

DREAGANSTAR

CHAPTER 1

PREFLIGHT

They had ordered, rather than requested her presence, then left her waiting in a small anti-chamber for well over an hour. Now slightly miffed, Doctor Samantha Alexander had considered leaving for a bite of lunch, when a massive blond jack of a man in a black security uniform opened the tall polysteel door and silently gestured her into the Board of Directors' chamber. She followed him into the spacious room, feeling an unusual suspicion. The inner chamber felt even more sterile than the majority of the artificial, underground environment in the city of Proteus. Thin sheets of polished gray moon rock decorated the always-present, dull polysteel walls that sealed in the atmosphere. Lighting, as always indirect and psychologically effective, directed Samantha to the long slate-blue table at the other end of the cold room. Seated behind the blue lacquered, crescent-shaped table waited the Dreagan Corporation's Board of Directors, who, along with the colony's Founder, Doctor Jonathan Dreagan, made up this ruling body of this pseudo-socialistic lunar colony.

Doctor Dreagan was not present.

Sam suppressed her frown.

Three of the four somber-looking men seated before Samantha had worked with Jon Dreagan for over 15 years, guiding the growth of each of the lunar colonies. Gus Adams was a nondescript, low-key company man. Doctor Ron Nichols was not only Dreagan's longtime friend, Sam knew, but also his personal physician. The translucent skinned, aging Doctor Vincent Abernathy had been the Founder's mentor for most of Dreagan's adult life. In keeping with lunar law, the fourth member of the Board, Amil Groves, had been elected, a mouthpiece for the masses, and was officially called the Speaker of the People. Sam Alexander was glad he only had eight months left in his term of office. Many lunans couldn't wait for the election to come.

Sammie felt slightly relieved that Doctor Dreagan was absent from the meeting, but now felt even more curious about her summons. Under the searching gazes of the four old gents, she shifted into a more defensive mental posture as she moved toward the spotlighted area. She knew these men by both reputation and psychological profiles, so Sam knew to be cautious. A little play-acting went a long way, and Sam was wary. Psychology was usually trickier than just the individual being studied.

These four were clever, she reminded herself as she stepped onto the lighted forum. She feigned humility, willing her body to slump slightly, while lowering her head. She made her fingers twitch and flutter.

“Doctor Alexander,” Speaker Amil Groves began while glancing at her through bushy brown and gray eyebrows. “We reviewed your portfolio, and although you are not the psychologist we had requested, you come highly recommended.”

Sam wondered who had been their first choice, but remained silent, studying her gray cloth shoes, listening intently.

“Your Trade has granted us unlimited use of your time and skills. My colleagues and I require your services for an assignment that may take you away from the psy-clinic for a few weeks,” gray-haired Abernathy continued. “So, first thing after you leave here, you will return to your office and reschedule your patients to other members of your staff. Understand?”

“No clinic work during your assignment. All right.” She swallowed once for effect, carefully watching the four, while wondering what they might be plotting. “My assignment?”

The man to Groves' right, Gus Adams, a sloppy little man, slammed closed a cube of disks and leered at her with contempt. From the other side of the crescent table, red-haired Ronald Nichols stifled a laugh.

“Space it, Nichols,” Groves grumbled, then turned his watery eyes in Samantha's direction.

“The Founder has gone space happy, and you, my dear, are qualified to make that diagnosis official. Take your time in your study of Dr. Dreagan, if he'll even see you. We want you to be completely thorough in your investigation. Is that understood?”

“S-space happy is vague... rather ambiguous,” she started, deliberately twisting a button on her gray tunic. She grimaced. “Do you mean schizophrenic, manic depressive, or obsessive-compulsive? Has he turned violent?”

“Oh, trust me. He is all that and much more,” Speaker Groves drawled, picking absently at his cuticles. “You will conclude that Dreagan is ill-fit to preside over the Dreagan Corporation. Take your time. Be thorough.” He leaned on his left hand while pointing his right index finger in her direction, causing Sam to suppress her rebellious reaction. “Be sure your findings please this Board. Understand, now?”

So, that's it, she thought, resenting their flagrant, thinly veiled assumption that she would follow their orders and not those of her own Trade. They're trying to push Dreagan out, she thought. But, specifically who? And why?

“Dr. Nichols,” Sam murmured. “Is Dreagan physically well?”

“Fit enough but I have cautioned him against returning to Earth's gravity. He's a lunan, permanently. You may have access to his psychological profile and past medical records to begin. I've ordered copies to be given to you as you leave here. Study them, and when you are ready, let me know, and I'll try to get Jon to talk to you.”

“Thank you, Dr. Nichols,” she said politely to the man who had known her new patient the longest and whose reputation was the cleanest of this dirty bunch. “I have no other questions.”

“Dismissed,” Groves said with a wave of his liver-spotted right hand and as one, the four men stood ~~and~~-as one, ~~and~~, walked away.



The rest of that day Samantha shifted her caseload and managerial responsibilities to others on her staff, finding that a few special patients were difficult to assign to her barely-qualified assistant, Master Psychologist Taylor Roberts. She told herself she could continue monitoring some of these cases, even if she was not supposed to. Sam felt determined not to get lost within the personality quirks that were notorious in pioneer, inventor, and city builder, Jonathan Dreagan.

Sam already knew that Dreagan, a genius of global renown, had odd habits and an uncivil and rude tongue, except when he recorded his DreaganStar educational programs. After conquering the moon and then making it somewhat comfortable and profitable for people to live below its surface, Dreagan had, for the last two years, contented himself with his minor inventions while producing holotank productions about the wonders of this and other galaxies. His programs circulated extensively through Earth's secondary schools and a few were used in initial astronavigation training. Jonathan Dreagan had one of the most creative and intellectual minds our species had yet produced. From his lack of public life, Jonathan Dreagan appeared to be an extremely private individual.

For the next four days, when not doling out her patients to other staff members at the psych clinic, Samantha studied the privileged information the Board had granted her. Additionally, she scanned the central library records for any information she could find on her new client. The data included eighty-seven DreaganStar programs, all created in the last twenty-eight months. There were three documentaries about the first and most difficult years of the colony existence, as well as four special 90-minute videos, under the designation Flights of Fancy, depicting his hypothetical journeys into the far reaches of space. All these had been produced in Dreagan's private holo-studio, located in what had been Proteus's original lunar landing port, not far from his underground home.



Four days after receiving her assignment from the Board of Directors, Samantha arrived in the oldest section of the city at the south end of Proteus, at the site where the Founder, Jon Dreagan, kept his personal workshops and living quarters. Everything Sam had researched on the man seemed to be concocted of one type of rumor or another. What was the real man like? she wondered again, while strolling passed the southern cubbies near his large residence. Judging from the size of the door, air locks and triple-paned windows, homes in South Proteus were more spacious than the newer section of the underground city. Here, near the surface, the dull gray corridors and polysteel-lined tunnels were larger, less confining, and Sam wondered what the local residential cubbies were like on the inside as she moved toward the old spaceport and her new assignment.

South Proteus had been constructed in the first year of the first colony over fifteen years ago. Back then, each cubby had its own life-support system—very expensive, Samantha thought. Everyone had lived on the surface in structures resembling Quonset huts and so had to wear full pressure suits just to go from one residence to another.

Before her, the tunnel sloped upward at a slight angle. She easily moon-bounced in the low gravity, and soon stood on the moon's surface. Around her, dinner plate-sized portholes offered glimpses of the surrounding flat, gray terrain with craggy, dark mountains rising far off into starlit black sky. The corridor itself was lit by Sol, which hovered on Luna's distant horizon. The shadows grew long. As she hurried through the maintenance tunnel, Sam became aware of the glittering addition to the sprawling old spaceport that was now Jon Dreagan's private playground.

Beside the now-unused Operations and Control Tower, an almost crystalline structure gleamed, rising over five levels high within a transparent dome. Sammie stopped to peer out a porthole and had to consciously tell herself to breathe again. The clear dome that enclosed the spaceport looked like thin ice on a small fishing pond. The crystal-like structure Jon Dreagan used in his holography programs stood inside. The oddly shaped holographic studio was a very familiar sight to the public - and to Sam because of her recent research. Excitement and delight stirred in her as she studied it.

The tall, multi-pointed structure looked like the shining star that sits on the top of a Christmas tree. Spikes of polysteel girders wrapped in something translucent and pearlescent jutted out from an opaque, hollow core that nested about two-thirds of the way up the body of the structure. She knew that this hollow area housed a holo-studio that balanced on a tripod of crystal appendages. The structure had been intentionally designed to resemble the fictional space vessel Dreagan flew in his educational programs. A gangplank stretched from the roof of the old spaceport's Operations tower, into a gap between two of the more massive, glittering spikes of the ridiculous structure. Samantha seriously doubted this thing's ability to fly and with a chuckle, continued through the access tunnel, childlike anticipation in each step.

Sam's research had furnished her with a strong mental map of the area and a good excuse for her being there. This rock-gray maintenance tunnel provided her a back door to visit Dan'l Girdner, one of her father's old friends. Reporting to the back gate security guard, dressed in traditional Security Trade black, Sam waited while he verified her appointment by comm link. After a stern warning to go straight to her intended destination, the Security jack waved her into the compound with specific directions to Girdner's shop.

Dan'l Girdner, a friend of the family's for almost forty years, had always joked that he had "adopted" her somewhere during her childhood. She had shouted for joy when she had found Dan'l's name on the small roster of Dreagan's sound stage staff. Dan'l had been listed only as a Master Electrician, and Sam felt unsettled that her old friend was working at only average Trade wages. His abilities made him worth so much more! She had also felt unsettled by the fact that his contract was recorded as exclusive. Samantha felt regret at not keeping up with old Dan'l.

Ahead of her, the polysteel corridor opened into the outdated spaceport receiving bay next to the main dome, protected from the vacuum by giga-yards of clear polysteel. Feeling

uncomfortable with how fragile these older structures were in the face of meteorite showers, Samantha gazed about, looking for the clues that would direct her to Building 6, the Electronics shop. Soon a Trade Blue 6 on the side of a corrugated steel building caught her eye, and she casually crossed the short distance to the small metal structure, unchallenged by the men working around there. Few females worked in the industrial Trades planet side, and fewer had dared the challenges of the moon.

To her left, the mock starship glowed in Sol's light, and shimmering rainbows danced on walls and floors in a colorful display. Sam thought of her mom's crystal chandelier in the dining room and how it seemed to become magically enchanted in the Montana sunlight of her childhood. Grinning, she stopped to look up again around the dome and the ridiculous-looking holo studio before entering Dan'l's shop. She found herself aesthetically liking that crystal monstrosity, even if it wasn't flight worthy.

As Samantha stepped into the large polysteel hut that housed Dan'l's shop, a young man dressed in the deep Blue that indicated his electronics apprenticeship smiled up from his workbench. His raven black hair, which tumbled riotously around his ears, immediately labeled him as the teen Dan'l had spoken of a few months earlier. This handsome youth could have become an Entertainment Specialist, according to Dan'l, if he applied himself in that Trade, and in fewer years than most. What had Dan'l called him? Todd.

"Is Master Dan'l around, Todd?" she asked, meeting dark, innocent eyes above that Trade Blue smock. "We have a dinner date."

"And you are?"

"Sam Alexander."

Hopping quickly to his feet, the teen gave her a wide-eyed glance, blushing with discomfort at the unexpected presence of the moon's Senior Psychologist. After nearly five years as an AshenGrey, Samantha still disliked the effect her Trade-presence had on some.

"M-master Girdner is still out on T-the Project," Todd stammered, looking nervously toward the door she'd come in. Then, the gangly apprentice turned, touched a corner of his hand held, and paged Dan'l.

While Todd waited for a response, Samantha turned her attentions to the oddly familiar atmosphere of this electronics shop. It reminded her of her own electronics apprenticeship, ages ago, when she had served a year for her "uncle." Like the five or six shops of his that she'd visited through the years back on Earth, this one bore Dan'l's personal touch of organization and planning. Two journeymen in medium Blue and another apprentice clustered at the far end of the open alcove, waiting out the final ticking seconds of the working week. Tomorrow was RestDay, and anyone could see that these lunans were ready for their day off.

"Dr. Alexander?" Todd called, as she wandered toward one of the three neatly kept worktables. "My master sends his regards and asks if you could wait a few minutes."

"Tell your master I am hungry," she said smiling lightheartedly. "So, he'd better not be too long."

“That's probably up to Doctor D.” Dan'l's voice chuckled over the comm's speaker. “Tell everybody to have a good RestDay and send them home, Todd. And you do the same.”

“Yes sir!” The teen grinned with a glance at his comrades, who had heard the order.

The others quickly grabbed their personal gear and made their way through the shop's back airlock. As Sam watched their departure, she heard the young man ask his superior about her. She returned to the tidy metalwork desk and young Todd.

“She'd better stay there,” he replied with a scowling tone over the comm's speaker. “I'll be there in about five minutes, apprentice. And I want you gone when I get there. Girdner—Out.”

The comm fell quiet after the customary chime that closed the connection, and Sam found shy dark eyes on her with questions in them. Looking down at her plain tights and floral tunic, she wondered if she had dressed appropriately for an evening with her Uncle Dan'l.

“I would remember if we had met, AshenGrey,” Todd said, standing near the computer that connected to all the city's communications, video, and library facilities. “Are you an elec-tech too?”

“Royal blue, just like you.” Sam grinned, using a common Electronics Trade's idiom.

“I heard you earned the Rank of Rainbow.”

“It's a fractured rainbow at best,” she replied with a shrug.

“Gonna become one of the Whites?” he asked, referring to those six people alive, who had mastered five Trades or more. “It might be nice to finally have a woman that high up in the Trades.”

“I'm happy working in this Trade,” Sammie said, then turned the conversation's focus. “I understand that you've had a tough year. I understand you recently lost your mother.”

“Depends on who you have been talking to, AshenGrey.” He avoided her eyes while shutting down his computer.

“Dan'l was very impressed after you joined his crew last winter.” Sam rested her left hip on the side of the desk. “He spoke highly of your abilities—theatrical as well as electrical. Have you ever thought that you missed your true vocation?”

“Entertainment? No, thanks.” He frowned, shaking his head. “Those people are the real crazies. And weirdoes, too.”

“The creative nature does seem to give way to some unusual characters,” Samantha conceded. “But, crazies? I wouldn't say that. And I ought to know.”

“Doctor D's a fine example of a creative crazy,” Todd pronounced, then he turned and closed the last of the cabinet doors. “Why is it I always end up playing housekeeper around here?”

“The joys of apprenticeship,” she muttered, smiling at her own memories.

“Look, I have to run, Dr. Alexander.” He smiled, moving toward the exit. “My master should be here really quickly.”

“Go. And be good to yourself.”

And with that, all that youth standing 190 centimeters of slim masculinity bounced out the airlock door.

Her mirrored image met Sam on the safety glass of the airlock's porthole. Her hair was long and deep brown with auburn highlights. She'd always wished it had the body and bulk most women enjoyed, and sometimes left her to feel a little inadequate for her slight tomboyish figure. But still, I don't have trouble fitting in a pressure suit and bubblehead, she reminded herself. She concluded, as always, that she liked being who she was, whoever she needed to be at the time.

Chuckling to herself, Sam slid into an old office chair to wait for Dan'l. The young apprentice's word flowed back to her. Did she hear Todd call his boss crazy? Good, fun crazy or dangerous, twisted crazy? she wondered.



When Samantha heard the footfalls, she was relaxed, playfully imagining her first conversation with Jonathan Dreagan. What if she divulged the Board's scheming to the Founder right on the spot? The blatant lack of tact struck a humorous chord in her, and smiling, she opened her eyes again. Deciding to meet them standing, she stood and brushed the wrinkles from her green floral tunic.

Dan'l Girdner bounded his two-meter bulk into the building, strode across the non-conductive metal floor, and greeted her in their customary fashion. Wrapping his huge hands around her waist, the aging man swung her easily into the lunar air, taking advantage of the low gravity to perform her favorite childhood greeting.

"Put me down, you old dear," she chuckled, and her feet bounced twice as they settled together on the deck plates.

"Oh, you look lovely, Sammie-girl." He kissed her cheek then hugged her in his delight.

"It's good to see you, Uncle Dan'l," she responded. "And what took so long? I am hungry."

Glimpsing a shadow moving into the open hatch, Sam quit her mock pout.

Pushing out of the Master Electrician's affectionate embrace, she turned to see a dark-haired man of medium but muscular build springing into the gray and blue shop. Dressed in dirty white coveralls, The Founder, Doctor Jonathan Dreagan moved like a man in charge, tall and straight without seeming rigid. He had the dark, handsome features of an aristocratic European. Somewhere outside of Mount Olympus, she thought, reminding herself of his human tendencies to be gruff and domineering. Her pulse had quickened, and she realized she'd been holding her breath. She exhaled slowly, and then swallowed once to ease the dryness of her throat. She felt mildly surprised by this reaction to seeing Dreagan for the first time.

"Dan'l, I want to run those goddamned tests again tomorrow," he was saying as he stepped to them and halted almost nose to nose with her uncle. "Be here at zero-nine-thirty."

The tone held no room for argument, and Sam marveled to see Dan'l's lack of response. Usually, her uncle would have bristled at being told his business. This man held a power over her uncle, she warned herself. His charisma radiated throughout the shop like the energy that draws the eye to the flame. She watched Dreagan carefully, intrigued.

"You'll recall tomorrow's RestDay?" Dan'l asked dryly, without irritation.

“Screw it. You said you didn't have any plans,” Dreagan challenged, eyeing Samantha briefly with a penetrating blink of thick black lashes. “You will be here.”

The last was spoken to Dan'l, yet Sam knew without a doubt that she'd been quickly categorized and filed by the Founder.

“Jon, this is my guest for the evening—” Dan'l began.

“AshenGrey Samantha Alexander, Director of the Proteus Psy-Clinic,” he said with a slight bow of chivalry, smiling in her direction. “This is an unexpected pleasure, Doctor, I must say. But please, excuse me. I'm busy.”

“So, I see,” she said with a calculating look in his direction, instantly liking the handsome man she saw. She looked back at Dan'l, and said, “I didn't mean to take you away from something, Uncle Dan'l.”

“And you haven't, Sammie-gal.” He smiled, and then glanced at his employer who was storing test equipment in a large wall locker.

“We are finished for the evening, AshenGrey.” Dreagan smiled then muttered something under his breath that sounded rude. “I'll see you at zero nine--thirty, Dan'l.”

“Yes, El Jefe,” the bigger man responded, laughing, then touched Sam's elbow to signal their departure. “Now, get your carcass out of my shop, Jon, so I can lock up.”

“Be sure you do.” Dreagan seemed flushed when he straightened, and slammed the locker closed.

Turning on his heels, Dan'l's boss hurried past Samantha toward the front air lock. He smelled of—a hard work, a pleasant smell. Then he stopped at the hatch and scowled back at her uncle.

“I don't want to hear about any more security problems.” He spoke harshly, and then the scowl disappeared, replaced by a bright smile as he turned to Sam, eyes twinkling. “Good evening, AshenGrey.”

Sam's ears felt hot as she tried to calm the flutter in her stomach. Butterflies, at your age? She asked herself. Dreagan possessed of some intangible quality that had left her blood racing. She focused on Dreagan's last words while her old friend checked around his shop one last time. Problems? Security seemed more than adequate from her earlier observations. Sam felt puzzled as her new client disappeared through the lock, and Dan'l shut down the shop's power. She stepped towards the front airlock.

“Security problems?” She asked as Dan'l palmed the outer lock. “I've heard whispers about a gantry accident.”

“Ha! Now, why he said that in front of you is beyond me,” he said in a huff, and they stepped out across the perimeter of the domed compound with its star-like building that housed Jonathan Dreagan's production studio.

“Why did Dr. Dreagan choose to build his stage like that?” she asked, looking across at the towering crystal edifice with all its dozens of glittering points. “That stuff stretched around each limb is almost transparent. What is it made from, Dan'l?”

“Wait, now, Sweetie.” He laughed softly as they walked. “Don’t ask too many questions. That only makes new ones, you know. Besides, you said you’d take the night off. That means mentally, too.”

“Too many new questions,” she sighed, stretching her legs to bounce after the old man’s longer strides.



Hart's had been one of Proteus's better restaurants ever since colonists first settled on the dusty lunar surface in pressurized huts. As private explorers found the caverns and inhabited them, James and Stacey Hart had wisely relocated their private-booth eatery underground and donated a percent of the profits toward colonial excavation. As Jon Dreagan explored, established, and expanded his colonial corporation, so did the Hart franchise and purse. Their establishments boasted a safari atmosphere, complete with silk plants, taxidermists' creations, old photographs of the real animals, and large holos that gave a feeling of being in the African veldt. Sam was relieved when she realized that the tunic she'd chosen blended very well with the sand and fake greenery. And again she wished that some scientist would develop some plant life that could survive the unearthly light gravity.

Dan'l had been too long away from their booth, she decided after a server in Trade journeyman Green delivered their drinks. Her “uncle” had excused himself to make some comm, leaving her to ponder the conversational patter they'd enjoyed on the public cart ride to this establishment. Her parents' longtime friend had been vague during the fifteen-minute commute through the caverns and tunnels of the moon. His hesitation to speak too openly about his boss confirmed the respect and friendship between the two men. Samantha's research had shown that people associated with Jonathan Dreagan tended to become introverted due to the public's fascination with the Founder. This had begun soon after the time capsules of the most recent colony, Halpern, were buried in those gray caves five years ago. Catching herself, she turned her thought to more recent events of teaching at the University of Tranquility. Samantha had decided to wait five minutes more before she rose to search out her friend, the crystal blue Trade Master.

Coming up the tree-lined path between booths, Dan'l waved his fingers at Samantha. She put her aggravation aside until she heard his explanation. Dan'l's wrinkled face held an irritation of its own as he slid onto the padded bench across from her.

“Sorry, Sammie-gal,” he began with a deep sigh and patted her hand. “El Jefé can be a royal pain at times.”

“Who came up with El Jefé?” she asked, casually studying him.

“Cal Washington. Have you met him yet?”

“Dreagan's engineer pal,” she said, smiling. “And his drinking buddy.”

“That's the one.” Again he sneered. “Cal's got an over-inflated mouth to match his over-inflated ego.”

“That's surprising, coming from you,” she said, then sipped her jasmine tea, while she watched Dan'l frowning.

“You didn't answer me about Washington.”

“No. I haven't met the man,” she replied, not adding that she'd studied his file with great interest. “I take it you were just speaking with Dreagan?”

“Just checking my messages.” He sighed, reaching for his beer. “Seems he wants to run those checks two hours earlier.”

“Zero-seven-thirty, it is, then?” She snickered, knowing her friend preferred to sleep in whenever possible.

“More like zero-dark-thirty, if you ask me. Ha!” He frowned, taking a deep breath before continuing. “That man's a workaholic, Sweetie. I swear he is.”

“You may want to sing a different melody,” she warned, mentally filing this piece of information on Dreagan to be proved or disproved later.

“Says who?” Dan'l sassed, looking over the display of pictured foods on the lighted menu panel to her left. “Have you ordered?”

“My mama raised me right!” She pouted playfully.

“You're a brat, you know.” He stopped his reading and eyed her. “What about the song I'm singing?”

“Doesn't that seafood gumbo sound tasty?” She intentionally sounded angelic.

“Sammie ...” he said in a warning tone.

“I think it does.” She grinned as Dan'l's eyes smoldered with mock anger. “What will you have, Uncle? My treat.”

“Ha! Your treat on the Trade Grey account.”

“You're quick,” she said, content.

“The gumbo.” Dan'l smiled, reaching to make her selection from the menu panel then choosing Cajun fried trout himself. “I wonder what [the](#) failure rate of these food workstations is.”

“I'm sure it happens. What a strange thought.”

“And so the old mind wanders.” Dan'l glanced about the low chamber lined with dinner cubbyholes in poor lighting. “When was the last time you heard from your folks?”

“Last Thursday. Mom called just long enough to say that Lilah Jameson is a grandmother. And that she and Daddy are still undecided about moving up here.” She gave a light laugh. “They've been going back and forth for over three months, but Dad doesn't want to sell the ranch and retire up here.”

“Don't you mean down here?” the old man asked.

“Up on the moon; down in the caverns,” she sang softly from a popular tune. Then she lied. “They're both doing just fine. And send their love.”

“They'd better,” Dan'l said with a wink, then drew deep on his mug of draft beer.

Padding softly in the imported sand, an apprentice server in dark Trade Green brought their meals and informed them that the dessert program was malfunctioning. Then he took away the soup bowls.

There was a brief, but comfortable silence.

“Ever hear from that Thompson kid anymore?”

“Not since he joined the Forestry Service. Dan'l,” she breathed, stirring the gumbo. “You never answered my question from earlier. What is that transparent stuff covering that strange looking holo-studio?”

“Something like coral,” he responded, sampling his meal.

“Seriously?” she coaxed, not liking to be played with when she wasn't playing. “I've got a job to do here.”

“Absolutely serious.” He frowned as he considered a moment, and she could watch his decisions resolve in his eyes. “What I said is true, Sweetie. But, you'll have to leave it at that.”

“Okay. Can I ask if you're still seeing Cinda?”

“No.” This was spoken between mouthfuls. Dan'l was frowning.

“Ahhh, care to specify?” she asked, knowing she shouldn't.

“No.” His face soured even more. “I don't see her anymore.”

“Yes, well then,” she sighed, wishing female companionship for him in a society where fems were rare. “So it's on to new conquests for you, then?”

“This work for Dreagan keeps me busy,” he said with commitment and sincerity.

“I wanted to talk to you about that—” She began.

“Figured that when you called,” Dan'l grumbled. “Ask. Go ahead.”

“How'd you get this position?” she asked, feeling too much like one of those accursed, nosy media people.

“The Founder looked me up,” Dan'l answered, breaking the filet up with the side of his fork. “I suspect that Ben Soqui may have recommended me, but I'm not certain.”

“You don't remember...” she sighed, frowning at the memory of that dirty old man. “What's Dreagan got you doing?”

“Three years ago, almost,” he offered, then regarded her a moment and sighed. “We started working on a land cycle—a Luna scoota we called it—and some interesting electro-stabilization theories. Then, we branched out into holography, astrophysics, and photography.”

“Put them all together, and they spell...?” she prompted.

“The DreaganStar Project. You've seen the holo-shows?”

“Some. Interesting,” she admitted. “But my work doesn't leave me much time to sit and just stare into a holotank.”

“Your clinic, you mean.” Her old friend sneered. “Sweetie, you spend too much time there and not enough socializing. You need to find a good contract mate.”

“I prefer my practice.”

“My ass, young lady!” Dan'l growled loudly, but stopped himself at this breach of Lunar social customs, muttered an apology, and she had to smile. “You've heard this before?”

“From you, and Mom, and Daddy, and Professor Norton, not to mention any names.”

“Solo. No contract mates in your future?”

“I’m not so sure I like that little custom,” she admitted, knowing some time later that statement would get back to her superior, the HazeGrey, head of the Psychology Trade.

Uncle Dan'l seemed startled. She hadn't really denounced the decades-old tradition, she told herself. Sam tasted the dark bread that accompanied the delicious meal while waiting for him to continue the conversation.

“You never did tell me why you left the university,” he began, raising his eyebrows playfully. “Something about three men and a sex scandal?”

“No. Something about a promotion,” she answered, feeling miffed that he insisted on misunderstanding her assignment here. “I told you all that.”

“I still don't swallow it. How'd you get to be a Master Grey?”

“Dan'l...” But she stopped herself and took up a monstrous portion of the gumbo, knowing he was teasing her.

“When's the last time you had a night on the town?” he asked softly after a moment, then tapped his fork against his drinking glass for emphasis.

Smirking in his direction, she casually savored her mouth full. Her friend fumed across the small table at her deliberate delay. When HAD she last been out? she asked herself.

“We're understaffed at the clinic.”

“Answer the question, youngster.” Dan'l's wrinkled face displayed a combination of love and concern.

“The last time we had dinner,” was her meek reply, as she tried to avoid his grim stare and parental attitude.

“Makes that about three months ago,” Dan'l chuckled and shook his head slowly. “They kept you out on that ranch too long.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You've developed antisocial tendencies,” he said, and she didn't care for either his accusation or his tone.

“Can you justify your statement, Uncle?”

“I don't think I need to.”

“Dan'l, I've found most men who have courted me to be presumptuous, uninteresting, domineering, and well, a woman can only take so much. Then, she stops dating.”

“You don't get lonely?” he asked with compassion.

“What! With Patric Hensen—a Security Master—as my clerk and personal JourneyGrey? He's a hovering hen. Did I mention that I have several journeymen and apprentices under foot? And there are Taylor Roberts' blunders to fix, and an understaffed clinic to fill my 27-hour workday. I have no alone time.”

“Sweetie, you know what I mean,” he said in a gentle tone.

She mentally bit her lip, assuring herself that the old dear thought only of her best interests.

“Dan'l P. Girdner, answer me a question,” she began, feigning wide-eyed innocence. “Why haven't you snuggled in with some nice contract? People your age are usually contracted for life.”

“Some even get married. Well, maybe not anymore...”

“You're waiting for a wife?” She felt amazed.

“Any ideas on how many women my age live in an area of, say, two hundred thousand kilometers?”

“Well, right...” she muttered sarcastically, knowing that she was chasing comet tails, but she attempted a guesstimate. “I don't know. Maybe twenty in all of the colonies.”

“I allowed for a ten-year age variance when I checked with Colonial Personnel,” he confided, a childlike grin wrinkling his face. “There are actually seven in this colony.”

“They are probably kept well occupied,” she sighed, knowing she needed information on Dreagan.

“Two are married. Yes, really married! Three are in long-term contracts.” Dan'l diverted his eyes to the silk ivy that crept along the upper portion of the booth. “One isn't worth the bother to save her life.”

Shuddering in animated gestures, he twisted his face into an expression that a man might have after eating secondhand snot. That brought them both to giggles, and Samantha made a mental note to have dinner with Dan'l more often.



Pleased that it was not yet midnight, Samantha scooped up her personal pad containing her notes on the last few patients as she came through the overfull and cramped living room of her cubby. She headed directly for her prized wooden desk and computer in the tiny back room, considering herself fortunate to live in so much space. Being director of a clinic, knowing Dan'l who knew Speaker Groves, the old sour puss of the Board, along with her professional accomplishments, had secured a two-bedroom cubby for her. The second bedroom had become a workspace and held a collection of general clutter.

Her home rested on the northern face of McKinley Terrace, up above the basin of a long cavern, but it came without any view of the massive underground cavern. Samantha didn't miss a view of anything down there. Most of the interior of her cubby had needed upgrading when she moved, but she couldn't complain about her home. Having seen the more modern modules, she'd declined billeting in one. They didn't feel that safe or roomy the way this older one did. To Samantha, the newer cubbies were too deep, too far under the moon's surface for her liking. They were nothing like her life on the ranch in Montana, but what could duplicate that childhood home? Here, the front room window displayed other cliff dwellings, systematically painted in pastel colors designed to give a calming effect. Everywhere, Proteus's artificial environment reminded her of the lower decks of an old-fashioned ocean liner.

Her rural upbringing left her over-sensitive to the barren and encapsulated ways of underground living. The Gray Trade Master supported her theory that such conditions were detrimental. Sam found that she sought the surface any chance she got. Hart's restaurant still did a good business up there. It had been moved, and now was in Proteus's busy spaceport where

shipping catapults were located along with a few small individual enterprises. Of course, the famous three-kilometer baseball field was still near the southern end of the city, only fifteen kilometers from the DreaganStar Project