

CHAPTER 1 - INTERLUDE

“I think you have a long way to go, Sam,” Rudy Rodriguez said, shaking a bony finger in her direction.

“Probably...” She sighed, ignoring that particularly aggravating gesture. “But both you and Dreagan picking through my mental dross, should put me to rights in no time.”

“We hope,” the small man muttered, making notes on his personal data pad. “You’ve survived several very difficult sets of ...er, circumstances.”

Yes. Yes I have. Samantha Alexander thought, glancing at the chrono on the wall of her office in the psy-clinic. *Lost in space... Killed a man. Lost my Daddy. Tortured twice. Almost murdered.*

“And then came the colony-wide bombings.” She finished for him.

“And you fell in love.”

Quite a couple months, she thought.

“Can I have the rest of the year off?” she asked, slowing climbing from the guest chair in front of *her* desk

She groaned with discomfort, cursing her broken ribs. Taking up their two coffee sippers, she moved to the side bar to refill them.

“No more for me,” she heard her friend mutter. “I’m going to see Jon next.”

“You get to fix *both* of us?” Sam wondered at the motivation behind that decision.

“It’s been quite a month. Actually I was surprised Thom didn’t take you as *his* client. Or Jon Dreagan.”

“He’s trying to stay neutral.” Sam managed to say without laughing.

“We’re not a sarcastic species, are we?” Rudy frowned, folding the small device and slipping it into his breast pocket. “Seriously, Sam. You must balance your contradictory need for alone time and your instinctual and hyperactive need to fix everyone in this clinic. Heck. You want to fix all the people of this city.”

“If only it were so ...”

“That’s your homework assignment. Design your balance. Add a little structure. And I’m telling Jon and Thom that I ordered you to do exactly that. Balance your inner hermit with your paladin instincts. Session over-- No wait! I wanted to ask you about Todd Abrams’s funeral.”

“Oh. Not much to tell, really. Dan’l, Jon, and I attend with a few jacks from his crew. The Chaplin at Water Reclamation said a few nice words, and they slid Todd’s body into the dehydrator.” She moved to her desk and leaned on its edge. “Dreagan stayed pretty stoic through the whole thing, and later, he and I went alone to scatter Todd’s ashes in the Hollister Rose Garden.”

“And you?”

“Todd was a nice kid. I only met him a few times...”

“Yet *another* death?”

“This one’s not on my conscience.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Rudy said with a gently smile. “And you know it. Okay. Session over.”

“You’re sure this time?” Sam teased, tapping her computer monitor to bring up her personal calendar.

“Can we meet again tomorrow?”

“Can you catch me during dinner? My world is still pretty busy.”

“That’s an understatement. How about 5 o’clock?”

“God willing…” Sam sighed, looking at her monitor from a severe angle. “Yeah, that’s open, so it’s a date.” She lowered her voice and added, “Did you get that, Ezra?”

“I didn’t hear your last.” Rudy said as the words *I got it, Sammie*, flashed briefly across Sam’s monitor.

She turned back to the Master psychiatrist. “I said: it’s a date.”

* * *

Rudy had hardly stepped through her office doorway when Sam heard Ezra quietly ask if he could speak to her. She drew a deep breath.

“Close the door first, please,” she replied, moving to the comfort of her chair behind her big wooden desk. “Okay, Bright Boy, what’s on your mind?”

“I thought you should know there’s been more trouble in Genni Colony.”

“Now what?”

“*Right Now News* reports the discovery of a failed bomb near a big water shipment at the Genni space port. They say it looks professionally manufactured. They’re sweeping for others.”

“Tell me more.”

“Nothing else, yet. But here in Proteus there’s another media story of looting in damaged sections of the city. Security has three new reports of altercations between miners and homeless guests in the ice mine dorms.”

“Only three?” She sighed, leaning back in her chair and taking up her sipper. “What’s being done to avoid more unrest?”

“The Reverend Billy Jackson has announced that he and some of his key people will be taking up residence there in a few hours.”

“He’s a good man,” Sam remarked after a sip of cinnamon coffee.

“That’s what Jonnie said.”

“Has Patric heard from Nikatta?”

“AshenGrey Tonaka left him a message that Genni can take another 100 homeless if we can transport them. People interested in permanent housing and employment get first priority.”

“As legal aliens on work visas?”

“He didn’t say. Do you want to comm him? Or talk to Patric?”

“What’s Patric doing now?” Sam asked, mentally switching gears.

“He’s facilitating the 4 PM group session in the large conference room.”

“We won’t disturb him right now. Would you please page Damian for me?”

Moments later, Damian Renolds stuck his young blond head in through

the now open door, his fair cheeks bright colored. The teen's breath came in big gulps. Sam wondered where he had come running from, and she waved him into her office.

"I have a little reconnaissance mission for you, apprentice." She began as the teen stepped up to her desk. "Go over to Dreagan's place – you can decide on what pretext – and get a head count of the homeless living there. I'm concerned that Jessica may be overwhelmed. Discreetly observe as much as you can, and when you return, bring Master Jack, and report to me. The three of us will discuss what – if anything – can be done to help."

"Does Dr. Dreagan know we're doing this? How long should I observe?"

"No, Dreagan doesn't know. As to how long? Hmmm... Observe through the evening meal and into the evening. Any other questions?"

Youthful eyes gleamed as he shook his head. *Ready for adventure*, Sam thought.

"Okay, then. Get moving, steward."

After Damian had disappeared from her doorway, Samantha whispered, "Ezra, please comm Master Miner Fitzhugh. No video, please. And close the door."

A moment later the voice of Luna's chief of ice mining operations came from her computer's speakers.

"Good to hear from ya, lass. What 's yer pleasure?"

"Master Fitz, I was wondering if you've seen any ice surveys from around the Genni colony?"

“I wish!” he laughed. “What’s on your mind?”

“Just following a hunch.”

“Well if you can get permission, I’ll have my two best ready to have a good look around for you.”

“You mean *for you!*”

“That too. I’m up to my eyebrows, AshenGrey. Anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes. Please be safe, old friend. I’ll get back to you *if* I can get permission, or if I uncover some survey intel.”

“Thanks, Sam. Fitz, out.”

Samantha shifted in her big office chair and returned her calendar to today’s appointments.

“Sam, Master Jack for you,” Ezra announced.

“Yes, Jack?” she called, closing her eyes against the headache her session with Rudy had had given her.

“Mistress, did you commandeer that rascal of an apprentice again?”

“Which one? You have three.” She chuckled but quickly continued. “Yes, Damian’s on an errand for me. Let me guess. He neglected to tell me he was in the middle of something for you again?”

“Again.” MasterGreen Jack Timmons sighed.

“I’m sorry, Jack. I could try to recall him.”

“No. I’m beginning to agree. He’s a better Grey than a Green.”

“But, he’s a great Green, so let’s leave him Green for a while longer.” Sam

drew a breath and then changed the subject. "Any news on those relief supplies from Finland?"

"They're scheduled to *cat* from Southern India at 1400 hours local time, and that should put them in NewPort by late tonight." Voices sounded in the background, and Sam heard her chief housekeeper and steward mutter under his breath. Then he asked. "Anything else, Mistress?"

"You're doing an incredible job, Jack. You have my heart-felt thanks. When Damian gets back, we'll three get together to discuss what he's discovered. I may want to loan a few Greens to Dreagan's personal staff, if you can spare them."

"I'll try to have a few available. Just let me know when."

* * *

Samantha's appointment calendar said that Jonathan Dreagan was scheduled in for the last hour of her official day. She knew that with luck they could enjoy about half of their evening meal together before someone would insist on interrupting. Nevertheless, she happily anticipated any time they could share.

When her office door slid open, Dreagan did not appear, but rather a young dark-skinned woman with startlingly blue eyes stood in the doorway, holding a folded metal structure at her side.

"How can I help you?" Sam asked, as the woman stepped in.

“My name is Angela Bewell, and “I’m a masseuse,” she replied in a soft and soothing voice. “Today my services are a gift to you from Jon Dreagan.”

“Please, come in.” Sam rose from her comfortable chair, quickly deciding where the woman could set up her table.

“Doctor Dreagan said you were still pretty bruised and banged up.” She began tentatively.

“That I am. Your skills are most welcome!”

* * *

After a leisurely stroll through Mallory's Arboretum, Samantha briskly walked the rest of the way to Dreagan’s mansion. Entering through the front, she slowed her pace as she made her way down the spiral ramp, enjoying the various vases and sculptures that rested in lighted alcoves along the way.

At the base of the slope, the green robot, Pal, rolled up to greet her and quietly asked if she required anything. At Sam’s request, Pal escorted her past the entertainment room full of mostly sleeping people, down a few corridors and into Jon Dreagan’s bedroom.

“Please, stay with me, Pal,” she said, starting to unfasten her grey p-suit. “In a few minutes I’d like an escort to the hot tub if that room is unoccupied.”

“It is not in use, mistress.”

After shedding her tunic and tights, she deposited her under things in the appropriate receptacle, found the bathrobe she’d been borrowing, and used the

'fresher.

"Where's Dreagan?" Sam asked the small unit as she came out of the lavish facility.

"Star says he's having a beer with his crew. They're in Ops."

"Thank you. Please, lead the way to the spa."

"Jessica asks if you'd like a bite to eat," Pal remarked as it turned to the door.

"Please tell her *no, thank you.*"

A little more than an hour later, Samantha climbed gingerly into Jon Dreagan's big empty bed and called the lights down to one-sixteenth.

* * *

A sharp pain in her wrist brought Sam out of a deep sleep to find the bedroom lights up slightly and Jon Dreagan settling beside her in the bed. The pull on her wrist happened again, and she started to move her arm only to find a stitch snagging on the bedspread. Shifting that arm clear of the cloth, she brought it protectively to her chest.

"Problem?" whispered the man next to her.

"Hello, dear one" she muttered. "No problem. Do you have any kisses to share?"

The bed lurched again, and gentle lips found hers.

* * *

“Sammie? Doctor Dreagan for you,” Ezra said quietly, interrupting Sam’s review of the Colonial Constitution.

“Hello, Jon,” she called, checking the chrono. *Will this day ever end?* She thought.

“Samantha, I just finished an official comm with Ambassador Izumihara. He’d like to get together on the FirstDay of next week to begin negotiations to incorporate Genni into our colonial community.”

“That’s good news.”

“Yes. I want you there in your official capacity, AshenGrey,” he said, and Sam could hear Ron Nichols’ voice in the background.

“And I shall be, Founder. Where are we meeting, and is there a planetside delegation included?”

“Prime Minister Sakurai will be invited, of course. Lindsey is drafting the invitation to him and also to the folks at Nippon-Nubo Corporation.”

“Sounds like a good plan. Include Thomas Penock, please.

“As you wish.”

“Thank you, Founder,” Sammie said. “And where do we meet?”

“Izumihara wants it to be in Genni.” His voice sounded uncertain.

“That is my choice, too,” she said strongly.

“Then I’ll see that it is in Genni. Had lunch?”

“Just finishing.”

"All right. See you this evening."

* * *

"Sweetie, did ya authorize Star to send anyone out after the lunar scooter's wreckage?" Dan'l asked, his sour face dwarfed in the monitor on Samantha's office desk.

"No..." *Why would Star want it salvaged?* Sam chuckled at the annoyed frown on her old friend -- her *new* father's face. "I can't take the credit for that, dear. What's happened?"

"Seems a two-man detail collected the remains of that prototype before Jon remembered it was still out there." Behind his frown she could see an unusual mess in his electronics shop and felt sad for him. "My best guess: Star authorized it."

"Have you and Jon talked any more about Star's new abilities?"

"Some," Dan'l grumbled, glancing off screen. "But I'm keeping an open mind."

"Good to hear," Samantha said with a heart-felt grin for him. "Someone's pounding on my door. I've got to go."

"We've got to get together soon, Sweetie."

"I'd like that. I'm just so swamped right now..."

"Jon's is complaining that he has to make an appointment just to see ya." Dan'l grinned. "Let's have dinner. Soon."

"Soonest," she agreed, tapping her console to toggle the door open.

Patric stepped into the room, followed by Damian who carried an overloaded tray of sandwiches with fries and salads. Her Master Steward came in last and palmed the door closed behind him. Jack moved to the sidebar to refresh Sam's drink with his usual empathic efficiency.

Samantha regretted that this meeting would have to double with dinner. She just wanted to be left alone.

* * *

The bay that surrounded *The DreaganStar Project* was closed and sealed when Samantha arrived a few minutes before 1900 hours. The fatigue within her clamored for this day to end, and she found even the moon's light gravity pulling at every muscle. The buildings that formed a semi-circle around the five-story vessel looked much better than when Sam had seen them thirty-some hours earlier. Debris had been cleared or stacked in piles for recycling. One such large pile was all that remained of Hugo Higgins' supply hutch, and Sam found herself wondering how the little man had dealt with his *kingdom* being blown up.

Samantha saw no one as she made her way to Star's tripod base, figuring that Dreagan had dismissed his workers after an eleven-hour day, as he'd mentioned. Most homes and offices needed repair throughout the higher levels of the colony. In fact, Patric Hensen, Joel Brogan, and Taylor Roberts had moved temporarily into Samantha's cubby on the condition that Patric stay in her second

bedroom - the room housed Ezra's hardware. No one knew who or what Ezra was, except Patric. Sam wanted it to stay that way.

"Welcome, AshenGrey Alexander," Star's voice whispered in her bubblehead, and she looked up at the tall, crystalline vessel. "Thank you for coming, but please, don't bother coming on board. I'd like you elsewhere."

"All right, Star," Samantha said, intrigued by her summons. "I brought the bucket you asked for. Where do you want it?"

"To your left, behind Operations. You will find an air lock. Go through it. Jonnie is waiting for you."

Sam began moving in that direction, while asking, "Are you going to tell me why you asked me here?"

"Not yet," the computerized being quietly said.

"Patience, my dear psychologist," Jon Dreagan said over her suit's comm. "The...er ... Star won't tell me either."

Samantha was tempted to correct his terminology, thinking *we're dealing with a lot more than a machine here*, but she kept silent. Instead, she asked Star if Ezra was hooked into whatever this was.

"Right here, Mistress," the male voice responded. "Star says your vitals are running a bit on the high side."

"I'm surprised," she muttered, spying the hatch, and the white p-suited figure next to it, some fifty meters ahead of her. "I'd have bet they would be as low as my energy levels."

"Another long day?" Dreagan asked, white p-suit turning toward her.

Looking around, Samantha located an escape route, just in case this was an imposter in that white p-suit. Finding two reasonable escape routes, she felt no better. Sweating, she recognized several places where another person could wait in ambush. Mentally Sam chided herself about such unreasonable thoughts.

"Dreagan, please lift your left foot," Sam called, feeling suspicious although her internal alarms had stayed quiet.

The white p-suit's left foot came up briefly, but she still felt strange about this.

What was Star up to? Sam thought.

"You're paranoid, 'Mantha," he said as she approached

She spell-gestured *Why?* using his newer variation of her Trade's hand alphabet at the white figure who stood motionless in the gray dust.

"Because," was all Dreagan said, after a shrug.

"Jonnie, would you please enter the air lock and walk over to the outside of my bay?" Star asked, and Samantha watched the white suit move into the lock. "Psyche, when you get there, please do the same."

As Sam stepped through the airlock and into the light gray moonscape beyond Star's bay, Dreagan came up to her, touched his helmet to hers, hands on her shoulders, and smiled affectionately.

"Let's make this brief. You're tired," he said with an affectionate squeeze of her shoulders, a gesture that Samantha gave in return, smiling.

"Very. Star? What now?"

"Jon, over to your right you'll see the remains of your lunar scooter--"

"So, that's what you did with it!" Dreagan laughed, releasing Sam and moving toward the mangled silver wreckage.

"Go with him, please, AshenGrey," Star said gently, so Sam did, content to let Star guide her to whatever she wanted. Samantha just wished that it would be brief and uneventful.

Stepping next to Dreagan, Sam stared down at the twisted metal that had been his three-tracked scooter. Before them in the gray dust, the wreckage looked much like it had the last time Samantha had seen it. Then she realized the shine of the metal was gone. The wheel forks were missing, she saw on closer inspection. So were the handlebars. Only a pile of what might have been those pieces melted down, remained, gleaming in the dirt close to where the handlebars should have been.

"Psyche? Would you move 1.2 meters to your left, and set your bucket down?" Star asked, and Samantha glanced at Dreagan.

He shrugged, and then nodded, so she carefully did as the computer had instructed. Or she thought she had.

"No, Grey," Star sighed a long-suffering sigh. "Lay the bucket on its side in the sand, so that the mouth is right next to that puddle of gelatinous azole."

"The what?"

"That silver stuff," Dreagan muttered, kicking a loose rock with his boot.

Samantha repositioned it the way Star wanted, and then she looked back over her shoulder at the big vessel. Dreagan, Sam noticed, wore a tired scowl within his bubblehead. She became uneasy about his attitude toward this new life

form.

"How's this?" she asked, making sure that the ship's external sensors and cameras could see what she had done.

"Fine. Thank you," was Star's reply.

"Star, would you please make a video of this for me?" Samantha asked, glancing at Dreagan, who had not moved from his spot.

"As you wish. Jon, you will find a mini-backhoe just--"

"I know where it is," he said, irritation in his voice.

"Please, move it next to the scooter's wreckage for me," Star said softly, and the scowl deepened on his face.

Dreagan did not move. Samantha counted a ten-beat, but he stayed.

"Dreagan," she said after a moment. "Please, do it."

"Why?" he muttered. "I, for one, think this has gone far enough."

"Jonnie," Star responded in her child's voice. "Please?"

"What harm will it do, Jon?" Sam asked, afraid he'd offend Star and cause some kind of irreparable damage to this fragile relationship that had been developing between the two of them.

"This is..." He began, and then stopped, but Samantha had heard the frustration building in his deep voice.

"What, Jon?" she challenged. "Something important is about to happen. You can spare about fifteen minutes of your time."

"I have better things to do with my goddamn time," Dreagan grumbled, sounding something like a spoiled child.

Not wanting to speak for fear of insulting the two enlightened computers on the comm, Samantha began hand-talking at Dreagan: *These two are asking us to perform a burial.*

Dreagan studied the signals soberly, and then shook his head in disbelief. Samantha signed: *E.T. contact?*

He laughed, but did not move. Samantha swore under her breath, and then waved him toward the backhoe. He stayed still, almost defiant, and her temper rose. *Her Grey Masters were right*, she had to admit. Dreagan could not be relied on to handle a first contact *without supervision.*

"JourneyGrey!" Samantha growled, projecting her controlling *Voice*. "Do as Star says. Now! Move it, before you're an apprentice!"

"Mantha..." he sighed with a weakness in his protest that told her that he would probably obey her next order.

"JourneyGrey! Do it!" Samantha barked like a drill sergeant.

Startled, Dreagan blinked, and then moved toward the small piece of digging equipment. Sam smiled, glad HazeGrey Thomas Penock had taught her the *Irresistible Voice* technique.

"What else can I do for you, Star?" she asked gently, watching Dreagan's white p-suit as he mounted the machine.

"Look in the bucket, please," Star said.

Sam did. This gelatinize azole was much shinier than the stuff she had found in that ice mine and placed in Ezra. It slowly flowed across the dusty dark moon's surface and into the polysteel bucket.

"It's moving along quite well, about 66 percent done," Samantha told Star while Dreagan climbed into the small operator's cage that was walled off from the rest of the backhoe. "What do you want me to do with it once it's all in here?"

"I'll tell you later," Star said. "Jonnie, would you please bring that rig right along side the scooter."

"That way we won't have to move it far," Sam remarked as Dreagan maneuvered the little backhoe parallel to the wrecked vehicle. "Did you know, JourneyGrey, that one sign of intelligence in a species is that they ritually dispose of their dead?"

"I didn't know," he muttered tentatively, working the controls. "So, we're burying it. Is that it, Star?"

"I understand that you humans traditionally bury their dead," she said in an even tone. "The recycling of bodily fluids done here on Luna seems to be an exception, but with that example, it makes sense to collect the petraluna first."

With a snort Dreagan began digging a grave for the lunar scooter.

* * *

As the apprentice ice miner disappeared into the corridor beyond her office door, Samantha toggled the in-house comm, glad that yet another long day had officially come to an end. All she wanted now was a quiet dinner, hopefully with Dreagan, maybe alone, and some time to stare at an inane video or read a book. Patric's voice acknowledged the comm.

"My calendar says that's the last client for today," she said, closing file information in her computer.

"Sorry, Mistress," Patric said with no hint of remorse. "I had to give you one more appointment. He's been waiting for almost an hour. He's on his way up."

"Pat, no!" she growled, annoyed and tired, and overextended.

The office door dilated open with its usual swishing sound to disclose Dan'l Girdner's irresistible grin.

"Yer a hard one to see," he said, strolling in.

"I don't plan it that way," Samantha laughed, delighted to see him.

Skirting the desk, Sammie leapt into his arms, joyful of their customary greeting, regardless of those damn ribs. Dan'l kept the embrace much longer than usual, and she stayed with him. When he finally released her, he grinned, brushing at his eyes while flopping casually into one of the two green chairs in front of the desk.

"Dana said I should talk to ya ASAP," he began.

"You both should have talked to me a long time ago," she said, failing to sound stern. "Want something wet?"

"Whatever yer having. Yer mother said the best thing to do was to tell ya to ask me anything ya wanted to know."

"Sounds smart," she muttered, moving to the wet-bar, in deep thought.

"Okay. First: How was I conceived?"

"Artificial insemination."

Samantha almost dropped the sipper cup she had grabbed, and then she recovered from his blunt reply and tapped the still hot urn.

"So, I'm not something some gene splicers rigged up?"

"We didn't trust them either."

"Where?" she demanded, handing black coffee to him.

"Thanks. In Billings. A private practitioner's office." Dan'l frowned, and she felt bad. Sammie hadn't meant to be unkind or to bring up bad memories. "Ya don't know her, and anyway, she's long dead, now."

She drew a deep breath. "And the big question. Why?"

"HA! I think ya need to specify, darlin' daughter."

"Okay. Two whys. One, why you and not... Daddy?"

"Jacob had himself sterilized before they met. He and Dana had tried undoing the procedure. They really wanted a kid. She's got a great set of genes, ya know. So do I, according to the Harold Foundation, who recommended me to them. We all agreed that we didn't want any genetics screw-up, so we left the gen-techs out of it completely, leaving ya in God's hands." Dan'l closed his eyes a moment. "What's Big Question Number Two?"

"Number Two," she said, easing into the chair next to Dan'l, while wondering if she even had the right to ask such questions. "Why you? Or was that the Harold Foundation?"

"We *all* felt it was the best match possible for intelligence, longevity, and procreation. We hoped to eliminate Dana's inconsistent fertility, although I must stress that the bulk of the problem was Jacob's physiology. Besides, I liked yer

folks and knew I could tolerate them while I watched my baby girl grow."

"Tolerate them? Is that why you didn't marry my mom?"

"That's three whys," Dan'l scowled, and then grinned when he saw Samantha didn't realize that he was playing. "But to answer yer question, we both loved Jacob. Divorces are always messy, and as ya know, I'm not the contracting kind."

"Maybe that's where I get it from." Samantha thought of Dreagan, then her mom, then her Daddy, and then she wondered what the years might have been like for "uncle" Dan'l.

"Dana will be here next FirstDay," he said in her thoughtful silence, and she looked up at him, annoyed by the coming new demand on her time and emotions.

"In six days, huh?" She checked her irritation, chalking it up to too many hard hours since the bombings. "I guess I'll have to throw Patric, Joel, and Taylor out of my cubby sooner than I thought."

"Sweetie. Dana will be living with me." Dan'l grinned as Samantha pretended to be horrified by the notion of him and her mom sharing a cubby.

"Have dinner with me?"

"Name the place! I'm buying!"

* * *

Using Dreagan's exercise equipment Sam worked off dinner and her

various anxieties and frustrations later that evening. The dark haired man came in during her cool down.

“That Genni meeting has been changed to the day after tomorrow—

“What?” Samantha shouted as her feet slapped the treadmill loudly.

“Why?”

“—the planetside jacks are arriving ahead of schedule. When do you want to ride over to Genni with me?”

“Can we talk about this after I clean up?”

“As you wish.”

CHAPTER 2 - MINDMUD

"It's Ambassador Izumihara," Patric whispered over the psy-clinic's comm. "Again."

"He's as subtle as a meteor strike. No video, Ezra," Samantha called, knowing her computer-friend would complete the connection. "Good evening, Ambassador Izumihara. I do believe it is evening there now, isn't it?"

"Forgive my, ah... impatience, AshenGrey," came the Japanese official's voice as Sam finished her preparations. "But my sources indicate that neither your name, nor any of your Greys' are listed on, ah... outbound Proteus transportation."

"Sir, I will be at there on time. Count on that." Samantha mentally chuckled as she looked into Mia Samuels' face in her mirror. "I have a few details to look into along the way."

"The planetside officials will be arriving tomorrow," he said, voice tight with tension. "I have not told them of the Grey involvement."

"They already know, Ambassador," Sam said, stashing the costuming paraphernalia box in her desk while wondering if he expected Sam simply to borrow Star and bounce over to his colony. *That was a thought...* "I'll try to arrive

earlier."

"I would be most grateful, Dr. Alexander," was his breathy response over the comm as she reached for a sip of tea.

"How can I not come, after such an elegant invitation? I must go now, but I will see you soon."

* * *

The mess around Dreagan's office reminded Sam of the perpetual disarray of Dr. MacClead's office at the University of Tranquility. Somehow he had a way of knowing where each item was, despite the chaotic appearance. She hated the purpose for her first visit to his corporate world and knew he would object to her decision.

Despite the facade of the books, printouts, and reports strewn about, Sam recognized the power in the psychological domination in the chamber's decor. The color scheme was mostly gray and black with a few geometric white patterns. A snow leopard holo lurked on the wall behind the Founder.

Dreagan frowned at her across his massive black slate desk, while mentally, Samantha resolved that her decision was correct. The hand-written note he held contained the date, place, and time when the Ambassador Hinto Izumihara and she would meet with the Genni ambassador's planetside superiors on Luna. Samantha had just shown him Izumihara's message that pleaded for Grey intervention.

"Goddammit, Samantha!" He slammed his hands on the desk. "Send someone else. I can't risk you."

"There is no one else I trust to send," she almost shouted at Dreagan, assured that his corporate office was secure. "Do you realize that I am seriously bending several Trade regs even telling you about this?"

"Send Hensen!" he grumbled with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I know you trust him."

"Protocol requires a Master, and he is not an AshenGrey," she said from where she stood on the opposite side of his oversized desk and ego.

"Send Roberts, then." It sounded like an order, and Samantha pushed down *that who are you to order me* feeling.

"He's not competent, let alone qualified," she replied controlling her temper. "This is my specialty, Jon. I must go."

"No! Too dangerous," he said with an authoritative tone that held no hint of the *Voice*. "Several planetside military vessels have already landed near Genni."

"I know. I wish they hadn't done that," Samantha sighed, thinking she didn't need or want more complications. "Please realize I am just going to work, now. I'll see you in a few days."

"I could put you under house arrest." The anger in his eyes told her that this was a serious consideration to him, but he made no move toward his comm.

Dreagan's hands were shaking.

"Please don't," Samantha sighed, stepping back two paces as she decided it was time to end this conversation. "Not if you want to stay a Grey."

"Mantha, please. Reconsider?" he asked in a calmer tone. "I don't want to see you to get hurt. Again."

"I trust you to back me up on this, Jon. The Haze is close by if you need him," she said with a shake of her head and felt the swing of the single braid of hair down her back. "I have a transport to catch. I need you understand this part of my job."

"Screw your goddamn job!" Dreagan roared, hands slapping his desk as he pushed himself up to stand. "You're staying here."

"No, JourneyGrey, I am going to work." Sam poked a fast index finger in his direction. "Don't interfere."

Pivoting, AshenGrey Samantha Alexander stomped out of Jon Dreagan's office. He didn't bar the door. She wondered briefly if this would hurt their long-term involvement, but put that aside to deal with events of the day.

* * *

The last time Samantha had seen NewPort from above, one of its clear geodesic domes were in flames. This time, from the ground she saw the dome under repair, work crews swarming within it like ants on a large ice cube. Much of the terrorists' damage was still evident around the bay she shuffled through, despite the operating schedule of the only working catapult. One hundred and fifty homeless and excited Lunans moved along slowly, making their way to a lunar shuttle. A monstrous-looking 50-meter cigar made of dull silver polysteel,

this shuttle was usually used only for inanimate cargo. *It would have to do*, Sam reminded herself, watching the crowd of mostly men who carried everything from standard luggage and blankets to saxophones and golf clubs. For herself, she chose to bring along a yellow paisley canvas duffel bag, carrying her Trade Grey clothing and grey p-suit. An old air "sniffer" completed her disguise as an iceminer.

"Looks like a full boat," the big man next to her mumbled, and she looked sideways at Patric with a slight smile.

"I hope you remembered to pack some sandwiches." She laughed as they were herded up a ramp and into the oily-smelling, girder-lined bowels of the transport.

"Hope bologna's okay. It's going to be a long trip."

"With ketchup?" she asked, thinking of Genni matters and saw Patric, also disguised as a miner, exaggerate his cringe.

"Crazy woman," he muttered with a shake of his head.

* * *

Now Samantha knew what Jonah felt like inside the belly of the whale. I-beams that reminded her of a monster's ribcage rounded the walls, deck to overhead. Besides a row of portable 'freshers and a curtained-off area designated for sleeping, there was only a 30-meter long, open bay. At least this lumbering cargo transport had a life support system. After Patric had won yet

another hand of seven-card stud, Sam gathered her credit chips from the red and white striped blanket on the polysteel deck and unfolded her cramped legs.

These five engineers had been fleeced of enough credits, she decided, and climbed to her feet. Patric's subtle hand gesture asked where she was going.

"Nap time, gentlemen," she said with a yawn and received two offers for casual sex from the all-male group, which she ignored. "You'll get a chance to win your credits back later."

Someone said something about the game continuing until they got to Genni, as Sam turned and started for the nearest 'fresher. Thinking that she would be glad to see this thirteen-hour trip end, she took her place in the 'fresher line behind a grizzled-looking graybeard dressed in JourneyGreen and reeked of cooking grease.

"I'm glad I decided to get in line now instead of waiting until I really had to go," Sam muttered with a chuckle to invite conversation.

* * *

"... so, with most of our neighbors work'n on the restoration, and me and him too old to help, me and Hershel - that's my 'tractmate - figured the best thing we could do, was to sub-let our cubby to somebody who could help. We got out of the way." A sadness came in the last of the old woman's words, and Samantha had the impression this woman had *gotten out of the way* several times before in her life.

"A noble gesture, mistress," Samantha said, half-listening to the array of conversations around her.

"And to think, we'd only been up here three months!"

"Will you be making Genni your permanent home?"

"Probably. You know, it's funny," she said with an un-funny look in her eyes, "but Hershel and me tried to migrate there first, when we started think'n of mov'n up here, but they wouldn't let us. Japanese citizens only."

"How ironic!" Sam laughed. "This journey must be karma."

The woman harrumphed a deep snort of disgust, picked at her fat, red cuticles, then looked at Sam with watery brown eyes.

"What do you iceminers know?" she grumbled.

"What do you know of us icers, ma'am," Sam replied with serenity, "that makes you so contemptuous of us?"

The elderly woman blinked once, startled, and then looked a little deeper into Samantha. Something left her uncomfortable about the woman's manner, so Sam tried to become more of Mia, and less of 'Mantha.

"Contempt?" She spoke with an odd little laugh. "No, dearie. But I just never thought I'd meet a female icer."

"There are a few. I'm finishing my degree in structural design ..."

* * *

Across the thirty-meter fuselage, Samantha could see Patric flirting with

one of several *business girls* who were making the trip, and she wondered if his conversation was grey business or personal pleasure. The woman sported a bald head, encircled by an array of miniature stars, generated, no doubt, by a micro-holo concealed somewhere on her body. The effect was startling and erotic to Sam, but she could not tell how she was affecting Patric who seemed more interested in her overdeveloped mammaries. Bored with watching them, Samantha moved starboard, passed the two gold-clad jugglers who were entertaining a small knot of people near the main cargo elevator. She headed for the sleeping area.

* * *

A hand clenched roughly at Samantha's arm and a big hand wrapped around her mouth, keeping her silent. This brought her out of a sleep filled with dancing silver knives and crazed eyes. Patric's face, creased with worry lines, came into focus. The huge cargo bay was oddly silent. She moved to sit up, Patric assisting. His head turned briefly toward the green curtain that separated the sleeping area from the rest of the hold, and then he looked back to Sammie. He removed his hand, and she glanced around the two-dozen or so sleeping forms in the designated sleeping area.

"No engine sounds," she whispered, checking the cheap chrono on the wrist of her black p-suit. "Early arrival?"

"We've been boarded by Japanese planetside security. About a hundred

of 'em." Patric reported, his worried face making her stomach lurch.

"Let's have a look," she whispered while getting stiffly to her feet, wondering who had the nerve to detain the transport.

He and Sam rose as one, and then stepped over or around sleeping Lunans until they reached the entrance to the rest of the big cargo vessel. Someone shouted what sounded like orders in Japanese as she looked carefully around the worn and dirty edge of the musty green brocade fabric.

On the main cargo elevator platform, twenty-five black p-suited security guards waited while many others made their way through the crowd of Proteus's citizens. The skin on Samantha's back turned to goosebumps, and she felt herself shiver as the guards began hauling people out of the crowd and onto the elevator platform.

"They're looking for you," Patric whispered near her ear. "See. They're only choosing short, skinny people."

Samantha looked carefully around the cargo hold, spotted a small person, and waited, watching. Within twenty seconds one of the guards had dragged the small balding man to the front, and into the circle of remaining police. A second group of security jacks moved now in Sam's direction, presumably to wake the sleepers.

"Earthers, by the way they're moving," Patric said next to her as his eyes swept the vessel's interior.

Sam watched the guards, all dressed in standard Security Trade Black, as they stumbled and bounced awkwardly through the crowd. Their clumsy manner

showed a lack of experience with Luna's lower gravity. Several of them pushed and shoved their selected citizens unnecessarily. Samantha's temper began to boil, but she forced it back down to a low simmer.

"This is not good," she muttered, trying to decide her next action: hide here or seek out what they wanted, perhaps freeing the rest of the passengers from them.

Patric's eyes met hers, and his held wrinkles of concern in every corner as he whispered, "Where do you want to hide? The overhead or in a port-a-fresher?"

"Should I hide?" she asked, watching the activity continue in the big cargo bay. "Look. They're being pretty rough with some of the people they're taking to the circle."

"Yes, but --"

"No such word as *yeahbut*, Patric." Sam laughed easily, knowing what she really wanted to do. "Look, JourneyGrey, I don't think they'll hurt me--"

"Mistress! Don't even think of waltzing out there alone."

-- so, pass me my duffel bag."

"I will not let you just walk out there and--"

"You will do as I say," Samantha ordered, using her *Voice* in the precise tone, knowing he could not resist. "I want you to get to Izumihara and tell him--"

"I'm suppose to protect you--"

"I must listen to the other side's argument," she continued, knowing which vocal tones would bend to Patric to her will. "Tell Penock to cover Genni for me

and brief him thoroughly. I'll be as careful as possible."

His hand grasped her arm, and she could easily read the desperate concern on his face.

"How can I protect you if you send me away?"

For a moment her heart softened to this man who held himself personally responsible for her safety. Patric passed her bag slowly, then looked down at her, pleading with silent eyes.

"I will be careful," Samantha whispered, touching his hand briefly before she parted the old curtain. "I promise."

Shouldering the yellow canvas bag, Samantha began moving boldly toward the group of citizens and Japanese Security gathered on the platform, not looking back. She spit out the dental spacers that changed her jaw line and Mia became Samantha again.

Pushing past people much larger than she was, Sam slowly made her way, unescorted, to where the twenty-five guards circled the growing group of short people. As she approached, Samantha managed to catch the eye of the stocky, black-clad man who still shouted orders, and he hesitated in mid-sentence. When he continued with orders to his people, Sam knew he'd recognized her. She needed to end his abusive little round up.

Samantha pushed her way onto the platform and into the guarded circle by bouncing over the linked arms of two of the black-clad guards. Startled, they made no move to stop her, so she casually strolled toward their stocky senior officer. Around her, small, frightened people muttered their discontent, and one

complained about how all his political pull would mean dire consequences for the Japanese government. She said nothing as two massive security guards stepped into her path, less than two meters from their stocky boss. His arrogant eyes locked on her as strong hands clamped down hard on both of her arms, pulling Samantha to a halt.

The leader said something in Japanese that sounded like an order, and the two security men who had blocked their mutual lines of sight stepped aside. They did not let go of Sam's arms. Again that man and she locked eyes. She read *duty* in them. And authority. He barked another order.

The guard on her left yanked her duffel from her shoulder, while the man on the right twisted Samantha's arm roughly. Then, he pulled open her p-suit's wrist clasps, exposing the stitches that had not yet dissolved. Across the platform, the officer-in-charge smiled, satisfied.

"Forgive me, but I didn't hear you call," Samantha said to him, as the first guard began pulling TradeGrey clothing from her duffel bag. "I was sleeping."

"You make this easy. Thank you," was the senior man's reply, seeing the contents of her bag. "We thought you'd be here."

"I am here. So?" Samantha asked, shaking off the hand that held her, trying to appear calm and casual. "What do you want?"

"My employer requires me to bring him AshenGrey Alexander," he said with a slightly odd, somewhat British accent.

"Let's not keep your master waiting," Sam muttered, smoothing down the seals of the pressure suit to conceal her still bruised and healing wrist. "And

release these people. You have what you came for."

The heavy hands did not return, but the two guards moved to stand behind her while the stocky Japanese Security jack shouted the phrases that recalled his men from the crowd of Proteus's refugees. A third guard appeared to Samantha's left, much younger than the others, and began throwing her clothes back into the duffel. She passed this apprentice an appreciative glance, then glared back at his stocky leader. Dark, deep Asian eyes met hers coolly.

"What's your name?" she asked without emotion.

"Captain Miyoshi Takashima," he said while he gestured his people toward the hatch that led into the crew's portion of the cargo ship.

Takashima wore the triple shield badge of a Security Master, and several ribbons of distinction decorated the area just above his heart. Samantha found an egotistical pleasure in the fact that she had apparently been sought out by one of Japan's best, but hid her delight, watching as his troops maneuvered into formation. Behind the wall of Trade Black jacks, Patric caught her eye, and she managed to gesture her farewell just before a guard nudged her toward Takashima, who had turned to the entrance to the cargo crew's compartment. The youngest guard passed her duffel to the man beside her as Samantha stepped across the platform, following the leader.

* * *

The strip search performed by a middle-aged, overweight Japanese

woman in a woman's restroom proved to be *unfun*. Pieces of Samantha's disguise landed in a polysteel sink as she worked. When she finished, Sam was allowed to dress in the TradeGrey, Dreagan-designed p-suit she had brought along. Then, the fat lady shoved Sam through the cargo ship and into the captain's cluttered office. Takashima waited there with two journey Blacks and the Indian man whom Sam had seen briefly while they were boarding. The cargo ship's captain seemed pale and was chewing his left thumbnail as Sam first walked in, followed by her fat female guard. Takashima muttered something at the woman, eyeing Sam's changed appearance, and the woman lapsed into a long monologue in her native tongue. He grinned a toothy smile when the woman finished.

"They thought you might try to conceal your identity," Takashima said, reaching for a bubblehead on the map table.

"Easier to get Lunans to talk to me," was Sam's reply as the fidgeting dark skinned captain handed her a second bubblehead. "What's this? I just get here and we're leaving?"

"My apologies, AshenGrey," the cargo vessel's captain whispered, haunted eyes darting from Samantha to the Security Master. "I have no choice in this."

"Take better care of the rest of your passengers," she warned, wondering why this blackjack scared the old cargo captain so much. "Don't worry. I expected this to happen and made provisions for it."

That last bit was a lie, but it did serve to unnerve Takashima, who

hesitated briefly as he donned his helmet, and then, gave Sam a brief, questioning glance. He secured his bubblehead, his face screwed up in thought. With only a command gesture to his guards, he stepped around Samantha and stomped out of the cabin. One of the guards pushed her after him, and Sam quickly dumped her helmet onto her head as she went.

Out in the narrow corridor, Takashima moved rapidly, but a bit awkwardly as other men cleared the passageway at his approach. Behind her, a male voice grumbled, and she felt something blunt shoved into her back. Samantha moon-bounced two steps and landed right behind the Japanese security chief. He took the next passageway to the left, and as she followed him, Sam found herself walking into a ship-to-ship docking umbilical.

The wide docking bay was probably a variation on a Dreagan design, made of dull silver polysteel with several large view ports on either side. Looking out at the multi-gray lunar landscape, Samantha could see nothing but an old chemical-burning launch shuttle. Its white paint blistered in several areas, the smaller ship probably had a passenger capacity of around twenty, which meant that Takashima's men were crowded, especially if they all carried combat packs as well as standard p-suits. Samantha wondered if he had orders to conduct a land assault on Genni. His ship seemed capable of hauling her back to Earth, if they wanted.

Whoever they were.

"Takashima-san, may I ask where you are taking me?" Samantha asked in a businesslike manner.

"You may ask, AshenGrey," came his polite but flat sounding reply in her helmet. He said nothing more.

As the stocky Takashima reached the end of this corridor between the small ship and the cargo vessel, the bi-valve airlock in front of him snapped open. Light poured from the interior of this vessel, and Samantha could see several black p-suits waiting inside.

"Your ship?" she asked as he stepped over a shin-high knee-knocker and into the ship's large airlock.

"No longer," came his response, his wide face sad as he turned and offered his right hand to assist her.

Samantha accepted this courtesy with a slight bow, never letting her eyes leave his. In them she saw a resolution, some kind of determination but also something gentle.

"A promotion, I hope," she said, moving through the lock and into the ship.

Takashima frowned, a touch of pain briefly displayed on his Asian face as he pulled off his bubblehead. Then, he gestured for her to precede him into the older ship. Before Samantha, the interior of this ship seemed inappropriate for what she had seen of the outside. Behind her, the airlock hissed as it closed. She unfastened her helmet, pulled it off, and cradled it in her left arm.

Everything looked new and shiny in the over-bright lights of the crowded entryway. Three journey Blacks, armed with electro-rifles, snapped to attention at either polysteel wall. To her surprise, a deep red oriental carpet extended before her, down the passageway that Takashima had turned to, but it only went to the

right at the first junction--toward the stern of the vessel.

"I'm expected, huh?" Samantha muttered, not expecting a reply.

He gave none, but his p-suit covered hand extended over her shoulder, pointing Sam down the corridor. She thought briefly of Scrooge and the *Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come*, and a shiver slipped up her spine. The black-gloved hand came pointing over her shoulder again, and she dismissed any fantasy she had about heroics against Takashima's six men.

With a sigh to bolster her fearful anticipation, Samantha stepped over the second knee-knocker and into the renovated vessel. Three steps bounced her to the corridor's T-junction, but the red runner only went right. She moved left, only to find a heavy hand pulling her back. Takashima frowned as Sam stepped back passed him, and then continued following the carpet-path. Several large hatches lined what looked like a main passageway, but they were all closed and gave no hints of their contents, or any possible escape. The air smelled like the typical, lightly scented, artificial air common to every space vessel Sam had ever been in, with the exception of The *DreaganStar*. Thoughts of Star brought thoughts of Dreagan. Samantha continued casually down the hall, saddened over the quarrel at their last parting.

At the end, a brightly polished polysteel hatch waited, slightly ajar, and she stopped before it, not sure if she should enter or knock first. That black glove reached over her and tapped the metal door.

A female voice called them to enter. The voice lacked any discernible accent, and when the black glove pushed the hatch door open, Samantha saw

an exquisitely ornate study finished in deep reds and rich blues with brass highlights every where. The room smelled of sandalwood incense masking burnt *baklie*, the most recent drug of addictive subcultures. A massive oak desk commanded the farthest corner of the rectangular room and two blue upholstered armchairs rested in front of it. Standing behind the closer of the two, a middle aged, yet extremely attractive Asian woman waited, holding an electro-gun. The man behind the big desk sat completely still, elbows on it, fingers steeped as if in prayer. His hard gaze seemed unusually intense, even for a *baklie* addict.

The woman gestured for Takashima and Sam to enter, and she felt a hand nudge her forward. With a glare back in Takashima's direction, she stepped over the knee-knocker and into the chamber, her eyes holding those of the Asian man behind the oak desk. He seemed to be in his late forties, was well built without being heavy, and wore a standard, yet expensive four-piece business suit. He wore no pressure suit, and Sam wondered what kind of fool would venture into outer space without one. But then there was the *baklie*.

"That will be all for now, Captain," he said in a high voice that belied his stature.

Samantha turned to Takashima fast enough to catch a fleeting look of apology on his face, similar to the forlorn look worn earlier by the master of the cargo ship. Then, like a rebuffed boot apprentice, the stocky Black Master saluted briskly, turned, and then pulled the hatch closed behind him. Sam turned her attention to these two Japanese. Although she didn't know the woman, Samantha recognized Tadao Morita behind the desk.

"Morita. I recognized your stink when I came aboard," Sam said with a vile passion. "So, when did you become a space-going parasite?"

"I prefer to be called a political negotiator," was his reply as Sam shifted her helmet to her other arm. "Kind of you to drop in, AshenGrey."

"Indeed." She glanced at the woman briefly, and then stepped forward to place her bubblehead on the farther of the two blue chairs. "Who are you working for this time, Morita?"

"I could ask you the same question." He grinned, tightlipped. Ugly. "But let's be civilized, shall we?"

He waved his woman to a small wet-bar attached to the bulkhead to his right, and she moved to it without a word. Samantha studied Morita from the corner of her eye. He watched the beautiful redhead with a lusty look in his intense brown eyes. Mentally, Samantha groaned, hating to have to place her life in the hands of a drug addict.

"You haven't answered my question," she began, pulling the second blue chair away from his desk, about a half-meter before she sat down in it, letting her manipulation of the extra space demonstrate her dislike for him.

"Who am I working for?" he laughed as the redhead manually shook the martini shaker. "Isn't that obvious?"

"Tell me anyhow." Samantha forced a burp, not excusing herself.

"Nippon-Nobu is signing my credit vouchers," he said, eyes following his woman. "I'm sure you know what that means."

"I wasn't aware that Japan had sold the colony."

"They haven't. Yet."

"And your orders?"

"Too easy, little Grey. Keep you away from Izumihara's talks with Prime Minister Sakurai." Morita grinned as the redhead passed a martini to him. "Join me in a drink?"

"I could use one," she muttered, her mind whirling about the meeting she would miss, possible escape routes, this fool's motives, and the angry Dreagan she had left in Proteus. "So, all you have to do is hold me until the talks are over?"

"I didn't say that. But, while I'm thinking of it, how much is Dreagan paying you to tip the talks in his direction?"

"There is no such agreement."

"Anyone can see that your Trade is merging with his corporation," he said as Samantha took a delicate glass sipper from the woman. "Thank you, Timiko. That will be all for now."

Tadao Morita waited in silence until the hatch had closed behind the woman. Samantha sampled the drink while his eyes burned into her with the cold look of a cutthroat.

"My Trade has no intentions of merging with any of the corporate states," she said in a cool tone. "You're confusing my private life with my public one."

"I'd say there's little difference between the two."

Samantha chuckled, shaking her head. "So, what do you want from me?"

"Nothing officially, but I am curious," he began, and then paused to sip the

martini. "Just what did Dreagan think he was doing when he started sniffing around that ice mine?"

"Excuse me?" Samantha coughed on the bitter alcohol, wondering what might be his interest in that little caper. Had the Proteus Security's Legal Section been able to make a Genni connection without her hearing about it? *Not likely.* "I honestly don't know what Dreagan's motives were."

"And yours?" That thin-lipped smile sickened her.

"People - friends of mine - were killed," she explained while looking at Morita across the rim of the martini sipper. "Friends personally asked me to investigate. So I did."

The intense gaze continued in silence. Samantha sampled her drink and decided that she could hold her own against the small dose of Phenobarbital Timiko had added to it. Irritated by clumsy tactics, she downed it, and, with a flourish, slapped the empty glass down on the oak desk.

"Another?" Samantha smiled, braking Tadao Morita's thought.

"Ah, yes. Another." He sighed, pulling himself to his feet and reaching for her sipper at the same time.

"This time, hold the drugs. Okay?" she asked, shifting in her chair and studying the chamber.

There was only one exit, and she had come in through it. The big desk lacked any office device except a leather blotter and an odd-looking comm unit known to be difficult to use unless you possessed the proper sequence codes. Looking at the tiny comm unit built into her p-suit's left wrist, Samantha wondered

how she could ever shout for help. She glanced at her host's lime green silk shirt as he worked the bar. She knew she would have no time to try that unfamiliar comm unit.

"Perhaps you'd like to try some baklie?" came his question as Morita poured them each a fresh drink.

"I tend to get quirky drug reactions. I'd rather not," Samantha sighed, knowing its reported side effects.

"But, I insist," he said with a chuckle, as he turned from the small bar.

"Let's go back to Izumihara's meeting with the Prime Minister," she began as he came toward her.

"It'll never happen," the Asian man muttered.

"Care to share the plan?" Samantha asked, reaching to take the glass he now offered, aware of effects from the first.

He thought a moment, and then smiled impishly as he moved again behind the oak desk. The drink smelled clear of additions this time, so she sampled it, wishing she had some food in her stomach. Morita sat down, leaning back in his high-backed chair, smug as if he were king of the moon.

"Prime Minister Sakurai has plans for Izumihara's daughter who's in Northern Oregon studying hydro-tech."

"Next, you'll be telling me that Sakurai owns most of Nippon-Nobu Corporation," she said with a slight chuckle.

"He does." His delight was intense as he drew from his martini, an intensity only baklie could give.

"I know." Samantha sighed, not liking to feel so helpless, and not wanting to waste the day with this ugly parasite. "So, what's the plan, here, Morita?"

"I merely keep you out of the negotiations. It doesn't matter how."

With a chuckle, Morita bent over the comm, toggled a switch, and muttered something in his native tongue. When he finished, he straightened, grinning. Samantha heard the hatch behind her opening. In an instant, two burly guards were pinning her arms while Morita hunted through his top left drawer. So she sat, pulse pounding when he produced the small air-hypo and moved around the desk towards her. A shiver raced up her spine, and Samantha was unable to breathe, thinking, *there's that nasty taste of fear.*

Her martini glass hit the floor and shattered.

"I'm a humane sort, *kokoro doktoru*," he said, bending toward her neck until Samantha could feel his rank breath. "At least I'll provide a bit of diversion for you while we wait for my next instructions."

Morita pushed the hypo directly into the left side of Sam's neck, and something cold flooded her carotid artery. Samantha stiffened, then her vision blurred as she felt her left arm convulse twice. She did not like this feeling, she decided, and then her body went limp, and her stomach lurched. Yet, most of Samantha didn't seem to care. Next, she began to sweat heavily and uncontrollable shudders shook her from head to toe. She turned her head and intentionally aimed her vomit at one of the men holding her arms.

"Uh-oh, fuben, Morita-san!" she heard a man somewhere to her right say. "Better get that ship's doctor."

Samantha's body jerked a couple of times, like just before you drift off to sleep, and try as she might, she could not control it. She had no motivation, no will of her own. Someone picked her up and carried her somewhere. *Where?* Samantha just couldn't care.

CHAPTER 3 - FREEDOMSPATH

Strong hands held her head while Samantha vomited again. She didn't care where the green bile fell. Feeling like she had been pushed through a septic recycler, Sam sighed weakly and fought down another wave of the dry heaves. The headache seemed less important at the moment, and she waited, slumped on her knees on some metal floor until she was reasonably sure the nausea had passed. When Samantha struggled to get up, strong hands lifted her easily from the cool, hard floor. A deep masculine voice asked if she was sure she was finished.

"I need to get up," she mumbled as she tried to stand on what felt like cold pudding instead of her own legs, while wondering whose 'fresher she was using.

"I think you should lay back down, *dokutoru*," the male voice said as Samantha tried to focus on the black-clad figure who tried to steady her by holding her shoulders as she leaned heavily against a metal wall.

Samantha asked for some water, and a green plastic sipper came into her hand. Sipping the stale stuff and trying to think clearly, she took several slow, controlling breaths. Her head cleared a bit. She finished the water. The strong hands nudged her gently, and she turned to see a small bunk built into the far

wall. In two halting steps, Samantha reached it, and then sat carefully down on its bright green bedspread.

She tried to focus on her surroundings and found that she was in some small room, perhaps a ship's compartment. Next to the green state-room-sized bed stood a narrow steel nightstand with a comm toggle built into it and a small lamp. Across the way a closed locker stretched from floor to ceiling and beyond that was the tiny silver bathroom she had just come from. To her right was a hatch, to her left, a built-in desk, the kind that folds into the wall. Her nurse's face crossed her line of sight. She focused with a surprised recognition.

"Takashima," she breathed, aware of an absolutely numbing fatigue. "How is it that you get all the fun jobs?"

"You should lay back down," he said, his crooked teeth forming a nervous little smile.

"No. That's what's causing my upset stomach," Samantha sighed, relieved to see that he wasn't armed. "Where am I?"

"These are my quarters," he said slowly in a voice touched with compassion. "I hope they are *jubin ni*, er... I mean acceptable. We are still on my...er Morita's ship."

"And where is the ship?" she asked, kneading her fingers in slow circles at her temples.

"We have remained in the same place since you came on board," he said, passing her a cool, wet towel. "Nine hours ago, AshenGrey."

"What'd Morita hit me with?" she moaned, belly churning.

"Apparently a large dosage of baklie," he sighed, leaning against the closed locker. Other than the bed, there was no furniture in the room. "My ship's doctor says you have had some sort of *husuri* ... er... allergic reaction."

"I tend to react oddly to most drugs," she said, realizing that he was not as fat in his p-suit as she had thought. "Sometimes my body even reacts exactly the opposite of what it's supposed to."

"Dokutoru Kakugen said you should be fine."

"I don't feel fine."

Her voice sounded strained to her. Her hands were shaking, and sweat droplets danced down her back and sides.

"Hungry?" he asked in a gentle voice, and her stomach immediately flip-flopped. "Can I get you anything to eat?"

"Uhgg! No," she moaned, watching her hands. "Some tea?"

"I can prepare tea here," he said, brightening.

The stocky Asian moved to the desk side of the room, and out of Samantha's line of sight. She heard the brief sounds of water being poured into a metal container, and then a toggle clicked. Fighting another wave of shivering nausea, Sam held her head in her hands and breathed deeply in concentration. When it had passed, she slowly wiped her face with the wet towel. It felt so good that she ran it across the back of her neck too. She felt a little more alert. Opening the front of her p-suit, she quickly wiped the upper portion of her chest, enjoying the sensation while trying to ignore the red lines of almost-healed slashes.

"Why do I stay in this job?" Samantha muttered to herself, feeling older than the Haze, and wondering if maybe she could resign before the Grey promoted her. Or she got herself killed.

"Did you say something?" he asked from behind her.

"I need a vacation," she answered with a sigh. "This last month... I'm definitely overwhelmed."

"I am sorry for your situation, Alexander-san," Captain Takashima said in a soft voice. "But I am not its cause."

Silence fell while he finished preparing the tea, and Samantha sat thinking, her throat sore from the acid of vomit. Her ribs protested that they would never heal unless she stopped abusing them. Sam's mind quoted her something about desperate measures for desperate times. Then Takashima brought a cup of hot tea for her. He brought one for himself as well.

"Thanks -- arigato. So, now you have to baby-sit me?"

"I ... *giyu-hei*, is 'volunteered' is the right word?"

"If you asked for the job," she said, accepting a ceramic sipper decorated with pictures of ocean-going sailing ships.

"You must understand, AshenGrey," he began in an eager, but quiet, voice, "that I was not aware of Morita's plan to... er... take you."

"What did you think he was going to do with me?"

"It was only my part to locate you," he insisted, eyes intense, which Samantha read as truth. "I have spoken harsh words at Tadao Morita over how he has treated you."

The green tea tasted slightly bitter, but good and warm, and Samantha could feel it soothing her sore throat. She took a few tentative swallows against the advice of her belly, while wondering which vocal tones might bend Takashima's will. It didn't always work, especially on strangers.

"I've been out nine hours, huh?" she asked after a moment. "I suppose the Genni conference has probably started by now."

"I have no information," he said in apology.

"Any idea what will happen to me?" Samantha tasted that metallic taste again and wondered why she even bothered to ask.

"I avoid knowing," he said with a grimace.

"Good tea. What happens if I try to escape?"

"Outside the door, your guard, Hiro, is a good man." Sam saw his slight frown. "There is no doubt he will shoot you."

His face told her his answer had been the only obvious one, and she wondered if these people were more mercenary than professional Trade Blacks. She also wondered if she might find an ally in this stocky Japanese man and watched his face carefully. His eyes darted around the small room nervously, while his left hand absently rubbed the rim of the tea sipper in his right. His fingernails had been chewed down to the quick and had several small scabs where he'd bitten himself. Samantha thought of his losing his ship. If Morita had taken Takashima's vessel, Takashima's loyalty must have been weakened. She decided she would take him away from Tadao Morita, if she could.

"Takashima-san, whose side are you on?" she asked softly.

"By Trade?" He looked at Sam, wide-eyed in surprise, and she saw him hesitate. "Theirs," he admitted, grudgingly.

"Really?" Samantha had pitched her Voice and saw him cock his head a bit, a good sign she had guessed right. "And in your heart?"

"I was once a Grey apprentice," he admitted, avoiding her eyes. "But that was a long time ago."

Hooray!! Samantha thought, relieved. *An ally*

"Can you try to get me off this ship before Morita gets his next instructions?" she asked, thinking of the old expression, *Once a Grey: Always Grey Way*. Samantha felt confident that he would help her escape if he could.

"No place to go." He shrugged slightly, regret in his tone. "We're hundreds of kilometers from Genni, and thousands from any of Dreagan Corps' *tokai... er, cities.*"

"Maybe there is a way," Sam breathed, wondering how crazy she really was to count on two computers that claimed to be real. "Could you place a comm with a coded message for me?"

"I ... might be able to," was his thoughtful replay.

"Comm my cubby and tell Ezra that Mia Samuels can be reached through your comm number." She smiled at his confusion. "If you can do that, Ezra will do the rest."

"And if he isn't there?" he scowled, chewing his thumb.

"Leave a message," she said, then drank some of the green tea. "That should be enough to bring the cavalry."

"Cavalry? *Shi nai wakarū*: I don't understand."

"That will bring help. Make the comm, please?"

"Do you want something to eat?" he asked after a moment, ever stoic.

"If that would give you a reason to return," she said, testing her stomach, hating the taste in her mouth. "And a toothbrush? Some crackers? Maybe some dry toast. Something to read?"

"We shall see what I can do. *Shi nai yakusoku...*"

Miyoshi Takashima stepped towards her, and Samantha stiffened, but he only poured his remaining tea into her mug. After setting his sipper on the tiny night stand near the bed, he turned, pushed open the hatch, spoke a few words to the big guard, and then headed up the vessel's passageway.

* * *

Several boring hours later, after Samantha had prowled the cabin a few dozen times, a Trade Black apprentice brought her a tray of steamed vegetables and brown rice. When she questioned him about Takashima, who had not returned, the young man scowled and angrily shouted something in his own language. She couldn't understand him, but she could easily recognize his anger and alarms touched the back of her mind. This guard had reacted specifically when she had spoken his captain's name. Had Miyoshi Takashima tried to place the comm only to have Morita discovered his traitorous act?

* * *

In the darkness, the hatch slammed open with a loud *clang* against the metal bathroom door. Samantha felt the hands again pull Abe Pardo from her bleeding, battered body and jolted awake as bright light flooded the darkened room. She could make out three Blackjacks in hall, and two of these stomped into the cabin. Rough hands dragged her into a sitting position, and she struggled to wake. Sam had no idea how much time had passed.

The JourneyBlack pawed at her arm several times, but quit when Samantha climbed to her feet. He pointed her to the door. Thinking how good it would feel to be out of her p-suit for a while, she moved stiffly out into the passageway at their insistence. Grumbling something in Japanese, one of the guards shoved Sam up the narrow metal corridor. It wasn't even two meters high, and the deck had cheap green metal-flake tile, coming unglued in several places. Apparently Takashima was still renovating the ship, she thought as she walked slowly toward another guard who waited near an open door. When Samantha reached that point, he gestured for her to go into that cabin. She stopped at the open hatch and looked in.

It was the same ornate red room, the same desk, just seen through a different hatchway. She wondered why she hadn't spotted this exit before. The only thing missing from the room was the redheaded Asian woman. Tadao Morita looked grim and drawn, perhaps on the down side of his baklie trip, she decided. Someone shoved her into the room. Samantha stumbled over the knee-knocker,