

DreaganGrey

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CHAPTER 1—GREYBOSS

The main doors of the Apperson Psy-Clinic opened into a reception area much smaller than that of the lunar hospital. On the right, four clients waited in comfortable blue or green chairs near the Southern Check-in desk. On Samantha's left, the clerical staff moved quickly about their routine duties. Psychologically soothing music seeped in from camouflaged speakers hidden throughout the room. The recycled air had been scented with a light aroma of clove this time, she noted. Medical intern Joel Brogan waved from his position in the Information Booth a few meters in front of her. With a smile Sam quickly made a loose U-turn and moon-bounced up the carpeted green stairs. Passing a number of clerks' cubbies still unoccupied in the early morning, she scowled down the narrow, green hallway at her office and the hundreds of issues she needed to catch up on.

"Mistress?" Patric Hansen's familiar, deep rich voice came from behind, and Sam stopped to wait for her big JourneyGrey.

Samantha turned to find the sturdily built 50-year-old man springing from his workspace and smiled. Greeting Patric made her feel like she had arrived "home." Business as usual was just what she needed to finish the "centering process" she had been working through. Her

assistant eyed her critically as he approached, and she didn't bother to throw any walls up. She was feeling very good about herself.

"I've tried to keep most of your day open," he began. "But there are a lot of people asking for you."

"The consequence of my fifteen minutes of fame," she sighed, hating how Jonathan Dreagan's triad had pulled her into that public spotlight. "I was warned. What have we got today?"

"The iceminers' representatives insist on seeing you as soon as possible. The Triad postponed their appointment. They'd had that appointment for almost a month," Patric said, getting in step with his superior. "They'll be here at 2 PM. The Elections Office has called at least a dozen times in the last two days. Your Trade fellows are clamoring for your summary, and the media, in general, wants to interview you."

"Nice to be wanted," she muttered, not quite awake, but glad she'd arrived before the morning bustle. "Okay for Iceminers at 2. That should give me some time to sort through today with you. What does the Elections Office want?"

"Your signature on an Intent-to-run form for the Speakership," was his reply as they turned right and walked toward the back of the clinic. "Think the HazeGrey will allow it?"

"I do not want it, Patric," she admitted and gave another sigh. "We shall see. I do want to meet with Taylor as soon as he gets in."

"He's scheduled in at noon," he said, frowning down at her. "He said to tell you it would take all morning to pry his fee from Gus Adams."

"No doubt." She laughed up at her JourneyGrey, his bright Security Master bars tacked to his grey collar. "I want to see him as soon as he gets in."

They stepped into her windowless office, lights coming up. Samantha looked around, feeling comforted and secure in the familiar chamber.

Someone had cleaned up the mess she had left on the side bar, emptied the trash, and straightened up the bookcases. Otherwise, it was reassuringly the same, with one major exception. Her usually tidy desk and computer waited, piled in paperwork, bytes and other reports of the office.

"I'm gone a few days, and you jacks do all this?" she muttered as she rounded her desk. "Thanks a heap!"

"A few days!" Patric grunted, tapping hot coffee from the side bar and service alcove. "Several. Sixteen days, to be exact."

"That many, huh? What a roller-rocket!"

"Yup. You were six days in space with the Founder. Four days in his Triad—"

"And four days visiting my folks and two with college friends," she finished for him. "Yup. That's sixteen."

"How's your dad?" This was asked gently.

"No better. I'll probably be going back to his funeral within a month," she muttered as Patric handed her a sipper-cup of coffee, and she shoved stuff on the desk aside to mask her discomfort. "Anyone else insistent?"

Looking up, she saw brief compassion in his eyes, but the professional personae quickly returned, and he answered, "JourneyGrey Nikatta from the Genni Colony."

Her mind leapt with delight. "I want more open communications with that Japanese colony, Patric. Do what you can to encourage it."

"JourneyGrey Nikatta's report seemed pretty vague. She wants to talk with you, ASAP." Lines wrinkled Patric's wide forehead.

“Make that comm as soon as we're done,” she told him while eyeing the mess on her desk. “All this hard copy is not necessary, Patric. You could handle most of this.”

“AshenGrey Roberts,” he grumbled an unspoken reminder.

“Maybe not for long. Contact each of those groups and deal with them, except the Genni. I'll talk to our JourneyGrey before she ends her day. That gives us, what? About three hours?”

“I think so. I'll check the time zones.”

“As for the media, I need to talk to their top lunar administrator, today—but no press conference. I have a little business proposition for them.”

“All right.” Patric gave her his what-are-you-up-to-now look, and she grinned wickedly.

“By the way, move the office furniture out of the room next door. Looks like I'll be living here for a while.”

“Already done,” he said with a straight face. “We figured it'd take the Housing Office a while to reassign you something you'd find acceptable.”

She stuck out her tongue at him, and he chuckled.

“What else have you done for me?”

“I rescheduled the apprentice induction for Thursday.” He back-stepped toward the door. “And I have two tailors on call for you. At your convenience.”

“Good man! Thanks. Bring them in tomorrow.” Grinning at his farsightedness, she dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

Before the door closed behind him, she palmed the lock on the underside of the desk open and checked the lower left drawer. Her gun

waited there, still wrapped in a small pile of tan oilcloth. Satisfied, she slid the drawer closed, locked it, and took up her coffee to consider the tedious work before her.

The recycle chute seemed the most likely candidate for most of the mess, but eventually it all ended up back where it had come from—the desk of Taylor Roberts. That man couldn't lead a group in silent prayer, she thought sadly. Samantha knew exactly where she wanted him billeted, and that was not in any of her clinics. About the time she had dumped Taylor's work back in his office, one of the apprentice clerks paged her for an incoming call. She bounced back to her now tidy office and toggled the computer to life as she sat down.

As her comm activated, two persons appeared, sitting in a contemporary Japanese living room. The aging Genni ambassador was familiar to Sam from media releases, by reputation, and also from the infrequent reports made by the woman at his side. He sat, dignified and alert, looking much older than she remembered.

“Greetings, AshenGrey,” the small Asian woman began. She was dressed in a medium TradeGrey business suit, hands resting wordlessly in her lap.

“Hello, Nikatta,” Sam said, disturbed by the dignitary's presence. She had wanted to talk with her operative in private.

“May I present Hinto Izumihara, AshenGrey.” The trim Japanese woman smiled with a delicate gesture of her hand that said traditional courtesy would be the order of business. Sam nodded moderately as Nikatta continued, “Izumihara-san, I am pleased to present Luna's senior AshenGrey, Doctor Samantha Danielle Alexander.”

“I am honored,” she breathed, realizing that such a direct first-time communication went against the accepted international business protocols.

“We have heard of your recent success, as well as the loss of two of the Founder's corporate officials,” Izumihara said, stone-faced beneath his thinning hair. “Dr. Alexander, I will speak candidly.”

“Please, do.” Sam always held her breath when someone used that particular phrase.

“My remaining colonists wish to merge the colony with the Dreagan Corporation,” the graying Asian announced quietly, and the small woman next to him grimaced.

Samantha exhaled slowly, guarding her reactions.

“Would your colonists be allowed to make that decision?” she asked, delighted by the man's straightforwardness. “I've heard rumors that your planetside allocations were again reduced.”

“We would have to rely heavily on your support for a short while. Less than nine hundred of us remain after last week's migration planetside,” he said while Nikatta's fingers hinted of greater difficulties. “We can offer new commerce, logistic assistance, and of course, sports competitions.”

And thousands of vacant living spaces, Sam thought pleasantly. Too complicated for a conference call, she silently told herself, but the initial logistics of such a merger already began popping into her mind.

“When can we meet, Izumihara-san?” she asked, smiling inside about lunar golf, the Japanese passion. “What would be convenient?”

He bowed almost imperceptibly. “Could you make the journey?”

“Nikatta requires an annual evaluation.” Sam dipped her head slightly and asked, “Can you be ready by the end of the week, Grey?”

“I'll be ready.” She smiled and gestured a warning of slow-coming trouble.

“Thank you, Doctor Alexander,” the elderly gentleman said quietly, pushing himself from the sofa. “Please. Let's discuss Nikatta's evaluation, when you're here.”

“Certainly, sir.” Sam bowed, and as the statesman rose to move out of camera range, she wondered why he had not used the formal ending to refer to his subordinate. “Let me connect you with my chief cleric, Nikatta. You two can make the travel arrangements. Thanks for a job well done.”

She again gestured “trouble” while she said good-bye, leaving Sam wondering.

From her position against the rail at the top of the stairway, Samantha could observe the two groups that milled about the main reception area below. They were as predictable as children at a social mixer in their self-imposed segregation. The smell of machine oil lifted on the circulated air, and the media jacks down there grumbled about the smell of the iceminers. Iceminers and media men, she chuckled to herself. What will come from a mix of the two, she wondered. From up the hall Patric emerged from his office and bounded toward her. She checked the wall chronometer and strolled back toward him.

“They're getting impatient, Mistress,” he whispered, glancing at the closed conference room door. “And now the Founder is on the comm, very insistent about speaking to you.”

“I'll take that in the conference room.”

“In front of the media people?” he whispered.

The JourneyGrey spun and caught pace with Sam, frowning as he did. They had walked passed several work cubbies before his shocked expression diminished.

“Dreagan's perfect bait for this trap,” she said, wagging a finger at the man. “Or maybe I should call it an extremely interesting proposition. We shall see.”

“Propositioning them or Dr. Dreagan?” He grinned, palming the door open.

Sam regarded her big assistant with innocent eyes, and he knew she wouldn't answer his question. The door slid sideways to reveal the clinic's ample conference room, its traditional rectangular table rimmed by several people dressed in various Trade colors. One obese Orangeman sat next to Media Master Jason Carmichael, a slender, black-haired man, wearing the Trade Silver of a Current Events expert, rather than entertainer's gold. Across from him sat a stunning blond, the new media mistress who went by the stage name of Cinda. Dressed in a flamboyant golden silk business suit, she turned her icy blue eyes on Samantha. Sam instantly felt her hostility. A handsome young apprentice standing behind Cinda shuffled his feet nervously. The greasy-looking clerk in Trade Green stopped pacing to look at the opening door.

“Please, join us,” she said quietly to Patric, then stepped into the small meeting room.

“Gentle people, please be patient,” she said while bouncing quickly to the small computer at the far corner of the beige conference room. “I must take this call, but I promise to be brief. Excuse me one more moment, please.”

Touching the computer screen, she swiveled it away from prying eyes, then slipped the earpiece into place. At the touch of the controls, Jonathan Dreagan's face appeared on the screen. He was watching something to his left, out of camera range. Behind him, Sam could see the silver and blue interior of the DreaganStar.

“I'm in conference with Jason Carmichael and a few of his people,” she warned him briskly. “What's so urgent?”

“Okay...” He drawled, his dark eyes twinkling. “I just heard you were back. Have dinner with me tonight?”

“I'm going to Genni for the evening,” she said as a thought occurred to her. “You're welcome to join me and we can dine there.”

The earpiece remained silent for a moment, and she wondered why she had just said that. Those days in Montana had not done very much to calm her confusion concerning Jon Dreagan.

A movement caught her eye. On a whispered command from his master, the apprentice media man slipped quietly out of the room, no doubt to make some Genni arrangements of their own.

“Can we be sure it won't turn into a media event?” Dreagan asked, frowning as Higgins passed him some paperwork.

“Not yet.” She pushed anticipation into her tone.

“Why tell me this?” he grumbled, scrawling a signature. “Are those goddamn media people in the room with you?”

“Yup.” Samantha grinned, gesturing to the earpiece.

“Damnit, woman...” he began, but caught himself and continued, “What do you want me to do?”

“Think about it,” she said with a smile. “I'll call you back. Bye.”

She carefully stowed the earpiece before turning to the four media people still in the room. She regarded the slender Trade Master across the table.

“I appreciate your patience, Master Carmichael.” She smiled sweetly, swiveling in her chair. “And I hope you found that communication interesting enough to listen to my proposal.”

“Very interesting, AshenGrey,” the brown-eyed man said, glancing briefly at Cinda O*Keefe, who wore a look of intense curiosity. “May I ask why you're heading to that foreign colony?”

“To have dinner,” she said with a slight shrug. “And I'm sure you and your people could think up a hundred more questions, Master Carmichael. I have little time. Will you hear me out?”

He ran a big hand through his greasy black hair, and then smiled slightly. The others fidgeted or drank from the cups of coffee a house steward had provided.

“Of course, I'll hear you out,” he muttered.

“Infringement upon someone else's rights violates Lunar Law,” she reminded him and his colleagues. “Wouldn't you agree?”

“There are also laws against impinging on our Freedom of Speech,” he responded in an even voice.

“If I can't move about and be a credit to my Trade because of people underfoot everywhere I go, Mr. Carmichael, wouldn't that be an infringement on my rights?”

“Freedom of Speech, Miss Alexander.” He smiled a sickly, ass-kissing smile that told Sam she was on the right vector. “We have the corporation's guarantee.”

“Ironically, the Founder seems to be your favorite victim,” she said, glancing at the others, whose blank faces disgusted her.

“The people want to know.” Carmichael quoted, rubbing his chin while glancing at the Orange Master at his elbow. “And after all, he IS the Founder.”

“He's one of the people, too. Infringement on anyone's freedom to move about is unlawful. Would you agree?”

Carmichael's Orange gave no gesture the media man could go on. No one spoke, and she glanced at Patric, who sat near the door. He grinned, and then she rose and moved toward an empty seat next to Jason Carmichael.

“Would you prefer compromise as opposed to legal actions?” she asked nicely.

The gaunt media administrator again glanced at his lawyer, Kent Ruthledge, who passed a grim reflection back to him. Carmichael turned his attentions back Sam's way.

“What is your proposal?” he grumbled, absently picking at the cuticle of his left thumb.

“You will assign one skilled media person each month to me,” she said, intentionally leaning over the seated administrator. “That person alone may have almost full access to my daily affairs – outside of client confidentiality.”

“Almost, Miss Alexander?” Carmichael asked, crossing his legs like a shield against her.

“That's AshenGrey Alexander,” Patric stated politely while she glared at the skinny media master.

“Grey affairs do not always affect just Luna, and I must often be discrete. I'm sure you understand confidentiality,” she said, watching these men closely. “I have a private life too, Master Administrator. I intend to enjoy it privately.”

“You state the obvious,” came his bored, subtly contrived reply.

“Overall, the media have many victims. Those with celebrity status are pounced upon whenever they emerge from their homes. The media violate their rights in the name of Freedom.” She shook her head slowly watching anyone but Carmichael. “Whose freedoms are more

important? Not mine, judging by what happened when my flight landed last night.”

“A regrettable incident, Miss...er AshenGrey,” Carmichael sighed, after checking with his lawyer.

“Security had to restrain one of your overly obnoxious media men who refused to take 'no comment' for an answer. He almost punched out the Security jack who intervened,” she reminded him, while on the other end of the room, Patric studied the room. “Regrettable, indeed!”

“Please accept my...er...our apology.” This time he did squirm in his chair.

“Nope,” she said, liking his discomfort. “I think I'll talk to Mark Hamble first.”

“Please, don't.” The black-haired man fidgeted, glancing again at Rutledge.

“She could have a case, under Lunar Corporate Law,” the obese Orange whispered.

“If I pressed the case,” she said, aware of the law only from an apprentice's education. “I will set a precedent. Shall we agree to make him the first to be prosecuted?”

“What compromise?” Carmichael muttered, shifting again in his chair.

“As I said: one media person a month, a new one each month,” she replied, thinking that Carmichael was still trying to figure who her dinner date might be.

“That would put a few people out of work,” he muttered, and the greasy cleric behind him nodded enthusiastically.

“There's plenty of work to be done in the ice mines,” Sam suggested. “News stories, too.”

Across the room Patric looked thoughtful, then smirked. The media could transform the public's distaste as well as the substandard conditions at the icers' dorms and tunnels.

"Miss Alexander—" The administrator began.

Angered by his repeated disrespect for her Trade position, Samantha quickly lunged and clamped her hand across his mouth. The incredibly swift action left Carmichael startled, wide-eyed, and immobile. Sam felt amazed by her own actions.

"For the last time," she said gently. "That's AshenGrey Alexander, senior psychologist on and inside this desolate rock. As head of this and all the psy-clinics of Luna, I'm telling you something very important, Administrator." She tuned her voice into an intensely persuasive tone and continued. "Listen very carefully. You WILL curtail your subordinates, assign one person to me as I request, and you will discourage all others from trailing me. And this is how your Trade will treat any celebrity or official residing on the Moon, and as well as those visiting here. Mobbing an individual will no longer be tolerated. As Senior Grey, I forbid it. Let it be entered as recorded law for Luna. My JourneyGrey and all of you have witnessed. Please record that, Grey Hensen."

Slowly, she brought her hand away, watching the stunned man digest her words and behavior. Sam sighed, easing into the nearest vacant chair and glanced at the lawyer, whose pained expression again mimicked his employer.

"The Greys have authority above corporate law," Rutledge said to his employer with a slight shrug.

Carmichael closed his eyes and swallowed twice.

"Do you have a preference for media members?" Cinda inquired demurely.

“Not at this time,” Samantha said quietly, while eyeing her through Grey Trade training. “What do you think would make good guidelines for candidates, Miss O*Keefe?”

“May I accompany you to Genni?” she asked with genuine politeness.

“That has yet to be discussed,” Samantha responded, eyes on the Administrator. “And that will determine if I go with or without a date, Master Carmichael.”

His eyes snapped open, glancing briefly at his blond media mistress, her face bright with hope.

“I'd like your decision,” Sam said, ignoring the woman.

The slender, well-dressed administrator ran his left hand across his chin, and then glanced around at his advisors. Both the Orange and the Green hung their heads.

Sam knew she had won.

Three hours later her office computer chimed, and glad for the distraction, Samantha activated its communications program. Nikatta's olive-colored face seemed older than her 33 years and from the stack of dirty dishes and the messy American decor behind her, Sam could assume she commed from a private cubby.

“Mistress,” she said, frowning slightly. “I hope I am not disturbing you.”

“If you were disturbing me, you would be speaking with Patric,” she replied, glad to be away from the paperwork. “Yes, Nikatta?”

“It's worse than he lets on.” Frown lines marred her pretty face as her fingers twitched—but without readable gestures.

“I expected it. What's troubling you?”

“There's talk of independence here,” she said with a shrug. “Any form of rebellion could be...messy.”

“Local problems?”

“Planetside, mostly.” She glanced off-screen momentarily. “His superiors are displeased with this whole experiment and have ordered all of us home. Planetside did not plan for the pioneering spirit to evolve.”

“A serious miscalculation,” Sam muttered, letting a frown show as she quickly thought of many possible ramifications. “How messy?”

“Already a few malcontents have disappeared—banished planetside, I hope.” Nikatta nodded slightly, tossing back her thick, black hair. “The planetside Committee seems fiercely possessive of what they think is theirs. Some remember that our ancestors were a warrior race.”

“Do those planetside warriors have any weapons?” She had to ask.

“Siege tactics, political trade blockades,” she said with a slight shiver. “Suffocation and starvation.”

Samantha studied the pretty woman's subtle, subconscious actions of clandestine cautiousness, and wondered how close to the truth these concerns were.

“Conventional warfare is, unfortunately, not that long dead,” she muttered, estimating what needed to be done. “Someone somewhere can always find weapons—if they want them bad enough. I'll need an estimated timeline of events when I arrive on Friday. Or sooner?”

She nodded, and then Sam heard the sound of a door swishing open on her side of the connection. Nikatta's face danced with indecision.

“Be very careful, Nikatta,” she warned, knowing their conversation would end here. “Call me if you need me.”

“I'll try not to, AshenGrey. Thank you—” The woman glanced over her shoulder.

The comm faded with the image of her tense face, and she tapped the in-house comm button on her computer.

“Patric?”

“Yes, Mistress?” her assistant responded, sounding very thoughtful, and she wondered if he had been eavesdropping again.

“Would you say that Nikatta exaggerates?”

“She is not known to,” Patric replied through the audio only. “In fact, I’ve heard that she’s more the opposite.”

“Thanks. Have you heard from Taylor Roberts yet?”

“Not yet.”

She chuckled to herself over the position that man was placing himself in. Roberts had some personal status impediments and could be relied on to follow his personal motivations with almost complete predictability.

The psychology text she studied seemed boring and dry. According to this author, The American Revolution, like every other political revolution followed a predictable course. First came discontentment with the “old guard,” then insurrection and upheaval. The new regime moved in while heroically calming the masses, reorganizing and dictating the new law. Ironically, within one lifetime, they would become the “old guard.” The time varied, but the cycle was nonetheless a clear one. Sam frowned as she logged off the library app and returned to the business at hand, sorting out the chaos of her neglected office.

The lemon twist tasted exceptional, and she complimented apprentice steward Damian on his mixology. The blond sixteen-year-old proved an extraordinary boon to her and Patric. In the two months since Damian Reynolds had come to work for her, she had done less of the annoying little tasks an administrator must deal with. And she had acquired a

devious set of ears tuned specifically to the interior of her clinic. The young man smiled slightly at the compliment while gazing around the beige conference room. A few icers had sought her out to talk weeks ago, and it seemed that they'd brought all their friends this time.

In the background, Patric lounged, dressed in casual clothes and ready to call it a day. Most of these men wore oil-stained overalls, but all came close to being clean. The room smelled of oil and ozone, common to their Trade. Turning from the teenage apprentice, she stepped through the crowd to the one overstuffed synthetic leather chair in the room. Evicting its inhabitant with a mild gesture, Sam felt pleased to see that each of the men held something to drink. Wanting them comfortable and at ease, she had even changed from her official grey-colored tunic into something casual in a green floral design.

“We're all residents of Haywood Dorms,” began the Trade Red she had met with originally—Master Miner Gerry Fitzhugh. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Where would you like to begin?” she asked as she flopped down into her chair.

Five or six men spoke up together, then stopped. Three began a second time, then stopped. Someone chuckled briefly, and then an uneasy hush swept the room.

“Master Fitzhugh,” she singled out the Trade Red mechanical engineer who lounged casually near her. “Talk to me.”

The redheaded man developed a flush behind his generous sprinkle of freckles, and he drew a deep breath.

“Well, you know a bit of it,” he stated uneasily. “The ice mines always need strong men and, on a temporary basis, it wouldn't be so bad. We've got plenty of space in the dorms.”

“How bad is not so bad?” she asked, seeing the frowns of his co-workers.

“It's risky work if you don't know what you're doing,” one big JourneyRed put in.

“Long hours!” an Indigo journeyman called from the back.

“Could pay more,” Samantha heard a Blue apprentice mutter.

“Not enough air.”

“Yeah—Somebody's stealing it,” another man said.

“Probably selling it to the Japs,” was said with hostility.

“What?” Sam cried, eyeing Master Fitzhugh. “How long has this been going on?”

They seemed to all shout at once, but she could glean a period of 2 to 4 months from the melee. Patric caught her eye, gesturing if she wanted this investigated, and she lowered her eyelids in affirmation. Sipping the juice, she waited as the men settled down.

“Like Josh says,” Fitzhugh continued earnestly. “We think someone's tapping off air and selling it somehow.”

“What's your Security say?” she asked quietly, knowing what terror suffocation was to these men.

“Dr. Alexander, they may be the ones doing it.” The Mine Master sighed, and she felt a slight shiver, her subconscious' way of nudging her about details she may not consciously acknowledge. “We're not sure because anyone who asks too many questions—”

“—Becomes a statistic.” Patric finished what had been left that hanging in the air. “Media seems to downplay this. But if you look, it's there.”

“And you've been looking, mister?” Fitzhugh challenged, turning to Samantha's still anonymous assistant while others rose from their chairs. “Who the hell are you to talk?”

“My man Patric,” she said, staring heavily at these men. “All of you. Sit down.”

“All I know,” Patric quipped with an exaggerated shrug of his massive shoulders, “is what I read in the media.”

A number of men frowned at this but resettled themselves in the chairs, backs to Patric. Their quick dismissal of him made Sam smile inside. They'd seen enough of him to leave him to his work when down in the mines.

“Why do you think the Media would downplay this?” she asked.

“Prejudice, if you ask me,” one hefty journeyman said quickly. “They don't know what goes on down there. And neither do you.”

She gazed evenly at his pointing finger and took a slow deep breath. Should she tell them about the months she had spent apprenticed in those mines, she wondered. Fitzhugh avoided her eyes, studying the ceiling, not willing to divulge that she had been an apprentice.

“I've worked the mines,” she said quietly. “And that's not for public knowledge. Ask Master Engineer Horawitz.”

“Horawitz was killed ten days ago,” Fitzhugh said with great sadness in his voice. “While you and the Founder were lost in space.”

“Was someone trying to kill him?” she asked coldly, feeling grief for the loss of the friend and business contact. “How'd it happen?”

“Media called it an accident,” the hefty journeyman informed her sarcastically. “We're not so certain.”

“He was tracing air lines,” Fitzhugh said with an edge of pain in his tone. “Seems he ran out of air. Let's just leave it at that.”

Master Engineers do not run out of air, she knew, realizing that Fitzhugh was attempting to spare her what he thought to be details too ugly to discuss. She had other ways of getting the information she wanted.

“I'll have my people digging deeply into this,” she promised through gritted teeth.

Several men began to talk between themselves, so she leaned back into the soft chair and took a deep breath to collect herself. Sipping her drink, she decided who would investigate. Patric caught her eye, eyebrows dancing. She lowered her eyelids in reply.

“AshenGrey, the corporation's becoming a zoo,” Putney, an acquaintance of hers, said from the back of the group. “Will the Founder's democracy be any better?”

“We shall see. Have you ever heard of the old United States democratic system being described as a three-ring circus?” she asked, watching a room full of faces react in thoughtful humor. “They had a three branch system made up of one Executive, a sluggish at best judicial system, and an ineffectual double legislative body made up of a congress and a senate. That meant that laws and their functions had to be screened twice before reaching the executive's desk. History is somewhat factual, I'm told, but it does occur to me that system could be made more effective.”

“So, we swap a zoo for a three-ring circus?” Fitzhugh laughed, and then swigged his beer.

“It requires time to evolve, and there's a lot to consider,” she said, then drew deep on the lemonade. “I'd love to see Doug Hershaw or that satirist, James Ronson, get into the middle of this. Wouldn't you?”

“Mannie Oliver's talents would be good, too,” someone offered from off to her left.

“Who's Mannie Oliver?” she asked, not placing the name.

“Runs a watering hole in Tranquility,” Josh drawled in a quiet tone as the other individual took a cuff on the shoulder from the man next to him.

“Right.” Samantha laughed, thinking Mannie might be worthwhile, and then turned the subject. “What about your mines, jacks?”

“Less work and more air, AshenGrey,” Fitzhugh said solemnly, and his associates muttered their agreement. “That would cover it.”

“The living conditions are adequate?” she asked, glancing at the chrono, to discover that she was out of time.

“Barely.”

“Just.”

“Almost.”

“Sometimes.”

The comm at her right beeped twice then once—her code—and she raised an eyebrow at the men. They quieted at once, and she reached for the comm toggle.

“Dr. Dreagan for you, Mistress?” came Damian's voice, and she wondered why the young steward was answering comms.

Patric's eyes waited for instructions.

“I'll take it in my office. Thank you,” she whispered into the micro-mic, and then flicked it off. “Gentlemen, my assistant, Patric, will take over from here. Please, consider him your contact for now. Excuse me.”

With a quick farewell to the miners, she rushed out and through the halls of the clinic, which were now empty. As she approached her office, she found an exception to the deserted corridors—one man and one woman. Cinda O*Keefe waited with a body-cam tech, a tall, strawberry blond whose slightly pockmarked face broke into a pleasant smile as Samantha passed them where they sat, just outside her office door.

“Personal comm,” she told them as she hurried to her door. “I’ll be right with you.”

The files in Samantha’s computer showed most of what she needed to know about the two media people who waited outside her door. Patric, in his usual fashion, had seen to that. After a brief scan of their profiles, she called the door open, and O*Keefe charged into the room, followed discreetly by the slender camera technician, whose photographic equipment quickly scanned the room. The blond woman marched up to Sam’s desk with an air of authority that instantly set off alarms in the psychologist.

“You’re not an easy woman to see. I’ve been trying to get an interview with you since you and the Founder came back from space.” O*Keefe frowned as Samantha gestured her to one of the two dark grey seats across the desk from her. “Your people were rude to me, and I got the feeling you don’t grant personal interviews—”

“I don’t,” Sam interjected, indicating to the tech to take the seat beside O*Keefe as she continued ranting.

“...so I had decided to sneak in here some night—”

“You’d be Earthside in a nanosecond,” the camera tech muttered, approaching Samantha with his hand out-stretched.

“—Or become enough of a problem client that I’d become your personal case—”

Sam considered how much of a problem O*Keefe would be as the cam-tech swung his lightweight, silver recording equipment to the chair in one fluid motion, then took her hand.

"Media Journey Silver Jones, Dr. Alexander," he said amiably and met her gaze with steady hazel eyes. "Cinda says she knows you."

"—But I decided not to. Just in case."

"I've met her. Once," she muttered quietly then raised her voice.

"Media Master O*Keefe, please sit down. Since you attended my meeting with Master Carmichael, you must know my feelings about how the people of your Trade tend to overachieve for any story."

Sam held the blond woman's eyes steadily, willing her into the gray chair. Once O*Keefe sat, Samantha looked briefly at Jones to find an amused smirk playing around his mouth. She drew a mental sigh.

"Do you both understand the consequences of any infringement of the rights of private citizens, as spelled out in the new contract?"

Blond heads nodded, but Sam wasn't sure if either one of them really did understand.

"I'd wager that within the next few days, some media people will push me to see if I'm serious," she said, folding her hands on the desktop.

"And they will find themselves banished from this rock. As the situation occurs I will expect you both to stand loyal to me. Understood?"

"Sucker's bet." Jones grinned, stretching his legs out and making himself more comfortable. "I will, AshenGrey."

"I don't see why I should betray my Trade," Cinda pouted, shifting in her chair when Sam glared at her. "I mean, that's what it sounds like to me."

"Quiet, Mistress," Jones whispered gravely. "Or don't you really want exclusive rights to Psyche for a month?"

"He's got a point there," Samantha said, stifling a chuckle. "Should I call your supervisor now, and request a different commentator?"

"I'd rather you didn't." O*Keefe sat straight up in the chair, eyeing her coolly as she realized that the little-girl game she automatically played in this male-dominated society wouldn't work with the AshenGrey woman.

"All right. Now, you both must realize that you can't have total access to me 100 percent of the time?"

"When don't we?" O*Keefe interrupted.

"Some Grey business, by just the nature of my Trade, must be kept confidential. I'll try to be clear about such situations," she continued evenly. "Also I expect to enjoy a private life without the two of you underfoot. Jones, I understand that this assignment will probably get you your Masters?"

"That seems to be the case," he said with pride.

"And, O*Keefe," Samantha sighed, steepling her fingers. "You're just chasing the hottest scoop on the moon."

"Well, most women viewers want to know what the real Jon Dreagan is like," she said with a slight shrug. "From a woman's perspective."

"Yours or mine?"

"Mine. I have heard that you and the Founder had many difficult moments both before and during the Triad," Cinda O*Keefe began in her commentator's voice. "But I was hoping for your input as well."

"That implies that I'm simply a means for you to get to Dreagan." Sam smiled, studying her.

"Dr. Alexander, that's not it at all," she insisted, lapsing into another long monologue, and Sam found herself thinking of the Shakespearean

quotes “the lady doth protest too much.” Mentally she promised herself to comm Cinda’s master and clarify the arrangements in the morning.

The spacious Genni garden had relatively few tables, and Samantha thought of how many Lunans would be uncomfortable in the spacious surroundings. The owner had managed to ship some lovely, oriental antiques up from planetside, and she marveled at the massive holotank that served as the back wall. The garden holograph, complete with floral smells, and a two-meter waterfall made the restaurant feel even more open, yet intimate screens and shrubbery barriers provided privacy for each dinner table. The meal, dehydrated stir-fry vegetables, crab in lobster sauce, fresh fried rice, real egg drop soup and green tea, had been excellent.

Her dinner guest had been very quiet, often eyeing Miss O*Keefe, who sat ten meters away with Holotech Jones. From the rude way Dreagan had spoken to Cinda during the flight over to the Japanese colony, Samantha realized he had dealt with her before—and to a bad end. She felt certain that he wouldn’t be chasing that skirt.

Waiting now for a refill, Dreagan toyed with his empty sake glass.

“I get the feeling you brought a chaperon,” he whispered, not happy.

“Two.” Samantha grinned, setting down her cup of green tea. “Guess we’ll soon be a gossip item for the romantics and adventurers.”

“And the Trades and politicians, keeping in twos.”

“And the historians and genetic techs...” she grumbled, her mood clouding briefly. “More twos.”

“Why the frown?” The dark-haired man asked in a gentle tone. “Trouble?”

“I may be a product of that science, I’m discovering.” She sighed, averting his eyes. “And I’m not at all comfortable with that thought.”

“This has something to do with your father's illness, doesn't it?”

She regarded him and found compassion, then glanced over Dreagan's shoulder to Jones and O*Keefe. They seemed content with their meals. The tech's equipment lay dormant on the chair next to him. She looked back at the man across from her.

“Perceptive of you,” she whispered, pushing her finished meal aside. “I've been conducting some double-blind research on my own background. Wanted to be sure Mom will inherit the ranch, you know...” She stopped to push premature grief from her emotions, and Dreagan touched her hand.

“How can I help?” he asked sincerely.

She looked down at his hand, then up at the man. Feeling that wave of anger wash over her, she threw the mental walls up almost automatically. Samantha pulled her hand back with a slight frown.

“Samantha, I can help, if you'll let me.” His eyes lit with affection. “I have some very influential connections.”

“Maybe if I get too many doors slammed in my face. But not at the moment.”

“As you wish. May I change the subject?”

“Please.” Sam sighed, leaning back and stretching her feet under the wooden table.

“How are you at Biophysics?” Dreagan asked with a glance at the holotank.

“Depends. What's on your mind?”

“You.”

“Any basic biological function in particular?” she chuckled nervously.

“At the moment, no. Later is another story.” He smiled warmly, and she found herself relieved of some pressures she had been putting on herself during the trip. “Star has some sort of nose notion.”

“Excuse me?” She laughed at the phrasing.

“Seems my onboard computer is experiencing a sense of smell—that I have not constructed,” he explained with a serious look on his face that kept her from laughing. “Did you program it?”

“You know I couldn't do anything like that without the accompanying hardware.” She frowned, glancing at the red linen napkin that lay on her grey formal outfit. “How can something like that occur in her without your knowledge? Dan'l? Cal before he fell? By the way, how's he doing?”

“We've discovered a few surprises, Ronnie and I,” the Founder told her, pushing his black hair back out of his eyes. “Seems Cal's the one who torched your cubby.”

Sam choked on her tea. She set the cup down roughly and gave him her full attention, ignoring emotions that welled briefly in her eyes and closed her throat.

“You'd be surprised just how much was involved in Abernathy's little plots.” He frowned, and she glanced again at the media people. “Are they still behaving?”

“Yup. Told you they would.”

“About this nose notion,” he continued in the restaurant's dim light. “Star says she can smell my coffee brewing, the ozone from the soldering or laser pencil—and me, after a long day.”

“That last isn't too difficult.”

“If you're equipped with a sense of smell, sure,” Dreagan said, as the server quietly set a small plate containing the check and two crescent-shaped cookies near his elbow. “That's quaint.”

“Life's a bit different here in Genni, from what I've read.” She smiled, watching the reaction on Tech Jones as his bill was also hand-delivered. “Fortune cookie?”

At the Genni golf links, the Founder, in his white p-suit, tried his skill on the driving range while Jones shot video. The two women were left to wander about the rocky, gray-green terrain. From Cinda's repetitive glances back to the airlock, the AshenGrey could tell the media woman longed to be safely underground and free of her space suit. On the other hand, Sam enjoyed herself, roaming within the limits regulated by the management, twice getting in the way of the two serious golfers.

“You seem uncomfortable up here, Miss O*Keefe,” Samantha commented, returning to where Cinda sat, bored with watching the men experiment at the tee.

Dreagan glanced back over his shoulder and gestured to Samantha that he'd noticed that too. Near him, Jones took a full swing at the glowing yellow ball and sent it sailing over a distant gray ridge. Sam could see the pleased look on his face through his bubblehead and smiled.

“You're enjoying this?” the media woman asked, from where she huddled under the protection of the entranceway.

“I grew up in the hills of Montana,” she reminded her, bouncing toward Dreagan and Jones, intent on trying the sport. “I'm enjoying all of Genni's spacious freedom.”

“I wish they'd quit clowning around so we could go back in.” Her voice over the comm filled with pouting, and Sam wondered how long O*Keefe would survive at her side.

“Dreagan?” Samantha called, as she skipped in the fine dust. “Can I try a couple?”

“O*Keefe, we'll meet you in the lounge,” she heard the Founder order in controlled anger. “Psyche, come see what you can do.”

“Will you all pipe down?” Jones laughed, readying himself at the tee. “I can't concentrate.”

Because Jon Dreagan bounded confidently, straight for the Genni Customs, Samantha decided he had been there before. He led her through the almost deserted labyrinth of Genni's small spaceport with such a casual air, that she thought he'd probably call the customs officials by their first names. Jones and O*Keefe, trailing behind Patric and Nikatta, kept lagging back for every photo opportunity. Cinda had finally stopped insisting that the Founder or Sam be part of every shot.

Suddenly, from off to the right, someone yelled loudly, “Here they come!” as they turned a corner.

“Dreagan, let me deal with this, please?” Samantha said while a group of camera-wielding people moved in. “Media at zero-three-zero. Jones! Time to get back to work. Remember, Cinda, you're on my side.”

Dreagan increased his pace, pulling Sam close to his side as media men approached from several different angles. She counted nine, much less than the usual mob, and heard footsteps from behind. Jones came from the rear, tossing his equipment onto his shoulder while O*Keefe moved up close on his right. Dreagan had tensed, ready for a fight, and tried to push Samantha behind him.

“Let me handle this,” she pleaded, her hand on his arm, pulling herself forward.

Discreetly whispering to her JourneyGrey who had moved protectively to her elbow, she gave quick instructions. Hensen dropped behind, and Nikatta's lovely face appeared. Eye contact was enough to tell her

support, and then she also dropped back. Before them, the nine spread out between the Customs' declaration tables and the Dreagan group, blocking their path. Dreagan altered direction, and the group shifted. He hesitated, but continued his approach when Sam nudged him forward. She had expected and wanted this. She had a point that needed making.

One large man of decidedly non-Japanese ancestry—a media master by the silver insignia on his left sleeve—separated himself from the gang and came forward with the rest of them at his heels. Dreagan slowed, while his body stiffened, and Samantha pulled on his hand. As Jones panned out to the Founder's left, she stepped in front of Dreagan, and the large man moved in.

“Good evening, AshenGrey,” the big man said in an overly polite tone, then asked how she was enjoying her visit to the colony.

“Excuse me, please,” she responded with a similar politeness. “We'd like to pass.”

She maintained her speed and direction, the others in her party following closely, but the media men stood their ground. Sam had expected as much and finally planted her heels, stopping herself just centimeters from the man's microphone. Dreagan's momentum caused him to jolt her shoulder, and she let herself be pushed, falling, and catching the media master's microphone arm for balance.

“You are in my way, journeyman,” she told the man, righting herself. “Please, move.”

“I'm a Master,” he replied proudly and switched to his commentator voice. “Would you tell our viewer how you are enjoying your visit to Genni Colony? What brings you and the Founder here?”

“Excuse me, please,” she repeated, spying Patric, who had brought a black clad security guard to the rim of this gathering. “We'd like to get through. Please get out of our way.”

The gang did not move, holding their cameras and microphones up and into her face, and Jon Dreagan's as well. Annoyed, Sam counted ten heartbeats to give the media people more than ample time to comply with her request.

“Are you aware of the understanding I have with your Trade, journeyman?” she asked the man who towered near and above her. “And are you sure you want to block my way?”

“Media Master Dadge Worthington, ma'am,” was his confident response, as she allowed her anger to show. “Won't you please tell us about your trip? Our viewers want to know why you and the Founder are in Genni Colony.”

“So, you're a Master? How unfortunate...” Without remorse, she waved Patric and the guard closer. “Are you aware you're risking prosecution, Media Master?”

“I heard about Carmichael's decree,” he admitted, but his laughter told her of his disbelief.

“Prosecution, Psyche?” Dreagan chuckled behind her, his hand gently resting at the back of her neck. “There's no law prohibiting him. Not a bad idea, though.”

“My Trade and his have a new understanding. Don't we?” She smiled sweetly at Worthington, tapping his chest with a painted fingernail for emphasis. “Don't we!”

“Yeah, but it'll never hold up in a fuck'n court of law,” Dadge said boldly, and by then he must have seen the black Security uniform. “Why the hell should it change anything?”

“I did make laws against that sort of language being used around women and children,” Dreagan grumbled angrily. “I think you'd better apologize.”

Worthington bristled at the Founder's order, and then looked over his shoulder. The rest of media gang had stepped back almost a meter and acted less aggressively, some staring at the green tiled floor. Sam liked that. Worthington said nothing, standing like a stubborn child reprimanded by a stern parent. Then, he smiled again.

“Just why are you in Genni, AshenGrey Alexander?” he asked politely again, shoving his mic into her face.

She glared in silence, intentionally waiting for some big, strong male to come to her rescue, while studying the buttons on the big man's shirt.

“Dadge, you're giving us all a bad reputation,” Cinda O*Keefe shouted and stepped in, grabbing the big man by his shoulder and pulling him around. “Forget the interview.”

“The hell I will!” he growled, shaking her hand away.

His watery blue eyes flashed, and Samantha could see the stubborn set of his round jaw. Worthington pushed Cinda O*Keefe back, hands at her shoulders and she staggered to the green floor.

Ignoring the gasps that came from behind him, Dadge stepped closer to Sam, towering above her tiny frame. Inside, she was enjoying the drama that would be the man's undoing, as she jumped backward into Dreagan, pretending to be startled and intimidated. She could feel and hear the Founder's rapid breath behind her, which triggered an unwanted memory. She slammed a mental clamp on that.

“Media Master Worthington,” she yelled, channeling that other anger. “Get out of my way!”

“Dr. Dreagan,” the large man began amiably. “Would you care to share your impressions of Genni with our viewers?”

Dreagan bellowed too near Samantha's ear, “Get out of our way!”

Her ears rang as she saw the black Security sleeve pass between her and the media master, pushing him away from her. Pleasant, brown Asian eyes met hers briefly, with a smile and slight wink. Again, as with many other times in recent years, she felt glad that Patric held a Master's ranking in the Security Trade and knew when to commandeer help.

"I want this man held on charges of obstruction of movement and harassment," she said, feeling Dreagan's hand rest lightly on her right shoulder. "Can you do that for me?"

"Instructions and guidelines were issued this afternoon, AshenGrey," the Japanese JourneyBlack replied. "An excellent injunction and one that will make my job very much easier."

"It's about time someone put a halt to these media gangs," Nikatta said, and Sam heard Patric's familiar laughter.

Dreagan chuckled as well, and she felt good about the incident and all it represented. Media Master Dadge Worthington stood silently, shoulders slumped, next to a second Blackjack while Jones and a few others shot video of his remorseful pose. The first guard returned to where Dreagan and Samantha stood in silence, and she noticed that the rest of the media were quickly dispersing.

"Anything else I can do?" the Security jack asked.

"Ship him back to Proteus," she said, inserting a tone of authority. "He'll be sent planetside soon."

"Now, wait one fuck'n' minute, woman," Dadge began, taking a step back in her direction.

The second Security guard grabbed him by the shoulder and shook the media master roughly. Patric quickly positioned himself between Worthington and Samantha, but soon relaxed and took a half step to the right—out of her line of sight. Dadge had subsided once again, a

polysteel nightstick poking into his ribs, and the two guards prepared to escort him away.

“Just a minute,” Dreagan demanded, nudging her shoulder. “What's this about a Trade agreement?”

“Celebrities get one media person assigned to them, and the rest of us have to go about our own business,” O*Keefe explained, scowling in her direction. “Those who don't, face legal actions.”

“I specified Earthside banishment to all offenders in the written agreement,” Samantha said, looking over her shoulder at Dreagan, then angrily added, “and believe me, I mean it.”

Dreagan caught the security men's attention and called out Domo arigato as Sam drew a contented sigh. Grabbing her hand, he began pulling her toward the Customs clerk as the others began falling in line behind.

“Interesting,” he muttered as his eyes burned down at her. “Dux femina facti.”

Dreagan had insisted on piloting the big lunar limousine himself during the trip to Genni Colony, leaving Carlos at home. Sam found it interesting that he granted Patric Hensen a try at driving the catapult-capable shuttle around to the docking airlock. Then, he persuaded the two media people to go along with Sam's JourneyGrey. The VIP room near the dock had a similar feel of the appealing oriental quality that Sam had found in every place they had visited that evening. The ornate red and gold-carpeted chamber was deserted when Dreagan and she stepped into it. On the far wall, a floor to ceiling blast-resistant window overlooked the hangar bay, displaying gigantic polysteel doors that leisurely yawned open. Although the bay, with its adjoining electromagnetic Cat and Catcher, had been designed for heavy traffic, only four freighters rested in its enclosure.

Nikatta's farewell, her subtle forlorn expression, drifted across Samantha's worried mind. Dreagan strode directly to that scenic window. She slowed, calming herself against the coming "cat-shot"—the standard mode of travel between the colonies. She preferred other methods of transportation. All those anxieties she'd been feeling toward him began to surface in the quiet stillness that surrounded them, and she decided to take a little peek into that emotional caldron.

"Quite a bargain you struck," she heard Dreagan say. She pulled her attention back to these surroundings. "Did you have to push an incident so soon?"

"I regret a master will set the example." She sighed, easing into a richly cushioned red chair facing the bay.

"Probably better to have a strong example," he resolved, gazing down into the hangar. "They'll know you mean what you say."

"Wonder who'll hear the case," she said absently, considering if maybe she had been overreacting.

"You know; it was strange to move about so freely." He chuckled, shooting a grin in her direction. "Not many people really bothered us. Of course, that media bulletin instructing the residents to respect my privacy might have had something to do with it. Your doing, no doubt."

"No one discussed that with me," she said truthfully, wondering how truthful she had been with herself recently.

"I don't like your chaperons," he said with a playful and very obvious pout.

"Mine? Only one is mine," she replied, and then laughed at the animated change to his handsome face. "You'll have Cinda for your very own—soon."

"Damn, woman!" Dreagan sputtered. "What are you trying to do to me?"

“She'll only be underfoot for a short while; then you'll get a new one next month.” She grinned, watching him screw his face into something long-suffering. “You'll get used to the media and get to know them.”

“And they, us,” he muttered sourly.

“True, but no more media mobs,” she said, watching the bay below. “And within four months the public's fascination with you will have ebbed.”

Outside, she noted the Founder's white lunar limo being rolled into the passenger bay by two small yellow tows, guided by eight p-suited dockworkers—far more than needed. Samantha guessed that it was Dreagan's vehicle that had brought out the extra people. Several Port Security personnel milled around the area, reminding her of the three who waited for her and the Founder in the passageway. Dreagan turned to watch these activities. She joined him at the window.

“Do people make you uncomfortable, Dreagan?” she whispered, and from the discomfort he briefly displayed she knew she had touched a nerve.

“Can I think about that before I answer?”

Running his hand gently down her left arm, he took her hand, studying her reaction. She tensed, looking down into the bay, and then told herself she was being foolish. Willing herself to relax, she raised her head and met his gaze. Jon Dreagan raised her hand to his lips, a soft smile playing there. His kiss lingered yet felt chaste.

She decided that Jon Dreagan had great potential as a serious knuckle-nibbler. She sighed, touched by his gesture as he straightened, grinning. She smiled.

“No. I'm not afraid of people,” he announced, keeping her left hand in his right. “I just don't like large doses of them for long periods of time.”

“Neither do I, my friend,” she sighed, becoming more relaxed in his presence.

“Well, at least we're back to being friends.” He touched her chin, raising it so their eyes would meet. “I was hoping for a second chance.”

“Is something stopping you?” she asked, not adding nothing had before.

“First, your chaperons might be back up here any moment,” he admitted, glancing behind her at the open door.

“Is that all?”

“Well...My previous attempt at...er, at romance...” Dreagan began, but fell silent, looking away from her, embarrassed. “I got the distinct impression that you were a bit... annoyed?”

“There are several ways to get beyond that.” She sighed at the unpleasant memory, and then slid her hands up and around his neck, startling him briefly.

Dreagan tightened the embrace, and brown eyes smiled down at her. He held her close—as close as two people in p-suits can—and she heard and felt his deep sigh. With one hand, he cupped the side of her head, and gently eased it to his chest. Sam felt his lips tenderly kiss her hair as he adapted his embrace to fit her.

“Samantha,” Jon Dreagan whispered. “Do you know how much I—”

“Excuse me, Founder,” a heavily accented male voice said. “Your limo is ready.”

CHAPTER 2—GAINLOSS

Patric with Samantha's staff converted a two-room office suite at the psy-clinic into a temporary apartment for her use until her name bubbled to the top of some bureaucratic list, at which time she would be awarded housing. She felt no urge to quicken the process. This apartment held a bed, a large, but cheaply made wardrobe for her meager collection of clothes, and a 'fresher in the next room. The other room functioned as a sitting room, attached to her clinic office by a brand new door. The furnishings were used, but clean and comfortable. Since the clinic never kept patients overnight, Sam felt secure here. Her staff rotated through an all-night duty roster, so there was always at least one person besides herself in the building. Whoever "had the duty" occupied a comm room in the opposite corner of the building, on the lower level. She would have her privacy, or so they promised at the staff meeting the first afternoon after Samantha's return from her parent's Earthside ranch.

Two days after her dinner date in Genni, as Samantha nibbled on a breakfast roll and scanned the morning media reports from Earthside, her comm chimed. She half expected the return of Apprentice Damian with some fresh melon he said he might be able to acquire, but she did not expect any comms before office hours. She had already dressed for the day, so she switched the computer from media scan into comm mode.

This comm had no visual, which was unusual for this sky-hi-tech world. Feeling slightly suspicious, she said hello with caution.

"Good morning," said a familiar female voice. "Hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Hello, Star!" Sam laughed, pleased to hear from the DreaganStar Project's navigation computer that she'd upgraded recently. "I was thinking about you just last night. Is everything all right, Bright Girl?"

"Yes, the Project's fine, but I am experiencing a decision error." Star made a sound that reminded Sam of a hiccup. "Oh, excuse me," the machine said politely. "I have a problem."

"What's the matter, Star?" she asked, trying not to chuckle as she set down her teacup.

"I need input for a decision. Error," the computer said with another of those hiccup sounds. "A decision error. Can you help me?"

"I will." She cleared her mind of what she'd been reading. "Tell me what you're working on."

"I have two situations," Star said as Sam moved to a green stuffed recliner that dominated one corner of the room.

"The bigger one first, please," she told the computer.

"Doctor D has not been here in three days," the computer began, "but I have been able to trace him through media reports. Can I experience anxiety or impatience?"

"Tell me more about what's been going on," she said, wondering how an artificial intelligence could be drawing such conclusions.

"I've reviewed all my personality programming, as well as the library psychology books." Star hesitated before continuing. "And I reviewed the Grey Theory of Human Behavior along with all we've discussed, but I just don't understand."

"Understand what, Star?" Samantha inquired, intending to treat Dreagan's machine as she would any client.

"Why Jon has been lying to me."

"What makes you think that?" Will I ever finish this program, she thought, or become a machine's psychologist?

"There's the decision error. Something seems wrong, but maybe it's not important."

"Analyzing human behavior is often difficult. Tell me more," Sam coaxed.

"Maybe Jonnie ordered these new peripherals and shut me down to make the necessary adjustments." Star paused. "He says he didn't install anything, but there's this odd gap in time."

"How long?" she asked, wondering if someone other than Dreagan could have installed peripheral sensors which would explain, what had he called it? Star's nose notion.

"Six minutes, 52 seconds," she replied.

"Not much time for a ship-wide installation. When did this happen?"

"Roughly one hundred and thirteen hours ago," Star said more evenly. "You were Earthside at the time."

"And Dreagan says he didn't do anything?"

"He was not on the Project sight during the whole time."

“What decisions are you trying to reach?” Samantha asked, matching this with what Dreagan had told her over dinner in Genni.

“Primarily: is he lying to me?”

Samantha thought a moment, then said, “I don't think so, Star. Are these new peripherals simulating a sense of smell?”

“That's right,” she said a note of hope in her voice. “But I can't identify where the sensors were placed. And Jon says he didn't install anything that would work that way. You didn't program it, did you?”

“No, I couldn't without the accompanying hardware.” She took a deep breath. “Do you think this time gap and the sense of smell are related?”

“Highly probable. Jon thinks they are,” Star replied, and then added, “Do you know anything about it, Sam?”

“Dreagan did talk with me about it the other night,” she told her. “And he seemed as baffled by it as you are.”

“Decision error nullified,” the computer announced.

“Good. What has Dreagan been doing that has caused him to neglect you?” she asked, trying to tap information from this excellent source,

“He's mostly been working with Lindsey at the corporate office. Lots of planetside communications. I shouldn't tell you more, should I?”

“No,” Sam said, staying with her initial decision to make this computer program highly moral and human at the same time.

“Sammie, I always monitor the news and entertainment videos just like you told me, and that helps me understand him,” she continued with a fretting tone. “But that doesn't help this impatient and anxious feeling, if I am labeling it correctly. What can I do?”

“Well, you can re-read Louaillier's dissertation on artificial intelligence and then study Gate's books on AI as well,” she began, trying to think quickly with her early morning mind. “You can comm me to talk if Dreagan hasn't got time to hear you out, but understand that sometimes I may have to put you off to deal with more pressing matters.”

“Then, you're not angry that I called?”

“Nope. It's good to hear from you, Bright Girl,” she assured her, noting her chrono. “But for now, I have to go.”

“Time to begin your work at the clinic?”

“You're my Bright Girl.”

The decor of the S.W.U.S. Restaurant resembled the North American Southwest of the late 1800s, a motif Samantha didn't particularly care for, but it had been her luncheon date's insistent choice. She had the feeling he didn't realize that her tastes had altered after so many years.

“Look, Abe,” she countered, pointing at him with her fork. “A lot of things have changed since you and I went to college—”

“Like your desire to spend the rest of your life with me?” He licked barbecue sauce from his thumb.

“I'm only interested in spending my whole life with me.” She laughed, feeling like she was wasting lunar air in this discussion. “Sound selfish?”

“A little,” Pardo said with a grin as she remembered how selfish he had been a week ago on a conference room table.

“But that's all I care to deal with.”

“Why?” he asked in a playful, childish tone.

“Why...” she muttered, poking her knife at the remains of her pork ribs. “The Trade has been making more demands on my time and emotions in the last few years. Ever since I moved into this pile of rock, the Haze has been—”

“I think you're avoiding the issue,” Abe suddenly said.

“If you'd let me finish—” She stopped herself from yelling for the third time. “Did you know that the official male/female ratio on Luna is around 20 to 1. Plus, it's inaccurate for dating purposes, because of all the retired people, mostly women, who move up here and settle in Merriam.”

“You fems out-live us men,” Pardo said with a chuckle.

“True, and in an average week I get five invitations to some meal or social event. I can date a different man almost every night of the week. No thanks.”

“So, what has this got to do with us?” he asked.

“There is no us.” She glanced at his wrist chrono, grateful that she would be back at the clinic soon.

“There's just Sam Alexander and her Greys, trying to keep a mob of overcrowded lunatics mentally balanced.”

“All the more reason you need to get out and socialize,” the Orange Master said forcefully. “Certainly, we can still get together for dinner or something when my Trade's business brings me up here?”

“How often will you be in Proteus?” she asked and held her emotional breath, wondering how bothersome he would be.

“Every few weeks. Other colonies too,” Abe Pardo said, a distant look coming into his green eyes. “I was hoping to vacation with you over in Tranquility Colony.”

“I never promised that,” she reminded him while watching media man Jones, who had finished his meal, pick up his body camera, and swing it easily to his shoulder.

“I can but dream,” Abe was saying.

Dream on, she thought bitterly.

Fourteen young men marched proudly out of the hall wearing their new charcoal Grey Capes of Office—designating them as apprentice Trade Greys. The small audience of relatives and well-wishers followed. This group of new greys would probably become excellent apprentice psychologists, she knew, both from her talks with them as well as the reports she had received from their Masters and JourneyGreys. She felt pleased not only with the selection, but with the much-needed swelling of the lunar ranks. She relaxed briefly in the high-backed chair, which sat like a throne in the center of Montgomery Theater's small stage. Grateful that tradition said the presiding AshenGrey did not join in the receiving line after the induction ceremony, she nodded to the journeyman stagehand waiting in the wings with several apprentices. Immediately, they swarmed onto the raised stage to begin its transformation for the second ceremony of the day.

At the rear of the small theater, several people entered, but seemed to hesitate, not knowing if they should be seated or not. Sam filled her lungs and loudly invited them to come down in front.

Taylor Roberts stepped through the double doors that led out to the lobby. Dressed in his official robes for the next ceremony, he looked like a ghost with his pale skin and gaunt face. Panting as he crossed the small amphitheater, he bounced with agility onto the stage's apron, not bothering with the wing stairs. She chuckled at this boyish behavior, glad that her colleague was in good spirits. Roberts, she knew, could be very moody.

Samantha rose to her feet, stretching, after all but one of the new apprentices had paraded out. Jonathan Dreagan, cloaked in a charcoal grey cape over his business suit stayed seated in the front row. He neither moved nor spoke, as was required of an apprentice in this special situation.

“Good morning, Founder,” Roberts said cheerfully to the silent, motionless figure. “Welcome to the Grey Trade and congratulations on your apprenticeship.”

Taylor Roberts understood that Dreagan was required to wait in silence, but probably greeted the man out of respect just the same. In the wings, both Jones and O*Keefe had set aside their video equipment and relaxed, coffee in hand.

“Good morrow, Mistress.” The skinny AshenGrey grinned as he skidded up to Samantha, avoiding the stage crew. “I’d hoped I would get a chance to speak to you before you leave for Genni.”

“What did you find out?” she whispered, gesturing for the man to lower his voice as they moved together into the wings.

“Not much. Someone in Supply may have been shipping surplus air.” He frowned, his green eyes glancing around secretively. “Unfortunately, my source isn't sure of the O2's origin, let alone who's doing the purchasing. Nevertheless, someone down there has air to spare.”

“Okay. I'd hoped for more, but...” she breathed, biting her lip. “Can you pressure your source?”

“He said he'd try for more details and would let me know, maybe tomorrow,” Taylor replied, then his eyes grew large. “Did you talk to the Haze?”

“All he sent was We shall see.” She smiled at him as a shadow very briefly crossed his pale face. She could hear more people entering the theater. “Relax. I think your chances look good, but the Haze just hasn't given me anything definite yet.”

Touching Taylor Roberts's left arm, she told him that they were still missing the required third Master, whose transit shuttle was late. Then, she poked her head around the curtain. The place was one-third full, and she spied Lindsey sitting with Jessica and Carlos.

“I'll be right back,” Roberts whispered in her ear.

Dreagan made a slight head movement, and Samantha could see him trying to catch her eye. She had hoped his control would have been a bit better. Damian signaled her from backstage, a steaming cup in his hand, and she moved toward the teen.

“Thanks.” She smiled, taking the mug from his hands.

“Patric says that Pardo has verified your court date,” the blond apprentice told her, glancing beyond the curtain into the audience. “Pardo insists that you contact him.”

“Why? I've signed all the paperwork against Cal Washington.”

“He told Hensen that it was personal.” He shrugged as she glanced at media man Jones, video equipment at his feet.

Apprentice Damian Reynolds leaned around Sam, fascinated by something behind her on the stage, and she turned to see what had caught his eye. The stage crew was completing their setup, and now the three brown high-backed chairs rested at center stage on a small dais, which was flanked on each side by three less ornate chairs. The JourneyGreys who had overseen and now sponsored these candidates would occupy these. The teenage steward continued gawking.

“Steward, what are you doing?” she asked, holding laughter out of her tone. “Could dignity be an issue here?”

“Never been this close to the Founder before, Mistress,” was his embarrassed explanation, bringing himself back to a correct posture as his throat and face reddened.

She had to chuckle, reminding herself that the lad was new to her world. His psych-profile had indicated an extreme interest in anyone of authority. He liked power.

“You'll be seeing more of Dreagan,” she said, thinking of the Haze's full message. “Anything else on your mind?”

“Yes, ma'am,” he whispered with contrived humility as she sipped caffeine. “Your shuttle to Genni leaves at 1015 hours tomorrow morning,” he told her, then added, “Anything I can do to prepare for your trip?”

“Please be sure that Jones has reservations and accommodations,” she replied. “And I'd better comm my folks before I go.”

From back stage a door slammed and heavy boot steps could be heard coming toward them. Samantha recognized the pattern.

“There's an Earther.” Damian's laughter oscillated due to his age. “No Lunan would ever stomp like that.”

Two sets of footfalls approached from behind Sam and she turned around and into Dan'l Girdner's enthusiastic hug. Damian saved her tumbling mug of coffee. She was glad she was offstage as her “uncle” swung her round in his customary greeting, and she hugged him back, thinking that his apprentice grey cape seemed too small for his massive frame again. As Dan'l quietly set her back on the floor, Ron Nichols stepped up behind him, dressed in formal JourneyGrey clothes, and gestured that all was ready. AshenGrey Roberts moved into position near the wing curtains across the stage, staying out of sight of the growing audience.

“Apprentice Girdner, get your carcass out with the others,” she ordered quietly, and he disappeared around a curtain before she could say congratulations.

Sam gestured for her mug, and then swallowed most of the chocolate-flavored stuff. Ron grinned, then moved away as she told the steward to be sure to see about Jones. Turning, she caught the video-journalist's eye and signaled him to standby. Beside him O*Keefe, who had been reassigned as Dreagan's media tagalong, began maneuvering into the position she chose to work from.

The back door closed again, but quietly, and Sam peeked around the back curtain to see a small, dark-haired AshenGrey hurrying toward her. Rudy Rodriguez gestured that he was ready to begin, so she cued Ron Nichols. Jonathan Dreagan's longtime friend and physician stepped quietly onto the stage, taking up his position at the polysteel podium that stood behind the platform. Dreagan, she observed, stayed immobile despite the surprising presence of his good friend. On this cue, five other JourneyGreys separated themselves from the audience, ascended the stage, and ceremoniously took their places in the chairs provided for them.

“Does Jon suspect?” Rudy whispered, after a quick, gentle hug of greeting to Samantha.

“Probably,” she laughed, looking him over. “New tailor?”

“My design.” He seemed happy that she noticed. “Shall I just stroll over there and say hello to Taylor? Is he mad about losing the Triad to you?”

“Doesn't give any indications,” she whispered, cueing Grey Roberts, who waited in the wings. “Shall we begin?”

“As you wish, 'Mantha, my dear.” He grinned.

Setting aside the coffee mug, she drew a deep breath. In synchronization with AshenGrey Roberts, she stepped back onto the small stage with all the dignity her rank demanded. Dr. Nichols called all present to rise. She could hear Rodriguez following at a respectful distance, while from the corner of her eye, she watched Jonathan Dreagan. The fifteen-minute-old apprentice's face glowed as he realized that he was about to be raised to the level of JourneyGrey. Treading softly on the boards, she smiled to herself without looking at any of the other candidates who now began processing in from the back of the theater. She and Rudy met Taylor at center stage, and they quietly greeted each other as she eased gracefully into the most ornate of the three seats.

The face of the grisly old man on the comm screen looked years older than the last time Samantha had spoken to him, and she wondered if being HazeGrey aged him quicker than his rumored illness. Thomas Penock attempted a smile, but his white beard hid most of it.

“So what, if his residence is a hulking monstrosity?” he chided. “You are not there to judge the architecture, but the well-being of your lunans. I thought I'd made that clear last time. Now, why date that Orange, Pardo?”

“Unfinished personal business, sir.” She grimaced, wondering just how much her superior knew.

“Revenge is not the Grey Way, Samantha.” His frown made her shiver even though he had commed from over two hundred thousand miles away. “Need I remind you that Doctor Dreagan is your prime concern for the time being.”

“Must you refer to Dreagan as if he were some inanimate object? And, yes, I do realize he is to be my focus for the moment.”

“For more than just a moment, girl,” he barked, veins standing out on his saggy-skinned neck. “Would you contract with him?”

She swallowed once for effect. “I hope you're joking.”

The elderly man on the comm screen frowned, yet nodded his head cryptically, as she wondered why he'd been so straightforward about her future with the Founder. How ill was he?

“I thought as much,” he muttered, and then eyed her seriously. “Who's instructing your star journeyman?”

"I'm waiting for orders," she said with meekness.

"How uncharacteristic of you!" He actually laughed a bit, but that ended in a chest-rattling wheeze that made her cringe. "Is he in need of much training?"

"He asks questions about the Trade, sir, and about your identity," she told her superior. "I explained that only AshenGreys know, and that your anonymity helps us. I was thinking of putting Hal Sharp in charge of him for a while."

"That would certainly guarantee a Masters for that JourneyGrey." Again, he chuckled, and she was amazed to see Old Lemon Face so cheerful. "No, little rebel, you can't farm out this one. The Founder is your journeyman and yours alone."

"As you wish..."

"Don't go timid on me now, girl. Much depends on how well you train Jon Dreagan."

"Like a whole world's growing populous." She frowned, shifting in her familiar office chair. "And maybe some new alien life form somewhere, too?"

"Those are two of my concerns, yes." Lips behind the white beard had become pale, and she was again concerned for his health. "Have you heard anything about a gathering of the Whites? A location?"

"No. I haven't spent much time with Dreagan this week. Been catching up on Trade business." She smiled at her aging boss with real affection. "Shall I inquire?"

"Not necessary," he replied, his wrinkled face softened with compassion. "I assume you'll be coming down to your parents' ranch right away?"

"I'm going to comm Transportation as soon as we're finished here."

"Dr. Dennison just called to say he could pass on at any time. You'll have much to do. Will your mother move up there near you?"

"That'll be her decision. Have you talked to her recently?"

"Master Physician Denizen reported in about an hour ago. We think your dad's waiting to say good-bye to you."

"I'll be there as soon as possible," she muttered, feeling tightness in her throat. "What about Taylor?"

"Roberts can't do any real damage as Speaker, can he?"

"It seems a safe enough place to corral him. Your reasons sometime escape me."

"Trust me." He smiled, turning her skin to goosebumps.

Samantha suppressed a cringe.

"I'll do the best I can. It would be helpful if I knew your goals, sir."

"In due time, Grey," he sighed, scratching his chin. "I'll be visiting your moon soon. Maybe I'll tell you then. And maybe I won't. We shall see."

"The unofficial Grey motto," she said, mentally shaking her head at his antics. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"Yes. Be nice to Jon Dreagan, 'Mantha." He shook an arthritic finger in her direction. "He's very valuable."

"Again you talk about him as if he weren't a human being."

"That raw nerve again?" The man raised an eyebrow. "I'm told you're unusually touchy concerning that man."

"Then why badger me?" she pouted, hoping for advantage.

"Because you're a stubborn, spoiled child who is better off mated to a man you cannot manipulate," Penock grumbled.

"And Dreagan's that man?" she sneered, hoping he was wrong.

"I didn't say that," Penock replied in mock innocence.

Letting out an exasperated sigh, she regarded her Trade's primary. His white bearded face and blue eyes gave no indication of what he really thought or felt, as usual, so she kept up her game.

"I'll try to be nice," she said, resenting his meddling.

"Good. Too bad I have to miss that double celebration for journeymen Dreagan and Girdner." He glanced off camera. "Nothing else? Safe trip, child."

"Good night, sir," she sighed, worried now that she might not get to the ranch before her daddy died.

Dan'l combed her temporary lodgings at the psy-clinic while Samantha was packing for the planetside journey. When her uncle's face lit the computer screen, she smiled bravely, unashamed of her tear-stained face. His sad eyes mirrored her pain.

"How you doing, Sweetie?" he asked sympathetically.

"Fine," she lied, folding a formal grey tunic. "Are you coming down?"

"Doctor D has other plans." His tone held resignation.

"Last chance," she warned, hoping to change his mind.

"I know, Sammie-girl," Dan'l sighed, grief written across his wrinkled face. "I've reconciled myself to that. Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"I am sorry I have to miss your JourneyGrey party." She sniffled, tossing a pair of grey tights into the carrying case. "Tell Dreagan that for me, will you?"

"Jon wasn't sure if he should comm you when I told him about your dad," Dan'l said, struggling with his emotions.

"Thanks for caring. Both of you." She tried to smile as new tears began to seep. "Any message for Mom?"

"I just commed her." Dan'l's face showed more grief, and she wondered what kept him up here when he obviously wanted to be with her folks. "When's your shuttle leave?"

"In about an hour."

"Then, I'll let you go, little girl." His face softened. "I love you, you know. And I'll be with both you and your mother in spirit."

"Thanks, Uncle Dan'l. I love you, too." She sighed, fighting back her tears. "I'll talk to you when I get back."

"Darlin', I'll see you in Montana, don't you worry about that." He grinned mischievously. "Just take care of your mother and yourself for me. Okay?"

"I will, I promise." What was he hinting? Samantha wondered.

"Bye, now," Dan'l whispered, choking back his emotion.

She shrugged as the screen blanked, too troubled to be concerned with an old man's cryptic ways. Usually, Sam looked forward to a brief rest at her family's ranch in the middle of nowhere, Montana.

The evening had chilled and the chirping chorus of crickets had begun their concert for the night. A light breeze brought pungent smells from the barn as Samantha fought her way through Earth's thick gravity to cross the wide gravel drive. She smiled, thinking of the snotty-nosed kid who had played on this ranch so long ago. Now a respected expert in her field, Samantha reflected on her duties and obligations to her pioneers overhead in their cold subterranean lunar homes. Sighing, she looked up into a cloudy sky, saddened that she could not see her home through the thick vapor. She wondered what Jon Dreagan was doing. Sam remembered their conversation about his wanting to ride a horse. So, here I am, she thought, struggling against gravity, sorrow, and fatigue. Able to be a part of nature in my daily rides, while Jon is trapped on Luna by too many years away from Earth's gravity. He can't ever enjoy these lovely green hills.

A single tear filled her eye. More tears? She thought with a sigh, not bothering to brush the moisture from her face.

“Mantha?” a weary woman's voice called from the porch.

Samantha quickened her pace and pulled her drained body up the five wooden porch steps with the help of the banister, straining every fatigued muscle. She'd done too much in these last three days, yet it felt like that was not enough. Her mother would never be able to handle feeding the few horses that remained, Sam knew. Now that Daddy was gone, those stinky chickens would finally go.

The small, elderly woman smiled pleasantly at her, an after-supper wine glass balanced delicately in her hand. How frail she'd become in the last six months! Daddy's decline had etched itself in her creamy face. Her hair had completely grayed. Was it that way last Christmas? Samantha wondered, noting puffiness in her mother's face from an increase in the number of after-supper wines. Guilt nudged at Sam for accepting the lunar job years ago when Penock had offered it. She took the assignment because she had strongly disliked working at the university in Tranquility Colony.

“How are you doing, Mom?” she asked, gently touching the old woman's freckled arm.

“Oh, all right, I guess,” she answered wistfully. “You're tired, honey. You shouldn't try to feed the animals all by yourself. You know how it tires you.”

“I'm fine. Tired, but fine.” Sam sighed, falling into the white wooden porch swing. “You'll have to feed those critters yourself after I leave, so just be glad I can help while I can.”

“Murray Tyson wants to buy Jubal,” she said, as if ignoring those words. “Or did I tell you that already?”

“Murray's wanted my horse since Jingle gave birth to him.” Sam laughed a little. “Are you going to sell him?”

“He's your horse,” she sighed, insistent. “I can't.”

“Mom...” Samantha breathed, realizing that her mother needed permission. “I sure can't take him back to Luna with me.”

“I suppose, but I hate to get rid of him,” Mother admitted, pain visible in her eyes despite the darkness of the coming night. “I just don't know what to do.”

“Give it time, Mom,” she said, using an inadequate psychologist's line. “I'm sure Daddy wouldn't want you to do anything in haste that you might feel bad about later.”

“Well, I've made up my mind about selling the place,” the old woman said with determination. “I can't stay here and do all this without my Jacob.”

“I understand, but I don't think you should make any major decisions for a few weeks, until your head and heart heal.”

“My head's fine, Little Bug.” She chuckled, casually waving her hand in Sam's direction to dismiss the subject. “Don't go playing psychologist with me.”

“Sorry. I can't help it. Didn't Reverend Fox say the same thing?” Samantha pointed out evenly. “So did Uncle Dan'l, didn't he?”

“Dan'l's such a good man. So was...” Her voice broke for a moment, and then she released a deep sigh. “How am I going to live alone? 'Mantha, I just don't see how.”

Dana Alexander looked out over the gently sloping land into the infamous and misunderstood Montana sky, and Sam kept quiet. She heard her mother sniffle, then saw her wipe her cheek. Sam fought back crying again. Sam focused on whether she wanted the porch light turned off. It seemed like a good idea—she could see the nighttime sky better, if the clouds would break. Standing, Samantha slowly moved through the thick gravity, reached past the screen door, and shut off the yellow porch light. The big barnyard light cast amber and grey shadows on everything, and she eased down onto the swing, too tired to go get a fresh glass of water.

“What's that?” Mom asked, slightly surprised, and gestured into the dark sky. “Over the trees to the South.”

Samantha saw nothing at first, then a flicker of green seemed to rotate from right to left about forty-five degrees above the horizon. The green light disappeared, left, only to be replaced by a red pulsing light that also rotated to the left in a similar manner and speed.

“Just some kind of airplane doing a tight turn,” Sam breathed, thinking how good her bed would feel.

“Some kind of lost plane, if you ask me,” her mother said from her rocker. “What's a plane doing out here? Nearest airport's sixty miles away, in Tannersville.”

“That plane's extremely low,” Sam said, watching it through the trees that lined the ranch's southern boundaries. “Maybe their instruments are malfunctioning.”

“You just never know. I don't hear an engine.”

“Then they're gliding in.” Samantha quickly analyzed all this and came to an uncomfortable conclusion. “Looks like we may have unexpected company. Is the first aid kit still under the sofa? If they can't get that plane up over those pines.”

“They won't crash.” Dana Alexander seemed certain.

“I don't know, Mom...”

“Lord knows, we've had our share of problems without this,” she muttered while they watched a huge silhouette spin slowly closer on the horizon beyond a stand of oaks.

“Shades of Grey,” Samantha grumbled, jumping to throw some switches inside the front door. The full bank of yard lights came up, bathing the farmyard in intense light.

“I hear a kind of trilling noise. Hear it, 'Mantha?”

“Like a high-pitched hum? Yeah.”

The aircraft floated nearer, emitting an unusual oscillating signal as it moved under the clouds in the night sky. As Samantha stood, with her back toward the porch light, she saw a shiver pass through her mom, who stayed in her rocker, watching as the craft approached. From within the small barn, horses whinnied in curiosity, and the chickens woke, raising a cackling din. Samantha thought of Daddy's shotgun in its place behind the front door, and she cautiously brought it out to check the chamber. Both barrels were loaded.

“You think that's necessary, Samantha?”

Her neck hair bristled. “Rather be safe.”

“Give me that thing, child,” Mom insisted, and Sam passed it to her, knowing that in this gravity, her mom could handle the heavy weapon far better than Sam could.

Samantha moved slowly to the outer edge of the long porch, her eyes never leaving the inbound plane. Behind her, she heard the close of the shotgun's breach, but that gave little comfort. Two women alone on an isolated ranch did not make for a secure situation, she thought, wishing for her handgun.

The craft dipped closer as Samantha tried to dispel her uneasiness while peering into the blackening Montana night. The tall vessel seemed to have too many wings as it slowly began to climb over the treetops.

“What an odd-sounding engine,” Sam muttered.

“Maybe it's some kind of experimental ship,” Dana said with a hint of fear in her voice.

“The experiment failed,” Samantha joked while thinking, He wouldn't—Would he?

While the multi-pointed vessel's running lights continued to indicate its trajectory toward the ranch house, chickens panicked, and the horses began neighing with fear. Samantha stepped carefully from the porch to get a better view as the craft passed overhead. Its silhouette against the dimming western sky looked like something from the top of a giant Christmas tree.

“Mom, that's Dreagan's starship. That man must be crazy!”

Soon, the crystalline vessel gleamed and glowed under its exterior lights, having settled in the large pasture on the opposite side the house away from the barn. Mother and daughter waited for Star's passengers to be lowered by an extendible crane and three-meter square elevator platform. High above, in the fourth-story airlock, three occupants of the ship struggled under Earth's gravity. Uncle Dan'l and Dr. Ron Nichols rode the descending platform standing up and with less discomfort than Jonathan Dreagan who sat in a wheelchair. Dreagan's face appeared drawn and pale, even in the artificial lighting Star's exterior lights provided, and the sight of his discomfort made Samantha's heart sink. As the pallet rested in the tall grass, she and her mom stepped forward. She could easily read fatigue and effort in the movements of each man.

