. She pressed her human side into its niche, and settled herself into her Halsan training, focusing on what she could sense physically to make herself present in the moment.

Yes, very good, Heart thought. You already have this skill you desire, to close the door for a private space. Now you will learn to build a space for the private thoughts as well.

Coria nodded, still separating her conflicting selves. She breathed deeply, stared at each one for a moment, and then let her breath out, feeling where each one stood, feeling a connection with each one. *Shall we start the training now?*

Open Doors and Closed

Two hours later, Coria and Plays Deep were exhausted. He had taken her by the hand, mentally, and led her into his own mental construct for reaching the deep kind of trance necessary to send and receive thoughts across the planetoid, and perhaps even into space. He showed Coria how to build her own mental rooms for separating her private thoughts, using the metaphor of her human self hiding in a dark closet.

Don't be so cruel to yourself, Plays Deep chided. Each part of yourself is beautiful, even if it needs to be protected from a cruel world.

What would you know about that cruel world? Coria's scorn came through with more intensity than she expected.

Because I can't experience it? Plays Deep sent her a wry smile. *Just that—because I can't experience it. To go out of the Enclave, I must learn to be a warrior, to be the killer we are rumored to be, just to save my own scaly skin from becoming someone's aphrodisiac.*

Coria shuddered. Her revulsion from the idea of someone grinding up Plays Deep to a powder on a L2 bazaar shelf pushed her out of her body. She hadn't done that since she was a child, her consciousness floating above her body as it lay inert on the lounge beside Plays Deep.

The others turned to look at her and beckon her to return. They did not seem upset, only a little surprised.

Welcome back, Plays Deep thought. It is time that we go back to the mundane world, as your spirit can tell. He again offered a mental touch to help Coria walk back up the ramps she had imagined into the depths of her mind.

Coria became aware of the lounge beneath her body, and the Beanath beside her, though her body still retained some of the feeling of paralysis of sleep. She opened only the door of her public

mind, the one she and Plays Deep had constructed as she opened her eyes.

Someone had brought in a pitcher of liquid and glasses. She realized that she had not seen the Beanathar eat, and that she might not want to. But thought stayed obediently behind her private door, and she got no reaction to it from anyone, not even Plays Deep.

Heart offered her a glass of the clear liquid. *This will revitalize your body and nourish your spirit. It is good to take after a deep trance.*

Coria sipped. The taste was fresh, like water with some kind of light sweetening and flavor. She noted that the others drank slowly, not quaffing it, so she followed their example. She could feel the drink soaking into her body, as if it went immediately into her blood, bypassing her digestive system.

After the break, when everyone seemed refreshed, she asked, *What is it you want me to learn for you? What connections do you think I have?*

Plays Deep grinned, his teeth showing just a little. *You can tell me about that outside world, what it is like, who is there and what they do.*

Continue to practice your trance. Heart collected the glasses and put them on the tray. *Letting Plays Deep see through your eyes will be very helpful, as he will learn what he can't learn elsewhere.* She turned to face Coria. *And we can learn what we need to know more about.*

You may find that you hear random thoughts from those others around you, Sceawk added. *Do not let this concern you, but let the thoughts pass by, as if they are on an ad screen. If you hear something interesting, you can follow up on it.*

But today is enough training. Heart offered Coria a hand to rise from the lounge. *Come back after your shift tomorrow, and we will set up a monitoring place in your mind.*

Cruel World

Coria came early to the late shift at The Red Thug Lycan, Wendell Crimson's bar. It was a slow night, and most of the regulars were used to her new arm. A couple rowdies had been bitch-slapped with it, and the story got around.

She was still popular and was able to give and take teasing with the best of them, but never encouraging more. So far, her mind had been quiet except for her own thoughts.

Two hours in, the bar emptied, as everyone suddenly had something else to do somewhere else.

The Man walked in. He was not impressive to look at, nearly average in any way that a man can be, except possibly more handsome, certainly not ugly, with his dark hair and eyes, his brown skin, and his well-tailored but plain suit.

It was the suit that got attention, as few others would dare this part of the spiral so well-dressed. He did not even have a bodyguard, and word was, he didn't need one.

He slid onto a bar stool in front of Coria, the only customer at the bar, and nearly the only one in the place.

"You can certainly kill business," Coria said. She mixed him a drink with Wendell's best hooch and a microdose of mushroom hallucinogenic. She handed him the drink, his usual.

He sipped at it. "How goes it with the snake healers?"

"I'm still making payments," Coria said. It was true enough, and this was one of the people she wished she could hear telepathically. "Luckily it didn't cost a leg too." She used this joke often, a sign to stop asking questions.

"What are they up to?" The Man looked off into the distance, not at Coria. "What do they want?"

She glanced around and then poured herself something fizzy. "I don't know for sure. They've been training me to use the arm, mostly."

“Don’t lie to me, Coria. I’ve known you too long.” He stared at her, his face impassive but his eyes shrewd.

“Fact is, I really don’t know.” She wished she had some of the refreshing drink, but they hadn’t sent her any, and she had no idea how to make it. “They said they wanted me to tell them what I hear and see in the bar. Nothing that important happens here.”

She propped her elbows on the counter and leaned forward. “What is you want to know?”

The Man leaned back, taking another sip. His mouth tightened with the bitterness of the drink, mimicking the narrowing of his eyes. “What they do know? What keeps them in business? It can’t be all guarding and healing.”

“I would think they made out quite well in those fields.” Coria shrugged. “There’s no sense of need or want in the Enclave, at least not what I’ve seen of it. I’m hardly in the inner circle.”

“Try to get in, if you can.” He took another sip. This time, his eyes dilated a bit more than the dark location warranted. He examined her with a calculating expression. “Your aura is different. You are not as open with me as you used to be.”

“Everyone changes.” Coria felt the mental touch of Plays Deep. She tried to keep her composure, not changing her expression. “Losing an arm and being bitten by the Beanathar Monarch will change a person.”

She probably shouldn’t have said that, but she was being as open as she could be. She didn’t realize that the Beanathar could communicate when she was not in trance.

She stared back at The Man, letting Plays Deep get an eyeful. Could the snake boy read a full human, if that’s what The Man was?

Yes came the answer in her mind. *Change the subject if you can.*

The Man turned up his drink and drained it. The bitterness made his face old, his expression dangerous.

“I hear that you and Zabayaba had a difference of opinion.” Coria reached for his glass, but he pulled it away from her hand.

“Don’t believe everything you hear,” he said. “It’s always good to see where a rumor goes, who is spreading it.” He set the glass on the bar. “Where did you hear this one?”

Where had she heard it?

“A couple Dwarvenkind were grousing on L2 about not being able to get supplies.” She gave him her most direct gaze. “I could not tell if they were mad at her or you.”

“Interesting. Let me know if you hear it again.” The Man got up, laid a credchip on the bar. “All yours. Keep me informed.” He walked out, looking distracted.

What do I do now? Coria asked.

Plays Deep sent a smile along with his thought. *Finish your shift, and try to go into trance when you get home.*

Deeper in Debt

At the end of a long shift, Coria went back to her quarters. The bar had been deserted for the last of her shift, so she'd made no tips except for what The Man left her, and no profit. Crimson would not like that. If he said something, she'd tell him to take it up with The Man.

Her electronic messaging said she had a package waiting, so she picked it up. The Beanathar had sent more of their special potion, with instructions of how much and when to drink it.

She undressed for bed, ready to try again for a deep trance. She wondered what would keep her awake long enough to know if she achieved trance. She felt her body sink heavily into her bunk.

As she performed the relaxation exercise and cleared her mind, an image of Heart appeared.

You gave The Man a hallucinogen in in his drink? Heart asked. *Do not take it yourself, as it will make your thoughts more available to others.*

I don't take it, Coria answered. *Tell me more about the potion for after the trance work.*

Follow the written instructions, never drink more than a small amount at one time. Heart paused.

Thank you. Coria shifted her weight to be more comfortable.

Tell more about the disagreement between The Man and Mistress Zabayaba.

I only heard they had one. As her trance deepened, Coria seemed to float out of her body again. *They were complaining about affected supplies, possibly of nike'rot, since she makes it and some Dwarvenkind use it in their eateries.*

Go back into your body, Gives More. Heart's thought sounded worried. We will train you to use this power, but it is too dangerous for you to use it without control.

The Man will not give up on finding out more about the Sisterhood. What should I tell him?

You do not need to know more at this time, as you may give away information harmful to us. Heart said. Wait until you are more fully trained, and then you can know more, and protect yourself better.

Retreating to her private thought, Coria wondered how to lie or at least tell less than she knew, if someone could always hear her thoughts.

You are tired, Heart said. Drink a small sip of the potion. Then sleep. Rest. We will work more tomorrow.

Coria took several deep breaths and said the words of detracement. She was so very tired, but she did as Heart said, taking only a few sips of the potion. Then she curled up in her bunk and waited for sleep to overtake her. Her body relaxed, but her mind spewed questions.

What did the Beanathar want, and why did they need her?

Were they after Zabayaba, probably the richest sentient on the Stone?

Did they know The Man's true identity, and why might that be important?

No one knew much of anything about him, and Coria certainly didn't, even after serving him drinks and even having sex with him on occasion. He asked her about what she heard in her work, and she shared the rumors. He sometimes took her as his plus one to some soirée or other, some meeting where she was to play nice with the other arm-candies, to see what they knew. Usually not much, but she got whatever gossip they would share.

He had not taken her anywhere since she had her new arm, difficult to disguise in formal wear. He probably didn't trust her anymore. She didn't blame him.

She hardly knew who she was.

Why was her out-of-body experience important? Where could she go, what could she do to help the Sisterhood, to help The Man, to help herself?

Looking for Normal

Her sleep had been full of image-shifting dreams, some terrifying, some merely surreal. Coria woke up more exhausted than when she'd gone to bed. She needed food before any more trance training. She needed to be in a familiar place, to have some kind of normality before going back into the telepathic miasma of the snake women's minds.

And Plays Deep. He was attracted to her, as exotic to his teen male's mind as he was to her, but she didn't need that kind of distraction. She needed normal, not exotic and not dangerous. Food, not sex.

She dressed in an L2 normal rig—loose, comfortable tunic and trousers, but good fabric, covering all of her with a hood to disguise her face. She'd play tourist for an hour or two, and then maybe relax long enough to rest before her next training and work shift.

She used The Man's tip to get a hot breakfast of mostly recognizable veggies in a toufood frittaja. A large cup of off-world coffee set her back a bit, but it warmed her inside, giving her focus for processing the previous night.

Plays Deep had been monitoring her last night, but something changed, and he could see through her eyes. She didn't feel his touch now, not like last night, but did that mean he was better guarded than she was?

She went through her mental private thought doors, closing each one tightly, mentally adding a welded polybdaloy screen outside each one.

She left the cafe, window-shopping, as any tourist might. She kept her thoughts to herself, simply observing the other sentients milling about, the tourists standing out by the unconscious hunched posture of off-worlders who didn't appreciate the stone around them.

She hunched herself to blend in with them. Con artists were standing tall, acting solicitous and friendly while their assistant Fuzzcats ran about playing, being cute, and picking pockets. Locals displayed their wares, keeping an eye on all the moving parts in the spiral. Normal.

She continued strolling, taking in all around her, but thinking elsewhere. What interests did the wealthiest sentient and the most mysterious share?

Just then a change in the atmosphere brought her to full attention. Locals scattered, tourists chattered, and a squad of The Guard marched down from L1.

Coria strolled closer to a group of tourists to listen to their speculations. They were more interested in some kind of drama than in finding out what had happened. The Guard rarely came down this far, but off-worlders didn't know that.

As she leaned in to ask a question, someone pulled against her tunic.

She turned around. A humanoid woman with flamboyant makeup, dressed in bright scarves and too many beads, yanked at her tunic again.

"Come." The woman pulled her into a small alcove garishly declaring the knowledge of the secrets and mysteries of the Universe for only a few creds. "Quiet."

Still playing tourist, Coria went along. The woman's storefront was small, barely room for three people around a small table with a built-in hologram projector. The room was draped with gaudy, dark fabrics and smelled of old spices and smoke.

"I know you, Coria," the old woman said. "I've got something you will want. No charge."

Looking past the garb and makeup, Coria recognized Old Sal, a late cyk regular at the Red Thug. "All right, Sal. Give it to me."

"No charge," Old Sal repeated, "but this is on the down-low. It was supposed to be delivered last night, but YouKnowWho came to the bar early, before I could shut the shop."

Coria held out her hand below the edge of the table where if someone peeked in, they would not see. No one was paying them any attention with the ruckus outside. It was beginning to get noisy.

Old Sal gave her a small box. “You ain’t seen me. He ain’t seen me. There ain’t been nothing to see.”

Coria nodded. She hid the box in an inner pocket. “Since I’m here, and I’ve still got a cred or two from last night, tell me what you see in my future.”

Old Sal cocked her head with a bit of a gleam in her eye. She turned on the holographic crystal ball which appeared with shifting patterns of colors. “Looks like a tall dark stranger will be seeing you soon.”

Coria felt the touch of Plays Deep again. She clanged shut the door to her thoughts.

Old Sal grinned, shaking her head. She cut off the hologram. “You are in a lot deeper than you think. Watch where you put your feet, and see that Himself gets that box. Soon. No charge.”

Just then the helmet of a Guardsman poked through the curtains at the door.

Old Sal cringed, wringing her hands. “It’s just me and a client, as you can see, Sir.”

Playing the tourist again, Coria stood up. “What do you think you are doing, interrupting my session? I paid this seer good money, and I intend to get my message.”

The Guardsman pushed past her and made a show of sweeping back the curtains, seeing that no one was hiding there. “We have to keep the public safe, Sentient.” He glanced back at Old Sal. “No cheating.”

When he left, Old Sal grinned. “Tall, dark, strange. Am I right?”

Plays Deep

Coria left Old Sal's place with her hood draped over her face, listening to the chatter of the other folk standing around. Someone had been killed across the way, a trinket seller, but the Guard was making a big deal of it.

Usually a body went to the recycle vats, and surely this one would too, so why the fuss?

No one seemed to know anything and the blaring adver-news channels were more interested in a soirée scheduled at the compound of Sentient Zabayaba. Ads for dress, hairstyles, makeup, and even bootleg videos blared from every interface.

Having achieved more than enough 'normal' for one day, Coria went home, taking a long-way-around route to make sure no one followed her. Her sector was deserted, with no incoming messages on the door comm.

She went in, locking securely. She changed into a simple shift to rest, and lay on her bed to go deep into trance.

Plays Deep must have been waiting for her, as his mind connected to hers almost immediately.

You were on L2 when the trinket seller was killed. What happened?

No small talk, no 'How are you?' She guessed that was how it would be.

I saw nothing except the Guard coming down the spiral, and then taking out the body. Nobody seemed to know what happened.

She kept her one door open to Plays Deep, and the other parts of her mind locked away. She'd share what she thought was important *after* she found out what it might be. *What are the sisters saying?*

Not much. His thoughts sounded irritated, whether it was with her or with his elders, she couldn't tell.

With so little sleep, Coria wasn't sure she could stay awake even now. *Can we do the training now? I will need to rest before I go to work tonight.*

Heart and Sceawk are somewhere else. We can practice. He sounded a bit petulant. Why did you lock me out? I was just looking.

I need to know when you are going to be looking. Coria sighed, still working on her focus. I know you are curious, but I need my privacy too. She sighed, wondering if her emotion came through clearly. I have to get used to someone else being in my head when I am trying to sort out what I'm being told, what is really being said, and whether I can trust the speaker.

You can always trust me. Plays Deep sounded very confident.

Not when you break into my head without my permission, she shot back.

He was silent for a few minutes. *You are transmitting very well.*

Thank you. Coria had an idea. *Since you like to look, let's practice that.*

She sat up in her bed. *Describe what you see as I look around. I need to get used to how that feels.*

She scanned her pod, as limited a place as it was.

So plain. Unadorned walls. No fabrics. A desk with a comm unit. A couple of chairs. A door leading to...

To my wardrobe.

Let me see your clothing. Plays Deep was such an adolescent. No wonder they didn't let him out of the enclave.

No, but I will show you something else. She opened a hidden panel in the edge of the door of her wardrobe, looking at it to show him how it worked. She put the contents of the package in the door.

Then she destroyed the package and put it in the reclaim vat. *Now you know where this is and how to get to it.*

She had just sat down on her bed when her door announced a visitor.

"This is the Guard. Open up. We have questions for you."

Watch carefully, she warned him. Don't comment or distract me in any way.

She tousled her hair, put on a long-sleeved robe over her clothes and made a bit of a mess of her bed sheets. She hoped she looked as tired as she was. She put her augmented hand in her pocket to hide it, pulling the sleeve down and tucking it.

The door announced her visitors again.

She unlocked the door and peered out through a crack.

“We have questions for you,” the Guardsman said.

She didn't think it was the same one from Old Sal's place. “I guess you're going to come in then.”

Questions

The Guards came in, a Human and a Saurian.

Coria gestured to the two available chairs and sat on the bed. “What do you want to know?” She was happy not to be taken up to the Guard Station, so it wasn’t likely serious. She’d been taken for questioning before.

She sent a mental message to Plays Deep. *Don’t distract me, but do watch.* She opened her mind a bit more for him to follow her reactions.

“Were you in L2, second spiral, section 4 about 5-hour today?” The Saurian Guard asked questions. The Human said nothing but recorded on a comm unit.

No point in lying. If they were here, they’d seen her. “Yes, I went to visit the fortune-teller up there. I needed a bit of amusement before coming home to sleep.” She yawned. “This won’t take long, will it? I have to work tonight.”

“What did you see there?” The Saurian was not exactly menacing, just inspecting everything in view from where she sat.

“I saw the Guard Squad come down from L1.” Coria shrugged. “Nobody seemed to know what was going on, so I figured it was none of my business.”

“Where do you work?”

“At the Red Thug Lycan, Wendell Crimson’s place.”

The Human Guard made a note.

“Rough place.” The Saurian did not change expression. “Did the shopkeeper Jerzy Shales come in there much?”

“If he did, I don’t know him. Why?” Coria could feel Plays Deep’s confusion, mirroring hers.

“He was murdered yesterday. Right across from the fortune-teller’s place.”

At least now she knew what was going on. “I’m sorry. I don’t know anything about that.”

Murder was not very unusual, but attracting the Guard's attention was.

"Did you see anyone running away?" The Saurian studied her face. "Looting maybe or acting suspicious?"

Coria was used to keeping her thoughts to herself, and the Beanathar training was helping with that.

"No." She shook her head. "Lots of sentients were milling around. Tourists, maybe, who can tell?"

"How do you know the fortune-teller?" The Guard sounded patient, bored even, just doing her job.

"She comes into the bar after her shift sometimes." Coria shifted her seat on the bed, careful to keep her arm covered in the robe. "A lot of people come to the Red Thug after work."

"You were in her stall then, today." The Saurian leaned in. "What did she tell you?"

"She said I'd meet a tall, dark stranger." She looked at the Human, one with a dark buzz cut over his swarthy complexion, though he wasn't especially tall. "She was right. Here you are."

The Saurian shared a glance at the Human, who ignored them.

Pausing for a moment, as if trying to decide how to phrase the next question, the Saurian stared at her. "Does the person commonly known as The Man frequent your workplace?"

"Yes, I saw him last night." Coria smiled slightly. "He's a good tipper." Old Sal was right. She was into something deep.

"Do you know his actual name?"

"No, I asked but he wouldn't tell me." She shrugged again. "None of my business."

"You have been seen with him on several occasions. What do you know about his businesses?"

"He has taken me out as his plus-one a few times, but not recently." She wanted them to leave, wanted them to tell her nothing, and to tell them nothing. She hoped the young snake man got that message.

“Why would he do that? No offense, but you are just a bar maid.”

“None taken.” Coria began to get uncomfortable. This was not about the L2 death. She wrapped her robe more tightly around her. “He says I’m a fun date. I get to dress up, eat real food, and see how the one percent manage.” *Mostly with other plus-ones*, she sent to Plays Deep.

The Human spoke up. “We understand that you had some work done with the Beanathar. Did The Man pay for that? Your arm is quite the topic of gossip in some spirals.”

“They replaced my arm when it was infected with a poison from a bar fight. The Man didn’t pay for it.” Sighing, she moved her hand from her pocket. At the moment, she was wearing the synth-flesh attachment that looked almost real.

The Saurian stared. “How does a sentient afford such... enhancement on your salary?”

“That’s between me and them. Ask the Beanathar if you want to do an upgrade.”

“We will.” The Human Guardsman stood up. “Are you spying for the Beanathar or for The Man?”

Coria stood up too. She took on the attitude she used in the bar with roughneck customers. “I think it’s time you went back to L1. I don’t know what you are looking for, but you won’t find it here.” She resolutely looked at the Human Guard, and not at the hidden pocket in the wardrobe door.

The Human spoke up again. “What do you call him when you are on a date? The? Man?”

Coria chuckled. “I don’t call him. He calls me.”

Out-Of-Body

When the Guards finally left, Coria sank down on her bed, and pulled a sheet across her. She was shivering with anxiety.

She wondered if they had put some kind of monitoring device in her pod. She hadn't seen anything like that, but she could not watch both Guards at the same time and keep her face and body under control.

Can we do training now? Are you too tired? Plays Deep sounded concerned, not his usual teasing tone.

I want to stay here for a while, in case they are following me. She wriggled up the mattress and got comfortable. *I told them I was going to sleep.*

Then go into trance. You do have the potion ready, right?

Coria got the potion and put it beside her bed where she could reach it without getting up. She pulled the sheets up and made herself comfortable. *Okay. What now?*

She started the trance ritual. Plays Deep was silent, but she could sense that Heart and Sceawk were close to him. As her trance deepened, she could see all of them as if they were lounging around her.

They had apparently been listening in during the questioning, thinking about it between themselves where she could not quite follow.

Heart spoke first once Coria was with them in mind. *We did not know you would be a person of interest to the Guard. What is in the package the old woman gave you?*

I don't know. I am concerned that if I open it here, it will be tracked. There may be a tracker on it already, since they came here.

Very likely. Sceawk said. *Do you have the attachment with a holding space in the forearm? Will the package fit there?*

I have the attachment. I recycled the package. Coria visualized the box, which had fit neatly in her hand. Probably some kind of files inside, but it could be anything from a couple grams of kreef to a few old coins.

You may be able to take it to work with you., Sceawk explained. *The holding compartment is shielded from most kinds of surveillance.*

Can you scan my pod from your enclave? Coria asked.

No, only you, Heart answered, *and only because Plays Deep has a strong connection to you.*

I will put the package, Coria said, *if it will fit, in the attachment as soon as we are through. If it's being tracked, then someone will show up looking for it and why the signal stopped.*

If you are taken to the Guard Station, Sceawk said, *we have operators there. You will be safe.*

That is good, Heart said. *We want you to try something that is not usual for this level of training.*

Coria shifted to be more comfortable. She was having some trouble staying in deep trance.

You went out-of-body before, Sceawk said. *Can you do that at will? Maybe you can see outside your pod or inside the package.*

Coria remembered being pushed out of body at the mention of someone killing Plays Deep, and again another time when she was training. How had she done it as a child?

She remembered just floating up, flying around her room. It was like a dream, every sense alert as if she had a body of information instead of flesh. She imagined doing that now, opened her eyes, and looked down at her body swathed in sheets.

Be still, Heart said. *You probably can move through solid things, but not move them. Try putting a hand to the door where you put the package. See if you can feel it.*

Coria's spirit body floated down to the wardrobe as she reached for it. Her hand passed through the door, but she did not feel it.

She imagined sitting cross-legged in front of the door, and reached through it to feel for the package. She drew her hand back.

If that is a recording device, will I damage it this way? She asked. I can't really feel it anyway.

It's possible. Sceawk suggested, Try the messaging device on your pod door. That can easily be replaced if it breaks or burns out.

She did try it, merely sliding her hand through the door to the back of the device. She could not feel it either, but she could feel when her fingers were outside her pod.

Should I try to go outside?

Not yet. Heart said. If you should break trance while in a more solid space, it could damage you, more than we could repair.

Plays Deep spoke up. *Try using your left arm, the spirit one. Imagine that it has the enhancements of your replacement arm.*

Coria looked at her spirit body. Her left arm was not the new one Sceawk built for her, but the original one. She pushed through the door to touch her message box. A spark flew through her body.

Everything went dark.

Lost Contact

I've lost contact, Plays Deep said. *She's not there anymore.* He slithered around in anxiety, off the trance lounge, back and forth, his hands to his head.

We need to send a runner to her pod, Heart said. She touched Plays Deep, her hand on his shoulder. *She is probably fine, maybe unconscious, but we need to check on her.*

Who can we trust to get the package? Sceawk asked. *Those back-tunnel kids are okay for simple messages and lookouts, but maybe we need to go there ourselves.*

We are known to have helped her, Heart said. *So showing up at her pod would be a possibility.*

Being seen outside the Enclave is not good, Sceawk said, *and a vehicle would be more noticeable than one of us. Send a runner. At least we'll know if a Guard is watching.*

Agreed. Heart sighed and squatted back on her coiled tail.

Plays Deep settled himself on the lounge and went back into trance, looking for the signature of Coria's mind.

The Saurian Guard outside Coria's pod called in to HQ. "Something is wrong with the door comm. It just burned out."

"Go in and see if the woman is all right," his supervisor answered. "She may have tried to jam the signal or disable the comm. Be careful."

"Copy that." The Saurian knocked on the door, announcing himself again. Then he pushed against the door, its electronic locks being burned out. There were physical locks too, not too unusual at this part of L3. The woman wanted to keep her place secure. The Saurian stomped at the door with her large boot, breaking the door jamb. HQ would probably have to pay for that, but that was above her pay grade. She'd been told to go in.

“That will wake her up,” she said to herself. But it hadn’t. The woman lay still on the bed. The Saurian checked to see if she was alive—low pulse, slow breathing, but not dead. She called back in to HQ. “The Clarke woman is unconscious. She was fine half an hour ago. Send a medic—one of the Beanathar. She’s worked with them, maybe they know something.”

“Stay there, look for anything. HQ out.”

The Saurian checked her comm unit, but it was turned off. She called HQ to find out what connections Coria had. She tried all the drawers, her wardrobe, her tiny cooking area. The woman clearly didn’t do anything here but sleep—few personal things except clothing, some decorative, some utilitarian.

Then there were the arms, and their attachments. The one Coria was wearing looked very real, only slightly off color. The others were metallic, with snap-in attachments for any number of things, some of which could be weapons. No law against that. Sentients had to protect themselves.

Her simple pod wasn’t so unusual either, as anyone could get food, entertainment, even company at a reasonable price on this level. But if Coria Clarke was used to going with The Man, she might not even have to spend much time here. Who was she really, and what did she know that she was not sharing?

Nothing about their questioning indicated her lying, but some folk lied expertly well, and she was likely one of that sort.

For her part, Coria floated in darkness, only vaguely aware that something was wrong. She thought she was dreaming, as people often dream of flying. She tried doing aerial tricks, somersaults, dives, spins, but there seemed to be no place where she was, only the no-sensory darkness: no smell, no air current, no sound, not even of her own heartbeat and breathing. Is this what dead felt like?

The Man

The Sentient known as The Man paced his hidden pod far beneath the dwelling of his alter ego, Bergen Basilisk, socialite, collector of curiosities, L1 mover and shaker of those who had wealth.

Who killed Jerzy Shales, and what information had they gotten from him? It was a messy job too, not the style of Mistress Z nor Granny Claws. Those two would just have paid, and then given a bonus for more information.

He'd have to find out what new players might be in town, and how they'd gotten the Guard involved.

Jerzy was hardly cold when he was found.

The hidden surveillance recorder in Jerzy's back room didn't show was how the man died. The recording both in the office and the shop showed only static for seven minutes, more than enough for a murder. There was no robbery, and only one of the four packages was taken, or given perhaps, to the assailant.

After that, a Kleek worker came in the shop, pretended to be looking merchandise. He or she waited on the shop cameras to move away from the back, and then went into the office, stepping carefully around the body to retrieve the remaining information packages that were supposed to be delivered to him.

From what he could gather, no one saw anything, the ad- news blasts being full of Mistress Z's big to-do.

Who had called the Guard? His source at HQ had been reassigned, and the replacement was new to the Stone, full of herself, and probably too naive to see how things worked here. It would take time to turn her, time he didn't have. He would have to get his old source a new position where he could find out what he needed to know.

His tunnel kid runner had also disappeared just as the Guard arrived.

He hadn't seen Old Sal either, and she was supposed to deliver information to him yesterday. She hadn't shown up at the Red Thug, and Coria didn't seem to know anything.

He would need a plus-one to attend the soirée, and he hadn't taken Coria out lately. She'd need a new dress, one that would cover that weapon arm, but if her shoulders and neck were exposed in the latest style, no one would be looking at her arm anyway.

He checked the time. She wouldn't be at work yet for a few more hours. He called her pod, but her comm was dead—out of service. Odd.

She was a free agent. She could be anywhere. He checked with the Red Thug, but she hadn't gone in early.

He picked up a water globe to put in the place for Slime to deliver whatever he might have seen.

Putting on his plainest suit, the one with enhanced listening devices, he checked to make sure he could hear the Guards' channel. They weren't chatty, only using it for professional purposes. He sometimes wondered how the command managed that much discipline.

He headed to the L2 tourist market. If nothing else, he could get Coria a new dress. It was quiet this late in the cycle, sentients tired of looking at junk, getting ready for an evening meal or other entertainment.

Maybe Old Sal had seen her.

Shales' storefront was boarded up. He couldn't tell if it had been looted or cleared out. That was quick.

Old Sal's fortune-teller stall was gone. In mere hours a for-rent sign had appeared where the bright banners were yesterday. He knew none of the other store-front operators would answer any questions, and it might be that the Guard had the old woman.

He slipped down the dark side tunnel. He tapped the tattoo on the hidden door to the tunnel kids' cave, then set the globe inside. Slime was not there. They needed a better system.

Could he trust the kid to use a comm? Too many questions.

He headed for Coria's pod, but on the way, he heard a Guard call for a med-tech, specifically a Beanath, to go to Coria Clarke's pod.

What had they done to her?

How Deep does he Play?

Heart and Sceawk prepared to go out of the Enclave. They wore the robes that concealed much of their bodies.

Heart balanced herself on a hover base that allowed her to keep her tail out of sight and out from under people's feet or bodies, if they were to trip over it.

Sceawk pulled a cart behind him with as many tools as he thought he might need.

As they were leaving, a message came from their office. The Guard requested their help with a patient.

They sent a receipt of message and hurried towards Coria's pod.

They do not know anything except that we have worked with her, Sceawk said. But it must be serious. Why are the Guard concerned with her?

It must have something to do with that sentient killed on L2. More is going on here than meets the eye. Heart shifted her thoughts. Plays Deep, can you contact her at all?

His thoughts came from a distance, as if he were on the other side of the planetoid. *No. I am searching.*

Stay in body. We must not lose both of you. Sceawk said.

Two Guards were posted at Coria's pod. One stood by the broken door, and the other by her bed.

Coria was comatose, her body pulled into a fetal position. Heart noted the small vial of potion on the night stand, unopened. Coria would need that as soon as she incorporated again.

"Thank you for calling us," Heart told the Guard. "We appreciate your concern with our patient." She parked her hover base at the end of the bed. "May we have some room to work?"

The Guard moved to the chair in the doorway to the smaller food prep/cleaning room. It would have to do.

Sceawk pulled his cart to the other side of the bed, in front of the wardrobe. He made a show of checking her arm connections, checking each attachment for shorts or other malfunctions.

He could not quite get to the wardrobe door hiding place with the Guard watching.

Heart monitored all Coria's vital signs. They were declining. No one should be out-of-body for a long period of time without strenuous, guided training. She hoped Coria was floating somewhere nearby, that the burned out comm unit on her door had not zapped her as well.

Send a transport unit, Heart sent to the Enclave. *We can do nothing here.* To the Guard she said, "A transport unit will be here shortly. Her condition is critical, and we must take her into the Enclave immediately. You did well to call us."

When the Guard stood up, Heart held up her hand. "Since this is already one of our clients, there will be no extra charge."

The Guard went to the door, poking his head out to speak to his counterpart outside.

Sceawk fumbled with the wardrobe door. It did not open so easily for him as it had for Coria.

The Guard turned around. "What are you doing in there?" She strode over to the Chelovitsa, jerking the cart away from the door.

Before Sceawk could speak, Heart struck the Guard, sinking her fangs into her massive neck, just below the helmet. *Help me. She won't be out long.

The two healers dragged the comatose Guard back to the chair.

She laid her hand on the Saurian's wide forehead. "You saw us take the body to be healed. Everything is fine," Heart said.

*Everything is fine. The woman is being cared for.

"Every...thing...fine..." the Saurian murmured. "Care... for... woman..."

Sceawk pried the hidden compartment open with one of his tools and secured the package. He placed it in the compartment in

one of the arm attachments, and then put that on his tool cart. He also picked up some plain clothing from the wardrobe to hide the arm.

“Where is that transport?” Heart said to the Guard outside. “See if you can speed it up. This woman must be treated immediately.”

The Guard got on the comm.

In a few minutes, the transport arrived. The Saurian Guard helped Heart to put Coria in it, “Take good care of her,” she said.

“We will do our best.” Sceawk said. “Now let us get on our way.”

Out of Darkness

In the no-space darkness, Coria floated, wondering what to do next.

Her Halsen mind training said, “Get grounded. Feel your feet. Send that energy into the ground beneath you even if you don’t know where it is.”

She pushed her feet away from her, since there was no up or down.

Then she felt as if she were spinning, her head going around and around, though no air touched her skin, nothing but dizziness.

She flung out her arms and legs, willing the sensation to stop.

Energy spun out from her, canceling her sensation of motion. She heard a voice whisper to her, softly, “Come back. All is well.”

Light appeared. A direction. She moved toward it, reached for it.

Coria. Sister Gives More. Come back, sounded in her mind, so softly, but somehow familiar.

The light became brighter. She was closer. She reached out, could feel the warmth of it.

The light reflected something. She drew back, unsure of what might be lurking in the darkness.

She reached for the light, gingerly, afraid it might burn her. That terrible burn had sent her here.

The other reached out too, just short of touching her.

She took a chance.

Plays Deep sent, *Come to me Sister Coria.*

She touched his hand, then grasped it, pulling herself towards him.

She gasped.

Air. Light. Touch. Warm. Smell. Musky. Sound. Rumble. Hungry. Touch. Many touches, caresses, probings. Taste. Cool liquid poured gently into her mouth. Swallow. Thirst. Swallow more.

The foggy colors that flooded her vision began to coalesce into the faces of her new family: Plays Deep, Heart, Sceawk.

She was in the Enclave. So many questions, but no time to process.

She struggled to sit up, but was too weak. Her mouth could not form the words. How long had she been out?

The package? The Guards? Old Sal?

All is well, Heart answered. *You are back from the dark, and we will care for you.*

Coria turned her head to see Plays Deep lying on his lounge, looking as weak as she felt. *Thank you*

He smiled, ruefully. *Don't play so hard to get next time.*

Sceawk gave her more of the after-training potion. It seemed to soak into her whole being. *No more out-of-body for you until more training.*

We will keep you here for several cycles, Heart said, *to allow your body to reintegrate with your spirit. Rest now. Later we will talk.*

Bergen Basilisk laid the ornate invitation on his desk. Not going to one of the Mistress's soirées would be a mistake. He needed to see who else was there.

He would not mind eating some of her new chef's cuisine either, especially if it was not laced with nike-rot. Slim chance of that. Taking the lad away from Granny Claws might have been another mistake.

He made a show of feeding his off-world fish, bright colored menaces of the deep. Anyone watching might wonder why he bothered. He had a persona to keep up, the collector of oddities.

Perhaps Zabayaba would have something interesting for him, in addition to what he might glean from his informants there. His other informants were not forthcoming at the moment.

He'd thought to take Coria along as his plus-one, but the snake women had spirited her away. Even The Man would not inquire about a patient he should not know about.

The Guard seemed worried about her after their questioning, but he didn't think they'd found anything. What did they want with her?

Old Sal had disappeared too, probably not with Coria. As far as he knew, the Guards didn't have Sal either, or the package she was to have delivered. Had she given it to Coria? Who else had copies, as he hadn't trusted Jerzy Shales to keep the information private, though he'd paid for privacy.

Who killed Shales? And why was the Guard involved?

Slime had not reported in either, which concerned him. Tunnel kids lived precarious lives, but Slime was smart, capable, a good leader. Had he killed Shales? No, he would have taken the Saurian for the tribe to eat, not leaving him there to rot.

Going to Mistress Z's became a necessity. If she were killing off his people, he'd need to see to curtailing her activities sooner than planned. She was a menace, and he would not let her go off-world to spread her kreef-soaked crimes.

Perhaps he should steal something from her. The Man already had some rumored dispute. She might hire The Man to find him.

Old Sal

While the Guards were boarding up the trinket-seller's shop and carting off all his wares, Old Sal prepared to close up and vanish. She had definitely seen too much and didn't want to be questioned further.

She was uploading her data from her comm when a space jockey came in.

He was lean, wearing a tight, gray jump suit, just off his ship. No insignia suggested what ship that might be, however. He wore goggles that hid most of his face, but he was pale skinned and sharp shaven, with an intense stare. With no introduction, he took the other seat.

There was a beep from her comm, a broken connection.

"I just blocked your signal and took your data, old woman." He smiled, showing his teeth. "Now tell me what you see, what you know."

A stab of fear locked Old Sal's mind. She could see he was dangerous, interested in her particularly, and that there were greenish stains on his gloves. That didn't take The Sight—it was perfectly clear in his body language. "Don't shoot me a line either. What did you see today?"

"J-Just the usual tourists." Sal stammered. She tried to pull herself together, to play the mark, but this one was an instrument she didn't know. "They wanted love, money, sex...the usual." She held out her hands. "I can read the cards for you if you like."

The space jockey began pulling down her curtains and ripped the cloth from her table. He broke the holo projector, stamping on it several times. "Are you stupid enough to have hidden recorders?"

"Just the holo," she quavered. She played the terrified old woman as well as she could, having a great deal of motivation to do so.

“If I come back in five minutes, will you still be here?” He stared at her, and then glanced across the way.

She hook her head, and let her hands shake as well. “No, it’s time for me to close up now.”

“Yes, you are right. Close up. Find a new line of work.” He reached up and jerked her sign down, breaking it as well. He watched as she tied the rest of her curtains into the tablecloth. He kicked the table, knocking it over to see that nothing was hidden below.

She stood, hunched over, holding the tablecloth over her shoulder.

“Give me your cards!” he said.

She made a show of putting down the bundle and pulled a set of cards from her side pocket. They were wrapped in fabric.

He took them from her, ripped the cloth and scattered the cards across the floor. One of them landed face up on his boot.

Death.

“Will it be yours?” he asked, leaning down to get the card.

She backed away, shaking her head, making no effort to get the cards. She could not outrun him even if she dropped the bundle at his feet. She kept moving away, down spiral.

Even if one of her friends might hide her, he would follow. She had to find a drop to a low level where she could drop her costume, find an uplink for her comm, and disappear into the dark.

If she could get to the edge of L3, she could drop to the Red Thug Lycan. They didn’t like space jockeys there, and she might have a chance. She made her way, walking a bit unsteady, not like running away, to the Guard at the L3 entrance, the space jockey following behind her, not chasing, but not letting her get ahead.

She showed her ID to the Guard, one who recognized her. If the Guard would just stop the space jockey for two minutes, she’d be gone. She looked up and the Guard and glanced back at the space jockey.

“Get on with you,” the Guard said, making a gesture of pushing her on.

Ten meters. Five meters. One.

She swiped her ID and stepped into the drop.

The space jockey jumped in with her and wrapped his arm around her neck.

“I guess I have a new place to stay tonight,” he said, holding her in a headlock as they drifted down.

At L4, she shoved an elbow into his ribs and kicked his knee. She dropped the bundle, and ran from the drop towards the bar. Surely some of the regulars would be there by now.

Even limping, the space jockey was quicker than she was. He caught her just as she entered the bar.

Hearing the struggle and her muffled cries, several of the patrons turned to see what was happening. The Red Thug was not a place for a damsel in distress.

“That’s Sal,” someone said. Several of them got up to sort things out.

Sal grabbed for his goggles, but he stopped her hand. He put a blade to her throat, “I think you folks ought to mind your own business.”

A Saurian pushed several tables out of the way. She grabbed the space jockey’s arm and wrenched it, breaking it at the elbow. “I am minding the business.” She let him struggle for a bit, and then took off his goggles to get a clear look at his face.

“We don’t like your kind here,” the Saurian said. “You can leave now unless you want more damage.”

“He killed Jerzy Shales,” Sal cried. She scooted away, getting behind the others to get to the recycle room to get out of her costume. The space jockey had not seen her face without its makeup. He would not be able to recognize her.

“Now that does put a bit of a spin on things,” the Saurian said. “Folks been looking for you. You may need to hide here for the rest of the cycle, until we can decide who to sell you to.”

What Gives?

After a few hours' rest, much restorative potion, and energy healing from all the available sisters, Coria felt alive again.

Grounded and centered in her body, she asked questions. "Did you find the information and decode it?" She was too tired to focus on telepathy. "What should we do with it? What about Old Sal?"

Relax Sister Gives More. Heart stroked Coria's hair. *We decoded the message. Those who need it received it.*

"What is it about?" She swung her legs to the side of the lounge to sit up.

What you don't know, you can't tell, Heart said. *We delivered the information to its intended recipient and to our Monarch.* She offered Coria another cup of water with the potion stirred in. *This information is the kind that we wanted you to provide. You served the Sisterhood well.*

"But Old Sal?" Coria propped her arms to balance herself so she could sit. "Is she all right? Is she safe?"

She has closed her stall and moved elsewhere, Sceawk said. *We have not located her, but found no evidence of her demise.* He had his tool cart by her side, where he checked and cleaned all her appendages.

"I need to contact Wendell at the bar." Coria said. "I need to tell him where I am. "I should be at work by now."

You must relax and revive yourself. Heart slithered around to coil at the foot of Coria's lounge. *We notified the bar of your condition. You will have several days off and you can stay here.*

"Wendell won't like that." Coria lay back on the lounge, too tired even to stand. She focused her mind. *What about my pod? Is there anything left?*

The Guards searched it well but not thoroughly enough. Sceawk raised his crest and made a chuckling noise. Your clothing and other possessions are here. The Guard broke in to rescue you.

Plays Deep leaned up on one elbow. The Man is searching for you. He may want you to go to the soir ee at Sentient Zabayaba's.

Oh no. When is that? Coria draped her arm across her eyes. I can't even stand. How can I make nice with the other plus-ones there?

Sceawk chuckled. Three cycles remain. We will help you regain your strength.

You can bring us more of the information we need if you are there, Heart said. As long as you stay in your body and don't fly away.

Don't worry, Coria said. I never want to be in that darkness again.

Rest now, Heart said. She moved to the head of the lounge. She placed her fingers on certain places on Coria's skull.

The touch soothed Coria, allowing her to relax, releasing the fear of no place to fight or flee.

Once she was in a deep trance state, Plays Deep reached into her mind. He asked her to open the mental doors for him to see what happened.

She visualized all the doors swinging wide. She fell asleep.

Their minds linked, Plays Deep with Coria, Heart and Sceawk with Plays Deep, they looked for the memory that threw Sister Gives More out of body. They sought to find out what happened, what she would never remember.

Her mind touched the comm panel, which jolted her out of consciousness then burned out. They'd seen nothing like that before.

We can't send her out without a lot more training, Plays Deep said. He pulled the other doors shut, curious but staying on task when healing work was required.

She would tell him when it was right. But now, she must heal.

Then they had to explain what they desired her to do and support her so that she could do it.

They had two cycles, maybe.

Send a runner to find The Man, Heart said. We must know what he wants us to do.

The Man's Informants

The Man started searching for Old Sal, whose fortune-telling stall had been packed up the day before. She had information he wanted, but no one had seen her.

He also checked the tunnel spaces that Slime used to give him information, and while the water globe had been taken, nothing was left in return.

It was a puzzlement.

He relied on his information sources, and three of them were either missing or disabled. Granny Claws had been released from Guard custody after a number of bribes and indirect threats. She had been out of the game for at least three days, and so knew nothing that was helpful.

He really needed a new contact in the Guard, one with a bit more authority. Even the Guard had not deduced who had killed the trinket seller Jerzy Shales, or why.

Nobody knew why the Guard was even involved. Being in the dark was not a comfortable place for The Man. Even less so for his alter ego Basilisk.

Granny might have heard something now that her diner was open again. He dropped to L3 in hopes of some tasty tunnel lips and firebug water.

The old Kleckovan was sitting in her usual spot, guarding the cash box and surveying her domain. She nodded to him and he took a seat nearby.

Her young server took his order. While they waited, Granny sat across from him, slipping him a data chip under the table.

“Have you seen Sal?” The Man asked. “I’m looking for some insights to the future.”

“She was here the day before they came for me.” Granny shook her head. “Haven’t seen her since.”

“How about Slime?”

“He has a new job,” she said, “same place my granddaughter works.”

The server brought his food, and he paid Granny.

“Not bad, but maybe you shouldn’t have let the human go to work for her.”

“Someone would have kidnapped him,” she said, “at least he and Yroi are reasonably safe now.”

“I guess the plan to get them off The Stone is still in place?”

“Yes, but the timetable has moved up.” Granny stood to go back to her seat. “When the Guard is riled up, things accelerate.”

“They do indeed.” The Man finished his meal in silence. He considered where to go next. He knew Coria had not been back to her job at the Red Thug bar, but maybe they’d seen Sal.

His plans would have to speed up too, now that Madame Zabayaba’s soirée was on the schedule.

As he made his way back to the drop to go to L4, a Human worker bumped into him. Automatically he grabbed the worker’s hand which was headed for his pocket.

As one hand clamped on the worker’s wrist, he spun the kid so his arm was behind his back. With the other hand, he pried the data chip from the kid’s hand.

Then he turned the worker around. He studied the face.

“Slime?” The Man said, cocking his head. “All cleaned up and nowhere to go?”

Slime smiled, not resisting or trying to run away. “New name, now. They call me Sly More.” With his other hand, Sly reached into his coverall to retrieve his ID.

“Not Sly enough, then,” The Man said. “You’re out of practice. Where have you been?”

“Running errands for the Mistress’s Assistant Provisioner.”

“So, moving up a few levels.”

Sly nodded. “I was putting that in your pocket, not taking it out.”

“Yes, as I don’t have anything in that pocket for you to take.” The Man stashed the data chip with the other one. He released Sly’s wrist.

“Do you know a woman called Old Sal?” The Man gestured to show how tall the woman was. “Looked old. Used to run a fortune-telling shill on L2.”

“You need to go down to the Red Thug.” Sly nodded toward the drop “They’ve got something you want.”

“And Sal?”

“She grabbed me, and we dropped up to L2.” Sly shrugged. “I met my new boss. I don’t know where she went after that. Maybe he knows.” Sly gave him a significant look toward the pocket where he stored the data chip.

Sly looked around them. “My boss said I can report to you, but only what he tells me.”

“That should be good enough.” The Man clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t get eaten.”

“You either.”

The Red Thug Lycan Bar and the Spacer

When The Man approached the Red Thug Lycan bar, he found it unusually quiet. Normally it ran on the edge of a drunken brawl at all times of the cycle, but not today.

He walked in, nodding to those Sentients he recognized, and took a seat at the far end of the bar, where he could see anything that happened. Gloria, the female Saurian who also worked as a bouncer, came up to him. He ordered a beer.

“You hiding my bartender?” Gloria asked. “She ain’t been in for nearly a week now.”

“No,” he said, “I’m actually looking for her.” He took a sip of the beer she handed him. “I heard there might be something else here I am interested in.”

Gloria pointed her chin at another Saurian in the back booth, Huldar. The other disappeared into the back and dragged out a Human, a spacer by his clothing, somewhat the worse for wear. The spacer was bound and gagged. He had a bruise around one eye and limped on his left side.

“This one had hold of Old Sal,” Huldar said, holding the spacer by his collar. “We thought someone might be interested in what he knows.”

The Man nodded. “Yes, I’d like to know. Have you seen Sal lately?”

The Saurian shook his head. “She ran out of here quicker than a Fuzzcat pickpocket.” He dragged the spacer to a booth and sat him down, gripping his collar. “What’s this one worth to you?”

“If he can speak, I’m willing to pay. Any damages collecting him?”

The Saurian smiled. “Not to the bar. There’s the matter of room and board, though.”

“Of course. I may need to retain your services to deliver him to another location as well.”

The spacer squirmed and tried to speak, but they ignored him.

The Man pulled out his comm and tapped out a sum. He showed it to Huldar, knowing it was at least a week's take for the bar.

The Saurian grunted, not impressed.

"Then there's the quality of the information delivered," The Man said, "of which you can't guarantee, a contingency to be added later."

"I could just drag him up to see the Guard," the Saurian said. "They like to talk to sentients."

The spacer's eyes widened, and he attempted to scream.

The Man added a zero to the end of the numbers on his comm. "I'd like first crack at him."

"A reasonable request" Huldar tapped The Man's comm, and then checked his own. He nodded, and then hauled the spacer to his feet, dragging him back to the room where he had been held prisoner.

The Man followed. The Saurian pushed the spacer into the room, let The Man in, and then locked the door behind them. He told the spacer to sit down and took the gag from the spacer's mouth. He offered a sip from a bottle of beer.

The spacer drank as much as the Saurian would let him. He looked thirsty and hungry, his cheeks sunken in. All spacers were thin, a consequence of space travel, especially smugglers who needed to be thin and quick.

"Let's start with the easy ones," The Man said. "Like name, ship, position."

The spacer shook his head. "Can I at least get something to eat?"

"Not until you tell me something I want to know." The Man glanced up at the Saurian, who tapped at his comm.

In a few minutes, a knock sounded on the door. When Huldar opened it, Gloria brought in a tray of tunnel lip soup and flatbread. It didn't smell as good as Granny Claws' cooking, but

seemed edible. She set the tray down on a side table where the spacer could not reach it.

Huldar nodded, and she left.

“My name is Harden Proffit,” the spacer said, “I’m quartermaster on the CS Nightfall, Captain Gwynne Lomax.”

The Saurian set the soup on the table in front of the spacer and fed him a spoonful of the soup.

“Very good,” The Man said. “Why did you kill Jerzy Shales? What was in it for you?”

The spacer shook his head. “I never...”

“Then why did you attack Old Sal here at the Red Thug?”

Training and Technology

Coria stood up and stretched, feeling the healing potion soak into her body from the many vials she had consumed. She could stand without being dizzy or holding on to something.

Sceawk had made her a new arm that held several vials of different potions that could be injected through her pinkie finger. Several vials had the healing elixir that Heart thought she should carry with her for the next few weeks as she recovered from her out-of-body experience.

Some others were for antiviral or antibiotic treatments, a soporific for defense, and an antidote for kreef overdose.

You should be immune to most hazards here on The Stone if you don't go below L4. Heart told her. *But we'd appreciate it if you tried to stay on the upper levels and out of bar fights as much as possible.*

Coria laughed. *I certainly agree with that.*

Plays Deep slithered into Coria's room now that she could move out of the infirmary. She had not tried to find a new pod as yet, and the Beanathar temple had spaces for many purposes.

Ready to work again? Plays Deep asked. *Your telepathy is very good for use with us, but it's time to spread your wings a bit.*

Sceawk squawked and bonked Plays Deep on the back of his head. Sceawk was a bit sensitive, being an Avian among Ophidians.

*Don't step on my tail, he warned.

Plays Deep and Coria went to the public part of the temple and stood near the reception gate. The entrance was only lighted from the opening to L2. Inside the representations of the snake goddess were in dark stone or ceramic with brightly colored details.

Music came from a water harp, water dripping into different-sized containers. Each drop resonated at a different pitch.

As the visitors moved into the temple, the inner room was lighter, in warm shades of ocher, orange, and tan lights on the native stone. The warm light pulled the visitors from the dark entrance, which most found disturbing. The warmer light kept them moving.

Listen for their thoughts, Plays Deep said. *Try to separate emotions from words.*

Coria cleared her mind, closing her eyes and breathing deeply. She began to hear various thoughts like many conversations at a large party. She opened her eyes to a soft focus, just enough to see a particular person.

A man gawked at the various sculptures and mosaics of the snake women, most of whom were depicted in their modest robes, not displaying either breasts or cloaca. His emotions were lust and avarice, as he considered how to undress the figures both for sex and for the theft of their jewels.

He was approached by a priestess prostitute, which both shocked and attracted him. He followed her and disappeared from sight.

Coria recoiled and looked away.

Plays Deep laughed. *You did not know of our third profession? Whatever the market will bear. And a good source of DNA for research.*

Coria looked at him. She did not answer but went back to semi-trance to listen to someone else.

Try the woman with the little dog, he suggested.

The woman was older, carrying a small fluffy dog that looked almost like a doll. At first, it growled, but then began to whimper. The woman held the dog close, whispering to it as it shivered in her arms.

She too was fascinated by what she saw, in a horrified way, but she was more concerned about her dog. She talked baby talk to it, and finally left the temple.

Having fun? Plays Deep asked. *You are doing very well.*

Are you doing this, sending to me, or am I doing it? Coria felt light-headed, leaning back on the wall for support.

Plays Deep put his arms around her waist. *Too much, too soon. I'll take you back.

She went limp, and he picked her up. He carried her back to her room where there were vials of the healing potion. He laid her on her bed and propped her up just enough so that she could swallow.

He'd had a lot of practice. She had been so weak.

"Thank you," she murmured. She lay back with her eyes closed to rest.

Iabbeshank's Connection

When Sly More dropped up to the office of his new boss, Iabbeshank, Assistant Provisioner for Madame Zabayaba, the woman Sal was in his office.

“Report,” Iabbeshank said.

“Delivered your message and sent him to the Red Thug,” Sly said. He nodded toward the woman. “The Man’s looking for you.” He stood still, waiting for further orders.

Sal glanced at Iabbeshank. “He hasn’t come to any of our meeting places. I don’t plan to be manhandled by any more of the spacer’s crew.”

“You are safe enough here for now,” Iabbeshank said. “I’ve sent word to the captain of his ship, and she wants to get away from here.” Xe grimaced, shaking xir head. “Seems she didn’t pay the Guard their cut, and now they want to raise the interest rate.”

“That’s not my business,” Sal said. “I didn’t see anything to report, other than a couple of sentients who entered that shop and then came out.”

“If I may speak, Sentient?” Sly said, looking at Iabbeshank. “She said she had messages for The Man. Might I deliver them?”

Sal sighed. “I gave my data chip to Coria, the bartender at the Red Thug. She’s missing.”

Iabbeshank took out xir comm and tapped on it. They waited several minutes until xe got an answer.

“The bartender is with the Sisters of the Beanathar, recovering from some injury.” Xe read further. “They delivered data to a drop for The Man.”

Sal sighed and slumped in her chair, clearly relieved. “Now I just need to find a new skill.”

“You can stay here for a few days.” Xe glanced at Sly. “Take her to the pod beside yours, and help her get settled.” Iabbeshank

turned back to Sal. “Lie low for a few days. Things are about to get interesting.”

After his runner and Sal left, Iabbeshank got back on xir comm, messaging the captain of the CS Nightfall. Xe warned her that she would likely lose her quartermaster, and to be ready to lift off immediately.

“I do not want to sever our relationship,” xe sent, “but I’ll need a middleman for your deliveries for the next few months. Make new contacts with the Guard before you come back.”

“Payment?” showed on his comm.

Xe tapped out the agreed amount and added ten percent. “Vet your people better next time, or pay them better, so we don’t have incidents here.”

“Agreed. Good doing business with you.” The other comm signed off.

Iabbeshank went to the delivery area xirself to make sure the goods xe had ordered had arrived in good shape. The crates were not accurately labeled, a source of plausible deniability. Nothing in them was poisonous or dangerous in itself, unless one had a strong allergy. That was his plan.

Xe delivered the food to the chef, making sure that he understood how the off-world food was to be prepared. Xe wanted an early dish as well as a dessert, one that would appear impressive and exotic. Mistress’s guests expected no less.

By the time the plan was in action, the chef would be gone, and the Mistress’s death unexplainable.

The Man stretched his neck and nodded to Huldar to let the spacer clean himself up.

After a long interrogation, the spacer had given in and admitted everything. He hadn’t meant to kill the trinket seller but got into a fight when Jerzy Shales would not pay him an extra fee for the information he had come to pick up.

The spacer bashed the Saurian on the back of his head with a replica of The Stone as Jerzy tried to crush him in a hug. The spacer took the chips that Jerzy had in his possession. Then he went back to his ship, never thinking anyone would notice or care about one less Saurian.

Huldar grunted at that.

He had accosted Old Sal, thinking she might have evidence against him, once he learned that the Guard was involved. He didn't know who alerted the Guard, or why Jerzy Shales was important to them.

“I believe him,” The Man said to Huldar. He took out his comm and added a sum to be transferred to the Saurian. “I think it's time to take a walk. Wanna come along?”

Coria and The Man

After delivering the spacer to The Man's contact in the Guard, Huldar took his earnings to have some up-level fun. He didn't think having L4 denizens aware of his good fortune was a recipe for a long life.

The Man went to one of his dead drops. Nothing. He checked two more, with the same results, but the fourth one had two data chips.

He pocketed them and returned to his L1 residence to read them securely. He needed to know what he had missed, what might be scheduled during Zabayaba's soiree, and what he needed to plan for.

Sal's message told rumors about him and Sentient Zabayaba, that he was trying to cut into her smuggling trade. Other rumors said he was trying to marry her or kill her. The first option made him shudder, and the second had too many consequences.

Zabayaba had a powerful network as well.

The other data chips told him what he already knew from interrogating the spacer. Granny's information came from Madame Z's employee, the plan to get her granddaughter and her mate off-world.

None of that would blow back on him, but he needed to be present and seen by witnesses not to interfere with the woman.

He wanted Coria to be his plus-one, but he had no way to contact her unless he went directly to the Sisterhood. Coria was smart, savvy, and able to listen discreetly to what others said around her.

With her new arm, she could be a bodyguard if necessary, More notably, her beauty distracted people from whatever he was doing.

The Man had no inside contact with the snake women. He knew they were powerful and well-informed with a powerful network.

He didn't know what he might offer them in exchange for Coria's whereabouts. They surely had more money than he did. He knew Coria had not had the cash to pay for the new arm she got.

They must be using her. Would they let her ally with him or refuse to let him see her?

Better to find out than to wonder.

The Man stood outside the Temple of the Sisters of the Beanathar. It was exotic, the massive artwork both alluring and disturbing. The sounds of the water harp, the scent of musky perfume, or some other pheromone pulled him into the dark interior.

A priestess stood behind a podium at one side. She nodded and smiled at him, beckoning for him to come closer.

"What service can the Sisters provide for you, Sentient?" she asked, her smile apparently genuine, but close-lipped, not showing her fangs.

"I wish to speak with Coria Clarke, whom I believe is under your care." He smiled too. No point in not being friendly.

"One moment." The Beanath looked into the distance for a few seconds. "Yes, that will be permitted. An escort will take you to her."

In a few minutes, another Beanath rolled in on a cart with a seat beside her.

"Please sit here," she said, gesturing at the seat. "It will be much quicker to ride than to walk."

He sat beside her, noting how her tail coiled beneath her robe.

She took him into a hallway and then to a drop that went down a few levels. They passed through a maze of corridors until they arrived at a pod door.

"She is waiting for you. Her healers are also present, as we require her to be monitored for her health."

“Thank you.” He nodded to her, and she bowed her head slightly.

“I shall return for you when your visit is concluded.”

“Thank you again.” He knew he’d never find his way out without a guide, and might not find his way out at all. Had Coria become one of them, or was she still just a patient?

Only one way to find out. He knocked on the door.

A Chelovitsa opened the door, peering at him with raised feathers on his head, and a piercing look from one side of his head, showing his beak in full profile.

“Come in,” Sceawk said, his voice squawky and somewhat difficult to understand.

A Beanath on the other side of the room pointed to a chair and asked him to sit. “We are happy to let you speak with Coria, but we need for you to understand that she is not completely healed.”

“Thank you,” The Man said. “What should I do to take care of her?”

“We assume you wish her to accompany you to the soirée at the Zabayaba compound.” The Beanath said.

The Man nodded. He knew their network was good, and Coria would know that was what he wanted.

“You must not let her exert herself in any way.” The Beanath folded her arms. “You must not allow her to imbibe any kreef in any form, which the Madame is known to serve to her guests.”

“I agree. I do not use it either, which is well known. Despite rumors to the contrary, I am not in that business.”

The Beanath gave the Chelovitsa a look. In a minute Coria walked into the room, a bit pale, but otherwise much the same as he had last seen her.

The Man stood. “I’ve been given permission to ask you to come with me to Madame Zabayaba’s. Will you come? I will not ask anything of you that you don’t want to do.”

Proposition

Coria leaned against the doorway. “I’ll consider going with you. What kind of contract are you offering?” She watched to see how he reacted.

She’d never asked for anything before, but she’d been through a lot of changes, and wanted to make sure she wasn’t putting herself in a situation she couldn’t get out of.

She opened her mind, scanning his thoughts. He was concerned, not about her but about the Sisterhood. He could see that she was different, not excited about a fancy dinner.

Their eyes met.

He knew she was reading his thoughts.

He looked away, and his mind closed to her, mostly. She felt his irritation, and that it covered a level of fear for his safety.

“You are safe here.” Coria smiled. “If you just want arm candy, I’m happy to oblige. Did you want more than that?”

The Man glanced at her two companions. “Actually, I hoped you would listen to whatever rumors are floating around and let me know what people say when they think you are not listening.”

Yes, Heart said. As long as you are very careful. Sit instead of standing. Drink only what you bring with you, none of the offered drinks.

Sceawk nodded in agreement.

“All right, I agree to accompany you,” Coria said.

“Thank you. Shall I send you a dress or do you wish to pick out one for yourself? With accessories, of course.”

“Thank you. I’ll get something.” She accepted the credchip he handed her.

“Shall I pick you up in the temple lobby, or is there some better place?” He seemed still uneasy, almost staring at her. He did not look at Sceawk or Heart, whom he thought were offering advice he could not hear.

Coria smiled. “The Sisterhood will bring me to the L1 drop nearest to Madame Zabayaba’s compound. Pick me up there.”

The Man stood up. “On L1, I go by Bergen Basilisk. I will call for you at the seventh hour.”

“Agreed,” Coria said. She could sense his relief at having made the date. “Your guide will be here momentarily to take you back to the entrance.”

The Man shook hands with Coria and nodded to each of her companions. Moments later, a knock sounded on the door, his ride back to the public tunnels.

When he had gone, Coria sat down. She took several deep breaths and grounded herself again.

You handled that well, Sceawk said. As one equal to another. He has great respect for you, even more now than before.

How well can you read him? Heart asked. We would like to know everything we can, but you are more important to us than he is.

I can read some of his thoughts and emotions, Coria said, but he won’t be that open again.

Gather what you can. Plays Deep will monitor you, as will the Sisters on staff. Sceawk lifted his feathered ruff for emphasis. Don’t overtax yourself. Let the boy do the work through you.

Coria nodded. *I will.*

Use as much of the healing potion as you feel you need, Heart said. This is not a time to be strong.

Plays Deep chimed in. *Let me do all the heavy lifting, and then we can decide what to tell Basilisk.*

Coria laughed. *You know he is afraid of you, of what you can do, what you may know.*

Heart smiled. *We are aware. Consider carefully what he may ask of you later on. We may be able to make a partnership if he is what he appears to be. And if not, one more casualty on the Stone will not be noted overmuch.*

The Soiree

As agreed, Coria met The Man, Basilisk, at the appointed drop. She had chosen a satin blue gown with little adornment but cut in an elegant fashion to play up her metallic arm. The silver sheen of the arm matched earrings, a bracelet on her other arm, and a simple necklace shaped like an abstract snake.

She was stunning.

Basilisk stopped to admire her before escorting her to the soirée. They were late enough that their entrance would be noted by everyone present.

Coria could hear his thoughts that she would be the center of attention for at least a few minutes, while his own black-on-black outfit would blend into shadows.

As they strolled up the pathway to the surface-level dome, he took her arm, gently as support. “Are you feeling strong enough?” he asked. “My instructions were stringent in keeping you from exerting yourself.”

“I am managing,” Coria said. She had injected herself with several doses of healing potion and had several more in reserve. She could feel the minds of Plays Deep and Heart monitoring her.

“Are you reading my mind now?” Basilisk smiled at her, believing his mental blocks would keep her out.

“Not at the moment,” she said. “I am saving my strength for the party, and all the minds present, at least the ones that are not burned out on kreef.” She didn’t tell him Plays Deep could hear his thoughts, as he hadn’t asked that.

They reached the airlock door, which opened as he held his invitation to the Inspector. After a retinal scan for each of them, the airlock closed. In a moment it opened to the transparent dome through which the spiral of the galaxy lit the pitted, rocky surface, between The Stone and nothing.

A Beanath guard led them to the entrance, handing Coria a crystal glass with a clear liquid. *This is safe, just water and a bit of potion.*

Thank you, Coria said. She took a sip, just enough to put a tiny bit of lipstick on the glass. She would know it was hers.

They were not announced but slipped into the buzzing gathering like a squad of the Guard on L3. Sentients gawked, drew away from them, made a few comments, but then turned back to their games or drinks.

They had been seen.

Basilisk made his way to the group around the Mistress, where she sprawled on her lounge, her bejeweled leg exposed by the high slit in her gown.

Coria followed, her face set in the soft expression of a nearly comatose kreefer... mimicking most of the people in the room. She could hear the murmuring of their muted minds, incoherent ramblings, in contrast to the clear and sharp thoughts of servers. They too wore the mask of no emotion, not looking at anyone, just moving through the guests with drinks and snacks.

She wondered what they would eat for dinner after such heavy fare.

Basilisk approached Zabayaba with a small box, which he handed to her with a deep bow and flourish.

Madame Zaybayaba opened it. A swirling swarm of tiny, iridescent butterflies emerged.

A gasp of delight came from the crowd, and Madame seemed mesmerized for a moment or two. Then she swatted the insects away.

She offered a smile to Basilisk, muttering something about a peace offering. He bowed again, backing away from her as if she were a queen.

Meanwhile, the butterflies dispersed around the room. One flew close to Coria, and she realized it was a camera drone, recording everyone and everything in the room. She made a

practiced barmaid smile, and it moved away to another guest.

Brilliant surveillance.

The Man would know the face of every person in the room.

We are on it, Plays Deep said, Our sisters on the inside are capturing the recordings.

A gong sounded, and the doors to the dining hall opened.

The sentients stumbled and weaved their way through the opening. It was lighted from the floor with the dome made opaque. Plants around the room's perimeter made odd shadows as the lights behind them shifted through spectral colors.

Madame Zabayaba walked to the far end of the table on Basilisk's arm, leaning heavily on him for support. Coria followed, not sure of the protocol, but wanted to be near Basilisk if something happened.

No place names were set out. With Basilisk at Madame's left, and Coria to his left, the other guests seemed to know their place in the pecking order without shoving or positioning.

Madame welcomed them all and ordered the soup brought in. It was thick and savory-smelling, although most guests sprinkled the nike'rot powder on it before tasting it.

Madame's taster did not use the spice but had no reaction to the soup.

Everyone began eating, with apparent enjoyment until Madame started choking.

Task at Hand

Madame Zabayaba put her hand to her throat. She wheezed, incoherent. Her face, already pale, turned a deathly blue. She leaned over and collapsed out of her chair.

The guests panicked. Most of them tried to get out of the dining hall. The doors had been sealed. Others forced their way into the butler's pantry where the food was set up for serving.

Others vomited into the plants.

Coria got up and went to Madame, laying her down on the floor. She'd seen allergic reactions in the bar before.

"Get me your jacket" she shouted to Basilisk. "She's going into shock." Coria folded the jacket and put it under Madame's feet.

Tell me I have adrenaline in my vials, she sent to Heart.

What can I use to help her?

Vial 7 will help her. Sceawk answered. *Inject her upper leg and then massage it to get it into her bloodstream.*

Coria opened the hatch in the upper part of her prosthesis, where a cabinet of ten vials was stored in a circular bin. She found number seven and put it in the opening in her hand above her pinkie finger.

As she reached out to inject the serum, someone grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her away.

One of the servers held her while another one gripped her arm. She could have pulled away but didn't want to hurt the server.

"She's having an allergic reaction," Coria said. "This will help her, keep her from dying."

"We don't know you," The server said. "Call her physician."

"You can trust her," Basilisk said. "She only wants to help."

"We don't trust you either," the server said. "Someone get the chef in here. He's responsible for all the food."

Someone ran into the pantry area.

Madame wheezed, her breath shallow and fast.

A portly Dwarvenkind waddled over to Coria. “I’m her physician. What is in that...finger?”

“Adrenaline,” Coria said. “It will keep her heart going until her body recovers from the shock. What is she allergic to?”

“Nothing I am aware of.”

“Then let me give this to her, or her death will be on your hands.” She jerked away from the servers and dived toward Madame. She shoved her finger into the woman’s thick thigh, through her jeweled stockings.

The servers grabbed her again, dragging her away and pinning her to the floor, her normal arm bent up behind her.

“Rub her thigh,” Coria shouted. “Spread the drug around so it gets into her blood. Do it now.”

Basilisk pushed two more servers away and did as Coria asked.

As the crowd peered at them like a group of vultures waiting for something to die, Madame’s breathing slowed, and she stopped wheezing. The color began to return to her face.

Only then did her physician examine her, listen to her heart, and take a pulse. He was unsteady on his feet. Coria thought he might be too intoxicated to do his job.

So did one of the Beanath guards. She slithered in from the other side of the room, opening the doors and ushering people out. She made her way to Madame, coiling her tail to reach down to lift Madame in her arms.

“Bring this woman and man with us,” she told the servers. “Everyone else will wait in the dome.” *You really shouldn’t have done that*, she said to Coria. *But what’s is done, is done.*

The Dwarvenkind and the four servers holding Coria and Basilisk followed the snake woman.

A server came running into the dining hall, breathless. He grabbed the door facing to steady himself. “The chef is missing!”

Processing

Hours later, the compound held Coria and Basilisk in a sleeping pod. They'd been questioned. Coria's arm and her vials had been taken and tested. It was returned, empty of its contents, but she put it back on.

None of the Sisterhood was allowed into the pod, although one Beanath remained by the door along with two of the Guards.

Coria took the time to rest. She closed her eyes, the better to listen to the discussion among the Sisterhood.

"Are you all right?" Basilisk asked. "They didn't hurt you?"

"I'm tired, but no, I'm all right."

"Did you hear anything from any of the guests, or the servers? Could you read their minds at all?"

She shook her head. "Not here," she mouthed. "Let's get some sleep."

Basilisk nodded. He looked in the closet and found a blanket. "You get under the covers, and I'll sleep on top"

"Don't be silly. Get in and put the blanket over both of us."

Lying back to back, Basilisk was soon snoring softly.

Coria was too keyed up to sleep. As she listened to the Sisterhood, she learned that a forensic team from the Guard had analyzed the soup and some of the other dishes. No obvious toxins were found, but some off-world ingredients were used: peanuts, milk, and bee pollen.

None of the cartons of food were labeled with these things, nor did the orders from the provisioners include them.

The ship that brought the supplies had lifted two cycles before with no registered destination. It was the ship that the spacer, Harden Proffitt, had served on. As he was already in custody for the murder of Jerzy Shales, he was charged with accessory to attempted murder.

All the guests were questioned, but no one had seen anything out of the ordinary, and some were too incoherent to be of use. Others experienced withdrawal symptoms and offered to say anything to get a bit of kreef.

The servers and the kitchen staff had all tasted the food they prepared, and no one had reactions to it. They did not know where the chef had gone, but he had received the food from the Assistant Provisioner, who had asked for some special dishes for xirself.

Iabbeshank was found in xir office eating with one of his employees. Xe showed the Guard xir files and requisitions, and xe seemed concerned at Madame's illness and the disappearance of the chef.

The young worker was to be trained by the chef's mate and had only been on the job for a couple of days. He knew nothing.

Pictures of the Human chef and his Kleckovan mate were broadcast across all comms, but the couple could not be found. No off-world travel arrangements could be found in their names, and no one matching the descriptions in the system could be found in the spaceport, in a transport, or anywhere above L5. They had vanished, and along with them, all evidence of who had tried to kill Madame.

The tiny butterfly drones were also collected and tested, but any information that they might have collected disappeared when their batteries died.

The case went cold, but Madame survived. Her physician kept her on a maintenance dose of kreef to allow her to avoid withdrawal but made her eat locally-produced food that had never caused problems before.

Madame complained.

Coria finally relaxed, letting her mind rest. She'd heard a lot of rumors, conspiracy theories, random thoughts, and incoherent babble in her short time as a plus-one.

She needed sleep to process all of it, under the sharp mind of one of the Sisters.

Mister Between Sisters

Bergen Basilisk fed his tropical fish, back in his own compound. He gazed out a portal to the dark side of the universe, as The Stone turned its back on the spiral arms in its slow rotation. On another planet, this would be considered winter, but it only affected life on L1.

Most denizens of the Stone never saw the surface or the stars, and some didn't even believe in them. He wondered if he should leave and find another place to set up shop. He'd slowed down some of Madame Zabayaba's trafficking, but not all.

He had hired a good many of her ex-employees once she recovered sufficiently to fire them. He didn't trust them, but he could at least keep an eye on them, see whom they knew and who knew them.

He made himself some firebug water, feeling a need to fire up his thinking process.

He was waiting for an answer from Coria.

He knew she would never be completely on his side, completely transparent to him, but he liked her style. He wanted an in with the Sisters of the Beanathar, and Coria was the only person who might allow him to share some of their information.

He had invited her to live with him, as a mistress under whatever conditions she would accept, or as a partner in some of his ventures. Or both.

He would even consider marrying her or setting up some similar contract if she wished to bear children—his or some sperm donor's. Children would complicate things, but if she wanted them...

Basilisk admired her, but love? He wasn't sure what that meant. If she lived here with him, even in her own separate apartments in his compound, he might find out.

For her part, Coria considered his offer, discussing it with her Beanathar mentors. She continued training with Plays Deep and several others in the Sisterhood.

She was learning to boost a signal from one Sister to another over longer distances, as well as sending and receiving on her own.

We have wanted to use the information network that Basilisk has developed, Heart said. *You could ideally do that, but do you want to live with him?*

There are many options for you, Sceawk said. *You could set up your own business if you wish. We would help, of course.*

Coria shut off her mental connection to Plays Deep before he could suggest some of his adolescent fantasies.

I'm not sure what I want. She still had nightmares about her out-of-body experiences. She didn't want anything else to trigger them. *What do people on L1 do for a living anyway? Their creds have to come from somewhere.*

Trade, Heart said. *Smuggling, trafficking, legit buying and selling, manufacturing, and even farming foodstuffs. Everything a sentient needs to survive here can be made, bought, and sold here, and anything else can be shipped in.* She held out her hands. *None of that is important. What you want is important.*

I don't want to be his whore. Coria crossed her arms and frowned.

Nobody, not even The Man, is suggesting that, Sceawk said. He fluffed out his feathers and then smoothed them down with his beak. *If you want, we can set you up wherever you feel comfortable and you can do whatever you think will make you happy. Go back to bartending, although preferably not on L4.*

No, that's one thing I have not missed. Coria sighed. *What does the Sisterhood need that it is hard or complicated for you to get? What could I import, buy, or even manufacture that would improve things for the Sisterhood? My loyalty is always to my Sisters...and brothers,* she sent to Plays Deep.

The most difficult connections for us, Heart said, *are those with other species—Humans, Saurians, Skintors, Dwarvenkind,*

Fuzzcats, Kelckovans. You are unique. That would be a great service to the Sisterhood if you could do it in good conscience.

“I don’t know,” Coria said aloud. “I will take some time to think.”

Coria Levels Up

Coria agreed to meet Bergen Basilisk in a private dining room in the exclusive restaurant that had a view of the surface and the spiral of the galaxy. It was secure, the food exquisite without nuke'rot, and the ambiance luxurious.

After a meal of locally produced foods, Coria and Bergen drank imported coffee, a plant that no one had been able to grow or synthesize in the food labs. It was rich, slightly bitter, and hot.

"I have decided," Coria said, "to move into your compound. I do not wish to continue to live in the Beanathar temple, and I have no other lodgings at this time."

"Thank you," Bergen said. "I hoped you would take me up on my offer."

"I have conditions," Coria said. "I am not a concubine or a whore. I am a business partner, sharing information with you from the Sisterhood, and from you to the Sisterhood. I expect to be involved in all business meetings, not making refreshments or being some kind of office decoration."

"Agreed. You have separate quarters, your own entrance," Bergen said, holding his coffee cup, "and whatever you desire in the way of security and administrative personnel, at my expense."

"I will be informed of the implications of plans for the business, and I will share what information I can gather through my own means and that of the Sisterhood."

"Excellent. I offer you a stipend and a percentage of the business income." He touched his comm and turned it for her to see. The numbers listed were impressive.

"That is acceptable," Coria said. She tapped a link to accept the agreement. She leaned back and savored the smell of her coffee. "Tell me about the plot to kill Sentient Zabayaba, what the objectives were, who was behind it." She could feel the telepathic

connection with Plays Deep, as well as sense Basilisk's emotions, if not his actual thoughts.

“Zabayaba's network was becoming too strong, with an excess of kreef being exported, and so much traffic of sentients that the population was affected.” Basilisk paused, drank more coffee, then set his cup on the linen tablecloth. “She had members of the Guard compromised. She had tunnel children swept up into the brothels, the ones that she didn't maintain as breeding stock. Her off-world connections were as corrupt as she was. There had to be a control imposed.”

Coria nodded. “Your network does not do these things? You don't have spies in the Guard? You don't have tunnel kid runners? You don't operate brothels or slave labor? How are you better than her, other than not being an addict?”

She felt his anger, saw his eyes narrow and his jaw set. “The Sisterhood also uses sex as well as intimidation and telepathy to create their influence.”

She nodded. “That is true.”

“I do have some of those interests, but I don't make my employees addicts. I have spies in every place I can find them. I pay them well, and I act on their information.” He turned away from her, breathing deeply, and then turned back, his face again under control. “I don't use my people up and then toss them in a recycle station.”

She allowed him to regain his calm, waiting in silence until she could feel the heat and edges of his anger fade. “Other than my telepathic skills, what can I do to understand and further your projects?”

“When your quarters are set up to your liking, we will meet, and my assistants will inform you about my immediate projects. You will be able to tell me what skills you have that will fit the objectives.”

“All right.” Coria smiled, cocking her head at a jaunty angle. “On the lower levels, you are known as ‘The Man.’ Will I be called ‘The Woman’?”

He laughed. “No, I think ‘The Lady’ will be much more intimidating.”

The End

If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review where you purchased it or on Goodreads. Thank you. It helps other readers find it .

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About the Author

Charlotte Henley Babb began writing when she could scribble her name on a chalkboard, although she sometimes mistook "Chocolate" for "Charlotte" at the drug store ice cream counter. She brings to any project a number of experiences, including work as a web designer, technical writer, washing machine gasket inspector, cloth store associate, girl Friday, computer tech, and telephone psychic.

She has studied the folk stories of many cultures and wonders what happened to ours. Where the stories are for people over 20 who have survived marriage, divorce, child rearing, education, bankruptcy, widowhood, and love's last kiss? She writes them.