

DREAGANDANCE

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 datapad. “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 sidebar 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.”

“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 spaceport. They described it as professionally manufactured. They're sweeping for others."

"Tell me more."

"Nothing else, yet. But here in Proteus, there's another media story of looting in 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 2nd-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.

“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.”



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’ll need an escort to the hot tub.”

“Yes, mistress.”

After shedding her tunic and tights, she deposited her underthings 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, 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."

"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 heartfelt 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. Patric Hensen, Joel Brogan, and Taylor Roberts had moved temporarily into Samantha's cubby on the condition that only Patric was allowed 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 airlock. Go through it. Jonnie is there, 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 airlock 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. 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.

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 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 leaped 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 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."