

# DreaganDance

## Third book of the *DreaganStar* Trilogy

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## 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 with you and Dreagan picking through my mental dross, *someone* will 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 recently.”

*Yes. Yes, I have.* Samantha Alexander thought, glancing at the chrono on the wall of her office in the psy-clinic. *Was lost in space. My cubbie torched. I killed a man. Lost my Daddy. She harrumphed. Lost? As if I could ever find him again...*

“You were tortured.”

“Twice.” She looked at the gray rock floor. “I don’t need reminding, Rudy.”

*And almost murdered.* Sam thought as a shudder caused the hair on her arms and neck to raise. *And now my boss is bartering me like chattel.* “And then came the colony-wide bombings.” She finished for him.

“And you fell in love.”

“Did I?” She wondered if she was asking herself or the AshenGrey in the chair next to her. *Quite a full month,* she thought.

“Can I have the rest of the year off?” Sammie asked, slowly rising from the guest chair in front of *her* desk. She groaned with discomfort, pressing her forearm on her cracked ribs to relieve the pain. Taking up their two coffee sippers, she carefully moved to the side bar to refill them.

“None for me,” she heard her friend say. “I’ve got to bounce. I’m going to see Jon next.”

“You get to fix *both* of us?” Sam wondered about the motivation behind that decision. She stopped and turned to Rodriguez. He was climbing to his feet with the awkwardness of an inexperienced Earther.

“Actually, I was surprised Thom didn’t take you on as his client. Or Jon, for that matter. You both have had quite a month.”

“Understatement,” She managed to say without laughing. “Six weeks if you count our space flight and his triad. I’m sure Penock is trying to stay neutral.”

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“We’re not a sarcastic species, are we?” Rudy frowned avoiding her gaze by folding the small device and slipping it into his breast pocket. “Seriously, Sam, you have got to balance your contradictory need for alone time and your hyperactive need to fix everyone in this clinic. Heck. You want to fix every person in this city.”

“If I only could...” she sighed.

“So here’s your homework assignment: Design your balance using any of the seven *Osaka* models. Be sure you add a little structure. And I’m telling Jon and Thom that I ordered you to do exactly this: Balance your inner hermit with your paladin instincts, Samantha. Session over-- No wait! I wanted to ask you about Todd Abrams’ funeral.”

“Not much to tell, really. Dan’l, Jon, and I attended with a few jacks from his crew. The Chaplin at the water reclamation facility said a few nice words, and then they slid Todd in the dehydrator.” She moved to her desk and leaned on its edge. “Dreagan stayed pretty stoic through the whole procedure, and later, he and I went alone to donate Todd’s ashes to the air plant.”

“And you?”

“I only met Todd three or four times. He seemed like a nice kid.”

“Yet *another* death?” Rudy sighed watching her closely.

Samantha nodded, looking into his dark eyes. “This one’s not on my conscience.”

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

“You’re sure this time?” She teased, touching her ‘puter monitor to bring up her personal calendar.

“Can we meet again tomorrow?” he asked, stepping toward the door.

“If you can catch me during dinner. My world is still insanely busy.”

“That’s an understatement. How about 6 o’clock?”

“God willing...” Sam sighed, looking at her monitor from an obtuse 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, smiling and replied, “I’m sorry. Did I mumble? I said it’s a date.”



Rudy had hardly stepped out of her office when Samantha heard Ezra quietly ask if he could speak to her. She drew a deep breath, feeling a bit impatient.

“Close the door first, please,” she replied, moving to the comfort of the familiar 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 bomb that failed to detonate near a sizeable water shipment at the Genni space port. They described it as professionally manufactured.

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They're sweeping for others.”

“Tell me more.”

“Nothing else, yet. But here in Proteus there's another media story of looting in some lower sections of the city. Security has logged another three new reports of altercations between miners and some of their homeless guests down 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 staff will be taking up residence there in a few hours,” Ezra reported evenly, and Sam found herself listening to the character of the AI's audio tones.

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

“That's what Jonnie said.”

“Has Patric heard from JourneyGrey Nikatta?”

“JourneyGrey Nikatta Ozaki left Patric a message that Genni is ready for 100 homeless if we can transport them.” Ezra reported. “People interested in permanent housing and employment will get first priority. They hope to host more as they make arrangements to house our homeless.”

“Must they be on legal work visas?”

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

“What's Patric doing now?” Sam asked, mentally switching gears. *Again.*

“He's facilitating the 4 PM group session in the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor conference room.”

“No, don't disturb him 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 brightly colored. The teen's breath came in big gulps. Sam wondered where he had come running from, as 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, help when you can, and when you return, report to me. And bring Master Jack with you. The three of us will discuss what – if anything – can be done to help.”

“Does Dr. Dreagan know we're doing this?” the teen quickly asked. “How long should I observe?”

“No, Dreagan doesn't know. As to how long? Hmmm... Stay through the meal and into the evening. Don't stay the night. 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, close the door and comm Master Miner Fitzhugh. No video, please.”

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

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“Good to hear from ya, lass. What’s yer pleasure?”

“Master Fitz, I was wondering if you’ve seen any ice surveys from around that Genni colony?”

“I wish!” He laughed, but that ended in a sigh. “What’s on your mind, Grey?”

“Just following a hunch.”

“Well, if you can get me permission, I’ll have my two best surveyors 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 any survey intel.”

“Thanks. Fitz, out.”

Samantha shifted in her familiar, comfortable 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 created in 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.” Service Master Jack Timmons sighed, and she knew that sigh. In her memory, Samantha heard an old professor drone on about keeping the *Greens* happy being the key to any successful venture.

“I am truly sorry, Master Jack,” she quickly said. “I could try to recall him.”

“No. That’s alright.” He sounded tired. “I’m beginning to agree with you and Patric: He’s a better Grey than a Green.”

“But, he’s a great Green, thanks to you, 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 that Finland promised?”

“They were scheduled to *cat* from Southern India at 0400 hours local time, and that should put them in orbit by dinner tomorrow and in NewPort by late tomorrow night.” 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’ll probably want to loan a few Greens to Dreagan’s household staff, if you can spare them.”

“I’ll try to have a few available. Just let me know.”



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

When her office door slid open, Dreagan did not appear, but instead, 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 today my services are a gift to you from Jon Dreagan," she replied in a soft and soothing voice. "I'm a masseuse."

"Please, come in." Sam rose from her comfortable chair, quickly deciding where the woman could set up the portable table she carried.

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

"That I am, but you're very welcome to do whatever you can."



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."

"Yes, 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. With a sigh, she sunk into the mattress and quickly went to sleep.



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,

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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 into her silent office, interrupting Sam’s review of the Dreagan Corporation’s 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 next First Day 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, saying something about imperatives.

“And I shall be, Founder. Where is the meeting, and has a planetside delegation been invited?”

“Of course. Lindsey is drafting the invitation to Prime Minister Sakurai and also to the principals at Nippon-Nubo Corporation.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Samantha muttered, starting to add the meeting into her computer’s schedule. “Include Thomas Penock, please.”

“As you wish.”

“Thank you, Founder,” Sammie said mentally chuckling at his words. “And where is this meeting?”

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

“That would be my choice, too,” she said strongly, wanting to assure him.

“Then I will 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 face animated in the monitor on Samantha's office desk.

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

“Seems a two-man detail was dispatched to collect the remains of that prototype. Seems Jon forgot it was still out there.” She could see an uncommon mess in his electronics shop behind him and felt sad for him. “My best guess: Star authorized it.”

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

"Some, but not here" Dan'l grumbled, glancing off screen. "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 really like that, but I'm just so swamped right now..."

"I heard. Jon's complained that even *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. "Love you!"

"You know I do!" he responded with their familiar childhood repartee. "Bye, Sweetie."

Patric stepped into Samantha's office, followed by Damian who carried an overloaded tray of sandwiches with chips and salads. The Master Steward came in last, wearing his "inscrutable" face, and he palmed the door closed behind him. He moved to the sidebar to refresh Sam's drink with his usual empathic efficiency while Damian set out the food.

Samantha regretted that this meeting would have to occur over dinner, but that was the way of it, and would be for a while longer, she reminded herself.

She suddenly shuddered, but controlled it before they could see her disquiet. Sam realized that she just wanted to be alone.



The bay that surrounded *The DreaganStar Project* was closed tight and sealed against the lunar vacuum beyond it when Samantha arrived a few minutes before 1900 hours. The fatigue within her clamored for this day to end, and she found the moon's usually rejuvenating 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 sorted 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 or burned down.

Samantha saw no one as she made her way to Star's tripod base, figuring that Dreagan had dismissed his workers after another 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 only 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 into her bubblehead, and she looked up at the 5-story, crystal-like 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 there,

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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. "This...er, this... AI 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 this, *whatever this was*.

"Yes, 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 would 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 while noting her racing heartbeat.

"Dreagan, please lift your left foot," Sam called, feeling suspicious, although her usual instinctual 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 wondered, squelching a feeling of hypervigilance.

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

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

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

"Jonnie, would you please go through the air lock and walk over to the outside of my bay?" Star asked, and Samantha watched the white suit move into the hatch. "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," he said with an affectionate squeeze of her shoulders, a gesture that Samantha gave in return, smiling. "You are tired."

"Very tired. What now, Star?"

"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 moved toward the mangled silver wreckage.

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

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She felt vulnerable and unsafe outside the protection of Star's dome.

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 then set your bucket down?" Star asked, and Samantha glanced at Dreagan.

He shrugged, 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?" Sam stifled a laugh.

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

Samantha repositioned it the way Star directed, 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 the 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 remained in place.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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: *Could be the first ET contact.*

He laughed, but did not move. Samantha swore under her breath, and then pointed him toward the backhoe. He remained motionless, 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 the controlling *Voice*. "Do as Star says. Now! Move it, before you're an apprentice!"

"Mantha..." he sighed with a weakness in his protest and posture 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 digging device. 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 compact machine.

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

Sam did. This gelatinous azole was much shinier than the stuff she had found in that ice mine and had placed inside of 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 alongside 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 ritual disposal 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 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 my petraluna first."

With a snort, Dreagan began digging a grave for his 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

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an inane video or read a romance novel. Patric's voice acknowledged the comm.

"My calendar says that's the last client for today," she said, saving filed information in her 'puter.

"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."

"Oh, 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.

"Never mind, JourneyGrey," Sam laughed with relief and toggled the comm closed.

"You're 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. Dan'l kept the embrace longer than usual, and she stayed with him, despite her complaining cracked ribs. 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 you ASAP," he began running a nervous hand across his mouth.

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

"Whatever you're having. Your mother said the best thing to do was to tell you to ask me anything you 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 her sipper cup, but then she recovered from his quick, blunt reply and tapped the still-hot coffee urn.

"So, I'm not something some gene splicers rigged up?" She asked, pouring him a cup of cinnamon coffee.

"We didn't trust them." Came another blunt reply.

"Okay. Where?" She demanded, handing a sipper to him.

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

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

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

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

"Because Jacob had had himself sterilized years before they met. He and Dana had tried to have the procedure reversed. No go. 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 you in God's hands." Dan'l closed his eyes a moment. "What's Big Question Number

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Two?"

"Number Two," she said, easing into the green cloth 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 conception problems were due to Jacob's physiology. Besides, I liked your folks and knew I could tolerate them while I watched my baby girl grow."

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

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

"So, 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 a potentially new demand on her time and emotions.

*Parents are never minor details*, she reminded herself.

"Six days, huh?" She checked her irritation and the growing lump in her throat, 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 before any formal or legal commitment. "Do you have time to have dinner with me?"

"Name the place! I'm buying!"



Using Dreagan's exercise equipment later that evening, Sam had worked off some of that indulgent dinner, as well as some of her various anxieties and frustrations. As she was in her cool down, the dark-haired man of the Mansion came in, but stood near the door, watching her in silence. He frowned while he avoided her gaze, causing her internal alarms to begin to clamor.

"Hello, handsome," Samantha shouted as her feet slapped the treadmill loudly. "How ya doing?"

"Not good." His mouth curled into a deeper frown as he stepped toward her. "The goddamn Earthers insisted that we reschedule the Genni meeting for the day after tomorrow, and Izumihara caved in to their demands."

"Moons of Madness!" Samantha screeched loudly. "Why would he do that?"

"No idea. Those planetside jacks are arriving ahead of schedule. When do you want to ride over to Genni with me?"

"Oh! Er, can we talk about this after I clean up?" Sammie asked, aware of her strong sweaty scent.

"As you wish."

## CHAPTER 2 - MINDMUD

"I have Ambassador Izumihara on the comm for you," Patric whispered over one of the psych clinic's restricted connections. "Again."

"He's as subtle as a 4-year old. No video, Ezra," Samantha called, knowing her computer-friend would complete the exchange. "Good evening, Ambassador Izumihara. I believe it is *evening* there now."

"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 staff are listed on any outbound Proteus transports."

"Ambassador Izumihara, I will be 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 officials from planetside will be arriving tomorrow," he said, voice tight with tension. "And I have not told them of your ah, involvement."

"I am sure they already know, Ambassador," Sam said, stashing the costuming paraphernalia box in her lowest desk drawer while wondering if Izumihara expected her simply to borrow Star and bounce over to his colony. *That was a thought...* "I could try to arrange to arrive earlier, but that may not be possible."

"I would be most grateful, Dr. Alexander, if you could come earlier," was his breathy response over the comm as she reached for her sipper of tea.

"How can I not come, after your elegant invitation? I must go now, but I promise that I will be with you soon."



The mess around Dreagan's office reminded Sam of the perpetual disarray of Dr. Lloyd MacLeod's office at the University of Tranquility. Somehow MacLeod had a way of knowing where each item was, despite the chaotic appearance. Samantha hated the purpose for her first visit to Dreagan's corporate command center 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.

Samantha had just shown Dreagan the message from Ambassador Hinto Izumihara that begged for Grey intervention in the colony's dispute with their earthbound supervisors.

Dreagan frowned at her across his massive black slate desk, while Samantha mentally resolved that her decision had been the correct one. The hand-written note he held contained the

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date, place, and time when Izumihara and she would meet with the ambassador's planetside superiors and their lawyers.

"Goddammit, Samantha!" He slammed his right hand down hard on the desk. "Send someone else to handle this. I can't risk you."

"I can't trust anyone else!" She almost shouted at Dreagan, wondering if his corporate office was soundproof. "Do you realize that I am seriously bending several Grey Trade regulations by even telling you about this?"

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

"Protocol requires a Master, and you know he is not an AshenGrey," she explained from the opposite side of his oversized desk and his oversized ego.

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

"He's not qualified, let alone competent," she replied controlling her temper and lowering her voice. "Negotiations is one of my specialties, Jon. I have to do this."

"No! I forbid it! Too dangerous," he said with an authoritative tone that fortunately held no hint of the *Voice*. "Three military spacecraft have already landed in Genni from planetside."

"I heard. I wish really they hadn't done that." Samantha sighed, thinking she didn't need or want more complications. "Please just think of this as if I am *just* going on a brief business trip, and I'll see you in a few days."

"I will 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.

"No... Please don't." Samantha sighed, slowly stepping back a pace as she decided it was time to end this conversation. "Not if you want to remain a Grey."

"As your friend, Mantha, I am asking you to please reconsider," he said in a calm, more professional tone. "I don't want to see you to get hurt again."

"I want 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. "Now... I have a transport to catch. Please, understand that this is just part of my job."

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

"No, JourneyGrey, I am going to work." Then Sam poked a fast index finger in his direction. "Do not interfere with my work!"

Pivoting, AshenGrey Samantha Alexander stomped out of Jonathan Dreagan's office, surprised that he didn't prevent her by sealing the door or calling out to her. As she hurried to the complex's bank of lifts, she wondered if this would hurt their long-term involvement, but put that aside to focus on coming events.



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The last time Samantha had seen NewPort from above, one of its clear geodesic domes was in flames. Now, from the ground she saw the dome under repair, repair crews swarming within it like ants on a large ice cube. Much of the terrorists' damage was still evident around the bay that she now moved through, despite the operating schedule of Proteus' only working catapult. One hundred and fifty homeless and excited Lunans shuffled along slowly through a wide passenger channel, making their way to a newer lunar cargo 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, which carried her Trade Grey clothing and grey p-suit. An old air "sniffer" dangled from her left shoulder and 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 remarked as they were herded up a ramp and into the oily-smelling, girder-lined bowels of the transport.

"Is bologna okay?" He spoke from behind her now. It's going to be a long trip."

"With ketchup and cheese?" she asked over her shoulder, thinking mostly of Genni matters while Patric, also disguised as a miner, exaggerated his cringe.

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



Involved with a group of men sprawled on the polysteel deck in a lively poker game, Samantha felt like Jonah inside the belly of that whale. She was not usually claustrophobic, but the ship's I-beams reminded her of a monster's ribcage. They rounded the walls, deck to overhead. Besides a row of port-a-potties and a curtained-off designated sleeping area, there was only about a 30-meter long, open bay for all these Lunans. Sam fumed at her people being crammed into such a small space. At least this lumbering cargo transport had a life support system, she reminded herself. After Patric had won yet another hand of seven-card stud, Sam gathered her few credit chips from the red and white striped blanket on the deck and unfolded her cramped legs. These five engineers had been fleeced of enough credits, she decided, as she 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 politely ignored. "You'll get a chance to win more of my credits later." She told them, laughing.

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. He reeked of cooking grease and garlic.

"I'm glad I decided to get in line now instead of waiting until I really had to go," Sam

muttered with a chuckle, hoping to invite conversation.



"... so, with most of our neighbors work'n on the neighborhood repairs, 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!" she whimpered.

"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. They said Japanese citizens only."

"That's sadly ironic." Sam laughed a little. "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 of us. 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 shaved 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 mammarys. Bored of 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.



Samantha woke suddenly to a hand clenching roughly at her arm and a big hand wrapped

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around her mouth, keeping her silent. This brought her out of another dream filled with dancing silver knives and crazed eyes. Patric's face, creased with worry lines, came into her focus. She nodded to him. He removed his hand. The huge cargo bay was oddly silent. She moved to sit up, Patric assisting. His head turned briefly toward the makeshift green curtain that separated the sleeping area from the rest of the hold, and then he looked back to Sammie. She glanced around the two-dozen or so sleeping forms in the designated sleeping area. All seemed quiet enough, then it occurred to her.

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

"No. I don't know where we are. Japanese planetside security just boarded us, and they're very aggressive," Patric reported, his worried face making her stomach lurch. "About a hundred of 'em."

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

He and Sam rose as one, and then stepped over or around sleeping Lunans until they reached the curtained 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, about a dozen black p-suited security guards stood, alert, while many others made their way through the crowd of Proteus' 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.

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

Samantha looked carefully around the cargo hold, spotted a small person, and waited, watching. Within twenty seconds, one of the security men and women 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.

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.

"Earthers, by the way they're moving," Patric whispered next to her as Sammie's eyes swept the cargo transport's interior.

"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 they held wrinkles of concern in every corner as he whispered, "Where do you want to hide? The overhead or in a port-a-potty?"

"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."

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"Yeah, 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 quietly, using her *Voice* in the precise tone, knowing he could not resist. "I want you to get to Izumihara and tell him--"

"I'm supposed to protect you--"

"I must listen to the other side's argument," she continued, knowing which vocal tones would bend Patric to her will. "Tell Penock to cover the Genni meeting for me and brief him *thoroughly*. You know his... ah, condition, so, keep our medical staff close. I promise 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?" Patric asked earnestly.

For a moment, her heart softened to this man who held himself personally responsible for her safety. Patric passed her bag slowly, and 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 spit out the dental spacers that changed her jaw line, and Mia became Samantha again. She began moving boldly toward the small group of citizens and Japanese Security gathered on the platform, not looking back.

Pushing past people much larger than she, Sam slowly made her way, unchallenged, to the twenty-five guards who threatened a circled of collected 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 vaulted up 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 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, bringing Samantha to a halt. Panic began well up inside of her, and she had to assure herself that these men were not her tormentor, Abe Pardo.

The leader said something in Japanese that sounded like an order, and the two security men who had blocked Samantha's line of sight stepped aside. They did not let go of her arms. Again that boss-man and she locked eyes. She read *duty* in them and authority.

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He barked another order.

The guard on her left yanked her yellow bag from her shoulder, while the man on the right twisted Samantha's arm roughly up and forward. Then, he pulled open her p-suit's wrist seals, exposing the stitches that had not yet dissolved. Cold eyed, that officer-in-charge nodded and then smiled a toothy smile, satisfied.

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

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

"Yes, I am here. So, what now?" Samantha asked, shaking off the last hand that held her, trying to appear calm and casual, while her mind whirled with possible scenarios. "What do you want?"

"My employer requires me to bring AshenGrey Alexander to him," 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 bruised but healing wrist. "And release these people. You have who you came for."

She expected heavy hands to return, but the two guards only moved to stand behind her while the stocky Japanese Security jack shouted the phrases that recalled his men from the Proteus refuges. 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 troopers 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 gestured 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 yellow duffel to the jack beside her as Samantha stepped across the platform, following the leader.



The strip search proved to be unfun, performed by a middle-aged, overweight Japanese woman in a small women's restroom. Pieces of Samantha's disguise landed in a polysteel sink as she worked. When the Japanese woman finished, Sam was allowed to dress only in her TradeGrey, Dreagan-designed p-suit. Then, the fat lady shoved Sam through the cargo ship and into a cluttered captain's 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

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and was chewing his left thumbnail as Sam walked in, followed by her fat female guard. Takashima muttered something to the woman, eyeing Sam's changed appearance, and the woman lapsed into a long monologue in her native tongue. His lips formed 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, his deep, haunted eyes darting from Samantha to the Security Master. "I have no choice."

"Take better care of the rest of your passengers," she warned, wondering why this blackjack scared the old cargo captain so much. "Besides, I half expected this to happen and had 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. As 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 donned her bubblehead 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 connector.

The wide, umbilical docking bay was probably a variation on a Dreagan design, made of flexible, spun polysteel with several large view ports on either side. Looking out at the multi-gray lunar landscape, Samantha could see nothing but an old-style chemical-burning launch shuttle. Its white paint had blistered in several areas, and it probably had a passenger capacity of around twenty. Sam quickly concluded that Takashima's men were crowded in there, especially since some carried combat packs attached to the back of their standard p-suits. She wondered if someone else might have orders to conduct a ground assault on Genni. This ship only 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 through her helmet's comm. He said nothing more.

As the stocky Takashima reached the end of this tight 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

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airlock.

"No longer," was his response, as he turned and offered his right hand to assist her. His wide face briefly betrayed his sadness.

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

She took his offered hand.

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

Takashima frowned, pain briefly displaying on his Asian face. Sam stepped over the hatch's knee-knocker and into the smaller ship, and he released her hand. Takashima pulled off his bubblehead. Then, he gestured for her to precede him into the older ship. She unfastened her helmet, pulled it off, and cradled it in her left arm.

Before Samantha, the elegantly tailored interior of this ship seemed inappropriate for what she had seen of the ill-kept exterior. Behind her, the airlock hissed as it closed.

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 strong shiver slipped down her spine. The black-gloved hand came pointing over her shoulder again, while she dismissed any fantasy she had about heroics against Takashima's six men.

With a sigh to bolster her fearful anticipation, Samantha stepped over a 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 turned left, only to find a heavy hand on her shoulder, pulling her back. Takashima frowned as Sam stepped back, passed him, and then continued along the carpet-path. Several large hatches lined this main passageway, but they were all closed. No identification plaques gave hints of their contents, functions, and so, no hope of possible escape. The air smelled like the typical, lightly scented, artificial air common to almost all space vessels 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, praying it would not be their last conversation. That would make a sad remembrance for him if she did not return.

At the end of this passageway, a bright and polished polysteel hatch waited, slightly ajar, and she slowed before it, not sure if she should enter or knock first. A black glove reached passed her and rapped on the metal door.

"You may enter, Captain Takashima," a female voice called from inside the space.

The voice lacked any discernible accent, and Takashima's black glove pushed the hatch door open. Samantha saw an exquisitely ornate study finished in deep reds and rich blues, with brass highlights everywhere. The room smelled of sandalwood incense masking burnt *baklie*, the most

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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 steepled as if in prayer. His hard gaze seemed unusually intense, even for a baklie addict.

The woman gestured to Takashima to enter, and Sam felt his hand nudge her forward. With a glare back in Takashima's direction, she stepped over the knee-knocker and into the appealing 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 space without one. But then, there was that smell of recently burned *baklie*, and she assumed that probably impaired his judgement.

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

Samantha turned to Takashima fast enough to catch a fleeting look of apology to her on his face, similar to the forlorn look worn earlier by the captain of the cargo ship. Then, like a rebuffed apprentice, the stocky Black Master saluted, turned, and left, pulling the hatch closed behind him.

Sam turned her attention to these two. Although she didn't know the woman, Samantha recognized the man behind the desk.

"Tadao Morita," Sam said with a vile passion. "So, when did you become a *space-going* bloodsucker?"

"I prefer *political negotiator*," was his calm 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 closer 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 toward a small wet-bar attached to the bulkhead to his right, and she moved to it without a word. Samantha studied Morita while he watched the beautiful redhead with a lusty look in his intense brown eyes. Mentally, Samantha groaned, realizing her life was now in the hands of an amoral drug addict.

"You haven't answered my question," she began, pulling the second blue chair away from his desk. She eased 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's body jiggled delightfully as she 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, lecherous eyes devouring his woman. "I'm sure you know what that means."

"I wasn't aware that Japan had sold the colony." She mumbled as the woman poured two

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drinks.

"They haven't." He watched the redhead approach him. "Yet."

"And your orders?"

"Easy task. 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 Jon 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?"

"We have no such agreement."

"Anyone can see that your Trade is merging with his corporation," he said as Samantha accepted a delicate crystal 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 killer.

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

"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. The image of the splattered brain of the man she had killed flashed through her mind briefly, leaving her sickened and shaking. *Focus, Sam*, she chided herself. Had the Proteus' law enforcement been able to make a Genni connection without her hearing about it? "I honestly don't know what Dreagan's motives were in that."

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

"Friends of mine had been killed," she explained while looking at Morita across the rim of the martini sipper. "Other personal friends asked me to investigate. So I did."

The intense, drug-induced 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 his clumsy tactics, she downed it, leaned forward, and slapped the empty glass down on the beautiful oak desk.

"Another?" Samantha smiled, breaking Tadao Morita's thought train – if there had been one in his drug-soaked head.

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

"This time, hold the phenobarbital. Okay?" she asked, shifting in her chair and looking around the chamber.

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There was only one exit, and she had come in through it. On the big desk were an old-fashioned leather blotter and an odd-looking comm unit, known to require the proper sequence codes for access. She knew she would have no time to try that unfamiliar comm unit. Glancing at the tiny comm unit built into her p-suit's left wrist, Samantha wondered how she could ever shout for help. She looked up at her host's back, draped in lime green silk shirt, as he worked at the bar.

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

"I get quirky drug reactions," Samantha sighed, knowing its reported side effects. "So, I'd better not, but thank you."

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

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

"It'll never happen," the Asian man insisted confidently.

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

He thought a moment, and then smiled impishly as he moved again behind the oak desk. The drink smelled clear of phenobarbital this time, so she sampled it, wishing she had some food in her stomach. Morita sat down, leaning back in his high-backed chair, as 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 light chuckle, the skin on her arm raising goosebumps for no reason.

"He does!" His delight held an intensity only baklie could give, and he raised his martini to her.

Samantha sighed, feeling helpless, yet angry to waste her time on this useless, 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, tapped in a code, 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.

Her martini glass hit the floor and shattered.

So, she sat pinned, pulse pounding in expectation and dread. Then Morita produced the small air-hypo and moved around the desk towards her. A shiver raced up her spine as the two men tightened their grip on her, and Samantha felt unable to breathe, tasting the coppery taste of fear. Again.

"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."

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Morita pushed the hypo directly into the left side of Sam's neck. Samantha stiffened with pain as something cold flooded her carotid artery. Then her vision blurred as she felt her left arm convulse twice. Another bad drug reaction, she decided, and then her body went limp in the chair. Her stomach lurched. Yet, Samantha didn't care. Soon, she began to sweat heavily. Next, uncontrollable shudders shook her from head to toe.

Samantha turned her head and strategically vomited down the black uniform pants of the man holding her left arm.

"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. Samantha just couldn't care.

## CHAPTER 3 – FREEDOMSPATH

Strong hands held her head as Samantha vomited toward the tiny ship's lavatory again. She didn't care where her bile fell. Feeling like she had been pushed through a septic recycler, Sam sighed weakly and succumbed to another wave of dry heaves. The headache seemed less important at the moment. Her cracked ribs screamed.

Slumped on her knees on someone's metal floor, Sam rested until she was reasonably sure the nausea had passed. When she 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 legs that felt like cold pudding, while wondering how she would protect herself until she could escape.

"You should lay back down, *dokutoru*," the male voice said as she tried to focus on the black-clad figure who steadied her as she leaned heavily against a dull metal wall.

Samantha asked for some water, and a green plastic sipper was pushed into her hand. Sipping the stale stuff while trying to think clearly, she took several slow, controlling breaths. Her mind cleared a bit, so she breathed deeper, causing stitches to complain.

She finished the water. The strong hands on her shoulders turned her and then nudged her gently toward a small bunk built into the far wall. In two shaky steps, Samantha reached the berth, and then sat carefully down on its bright green bedspread.

She focused on her surroundings, some small room, perhaps a ship's compartment. Next to the green stateroom-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 metallic bathroom she had just come from. To her right was a hatch, to her left, a built-in desk - the kind that folded up and into a wall.

Her helper bent toward her, and his face crossed her line of sight. She focused with a surprised recognition.

"Takashima," she breathed, aware of her unreasonably and numbing fear. "How is it that you get all the fun jobs?"

"Lie down," he said gently, his crooked teeth forming something like a smile.

"No. That's won't help my upset stomach," Samantha sighed, relieved to note that he wasn't armed. "Where am I?"

"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 remain in the same place where you came on board," he said, passing her a cool, wet hand towel. "That was nine hours ago, AshenGrey."

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"What'd Morita hit me with?" she moaned, her belly threatening to erupt again.

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

"I react oddly to most drugs," she said, realizing that he was not as fat as she had thought. "Sometimes my body reacts to a drug almost exactly the opposite of what it's supposed to."

"Dokutoru Kakugen said you should be fine."

"I do not feel fine."

Her voice sounded strained to her. Her hands shook, and sweat droplets trickled down her back and sides.

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

"Uhg! No," she moaned, staring at her shaky hands. "Some tea?"

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

The stocky Asian moved to the desk side of the room, and turned his back on Samantha. 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 small wet towel. It felt so good that she ran the rag across the back of her neck too. It helped her feel more alert. Opening the front of her p-suit, she quickly wiped her upper chest, enjoying the cool sensation while trying to ignore the red lines and remaining stitches around her almost-healed slashes.

Images of Abe Pardo's dancing silver knife briefly filled her vision, but she desperately tried to push that from her mind. More important issues now, she told herself, and bullied her mind to focus on the here and now.

"Why do I stay in this job?" Samantha muttered to herself, feeling older than the stars, and realized that maybe this time she would get herself killed.

"Did you say something?" Takashima asked from the deck's little hotplate.

"I need a vacation," she answered with a sigh. "This last month..."

*I'm definitely overwhelmed*, she finished silently to herself.

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

She had no response, so silence fell while he finished preparing the tea. Samantha sat quietly struggling to intone her fear mantra against this new threat. Her throat was sore from the acid of her 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 handed a cup of hot tea to her, and she noted that he had made tea for himself as well.

"Thanks -- *arigato*." Sam said, accepting the ceramic sipper. "So, now what? Do you babysit me?"

"I ... *giyu-hei*, er... is '*volunteered*' the right word? – to guard you, yes."

"If you asked for the job, yes" she said, looking at her sipper's decorative pictures of sea-

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going sailing ships.

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

"What did you think he was going to do with me when he found 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. The *Voice* didn't work well 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 do not know," he said with an apologetic shrug.

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

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

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

"Outside the door, your guard, Hiro, will follow orders." Sam saw his sad frown. "He will kill you."

Sam swallowed bile, projected false confidence, and looked at the door, wondering if she should take her chances with Hiro the guard and whatever lay beyond that door.

Takashima's face told her that his answer had been the only one, and she wondered if these people were more mercenary than *professional* Trade Blacks. Sam 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 undermined, 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 an apprentice Grey," he admitted, avoiding her eyes. "But that was a long time ago."

Hooray!! Samantha thought, relieved. Once a Grey - Always the Grey Way.

"Can you get us off this ship before Morita receives his next orders?" she asked, not feeling confident that he would help her escape.

"There's no place to go." He shrugged slightly, regret in his tone. "We're hundreds of

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kilometers from Genni, and thousands of clicks from any of the Dreagan tokai... er, cities."

"Maybe there is a way," Sam breathed, wondering if she could count on two computers that may be real. "Could you place a comm with a coded message for me?"

Takashima was quiet for a long moment.

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

"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 right thumb's blunted fingernail.

"Leave a message," she said, then drank a little 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? Mouth wash? Mints? Maybe 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 nightstand, he turned, pushed open the hatch, spoke a few words to the big guard, and then headed up the vessel's passageway.

We shall see. Samantha thought hopefully. He had said We shall see.



Several boring hours later, after Samantha had felt well enough to prowl 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 discover his traitorous act?



In the darkness, the hatch slammed open with a loud clang against the metal bathroom door. Still dreaming, Samantha again felt Abe Pardo pulled from her bleeding, battered body and she jolted awake as a bright overhead light flooded the room. Eyes open now, she could make out three Blackjacks in the hall, as two of these stomped into the cabin. Rough hands dragged her into a sitting position, and she tried to wake. Sam vaguely wondered 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

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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, that was 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 downside of his baklie trip, she decided. Someone shoved her into the room. Samantha stumbled over the knee-knocker, but quickly recovered her balance. Morita grinned with delight.

"Too bad you had a rough trip, Alexander," he said, playing with the wine sipper in his hand. "I really hate to waist good dope."

"I didn't think it was all that good," she muttered as momentum took her to one of the blue chairs.

Samantha flopped down into one carelessly, dangling one leg over the left arm, and gave the Japanese man a cold stare. Morita toyed with the half-full, long-stemmed sipper for a moment, then placed it on his desk. Sam's body still felt odd from his drug, especially her breasts, and the nap they had interrupted had not gotten rid of her headache.

"You don't look too good," he began with a chuckle.

Samantha just stared at him, while mentally blocking various pains.

"My people tell me that the Genni negotiations are at a standstill. Some Grey named Penock shuttled over from Proteus to assist." He chuckled, and Samantha wondered if he planned to kill Thomas as well. She kept quiet. "Eight hours ago, your psy-clinic offered nine thousand credits for information on your kidnapping. Twenty minutes ago, Jon Dreagan tripled it."

"Turn me in and collect the reward," she muttered, playing idly at the comm unit around the wrist of her light grey p-suit and wishing it had enough power and distance to contact the DreaganStar.

"And you still say you're not working for the Founder."

"He's apprenticed to me," was Sam's flat comment. "Not the other way around."

"And in love with you," was said as a flat statement.

"What do you want, Tadao?" Samantha sighed, trying to stay calm while mentally organizing her options.

"I've talked with my employer." He locked eyes with hers, took up his wine, and drained it. "I get to kill you."

"I figured as much," she said, poker-face controls working overtime.

"So? This doesn't frighten you?"

"You would have already killed me, if you didn't want something." She yawned, feeling numb and still not fully awake. "What do I have that could interest a man like you?"

"What do you mean a man like me?" he growled, suddenly leaning forward in his chair. Samantha felt pleased to have offended him.

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She didn't answer, hoping it would keep him off balance. After a heartbeat, she asked, "So, tell me. What do you want?"

"The identity of the HazeGrey." He grinned wickedly.

"It's not me." She played with the wrist comm's squelch dial.

"I didn't think so. But the question is who?"

"That would make some nice negotiation leverage," she sighed, slumping in the cushioned chair. "But the Haze is a sore subject with me right now. He's deliberately pissed me off. *Again*. I don't suppose you'd like to change the subject?"

"Not this time. What's he done to piss you off?"

"He's ordered me contracted to that megalomaniac Jon Dreagan."

"Awww... Would that be so bad?" he asked in a soothing, yet condescending tone.

"I think I'd resign first. You looking for a partner?"

That had a visible impact! Morita's body flopped back in his chair in surprise. His facial features danced with thought shadows for a moment, then he stood and, like any Earther new to Luna's gravity, he stumbled over to the wet bar.

Having lost her internal sense of time, Samantha decided she would like some tea. When she asked it, his shoulders slumped slightly, but he did bring a second sipper out of the cupboard. As he tapped from the bright brass spigot, she wondered again if Captain Takashima had even attempted to comm Ezra. Sam decided to ask Dreagan to create some sort of portable comm link between Ezra and herself, if--

"This used to be Takashima's ship?" she asked to keep her mind off the unpleasant alternatives.

"He was supposed to continue to captain her."

Samantha caught his use of past tense, and small drops of hope dribbled out of her being. "And her name is?"

"The *Megami Kibo*," was said with an odd pride and a little chuckle. "Ironically, it means the Goddess of Hope."

"How'd Takashima lose her?"

"Game of chance," Morita said, storing the wine decanter and turning to face Samantha. "She's mine now. Like you, *dokutoru*." He grinned, sipping his drink before continuing. "I lead a charmed life," he said as he turned and brought her a drink. "But, you knew that."

"You probably cheated," was Sammie's reply as she turned in his direction, thinking how cursed she'd like to make his life. Morita nodded, affirming that he'd stolen the ship from Captain Takashima, and her stomach lurched with hatred.

"I did. But he can't prove I cheated him out of his precious space shuttle," Morita chuckled, passing Sam a goblet of water. "We were waiting to ambush your ship at the time."

"You're a true gem of humanity." Samantha could feel her frown. After the glass touched her lips, she stopped. "No drugs?"

"That would be wasteful," he said, skirting the desk to return to his seat. "You're to be terminated. But, you know, it is a shame that I'll never know if you were serious about a

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partnership. He sighed, lobbing his big boots onto the oak desk, marring the shiny surface. "But, as you know, I do have a previous business contract. To get rid of you."

The odd little comm near his elbow squawked twice, startling Morita, and then he swung around to key three of the seven buttons on the unit. He spoke two syllables at it. A harsh male voice grumbled several Japanese phrases in return, and Samantha watched Morita's eyebrows knit together as he listened to the report. She liked what she saw. This man was not pleased.

With a few words back through the comm, Morita keyed the unit off and wiped at the black stubble on his chin, thoughtfully. After an oddly suspicious glance in Sam's direction, he stood and started around the big desk, telling her to come with him.



Samantha could not see anything through the pressure windows at the front of the ship's control room.

She had felt surprised that Morita had his guards haul her to the ship's small bridge, and she was even more surprised when they brought Miyoshi Takashima, dressed in full p-suit, his bubblehead in his hand, into the control room as well. The condition of his face shocked her. Takashima looked like someone had used his face for whittling practice. Most of his nose was gone. Derma-nova salve was smeared all over his injuries to stop the bleeding, and it looked like that had been done by an amateur.

"Takashima?" Sam whispered, shortly after he was placed a meter from where she now obediently stood. "Captain Takashima, can you hear me?"

His eyes gave no hint that he had heard her. Nothing but drug-dulled pain showed in his dark eyes. Stepping nearer to the battered man, she touched his arm, while Tadao Morita and a few others argued and pointed at something she could not see out on the gray lunar surface.

"Takashima!" Samantha hissed, slapping his arm.

No reply. She cursed under her breath and looked back to the command crew to be sure they had not heard her. She saw Morita, bending low as if to look up at something very tall out on the moonscape. She could see nothing out there.

If anyone had seen Takashima making that comm, Sam thought, sensing his pain, Morita would probably beat and butcher him like this.

Miyoshi Takashima's body trembled briefly, but his eyes stayed vacant. Sam reached discreetly and squeezed his arm. Then, he stiffened. His eyes brightened slightly as if gathering his senses. The condition of his face set off a new wave of nausea in Samantha. After blinking several times, Takashima lowered his head slightly, sighing. He met her gaze with fear, which was quickly replaced by confusion.

Takashima seemed to recognize her and relaxed a bit when she asked him how he was. Glazed eyes held hers, as he muttered in Japanese. Sam could see pieces of his cheekbones beneath the derma-nova. His right eyebrow had been hacked off. Looking away as another wave of nausea struck, she managed to maintain control by staring out at the moon's gray-white horizon, while listening to Takashima's labored breathing.

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"Takashima-san," she sighed whispering. "Tell me where you landed."

He muttered something, including the ship's name, his battered face turned to Sam, and she could see that he was trying to focus on her face. She called his name a few times, rubbing his arm and hand. He became more alert, but still muttered in his own language. Their two guards found Morita's excitement much more interesting than Samantha talking to a zombie traitor.

"English, damn it," she whispered harshly, wanting to shout at the man. "It's me, Sam Alexander. Talk to me in English."

"AshenGrey?" was whispered with recognition.

"Yes, Takashima. AshenGrey," she said, softening her voice, hoping to keep the panic out. "I'm here."

Samantha felt his hand move to her right arm, and his grip felt strong. Haunted brown eyes met hers again, and she could tell that some intelligence had returned.

"Are you... all right?" he asked in a weak voice.

"Fine. I need to know where we are."

"Doomed," he said with a sigh as he shifted away from her and stood up straight. "More than two hours from Genni," was his answer. "That's flight time." He swallowed with difficulty, looking around now before adding, "Three days on foot."

"If we had enough air," Samantha groaned. "Did you reach Ezra?"

"Morita caught me as the connection completed," he groaned as he shifted his legs. "Sorry. No, er... cavalry."

With the minimal amount of medical treatment they had given Takashima, Samantha knew he could bleed to death before any real help could arrive. *Who am I trying to kid?* She wondered, reaching to nervously twist the comm dials on her wrist.

"Alexander!" Morita shouted, and instantly big hands shoved her toward the front of the ship and its view port.

"Sammie? Are you all right?" Jon Dreagan asked over the bridge's comm speaker. Her heart did a beat-skip, and her stomach flipped with relief. Then, Samantha glanced at her wrist comm, wondering how much assistance it could give.

"I'm okay, Jon," she said in the direction one of the bridge people pointed, a built-in mic, she assumed, while realizing Dreagan never called her *Sammie*.

Big hands pulled her back toward Takashima, but not before she caught a glimpse of Star's huge crystalline tripod about thirty meters away out on the moonscape.

Morita barked an order, and Sam was nudged back, out of his way. She would still be able to hear the conversation between him and Dreagan. Morita was threatening to send seventy Blackjacks to dismantle Dreagan's ship. She knew there were less than half that many on board.

"Not goddamn likely," Dreagan growled and then gave a menacing chuckle. "I recommend you send the AshenGrey over to me, and then just sit quietly until the authorities arrive."

"And if I don't?" Morita retorted in a dangerous tone. "I seriously doubt that you have any weapons on that thing, Dreagan."

"Care to find out?" he asked with a coldness Samantha had never heard before in his voice,

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and she found herself chilled. Was this his *Voice*?

Tadao Morita roughly elbowed one of his bridge crew for looking sympathetically at Miyoshi Takashima, and then grumbled some orders. After the tech had toggled off the comm, a second tech began running a series of computer programs on what looked like a new Avrey-Tunuka Sensor Array screen. They were scanning Dreagan's ship.

Ignored again, Samantha pretended to be yawning and stretched her arms high. Certain that no one was looking her way, she whispered into her wrist comm, "Beep me quietly, if you can hear me, Star."

The comm's beep was barely audible, as she lowered her arms, wondering if she could safely sprint to an outer hatch. Then Samantha glanced back at Captain Takashima, battered and dazed, and knew that she couldn't leave him with these brutes.

"Doctor Alexander!" Morita shouted, pulling her attention back to his problem. "Does that ship have any weapons on it?"

Samantha thought a minute, running the structure drawings and schematics that she had seen through her mind, and then replied, "Honestly, I'm not sure."

Star was completely defenseless, from what Samantha knew of it.

"You'll regret lying," he rumbled, waving his hand in her direction, then spoke to the blackjack next to her.

The guard nudged Sam a few small steps closer to Morita, who scowled down at her, the red lights of several piloting gages making his face glow in his anger.

"I'm a psychiatrist, not a goddamn engineer," she said through clenched teeth. "What do your scans tell you?"

"Nothing." He frowned.

Samantha wondered if Star was somehow impervious to scan and sensor technology, or if Morita meant that the scans read nothing, but he didn't trust the readings.

Morita muttered to the JourneyBlack who stood two heads taller than Samantha, and the guard grabbed and twisted her right arm roughly behind her back. She yelped in pain, and the blackjack grinned into her face, stinky fish sauce on his breath.

"Are you certain of your memory, AshenGrey?" Morita asked with a dull glint in his brown eyes.

"Star's an FTL experiment -- hey!" Sam winced under the guard's heavy hand. "She's designed for exploration. Why would -- OW! Call off your goddamn monkey-boy, Morita! Why would Dreagan arm it for exploration?"

"But did he?" Morita insisted as the pressure on her arm eased.

"How the hell should I know?" Sam yelled, anger rising.

"Is that how the game's--"

"Morita?" the comm exploded with Jonathan Dreagan's shout: "Morita, you hurt that woman again, and you are dead!"

The look on Tadao Morita's face read *How'd he know*, and Samantha stifled her laugh. Instead, she glanced back at Takashima to find his grim eyes locked on Morita, who studied what

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Sam presumed was the sensor array panel. Next, Morita swung around and flipped the comm toggle on.

"You're unarmed, Dreagan," he gloated, his hand tapping the third tech lightly.

"So are you," was spoken in that icy tone again. "But I have two advantages over you."

"I doubt that," Morita responded, his angry look at his four technicians demanding that they do something.

"You are acting outside established lunar laws," Dreagan's voice said, and that syntax seemed wrong for the Jonathan Dreagan that Sam knew. "On the other hand, I am acting within the law."

"I do not see that as any advantage, Founder."

"I thought as much. I am also very much bigger than you," Dreagan continued coldly. "As such, I out-weigh you."

"So what?" Tadao Morita laughed, as did his crew, and she felt surprised that some of them did indeed understand.

"Would you prefer me to rupture your ship's hull?" Dreagan's voice continued emotionlessly. "Or shall I merely sit on you until law enforcement arrives?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Morita spat.

Samantha looked out the front viewer to see Star's tripod raise a few meters above the dusty gray lunar surface. It swayed gently toward her direction. Excited technicians began shouting fearfully in Japanese, but Morita roared them to an edgy silence.

The five-story, crystalline starship drew ominously closer. Samantha noted several crewmen glance nervously around to Morita, then to their shipmates, to Star, and back to Morita.

*Could one of Star's tripod pieces pierce this ship?* She wondered, more alert than she'd been since waking.

"Dreagan does not bluff, Morita," she called across the bridge, hoping to increase crew tension and this man's problems.

"Shut her up!" he shouted without taking his eye away from the ship's front window and Star's approach.

As a guard began to move toward her, Sam flowed into a strong karate defensive stance and glared a warning at him. He stopped, glancing back at his boss, then he shrugged and turned away from her. She forced herself to relax taking slow deep breaths, as that coppery taste of *fear* had returned.

Framed in the cockpit's window, Star's three massive crystalline landing points drew nearer, offering a unique view of the imposing, five-story starship. Morita growled several orders in Japanese, and his people jumped to obey.

This ship's floors began to vibrate as its engines rumbled to life, and Samantha wondered if Dreagan could really prevent their liftoff. Quickly looking around the flight deck, she found no available bubblehead, so planning to take whatever advantage karma would hand to her, Sam stepped closer to Takashima.

"How are you, Takashima-san?" she whispered, and the deathly-pale captain responded with a low groan of pain and a slight shrug.

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The nearby guard poked her in the ribs - not the sore side, thankfully - and gave her a warning look. She nodded, wondering if her Trade's hand language might be of some use. Catching Takashima's eyes, Samantha blatantly gestured a basic apprentice Grey phrase, only to be met by a slight shrug and small shake of his head. She assumed that meant he couldn't read or recall it, so she returned her attention to Morita's problem.

One of Star's spikes now hovered less than a meter in front of the window, still coming on. Samantha grabbed at a zero-g handle near an instrument bank and grabbed Takashima's arm just before the tall starship nudged the little shuttle.

The flight deck lurched left as the ship rolled toward one side, throwing shrieking people around the bridge. Morita was plunged sideways, smashing his shoulder into a wall of electronics. His technicians, all seated, simply dangled from their belted positions, feverishly working their controls as the ship rocked, settling on its side. Caught off guard and thrown off his feet, the nearest guard's head smashed into a bulkhead. Dazed, the guard slumped to the deck.

Hanging onto her handle, Sam swung and kicked another blackjack slightly off-center of his temple. He slid down the wall, unconscious. Takashima managed to grab that guard's electro-gun before she could let go of the zero-g handle.

"That's enough, Dreagan," Sam commanded quietly into her wrist comm, as she looked out and saw Star's tripod point right in front of the view port, blocking the *Megami Kibo* as her engines fired. Takashima shouted Samantha's name, and she glanced his way, to see him aiming an electro-gun on Morita.

Takashima's bubblehead flew in her direction. Catching the globe, Samantha dumped it on her head while a much-more alert Captain Takashima barked orders at *his* bridge crew. No one moved, and she wondered if they would follow his commands. Morita had righted himself now, rubbing his shoulder while glaring at Takashima.

Sealing her bubblehead, Samantha smelled canned air fill the helmet. After adjusting the comm dials, she could hear the voices around her. Takashima reached out sideways and frantically waved her toward the exit while keeping the electro-gun leveled on the bridge crew. She sidestepped to the hatch, wondering what the captain had in mind as she un-dogged the polysteel door.

Opening the heavy metal hatch only a few centimeters, Sam looked and listened for other security personnel, and felt relieved no one lurked in the passageway. Takashima stepped closer, crowding her, so she swung the hatch full open and stepped over the knee-knocker, expecting guards at any moment.

A sizzle-sound crackled through the sensors of her p-suit, as Samantha stepped cautiously down the corridor. She was curious about whom Captain Takashima had just fried. *And why?* Part of Sam didn't care. The air rang with the sound of a hatch slamming closed, and then she heard a second sizzle behind her. She turned and saw Takashima sealing the hatch, using the electro-gun like an arc-welder.

Five meters in front of Samantha, at the first passageway junction, three blackjacks lurked in

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black p-suits, e-rifles aimed at Sam and the Captain. Sam's vision narrowed darkly and another bloom of fear soured her mouth. Struggling against other terrors, she slowly breathed in stale air, determined to focus. Her head pounded in pain.

She glanced over her shoulder to find Takashima backing toward her, and she reached out to touch him. The stocky captain whirled around, saw her, and then saw the approaching guards. He shouted something in Japanese. Samantha watched the three men grin in happy recognition, and then touched her wrist comm.

"Dreagan?" she whispered into the comm, relieved these three were friendlies.

"Right here, Sammie," the male voice replied evenly, and again she thought *He never calls me Sammie*.

"How soon until the authorities arrive?" she whispered, wishing she could spit out the taste of harsh fear in her mouth.

"I estimate one hour, twenty-five minutes," Star said.

Samantha cursed like an old ice miner under her breath. Too long.

One of the three guards broke from the group, awkwardly bouncing up a passageway to the left, while the shorter of the other two began what sounded like a report to Takashima. Samantha slowed as she drew near the two blackjacks - obviously this captain's men. The larger of the two pushed quickly past her, and then beyond Takashima. The other man took up a position between them and the ship's bridge as Takashima spoke again in Japanese. His face had begun bleeding again, a red stream flowing over his eye where they had hacked off his eyebrow. He looked down briefly at Samantha, and her stomach lurched at the sight of his face. Uncharacteristic revulsion washed briefly over her, but she checked that quickly.

"Too many of Morita's people for us to fight," he panted in a tired and raspy voice. "Can the Founder's ship accommodate ahh... maybe ten of us?"

"Yes!" Sam said as footsteps pounded toward them from the left, and loud alarms began to sound.

Blood pounded in her ears, making the headache worse, as more sweat poured from her pores, filling her p-suit's moisture collectors. Three more of Takashima's men joined them in the junction, each massive man in a Security Black pressure suit. The closest guard passed a bubblehead to Takashima, which he quickly dumped on his head. As he was sealing it, four men ran up from the right, guns drawn. An electro-bolt smacked and sparked on the metal wall less than a few centimeters from Samantha, and she found herself staring stupidly at the hissing burn mark in the bulkhead.

Someone grabbed Sam's shoulder and shoved her down to the deck, then he dropped between her and the newcomers. Trembling, she curled up safely behind the guard and tried to just breathe. Several guns sizzled, but Samantha couldn't see anything because of the burly man in front of her. He suddenly stiffened, then slumped back against her. An electro-gun rattled to the floor a few centimeters from her arm. More hissing filled the air. Pushing at the dead weight that leaned on her, Sam grabbed the gun, chancing a look around the junction. The last of the four was dropping to the green-tiled deck, and beyond them, Samantha could see the beginnings of

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that gaudy red hallway runner.

The guard's weight shifted off her. As she pushed to her feet, strong hands propelled her forward and over four other dead bodies in the corridor. The stocky man in the lead bounced awkwardly toward the red-carpeted passageway with two others, while Samantha, with two security men behind her, scurried after Takashima and his men. Her pulse pounded in her ears so loud that she almost didn't hear Star ask how she was doing.

"We're coming out," she gasped, catching up with her escorts. "Have your lift down and ready for ... um, six people."

As Samantha heard Star's affirmation through her comm, Takashima quickly turned up the hall to the left, following the red carpet. She recognized the door to Morita's office as she passed it, hoping that they hurried to an airlock.

Arriving at the next junction, Takashima and his men halted before they turned the corner, but Sam could not hear their conversation.

"Star, can you discover the comm frequency the men with me are using?" she asked, two blackjacks sandwiching her so tightly that she felt claustrophobic.

"I've been monitoring them," the starship replied. "They expect someone to be waiting for them around the next corner in the air lock."

"Can you patch me in if I need to speak to them?"

"And I can translate," Star said with childlike pride. "They're ready to attack now."

Takashima and his men burst into a strike on their hidden foes, rounding that corner as one.

Samantha couldn't see the melee due to the guard who had forced her behind him, using his body as a shield. In 15 seconds it was over and now five more of Morita's blackjacks sprawled dead on the airlock floor, along with two of Takashima's men. Soon they had moved the dead bodies out of their escape path, and when they were all in the airlock, someone dialed it closed. With a hiss of air escaping into the vacuum, the outer hatch dilated open, and the four jumped onto the moon's sterile, dull surface.

## CHAPTER 4 - AFTERMATH

Samantha jumped from the shuttle's airlock onto the gray dust and lunar rock and bounced towards Star's waiting cargo lift. Takashima and his two surviving men followed her. She hurried to the platform suspended by spun cabling, as it waited on one side of Star's shiny tripod. She glanced back at Takashima, to see him between his two remaining men, almost being carried. Blood speckled the inside of his bubblehead. As far as she could tell, the Japanese captain had to be functioning on adrenaline and willpower.

Once she had reached the lift, Sam looked back to see the three men imitating her lunar bounce fairly well, and within a few seconds, they joined her on the polysteel lift. On Sam's word, the cargo platform lurched upward, and in a few more seconds, they landed in Star's open airlock. Looking down at the small shuttle beneath the DreaganStar, Samantha felt relieved that none of Morita's troops had yet come after her. *Them*, she reminded herself. She took a brief moment to savor the sight of a vanquished enemy trapped within Star's tripod.

By the time the inner hatch had dilated open, Takashima's eyes had begun to crawl up into his head, and then his eyelids fluttered closed. He collapsed heavily on his men as the outer hatch began to seal.

Samantha entered the starship first, Takashima's men too concerned with their wounded leader to pay attention to the incredible vessel. Quickly easing his captain's body to the deck, one security guard looked up at Sam with questions on his tense face. She ripped off her bubblehead, set it on the deck, and then bent to remove Takashima's while his men took off theirs.

"How the hell'd you find us, Jon?" she asked, gulping in Star's spicy-sweet air, as she began to pull Takashima's helmet seals open.

Takashima's wounds seemed much worse, and from his chalky-white pallor and shallow breathing, Samantha had no doubt that he was in severe shock. She glanced up at the nearer of the two Japanese men, wishing she could speak their language.

"Once you turned on your wrist comm, I just homed in on you," Star said as the vessel lifted gently and *loudly* into flight.

"Jon?" She called, setting the bloody bubblehead on Star's polished deck.

Samantha turned, wondering why Dreagan hadn't come to assist her with the injured captain, but found only two gray-faced blackjacks gawking around the empty vessel. Takashima groaned, panting shallow breaths, and she touched his arm with her gloved hand. One of his men knelt with her on the floor, speaking gently to his injured captain.

"Jon, bring me the first aid kit!" Sam shouted as she stood on shaky legs, turning toward the interior of the ship.

Dreagan was not at the flight controls.

"Jon? Where are you?" She called, pulling off her gloves.

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"Jonnie is with AshenGrey Penock at the Genni negotiations," Star said evenly. "I had to come on my own."

"With or without his permission?" she asked slowly, in awe, and she quickly felt concerned by the vast degree of independent thinking this computer demonstrated.

*How independent would Ezra get? Samantha wondered. How long could she and Dreagan keep them a secret from the scientific community?* Sam knew she had a long-term project ahead of her, but...

Sam only wanted to go and hide, safe in her own bed.

"I've already sent out a message that you're safe," Star was saying, and Sam wondered if Star had intentionally avoided her question about getting permissions.

"Thanks for coming for me, Bright Girl. Great diversionary tactics, too," she said as she gestured for Takashima's men to carry their wounded captain to the sleeping alcove. "Head for Genni at fastest speed."

"Flight programed and executed," her computer friend responded with happy tones as Takashima's guards began lifting him carefully. "I'm glad I found you, Sammie."

"So am I, Star," Samantha breathed, feeling the ship come about. "Do you know of any pain killers on board?"

"In the 'fresher's cabinet," she said, engine whining loudly in her banking turn. "ETA for Genni Colony is nineteen minutes."

Samantha bounced for the 'fresher, thinking of the bastard who had cheated Takashima out of his ship. A familiar icy feeling filled her. Samantha knew that she had enough evidence to prosecute not only Morita, but also the Japanese official who had ordered her killed.

"Star, comm Proteus Port Security for me, please," she said as she reached the 'fresher, feeling nauseous and weak.

"On the comm, Sammie," Star responded almost instantly.

"This is AshenGrey Samantha Alexander," she began, as she opened the little medicine cabinet, while praying that Takashima would not return to a complete, painful consciousness.

"First Security Assistant Calvin Berryston," a tenor voice announced over Star's speakers. "We're pleased that you're safe, AshenGrey. How can I serve you?"

"I want the space shuttle *Megami Kibo* impounded on Luna, and its acting captain, Tadao Morita, held and charged with drug trafficking, battery, kidnapping, attempted murder, and grand theft: spaceship. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am. Doctor Dreagan has already put out similar warrants on your kidnappers," Berryston replied on the comm. "All except the battery and grand theft charges. Tadao Morita, huh? I've heard he is sleazy. Any particulars?"

"Miyoshi Takashima, the ship's registered owner, is with me and in need of emergency medical care and hospitalization because of Morita," Samantha growled, grabbing a brown vial labeled as a strong pain-killing narcotic. "I'm certain Takashima will press grand theft charges. By the way, there are twenty armed blackjacks on that ship, so please tell your people to be careful. Transmitting that ship's coordinates now."

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"Star, transmit those coordinates," she whispered, and heard the ship's quiet acknowledgement.

"We appreciate that, Dr. Alexander." Berryston quickly said over the comm. "Earth ports and securities are being notified. Where can we reach you?"

"Through my clinic, tomorrow. Alexander out," she muttered, and as Samantha came back into Star's huge main chamber with the meds, she heard Star quietly conversing with the two guards in Japanese. She hurried to the flight console.

When Samantha pulled the first-aid box from under Star's console, one of Takashima's men came to help her, taking it quickly to the other man. Star explained to Samantha that this was the ship's doctor.

"Star, tell him these pills are for pain," Samantha said, setting the small vial on top of the box while feeling very tired and very dirty.

She wondered how long had she had been in this filthy grey p-suit.

Smelling her own vomit, with a mouth that tasted like she smelled, Samantha moved to the kitchen for some water for the pain medicine. She then moved toward the sleeping alcove and the three men. The larger of the two men had yanked open the medi-kit, and the small doctor had grabbed quickly for the suture kit. As she came closer, Sammie watched as Takashima's eyes fluttered open, and glassy brown eyes begged for relief from the torment.

Standing near the larger jack, next to the sleeping pad, Sam had only enough energy to observe.

The small man muttered something while expertly loading the suture needles, asking if she would administer the pills, while holding out the little bottle. While he prepared to stitch the Captain, Sam doled out the pills. With the help of the larger man who held Takashima's head up, she was able to give Takashima the pills and some water. In pain-brave dignity, he slumped back down onto the blue and silver pillow with a haggard sigh. The doctor bent over his captain's battered head, dabbing his face with an anesthetic swab before he began his sewing. Takashima met Samantha's eyes.

"It's his ship, now," he rasped with a sad sigh.

"No. You're wrong, Takashima-san. Morita told me that he cheated you to win it," she said, then asked Star to translate for the others. "That's only one of several mistakes that bastard's made. You'll get your ship back, Captain Takashima. That's an AshenGrey promise."

Sam heard his slight and labored chuckle as the doctor began to sew, and she rose to go find a fresh p-suit.