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CHAPTER 1

PREFLIGHT

About the time Doctor Samantha Alexander began to consider leaving for a bite of lunch, a massive blond jack of a man in a black security uniform appeared and gestured for her to follow him into the Board of Directors' chamber. She did, feeling the usual 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 held 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.

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 but also his personal physician. The translucent skinned, aging Dr. 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, officially called 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.

Doctor Dreagan was absent from the meeting, Sammie felt slightly relieved and bit more curious about her summons. The searching gazes of the four old gents before her made shift into a defensive posture as she stepped toward the spotlighted area. She knew these men by both reputation and psychological profiles, and Sam knew to be cautious. A little play acting went along way and Sam was suspicious. Psychology is always as tricky as the individual being studied.

These four were clever, she reminded herself as she stepped onto the lighted forum. She pretended humility, willing her body to slump slightly, while lowering her head. She let 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're 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.

"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 us, you will return to your office and reschedule your patients to other members of your staff. Understand?"

"No clinic work during your assignment. Alright." 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, 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 said, deliberately twisting a button on her gray tunic. She grimaced. "Do you mean schizophrenic, manic depressive, or obsessive-compulsive? Has he been violent?"

"Spare us your trade jargon," Speaker Groves drawled, picking absently at his cuticles. "You will find Dreagan to be antisocial, uncivilized, and ill-fit to preside over the Dreagan Corporation. Oh, trust me. He is all that and much more. 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 Master. *They're trying to push Dreagan out*, she thought. *But, specifically who? And why?*

"Dr. Nichols," she muttered. "Is Dreagan physically fit?"

"Fit enough for a Lunan. 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 with you."

"Thank you, Dr. Nichols," she said politely to the man who'd 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, walked away.

* * *

The rest of that day Samantha shuffled her caseload and managerial responsibilities, 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 Psy-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 87 DreaganStar Programs created in the last 28 months. There were three documentaries about the first and most difficult years of the colony existence, as well as four special videos of ninety minutes each called Flights of Fancy, depicting 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 at the south end of Proteus, the oldest section of the city, at the site where the Founder, Jon Dreagan, kept his workshops and personal quarters. Everything Sam had read or 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 roomy southern cubicles 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. Up, 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 wore full pressure suits just to move from one home to another.

Before her, the tunnel sloped upward at a slight angle. She easily moon-bounced in the low gravity, and soon stood on level ground 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 about five levels high within a transparent dome. Sammie stopped to peer out a porthole and had to consciously tell herself to breathe again. The geodesic dome that enclosed the spaceport looked like thin ice on a small fishing pond. Inside stood the crystal-like structure that Jon Dreagan used in his shows. The oddly shaped holographic studio was a very familiar sight to the general public, and to her because of her recent research, yet excitement and delight surfaced as she studied it.

The multi-pointed structure looked like the decorative star that sits on the top of a Christmas tree. Spikes of polysteel girders wrapped in something translucent and pearlescent jutted out from the opaque, hollow core that rested 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 its crystal appendages. The structure had been intentionally designed not to resemble the fictional space vessel Dreagan flew in his programs. About two-thirds of the way up the multi-pointed framework, a gangway stretched from the roof of the old spaceport's Operations tower, into a gap between two of the more massive, glittering spikes. Samantha seriously doubted this thing's ability to fly and with a chuckle, continued through the access tunnel, childlike anticipation in her step.

Sam's days of 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 with a back door to visit Dan'l Girdner, one of her father's old buddies. The back gate's security guard, dressed in traditional Security Trade black verified her appointment by comm link. After a stern warning to go straight to her intended destination, the Security jack sent 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 jokingly "adopted" her somewhere along the life's line. She had shouted for joy when she had spotted Dan'l's name on the small roster of Dreagan's sound stage staff. Dan'l's was 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 was also 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 Six, 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 with no questions asked by the few 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 flooring in a colorful display, like a diamond chandelier enchanted by sunlight. Grinning, she stopped to look up again around the dome and the 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 facility that housed Dan'l's shop, a young man dressed in the deep blue of electronics apprenticeship smiled up from his work at a computer. His raven black hair, which tumbled riotously around his ears, immediately labeled him as the teen Dan'l had spoke of a few months earlier. This youth could well 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, then began to blush 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 upon some. Todd stammered that Master Girdner was out on The Project. Then, the gangly apprentice turned and pressing a button on his 'puter, paged Dan'l.

While Todd waited for a response, Samantha turned her attentions to the familiar atmosphere of this electronics shop. It evoked memories, reminding her of her own electronics apprenticeship, ages ago, when she had worked a year for her "uncle." Like the five or six shops of his that she'd visited back on Earth, this one bore Dan'l's personal touch of organization and planning. Two journey Blues and an apprentice clustered at the far end of the open workbench area, waiting out the final ticking seconds of the working week. Tomorrow was RestDay, and anyone could see that these Lunans were ready for the 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," came Dan'l's voice, chuckling over the comm's speaker. "Tell everybody to have a good RestDay and send them home, Todd. And ya do the same."

"Yes sir!" He grinned with a glance at his comrades.

The others quickly grabbed their personal gear and made their way through the shop's open airlock. As she watched their departure, Sam heard the young man ask his superior about her. She returned to the tidy metal work 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 don't want ya round when I get there. Girdner -- Out."

The shop 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 tunic, she wondered if she had dressed appropriately for an evening with Dan'l.

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

"Royal blue, just like you." Sam grinned, using the Electronics Trade's expression.

"I heard you earned the Rank of Rainbow."

"It's a fractured rainbow at best." She shrugged.

"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 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 few difficult years. Losing your mother."

"Who have you been talking to, AshenGrey?" He laughed nervously, while shutting down the computer system.

"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 agreed. "But, crazies? I wouldn't go as far as to say that. And I ought to know."

"Doctor D's a fine example of a creative crazy," Todd said, as he turned and closed the last of the cabinet doors to hide a coffee tap and several cups. "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 real quick."

"Go right ahead. And be good to yourself."

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

A mirrored image of herself met Sam on the glass of the airlock's porthole. Her hair was long and deep brown with auburn highlights. It lacked the body and bulk most women enjoyed, sometimes leaving her to feel a little inadequate for her tomboyish ways and slight figure. *But I still don't have trouble fitting in a pressure suit and bubblehead*, she thought, and decided, as always, that she liked being who she was. Who ever she needed to be at the time.

Chuckling to herself, Sam slid into an old office chair to relax and 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 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 brushed the wrinkles from her green floral tunic.

Dan'l Girdner bounded his two-meter bulk into the building and greeted her in their customary fashion. Wrapping his huge arms 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 dull metal deck plates.

"Oh, ya 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 moving shadow in 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, Jon Dreagan walked like a man in charge, tall and straight without seeming rigid. He had the dark, handsome features of an aristocratic European. Somewhere just outside of Mount Olympus, she thought reminding herself of his human tendencies to be gruff and domineering. Her pulse had quickened, and she'd been holding her breath. She exhaled slowly, and then swallowed once to ease the dryness of her throat. She was mildly surprised by this reaction to seeing Jon Dreagan for the first time.

"Dan'l, I want to run that set of goddamn tests again tomorrow," he was saying as he 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. Typically her uncle would have bristled with insult 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 eyes to the center of the flame. She watched Dreagan carefully, intrigued.

"Ya'll recall tomorrow's RestDay?" Dan'l asked dryly, without his usual irritation at authority.

"Screw it. You said you don't have any plans," Dreagan challenged, eyeing Samantha briefly with a penetrating blink of thick black lashes. "You'll be here."

The last was to her old friend, yet she knew without a doubt that she'd been quickly categorized and filed.

"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. Right now, I'm very busy."

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

"And ya haven't, Sammie-gal." He smiled, and then passed a spanner to his employer who busied himself with 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 yer 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 strode gracefully passed Samantha, toward the air lock. He smelled of a hard day's work, a pleasant smell. Then he stopped at the hatch to scowl 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."

Problems? 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 left her blood racing. She focused on Dreagan's last words her old friend checked his shop over one last time. 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 through the airlock.

"Security problems?" She asked as Dan'l palmed the outer lock.

"Ha! Now, why he said that in front of ya 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 the one hundred or so meters to the towering crystal with all its dozens of glittering star points. "That stuff stretched around each limb is almost transparent, Dan'l. What is it?"

"Wait, now, Sweetie." He laughed softly while turning to go. "Ya ask too many questions. That only makes new ones, ya 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 humanity walked the dusty gray surface in pressure suits. As explorers found the caverns and inhabited them, James and Stacey Hart had wisely established more of these private-booth eateries and donated a percent of the profits toward colonial excavation. As Jon Dreagan explored, established, and expanded his corporation, so did the Hart subsidiary and purse. This particular establishment boasted a safari atmosphere, complete with taxidermists' creations, large holos that gave a feeling of being in the African veldt, and old photographs of the real thing. Sam was relieved when she realized that the tunic she'd chosen blended very well with the sand and scrubby pseudo-greenery. And again she wished that some scientist would develop more plant life for the unearthly light gravity.

Dan'l had been too long away from their booth, she decided after a journeyman in Trade Green delivered their drinks. Her "uncle" had excused himself to make some communication, leaving her to ponder the conversational patter they'd enjoyed on the public cart ride to this establishment. Her father's longtime friend had been intentionally 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 or friendship between the two men. Samantha's research had shown that people associated with Jonathan Dreagan seemed 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 let herself get lost in the recent memories of teaching at the University of Tranquility, deciding 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 gestured to Samantha. She put her aggravation aside until she heard his explanation. Dan'l's wrinkled face held an irritation all 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 Jefe can be a royal pain at times."

"Who came up with *El Jefe*?" she asked, casually studying him.

"Cal Washington's the one. Have ya met him?"

"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 tea, while watching Dan'l frowning.

"Ya 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 Dr. Dreagan?"

"Just checking my voice mail." 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 ya 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 ya ordered?"

"My mama raised me right!" She pouted playfully.

"You're a brat, ya 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."

"I'll bet! Ha! Yer treat on the Grey Trade 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 failure rate of these food computers 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 had to 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 ya mean down here?" the older gentleman 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 in 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, trying his meal.

"Hey, get serious, please," she said, 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.

"Ahh, care to specify?" she asked, knowing she shouldn't.

"No. Don't ask." His face soured even more. "I just 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 contract with Dreagan is more than enough to keep me busy," he said with commitment and sincerity.

"I wanted to talk to you about that--" She began.

"Figured that when ya called," Dan'l grumbled. "But go ahead."

"How'd you get this position?" she asked, feeling too much like one of those accursed, nosy Media reporters.

"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."

"When?" she asked, 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. Ya've seen the holo-shows?"

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

"Yer clinic, ya mean." Her old friend sneered. "Sweetie, ya 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. "Ya've heard this before?"

"From you, and Daddy, and Professor Norton, not to mention any names."

"Soooo. No contracts in yer future."

"I'm not so sure I like that little custom," she admitted, knowing somewhere down the line that statement would get back to her superior, the HazeGrey.

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

"Ya never did tell me why ya left the university," he began, raising his eyebrows playfully. "Something to do with a sex scandal and three men?"

"Something to do with a promotion," she answered, feeling miffed that he insisted on misunderstanding her assignment here. "I told you that before, old dear."

"I still don't swallow it. How'd ya get a Masters?"

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

"When's the last time ya had a night on the town?" he asked softly after a moment, then tapped his fork against his water 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 been out last?* 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. "We kept ya out on the ranch too long."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"Ya've developed antisocial attitudes," he said, and she didn't care for either his accusation or his tone.

"Can you justify your statement, Uncle?"

"I don't feel the need to."

"Dan'l, would it sound too conceited to say I've found most men who have courted me to be presumptuous, uninteresting, and well, a woman can only take so much. Then, she stops dating."

"Ya don't get lonely?" he asked with compassion.

"What! With Patric -- a Security Master -- as my clerk and personal journey Grey? He's a hovering hen. And not to mention several journeymen and apprentices under foot. And there's Taylor Roberts' blunders to undo, and an understaffed clinic to fill my 27-hour work day. I have no alone time."

"Sweetie, ya 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 often contract 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 comets, but she made a rough guesstimate. "I don't know. Maybe twenty in all of the colonies."

"I allowed for a ten-year variance when I checked with the Personnel Department," he confided, a childlike grin wrinkling his face. "There are seven in this colony."

"They are probably kept well occupied," she sighed. She needed information on Dreagan.

"Two are married. Yes, really married! Three have long 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."

"You've met her?" she asked, curious.

"She graced me with her presence for breakfast, once."

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 notes on her last 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 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 work space 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 mind missing a view of anything down there. Most of the interior of the 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 hers did. To Samantha, the newer cubbies were too deep, too far under the moon's surface for her liking. Nothing like her life on the ranch in Montana. But what could duplicate that childhood home? Here, the front room window usually displayed other cliff dwellings, systematically painted in pastel colors designed for 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.

CHAPTER 2

FIRSTFLIGHT

Two days passed. By the time Samantha got away from the Clinic for the day, the evening traffic had thinned, for which she was grateful. All she wanted was a chance to get home, cleaned up, and feel human again. She considered calling Uncle Dan'l and suggesting a seriously drunken evening as she crossed her cubby's threshold. His message waited on her comm, cryptic and brief: *Be at Dreagan's holo-studio before 2000 hours*. Dan'l's tone seemed unusually insistent. Intrigued, she dropped her carry-case of homework on the green sofa in the front room, and then she left her cubby, having little time to make that meeting. She grabbed a fast meatroll from a vendor as she waited for the cross-city transit, not even taking time to clean up.

Dan'l had been specific about the holo-studio and the time, which was long after his usual working hours. When they had last talked, he said he wouldn't help her research Jonathan Dreagan. She hurried through the halls that led to The DreaganStar Project's back entrance. There she met Dan'l who carried a pair of gray coveralls and an official project security badge bearing the holo from her old ID badge. Samantha had given him the expired identification tag as a joke months earlier. Pinning the forged identification to her tunic, she thanked her friend and conspirator. Wondering what had caused his change of heart, she bounced into step with the big Trade Master as they walked across the domed compound.

"You know how much I appreciate this, don't you?" she asked, moon-bouncing to keep up with his long-legged pace.

"Do me a favor, Sweetie." Dan'l frowned, glancing about. "Don't mention it. If ya get caught, yer on your own. Ya understand, darlin'?"

"Understood," she said, concerned by the overly secretive look on his wrinkled face. "Why so late in the day?"

"Can't tell you," he said, eyes darting around the bay constantly. "But ya've got very little time before they seal her up."

"Seal who up?" She asked, wondering when he had joined the groups of conspiracy theorists.

"The, er, holographic stage," was his response, and it wasn't like her uncle to stammer. Minor alarms nudged her mind as he continued. "Look, Sammie, ya want to know who Jon Dreagan really is, right?"

"I need to know the truth," she said forcefully.

"Ya got to believe that I'm answering ya the best I can. Trust me, baby girl. Just get in that monster before they lock ya out." He pointed up at the crystalline holostage. "And then just play it by ear. Before ya come out, most of your questions will be answered, and ya'll have a whole new set to play with."

Before Samantha could reply, Dan'l patted her fanny affectionately, winked, and turned to leave. She hurried in the opposite direction, wondering what questions she would be confronted with.

Thankful that she had done her research, Sam made her way quickly across the docking complex. On impulse, she glanced down at the ID badge Dan'l had gotten for her, and read her supposed job title, expecting to pretend to be a tech. To her astonishment the card stated her correct name, payroll number, and occupation as Master Psychologist. She seriously doubted her uncle's sanity or at least his sincerity to her research, but recognized that it was what she had to work with. She knew she'd never pass for any kind of technician, not even an apprentice green floor scrubber.

Samantha spotted a 'fresher station off to her right and quickly entered it to change into Dan'l's gift of oversized gray overalls, her Trade Color. How did Dan'l do this? she wondered, as she closed the fasteners over her other clothes and clipped the name tag to a breast pocket. Then, she moon-bounced quickly from the small booth, glancing at Earth's shimmering blue form on the horizon. As she neared the Operations Tower next to the crystalline sound stage, she thought, Why so late in the work day? And why so easy? She began to feel set up and thought of a dozen ways to get even with sweet old Uncle Dan'l.

Two tired looking men dressed in mechanics Trade Red walked passed Samantha about 30 meters from the sound stage, and she wondered if she should schedule interviews with everyone involved with the Project. Neither spoke to her or tried to prohibit her. Just how much had Dan'l taken care of? She wondered, rounding one of the legs of the crystal tripod base that shimmered in the combination of natural and artificial light. Samantha had to force herself to continue walking, when she really wanted to stop and examine the huge, pearlescent star point. Finding a side entrance to Operations, she made her way up several flights of utility stairs to the fourth level. A big blond man dressed in Master Mechanics' Trade Red coveralls passed her on the steps with a slight nod of his head. She recognized Cal Washington and silently watched the man move stiffly down the stairs without a word. Sam continued upward.

Again she became suspicious as she realized that people accepted her unauthorized presence on the holograph production stage. Was Dan'l's word the law? He'd been very reluctant to speak of his position, but he had worked in high security areas before. She had not pressed him during their last dinner.

With a mental shrug, she stepped pushed open a polysteel door and stepped out onto the roof. Standing on the roof of the building, Samantha found herself confronted with the spectacular structure called the DreaganStar Project.

Up close, the exterior of the sound stage resembled a gigantic single crystal sculpture with a cathedral-like appearance that created a feeling of awe within Sam. The gangway that stretched from the roof across to the sound stage's entrance was a common, portable metal access ramp with side rails. As she strolled casually toward the suspended walkway, she glanced around at the lunarscape and sky beyond the dome. Living underground, like other adjustments, caused some lunans to grow to fear the open spaces. Sam had no such sensations and even took time to appreciate the mostly barren, blue-gray vista of far-off mountains for just a moment. Next, she braved the gangplank to creep within the multifaceted structure.

She had been on holograph stages before, but had found only a few photos of this one on file. There had been plenty of pictures of the production area itself, but only three showed the areas behind the scenes. Stepping off the metal plank, she entered what looked like a functional pressure lock about two meters deep. The inner door

stood open wide, and she stopped to listen. She counted to thirty slowly, listening for any sound. Except for the hum of electrical systems, she heard nothing. Gathering a false courage, she checked for security beams and found none. Samantha stepped over the second lock and into Dreagan's private fantasy.

The white, gray, and blue room was oblong, and she stood at one end, staring for a while at the staging area that encompassed more than half of the opposite end. Some fifteen meters away on the far wall was a huge video screen. The compartment, so familiar from her research, seemed to echo Dreagan's fascinating episodes. Standing there, she took a moment to digest the possibility that she, too, had become one of Dreagan's fans. She took a deep breath and focused her mind. Then she carefully looked around the chamber. This stage was not at all what she had expected, not the usual video production studio. The place smelled of something like sweet spices, but she couldn't identify what exactly it was.

Halfway across the spacious room stood a semicircular computer console with three inlaid video monitors. A person using it would have their back to the door, she thought, glancing across the chamber at the huge view screen that covered the upper half of that wall. Lights and cameras had been suspended from the ceiling. That much she had expected. But the rest of the fictional vessel was furnished as one might expect of a space-going vehicle and very detailed in its decor. From where she stood near the door, to her left and hollowed out of one of the Star's appendages, was a spacious sleeping area decorated in blue hues and silver accents. Against the opposite wall were a compact kitchen and bright yellow dinette. Nearer to her on the same side stood a small work alcove that seemed to double as a desk. The whole area was tidy. Anything that might move, like a coffee cup or a spanner had been secured or fastened down.

Glancing at the main console, Sam saw three yellow lights flickering and what looked like a star map on one of the monitors. The computer looked completely functional.

Voices floated up on the still air and through the airlock and startled Sam back to the fact that she might be trespassing. Three males approached. She could hear their footsteps on the Operation's tower roof. The instinct to flee took over. Samantha

quickly bounced to the sleeping area, feeling like a stowaway, as boots sounded on the gangplank outside. She heard the sound of muffled laughter from the men as she slid around the high sleeping mats and ducked between them and the polysteel wall. Rolling on her side, she slid down on her right side, out of sight, and felt a tug on her left foot. In the next instant the men came into the main room, and she could only recognize Dreagan's voice of the three.

"...Unless that stabilizer acts up again," a deep rich baritone was saying. "Jon, are you sure this is right?"

"I've made up my mind, Cal," she heard Jonathan Dreagan reply. "It's my responsibility. The only way to solve that vibration problem is to test it under actual conditions. What else can we do? Build a derrick to rock the ship until you're satisfied? This will work, Cal. Believe me."

"And if it doesn't?" the deep voice asked grimly.

"Maybe I'll sell the whole goddamn mess and retire to some lovely desert isle planetside." Dreagan's voice sounded tired and bitter compared to the videos Samantha had studied. "Let's get on with it. What'd you want to check, Higgins?"

"Just some supplies," a nasally voice said. "I'll just be a moment."

One set of feet shuffled toward the kitchenette, and Sam could hear one of the others release a long sigh. She tried to soundlessly free her tangled left ankle from the cords that anchored the sleeping pads to the wall -- just as if it was a spaceship.

"Jon, I wish you'd reconsider," the baritone said sternly. "It's not just your life your risking."

"No life is being risked." He laughed in reply, and Sam heard the sound of cabinets closing. "Look, do your goddamn job, and I'll do mine." Dreagan let out a sigh of resignation. "Cal, I appreciate your concern. Dan'l and I went over those simulations on three separate occasions."

"And I heard that's not all you and that crazy old man went over. I don't like it. I don't, Jon. You can't change that. But I won't push this because I wouldn't want anyone else working on Star's engine. So, I'll play it your way. Come on, Higgins. Have a good flight, Jon."

Samantha listened to the footsteps signaling that Cal and Higgins had departed, while she turned the conversation over in her mind. *Stabilizers?* Probably for the cameras, she concluded. But, *Have a good flight?* She decided that Cal Washington must have been humoring Dreagan for some reason. Maybe the Founder had indeed gone mad, and his technicians merely played along in the game. Then, she heard the hatch hiss closed, and a lump formed in her throat. Footsteps crossed the big chamber. Sam held her breath.

"Star," Dreagan called. "Preflight check: Begin."

Various sounds of electronic activity sounded about the main room, and a second airlock sealed shut with a hiss. The floor began to vibrate slightly, and with that came an undercurrent of something like a powerful engine's rumble. Perspiration trickled down Samantha's back. Mental alarms clamored inside her, and she quickly rethought her situation.

"Preflight completed," the computer reported in a deep masculine tone.

"Three minute delay count to liftoff," was Dreagan's next order, his voice sounding a little closer. "Better give me minute reminders."

Liftoff? She laughed soundlessly, tangled in the bed's tie-down cords. What does he mean *liftoff?* She let out air slowly to calm the pounding in her chest. Silently, Samantha wondered how to unwrap the elasticized cords around her ankle without being seen.

"Where's my passenger, Star?" Dreagan asked, and she knew for sure that dear uncle Dan'l had set her up.

"There is someone reclined between your sleeping pad and the bulkhead," said the mechanical voice. "An unconventional position, but secure. Her foot seems to be stuck."

"My sleeping pad?" Dreagan laughed heartily. "Good evening, Doctor Alexander. I suggest you use the goddamn jump seat for liftoff. We'll be weightless in a short while, and I'll feel better if you're safely strapped in."

"Shades of Grey," she muttered with thoughts of strangling Dan'l as she tried to pull herself up gracefully to sit on the blue bed sheet with its silvery threads.

The anchoring cord tightened, allowing her to go no farther.

"Need a hand?" she heard Jon Dreagan ask, and she glanced over her shoulder to see him standing at the crescent-shaped computer console.

His face was expressionless.

"No," she muttered as she reached to free her trapped foot, unwinding the cord, and then throwing it to the gray polysteel floor.

Climbing to her feet, she felt hot blood flow into her cheeks. Samantha looked across the chamber to find the dark-haired Jonathan Dreagan smiling at his console. He activated the forward viewing screen with a wave of his hand over the console. Then he gestured her toward the two overstuffed jump seats between the console and the view screen, which now displayed the old port's domed bay and part of the Ops tower.

"I assume Dan'l told you of my visit," she chuckled at herself, feeling foolish as she casually crossed the chamber, head high and hoping to look dignified.

"I arranged it," he said with a disarmingly boyish grin. "Dan'l didn't think a 3-hour tour of part of the solar system would inconvenience you. I am your job right now. I hope you won't have any objections."

"An excursion?" she asked, as she suppressed the flush that had rushed to her cheeks. "What kind?"

"Jon," the computer interrupted. "Two minutes."

"The DreaganStar is a functional space craft," Dreagan explained, pushing back a black lock of hair. "She's experimental, of course. We're retesting some stabilization equipment -- Cal Washington's design. Care to come for the test flight?"

"You're telling me this oversized Christmas ornament flies?" She hesitated, stopping near the seats below the console, deciding as she watched his expression.

Shrugging, Dreagan bounced around the computer console during her silence and stood near one of the blue, soft-sculptured chairs. They actually had a gray harnesses installed on them, Samantha saw, impressed by his attention to the stage's detail.

"Believe it's a holo studio, if you wish, but in a minute the flight sequence locks the computer. You will be my shipmate for three hours of space flight, and you can't walk away."

The Founder settled into his seat.

Sam regarded the "boy genius," now in his early forties, as he began buckling himself into the jump seat farthest from her. Samantha noted that he held himself well and reminded herself that his Psych profile showed outstanding social adjustment. Those little eccentric behaviors known to be found in mental giants had been rumors.

"I need your decision," he said, grave-faced and grim. "Computer, audio count, please."

Dreagan stared directly at her, holding her eyes, and Samantha wanted to know what he was thinking. The computer began counting backward from forty-eight. The Founder relaxed in his chair. His deep-set, intelligent eyes watched her, and they held an uncomfortable intensity. He waited, smug.

Sam noticed that the second jump seat was a recent installation, and she remembered that of the two photos she'd seen of this specific area, both showed only one such chair. The off-centered position of the second jump seat in relation to his chair told Samantha that it was not only a more recent addition --it was an afterthought. She could see subtle design differences between the two chairs.

"I installed it for you today," he said evenly.

Glancing back to Jonathan Dreagan, she saw his confident smile. He waved a hand in the chair's direction. With a grin, she bounced over and flopped easily into the second chair, pulling the harness about her as the computer announced nineteen.

"Begin flight sequence," Dreagan ordered, grinning like a happy child.

Then he reached over to tug once on her harness. Samantha settled into the deep padding holding her breath with anticipation. Next, he tapped one of the seven buttons on the arm of his chair, and she gazed forward to the view screen. On the wide viewer cryptic information overlaid the scene of the operations area below. She conceded that maybe the Founder's flight of fantasy would be a pleasant diversion.

"There will be a mild G force for a lunar liftoff," he informed her with a glance sideways. "You're comfortable in free fall, aren't you, AshenGrey?"

"I've trained for it," she muttered, trying to keep the scorn from her tone.

"Once we're free of Luna, the ship will begin to tumble to simulate gravity. I prefer lunar gravity, but I can adjust it if you'd like."

"To Earth's? No thank you!" she sputtered in mock horror, then smiled. "Lunar G is fine, Dr. Dreagan."

"I thought as much," came his reply. "Star, is the dome cleared?"

"The dome is open."

"Lift off when ready, Star."

The holostage rumbled beneath Samantha's feet.

With that sound came a high-pitched electrical whine that was just short of deafening. Sam shook her head to clear its ringing. The whine persisted. When she covered her ears with her hands, Dr. Dreagan glanced at her. He shrugged sheepishly, then resumed watching the screen. She followed his gaze and watched Proteus shrink away.

Now, the gray surface of the moon fell away, and Samantha almost felt like she was flying. Dreagan had managed to simulate even the G forces that pushed against her body and a swaying sensation that the viewer angle mimicked. All that made her wonder how long she would have to go along with this game.

Come on, Alexander, she thought sarcastically to herself. *This crystal Christmas tree ornament doesn't fly. It can't.* But it was a damn fine simulation!

Relaxing in her seat, she reminded herself of her assignment and felt relieved that the interview had come so easily. Soon, the sound effects quieted down, and Dreagan pushed out of his harness effortlessly into zero gravity.

"Computer. Structural report," he called, pushing toward the airlock.

Sam wondered what he was up to.

"No indications of damage, Jon," the computer replied.

Sam freed her harness and swung over the computer console. The zero gravity seemed remarkably realistic, she thought, bouncing carefully to the floor and grabbing at the side of the console to stop her motions. Dreagan, who was opening a wall locker near the air lock, caught the movement in his peripheral vision and looked up, startled. He grinned, then pulled a white pressure suit from the closet. Samantha gently pushed to move closer.

"Not that I don't trust Dan'l's circuits, but I think I'll have a look." His eyes danced with amusement, as he donned the white p-suit. "I believe I told you a lie when I said you couldn't walk away. Care to take a walk?"

"In a p-suit, Doctor Dreagan?" she asked, floating to a stop by bumping her left palm gently against the airlock door. "Well, I'll admit your antigrav field is remarkably advanced. But a p-suit?"

"Antigrav field!" Dreagan laughed as he sealed his rare Trade White suit. "Trust me, AshenGrey Alexander; you will require the pressure suit. I feel responsible for your safety while you are on my ship."

Fishing inside the opened locker, Dreagan produced a second life-supporting suit in Trade Grey and floated it over to her. She'd decided to play it by ear as Dan'l had suggested, and quickly donned the Founder's second p-suit while reminding herself that this was Dreagan's game. She had to learn his rules first, and then she'd modify them to fit hers.

Once she had sealed the front of her small suit, she looked up to find his head encased in a delicate polybubble. He passed a second bubblehead to her and turned to the locker once more. While she sealed the helmet, he brought out a small electronic wristband and strapped it on. Next, he caught her arm, plugged a second device into her suit, and then wrapped it around her left wrist. She could hear his breathing within her bubble.

"Thought you'd prefer to communicate with more than just hand gestures," he whispered, checking the various seals on her p-suit with impersonal professionalism. "Volume check."

"Sounds good, Doctor. No need to whisper."

He took her arm and tweaked one of the micropods, then adjusted his own. She found herself amazed at his thoroughness in all of this, realizing that he truly believed his delusion of space flight. Maybe the Biggies of the Board knew more than they'd insinuated, she thought, working to stay stationary in zero gravity.

"Volume check, Star," Dreagan said while closing the locker.

"Where are we going, dressed like this?" she asked, sharper than necessary.

"Comm link, affirmative," the computer responded in her ears. "Still no indications of stabilizer malfunctions."

"Good." He seemed satisfied. "Open the airlock."

Only the inside oval hatch dilated open, and the Founder casually waved Samantha ahead. She pushed carefully against a camera mount and swam into the cube. Dreagan came through, then ordered the hatch pressure-sealed. The computer complied with a hiss sounding amazingly like a real air lock.

Hands touched Samantha's shoulder and spun her around, startling her. Dreagan attached a guideline tether to a ring on the waist of her suit. Securing it to a pad eye in the wall, he attached a second rope to himself, then clamped it in the airlock. Sam found herself trembling.

"Wouldn't want my first-mate drifting away," he chuckled, with a final check on the seal of her helmet. "Star, open outside airlock."

Dreagan's hand held tightly to her guideline as the two shielded doors slid sideways, and she gazed into the vacuum of space where Proteus should have been.

The arch of the Milky Way galaxy stretched brightly glistening across the flat black expanse of space. She'd only seen this from the portholes of the many Earth/Lunar shuttles she'd ridden in the last few years. She hadn't expected to step out into the complete nothingness that danced before her. Feeling nauseous, Samantha stepped backwards and slightly behind Dreagan while closing her eyes instinctively to center herself. Walking in space! She thought with delight at the reality of a childhood dream. Opening her eyes, she felt some disorientation and steeled herself against it. She swallowed once.

A hand on her arm steadied her, and she found dark eyes watching her with concern. She whispered that she would be all right in a moment and drew in a deep breath, exhaled and then drew in another.

"Are you certain you're okay?" J on Dreagan asked over the comm.

"This is like a dream, a childhood fantasy come true. Just give me a minute."

Looking around with newfound wonder, she couldn't distinguish Earth's moon in the distance. Dr. Dreagan wordlessly pointed in its direction. A dark gray speck, Luna shimmered in a pale halo of light, superimposed on the blue Earth.

"Feel free to wander, AshenGrey," Dreagan said. "Just stay on your leash, please. I'll be looking over Cal's goddamn problem child."

"I think I'll stay here, thank you," she muttered, concentrating to calm her heart and breathing while wishing he would watch his language.

With a shrug he turned away and climbed out along one of Star's hundred bright appendages. She gathered the strong maintenance tether tightly in her hands. The reality of the situation flooded into her mind, and she found herself holding her breath. Shaking off the impact, she became delighted with the sparkling universe all around her.

Jonathan Dreagan took his time with his examination for he was a thorough man.

Aside from the shuttles from Luna to Earth, outer space seemed an exciting new experience to Samantha. She'd read volumes on the cosmos, but never had the experience of becoming so intimately acquainted with it. And here it was, waiting to be lived and believed! Her initial shock had passed. She reviewed her basics in Zero Gravity Maneuvers and began experimenting with her twenty meter tether. Sighting her host almost thirty meters out on what seemed to be one of the largest star points, she felt more at ease and took the time to examine what she could of his amazing vessel.

Star's outer hull seemed constructed of a sturdy fabric she'd never seen before. Yes, a fabric! The silvery, almost transparent stuff stretched across and around the girders of the vessel. At times, she could almost make out the shapes of the electrical and mechanical equipment within the vessel's skin. Had the Founder invented a new substance, she wondered. Or had he simply discovered something yet unknown to the scientific community? The ship appeared sometimes white, sometimes blue, and sometimes silver against the black velvet backdrop. Easing into a relaxed state of mind, she made her way carefully across the many and varied lengths of star points on the surface of the craft. She wandered about the configuration of spokes, but she could not see any obvious pattern or sequences.

Jon Dreagan never spoke. She could hear the reassuring rhythm of his breathing, and she felt grateful for time to reevaluate her situation. Satisfying her limited scientific curiosity of the starship, she relaxed and allowed her body to drift on the tether. How this thing could lift off of Luna, let alone actually fly, was beyond her! The power plant had to be based in a whole new theory, she decided, and remembered that

Dreagan had referred to Dan's circuits. She felt proud of her old friend and very happy that he'd let her in on this little secret. Deep in thought, Sam heard Dreagan's soft voice in her earpiece.

"AshenGrey, how are you doing?"

"Just fine, Dreagan. I'm enjoying this wonderful dream." She chuckled, as he scooted easily across a larger crystal spoke near her. "How's Cal's problem?"

"Looks good. I guess the third time is a charm." He stopped, having reached the airlock. "Time to go back in."

"If you insist. It's beautiful. And so wide open." She gathered up her tether, and Dreagan reached to yank on her rope. "No, Dreagan, don't. Let's see if I can do this alone."

"Dreagan, is it?" he asked with an odd little chuckle.

"It fits. My friends call me Sammie."

"So does your Uncle Dan'l," he said, as she approached the lock with care.

"Would you mind if I called you Samantha?"

"If you wish." She sighed, not enamored with her given name. "What happens now?"

Dreagan gave her an odd side-glance as he caught her in his arms and swung her into the airlock. He took a moment to peer into her bubblehead before letting her go. After telling the computer to seal the outer doors, he released his tether. As space began to disappear behind polysteel doors, Sam successfully loosed her rope. Then, she glanced back for a last look before the polysteel hatch blocked the view.

"You don't scare easily," he remarked as the interior hatch dilated open into the ship. "Unusual in a female."

"I enjoy a good adventure now and then," she said, reaching to her helmet's releases.

"Don't those distinguished members of the Board of Directors intimidate you?" he asked, pulling off his.

"You scare me more," she admitted, yanking off the bubblehead. "You didn't answer my question, Dreagan."

"What happens now? Dan'l said you drink lemon twists." The man stripped off the pressure suit expertly, revealing his white coveralls. "Would you care for one? Now, your interview."

He headed for the kitchenette. Sam sought to focus herself.

After stowing her p-suit, she took another look at the ship's interior, but with a completely different perspective. Everything was as before her walk in the void, but now it made sense. Of course equipment and fixtures had to be secured before the flight, she reminded herself. Was this more than just another shuttle design?

The Founder called her to join him at the yellow dinette set. When she'd hopped across to him, Dreagan passed a plastic tumbler into her hand. Accepting the drink, she took the stool across the polysteel table from Jon Dreagan and looked at him with new but concealed interest, completely intrigued.

"What do you think of The DreaganStar now?" he asked with pride. "Not quite the ornament on top of the Christmas tree you first thought of it. Is it?"

"This answers a multitude of questions," she admitted after a sample of the lemon drink.

"Such as?" He sputtered a laugh over his coffee.

"Such as what the Founder of the Five Lunar Colonies is up to these days," she said happily. "I couldn't picture a man of your reputation settling down to being just a holo-actor."

"My reputation?" he asked with caution and a slight raise of his black eyebrows. His smile quickly returned.

"As an adventurer, inventor, and pioneer," she said.

"You know Groves wants to nail me?" He growled suddenly. "I won't let him in on this project. It's driving him nuts."

"I take it the Corporation doesn't own this experiment?" She studied his face.

"Bright girl!" Dreagan grinned, visibly pleased. "The DreaganStar Project is privately funded by your uncle, Cal, and me."

"Do you realize my assignment, as decreed by your Board of Directors?" she asked, trying to stay casual.

"I'm reasonably sure they want me committed." Dreagan leaned across the small table towards her, eyes drawn tight in speculation. "But do you know why, Doctor?"

"I have been wondering," she said. She leaned in toward him. "The Speaker would love to get the royalties from a new space drive, no doubt."

"Undoubtedly, but more." Dreagan sighed deeply and pushed back a dark lock of hair. "Amil and I go back too many days. He's a camp follower who used to be content just riding on my coattails. I'm sure greed is getting the better of the boy. But Groves wants my position."

"As Chairman?" she asked, keenly aware of his closeness, his natural smells, and intense scrutiny.

"And more," he said in a clandestine whisper.

She laughed, easing away from him and then drank some of the lemon twist.

"Careful, Dreagan. That's paranoid."

"On whose part? Mine or his?" he asked, not offended.

"You're my client, Dreagan. Tell me, why arrange for me to come with you?"

"Even up until that airlock opened, you believed what I want everyone to believe -- Star is simply a studio." His smile was gentle, but then he looked sternly at Sam. "I prefer that it stays that way."

"Right now, I have no problem with that, Dreagan. I want gigabits more data." And then it occurred to her that they weren't floating all around the ship. "How did you arrange for this artificial gravity?"

"I set Star to tumble while you were getting out of your p-suit." Dreagan hesitated slightly then continued. "I've discovered that someone broke into my personal file. Later the same day the Board members interviewed you. I'd like to discuss, er... Did you say you are more afraid of me than them?"

"Irrelevant. You're right about their motives -- especially Groves. Since you know why I am here, let me ask, why allow me? Surely, I must pose some threat?"

"I like adventure," he said with a rakish grin. "After Dan'I told me your background and probable temperament toward them." Now, his eyes squinted in disdain. "I decided to risk it. Besides, maybe I wonder about my precious sanity,

whatever it is. You, Samantha Alexander, have just become another pawn in Grove's sly game."

"Pawns sometimes checkmate, Dreagan," was her reply as she set her drink down for emphasis. "And don't be so sure I'm just a pawn. How do you feel about my observing you?"

"I'll cooperate, providing you stay out from underfoot when I'm in the 'fresher," he said with a grin that quickly transformed into a sneer. "Despite all our security precautions and late night tests, Groves now knows about The DreaganStar Project. I have no idea how long he'll keep quiet. You're not to discuss it with anyone."

"You're my client: I am legally bound to your privacy. Groves may not have allowed for that."

"Maybe, maybe not. He rarely misses a trick, that son of a..." He stopped and drank his coffee to drown his growl. "How much of my time will you require for your analysis?"

"I'll observe you in and out of your usual routine. It's best that way. A competency decision is not an easy judgment, Dreagan," she said, wondering about the mood swing he had just displayed. "I work best without time tables and restrictions, so if I get in your way, it's okay to tell me, and I'll move."

"Sounds workable. Would you like to take a fast flight out as far as Saturn? I'll have you home safe before 23:00. I have work to do in the morning."

"You're serious?" She laughed away internal stress, not really knowing if he was serious or not. She toyed with her tumbler, curious to see what he'd do with the silence.

"We've built an all new type of power plant into the Star. Saturn and back, with time for sightseeing, in two hours. And that is at less than quarter speed. You wanted to talk?"

"You're the pilot." She laughed to lessen her tension. "And yes, I think I'd really like to see Saturn."

"As you wish. Star, load flight program; Saturnalia, then comm the base." Dreagan took a long breath. "Washington?"

"Glad to hear you." The speaker in the computer console imitated Cal Washington's deep voice. "Any problems, Boss?"

"None, my friend. I went out and had a good look around, and so did the goddamn Psyche." Dreagan winked and motioned her to keep quiet. "Stand-down for about ninety minutes, will you? I'm taking her out for a spin."

"Show off! Okay. We'll break for a while and be back listening in one hour." Washington's deep voice sounded as Samantha finished her lemon twist. "You're paying overtime."

"Which means nothing," Dreagan laughed easily. "See you later. Computer, close comm. Implement Saturnalia."

Around them engines began to hum loudly, but not quite like in the takeoff sequence. Dreagan appeared to listen for a moment, then rose and went to the computer console in the main chamber. When he waved his hand above one of the sections, the humming ceased, and he returned to the small kitchen table where Sam waited, thinking.

"The jump seats are more comfortable," he said amiably, taking up their empty glasses. "And the view's much better."

"Did you install that second seat for me?" she asked, standing and stretching muscles left tense after a bad day.

"Couldn't have you bouncing around up here," he replied and began to replenish her drink from a miniature refrigerator.

"Sounds like you and Dan'l ganged up on me," she chuckled, wondering why he'd just emphasized her bouncing.

"The Board is ganging up on me. Groves thinks like that. Consider it self-defense on my part, Psyche."

"He can't force me to rule against you," she said as he passed her glass back to her. "That has to be based on my judgment."

"Don't be so damn naive," Dreagan growled, as he headed to the jump seats below the computer console while on the viewer, a spectacle of stars rotated. "Look, I realize the power your profession has gained in the last hundred years, but you'd better realize Groves plays for keeps."

"That's the only way I play, Dreagan," she responded heartily, settling in her seat and feeling flattered that it had been put there for her. "I still don't see why you're so agreeable to my presence."

"I can ... tolerate you underfoot because, ah ... of Dan's recommendations," he began, and she knew he'd wanted to say something else. "Your uncle is a shrewd man. Sometimes he's a better adviser to me than most of my goddamn administration staff. Loads of common sense."

"Not so common, is it?" she muttered trying to read his real intentions from his eyes and casual posture.

"But even more, Psyche, I realize the power of your profession. So does Amil, I'm afraid." Dreagan sat in his chair and frowned, looking out at the starfield. "I hope you have some political savvy, or you'll be ripped apart by my amoral Board of Directors."

"Is that a holograph out there?" she asked, trying to lighten the subject as well as change it.

"That's the real thing, right now, although I can throw holos or photos up there as well." Dreagan shuddered almost imperceptibly, and then sighed. "Tell you what, Psychologist, I'll pay you, say, 11,000 credits and passage to wherever you want, if you'll drop this case against me."

"Resign?" She kept from laughing.

"No guarantee of next possible position or occupation." He turned to her and added, "Is a gratuity unprofessional?"

"Barely legal, sir," she said hotly, then cooled her act down a notch. "And it can be very offensive."

"So, you are emotional! Good. That's not professional, though, is it?" Dreagan asked snidely, then leaned hungrily in her direction as his eyes swept the length of her body. "And if I decide to seduce you?"

Samantha pretended to shiver under his lusty gaze, sensing the adrenaline increase in her bloodstream. With regret she knew how good his idea sounded. She mentally ducked behind her professional shroud.

"No human has truly been seduced in the last hundred years, at least, Dreagan. But sex is great for tension release, you know." She watched his thoughtful amusement at that, then dared to add, "And what if I decide to seduce you? You are a very attractive man. In some ways." Dreagan shifted in his seat, smiling, and she knew she had to get that out of his mind fast. She hurried to add, "No, I don't want your gratuity. I'd be thrown out of my Trade. Besides, you may well prove to be my most fascinating case."

"So, do you think your Trade wants you to be my psychologist or to play my sex kitten?" The Founder smirked, easing back into his seat, then taking a deep breath.

"I always make my own decisions," she said in a cool tone, knowing she'd riled him, and feeling glad for it. "Not my Trade. And I don't make trades or sales."

"I could sweeten the offer," he suggested, turning in his seat to face her. "You're a Trade Master. I could supply you with private grants, fund projects."

"I am content financially, thank you. Your project has delighted my sense of adventure, and you can appreciate that." She laughed as his face brightened. "No, Dreagan. You can't buy me out. I'd like to even be able to be on board when you test Star at full throttle." She hesitated as a thought struck. "Why, if this ship is her and she, does IT have such a masculine-sounding audio response system?"

"Good question. Shows how you think." He chuckled, pushing back his black hair. "The computer's vocal is a combination of many of ours. Mine and Dan's mostly. We tried to give it a New England accent, but it's not working. Never looked at it that way." His eyes took a thoughtful glance back at the console, and then he shifted again to watch the stars on the front viewer.

"Why keep the ship a secret?" she asked after a bit.

"Industrial espionage. Structural and communications screw-ups. There have already been a few suspicious setbacks." He grimaced. "Some personnel injuries, too."

"Accidents?" she sighed, thinking here it comes.

"I don't accept that goddamn theory," he growled as she glanced at the viewer with its tumbling star field.

The man again grew silent. She watched his body carefully, and saw that he used some kind of relaxation technique. After several deep breaths, he blinked three times, then turned back to her, smiling.

"I'm sorry. It's been a long day." He released a deep sigh, continuing, "We could have been killed on take off."

"But we weren't," she chuckled then added in a serious tone. "Why are you trying to frighten me, Dreagan?"

"Your teachers should have taught you the goddamn answer to that, kitten," he muttered, rubbing his dark eyes. "And I thought you understood politics."

"I don't like politics, Dr. Dreagan. In fact, I disregard politicians most of the time. Low level power fanatics, most of them, and unable to compete at my Trade's level." She sounded truly bitter. "You think you have power struggles! Imagine, if you can, a hierarchy of professional manipulators at each other's throats. Grey is not my favorite color, Doctor. What I do for a living is my business -- only."

"Dan'l said he'd have to trick you into those coveralls, but we couldn't have you getting stopped by Security before you got up here." Dreagan chuckled softly. "We altered and dyed a pair of mine."

"You can't deny you ganged up on me," she said, pointing an index finger his way, watching for his reactions.

"In the interest of science, Doctor Alexander," he said with a tired sigh. "All in the interest of science."

"Providing it suits your interests," she muttered, wondering if biology was the science he had in mind. "And investments. That's your reputation too, Dreagan."

"I need to do more research on you. By the way, what have you been doing since they gave you my dossier? I expected you two days ago?"

"Researching the many public sides of Jonathan Dreagan."

"My exciting and phenomenal career?" His tone became sarcastic. "Did it make stimulating reading?"

"Might make an interesting documentary some day. Not my line of work, though. What plans do you have for me?"

He grinned wickedly, playfully bouncing his black eyebrows.

"Frankly, this sanity investigation is just short of being humorous to me. I've spent half my life under one kind of scrutiny or another." He stretched his legs and glanced in her direction. "Where would you like to start? Childhood? Sexual preference? Or perhaps religious attitudes?"

"I don't work that way, Dreagan. Show me how you control that main console."

"Absolutely not."

* * *

"So, you see it just doesn't work that way for me," Dreagan replied, as Sam settled into her jump seat. "I thoroughly enjoyed the hoax on the public, then laughed 'til I cried when I heard about their photo-realism award. They wanted to know who did the work, and I didn't have the heart to tell them my ship's computer did it. By the way, how much do you know about compu-psych?"

"I taught my first semester of college level when I was thirteen." She laughed at the memory. "What a joke!"

"How long ago? If you don't mind my asking." He brushed back that stubborn black forelock.

"Seven years worth of compu-psyche, Dreagan. I finished that degree at Montana University. Houston for Grad School, and Luna was my Doctorate."

"My report said you've been up here for a while." He looked at Samantha, straight on and serious. "What brought you from Tranquility to Proteus Colony?"

"I'd finished what I'd started. My superior felt that it was time for me to move on. Is that one of the moons or an asteroid?"

* * *

"I'm sorry, Dreagan. I just can't agree with your point of view. Must we continue the subject?"

"Your job is to listen. I don't understand how you can rationalize away the billions and billions of years." He paused a moment. "There's evidence that points to it

at every turn. Why, the dinosaurs existed and thrived for over six times what we have of man's recorded history. Then they vanished, in a mere instant by comparison."

"And we've tried to annihilate ourselves several times in many creative ways in just the last two hundred years," she reminded him, considering this new turn in their ongoing conversation. "Let's go back to your test flight. Why not Alpha Centauri? It's always seemed most logical place."

"Psyche, you know the shortest distance between two points is an arc. Goddamn ten year olds are taught that."

"But only when the measured distance is a significant percent of a spherical surface's radius. Shades of Grey, that's beautiful!" she breathed, mentally cringing at his language as the vessel passed through one of Saturn's rings, and the viewer sparked multicolored miniature explosions that swallowed her full attention. "You've invented some sort of protective energy shield?"

"Don't change the subject. That arc goes back to what I said earlier about navigation at faster-than-light speeds. Star, you'd better take us home."

"Must we?" she asked, pleading with her eyes, but he seemed to ignore this.

"Congratulations. You're the first woman to penetrate the rings of Saturn." Dreagan chuckled, watching her face as the ringed planet dominated the viewer. "Although, I'm not certain your name will make it into the records."

"No great shakes," she said with a shrug. "Can you stop the tumble so I can get a good look at her?"

"That means no gravity, woman," he warned, smiling.

"That's no great shake either."

* * *

"No, not that I can remember honestly," Dreagan replied. "Fighting didn't interest me, although a few times fast talking didn't seem to want to do it. No, I don't throw the goddamn first punch, but usually the last is mine."

"Would you mind your language, Dreagan?" She asked, getting out of the soft seat for another drink. "Are you happy with the way Luna's being run?"

"It's as good a program as any, considering the political messes planetside. There are very few laws about extraterrestrial real estate to date, but if that Japanese colony can regroup their forces and settle into a stable society, there will be some fool along shortly wanting to be proclaimed Man in the Moon and Supreme Ruler of Luna. I'm taking wagers, Psyche. Care to bet? I give good odds."

"Is that kitchen stocked?" she asked, ignoring his last question. "And more importantly, can you use it?"

"Got a hunger?" His tone was polite, his leer, happily lecherous. "We should be home in about forty-five minutes."

"One of our clients suicided in an airlock earlier this afternoon." Her stomach lurched in the unhappy and unpleasant memory. "I missed dinner, and now I'm ravenous."

"That suicide? Damn!" He breathed out slowly, looking into her with his intense dark eyes. "And I complained about my day! Let me get you something. Hot sandwiches?"

"Anything. And something alcoholic for dessert?"

* * *

"Well, anyway, I was thinking you may be useful in correcting the programming," Dreagan said, sitting at his workbench toying with some black box and two screwdrivers. "Tweaking the vocals a few octaves will give a sufficiently female sound to it. But the software will probably need revising."

"Programming a computer for emotional responses is notorious for backfiring on its programmer, Dreagan." She laughed, sitting on the floor a meter away from him. "Are you trying to set me up again?"

"Just a suggestion to keep you distracted when I'm in the middle of something important. You did express a desire to try this mode of travel again, didn't you?"

"While you'd reap the benefits of my work?" She felt her mouth turn down in a scowl. "Is this another form of bribe?"

"You'll be paid fairly," he said as he turned the fist-sized box, examining it closely.

"I'm being paid to investigate you." She leaned against the wall as she munched a meatroll. "One job at a time."

"Touchy?" he asked, tweaking the *whatsit* gently with the small red screwdriver.

"In touch with my emotions," she replied, wondering just what he thought of her. "There's a difference. Do you have a regular routine to relieve stress?"

"Not what you'd call regular, no. Sometimes Cal and I pack up two or three air tanks and take a hike over toward the high ridges just outside of NewPort."

"I'd like to try that," she said, finally beginning to feel the alcohol's effect. "Tell me about you and Cal."

"Damn! I forgot all about him. Star?"

"Yes, Jon?" the male-sounding computer asked.

"Open communications to home base," Dreagan ordered loudly while securing the black box in a storage container. "General Washington. Are you there?"

"Quaint little nickname," she commented, watching the big screen as they glided across Mars' orbit -- according to the superimposed star map on the viewer.

"Quiet, woman." But he winked, and then glanced at his computer console. "You there, Cal?"

The speaker crackled, but no human sounds came. Dreagan frowned and thoughtfully pushed his hair out of his eyes while muttering a string of curses under his breath. Then, he glanced her way and smiled sheepishly.

"Sorry about that," he muttered. "I guess cussing just seems to come naturally to me."

"It's a stupid habit, and one I've asked you not --"

"I know," Dreagan growled. "I said I'd work on it. Right now, I need my ground crew. Star?"

"Communications check out fine," the masculine voice reported in its monotone. "They *are* receiving."

"Still out to dinner." Dreagan sighed as he moved away from the work area. "All right, Star, call at thirty second intervals until someone responds. Now, where were we?"

"Can you land this ship without your ground crew?" she asked and moved to join Dreagan at his vessel's control panel.

"Sure. Star can open her space bay doors, glide in, and touch down completely on her own, if necessary."

"Wise piece of programming," she put in, looking over his shoulder at the control panels.

Dreagan had encrypted all the labels on the console into a code that Samantha couldn't read. Multicolored lines connected several large triangles. Some triangles held red, yellow, or green buttons. Other triangles, the inverted ones, were blank, and Sam decided they might indicate some inactive systems. A lone blue triangle to Dreagan's right looked like it was full of fluttering clouds.

"I try to think of all possible contingencies, so my ass is covered if an emergency arises," Dreagan said soberly. "Too many possibilities. Where's your drink?"

"Cleaned and stowed. Yours too, Captain."

"Don't call me that!" The dark-haired man spat, as he maneuvered himself to a standing position at his console. "Prepare for landing. Into your jump seat, Psyche."

"You insist on calling me that, don't you?" She laughed, moving toward the blue chairs.

"Well, you said you didn't like *Kitten*," came his happy reply as Dreagan's hands danced over the console display.

She stuck her tongue out at him. Suppressing a giggle, Samantha eased into the soft jump seat, then secured the harness. Twisting in the chair, she found the man looking questioningly at her, and she passed him a slight smile. His expression was one of satisfaction, and it left her wondering again what went on in that marvelous mind of his.

"General Washington here, Jon." The comm speaker crackled suddenly in Cal's deep voice, startling Sam. "What's your ETA?"

"Star, respond." Dreagan whispered, then the computer using Dreagan's voice, replied that they would be home in fourteen minutes, thirty seconds.

She was watching the man at the time. He had not moved his mouth. The computer had mimicked him perfectly, and her mind raced with the possible implications. Dark eyes met hers as it happened, and the Founder grinned.

"Washington, let's try the Blind-flight maneuver," Dreagan said in an even tone. "Clear the bay. P-suits for all the crew. This is a test."

The voice on the other end hesitated, and her host winked in her direction, as if to assure her. Sam appreciated the gesture while she turned to watch their fast approach to Sol's third planet.

"Blind-flight, it is, Doctor D." Cal Washington sighed. "Yell if you need anything."

"Right. See you on the ground, General." She heard Dreagan chuckle as the big blue planet's size increased at a disturbing rate on the screen in front of her.

"Hope this thing has good brakes," she muttered.

"Star should begin braking in about seven seconds," Dreagan said as the console behind her beeped twice. "Good work, Star. Nice and steady now."

Beneath Samantha, the deck trembled slightly, and the sound of engines filled the compartment with that painfully shrill pitch. She cupped her ears to deaden the piercing whine. Star circled the planet twice in the next eight earsplitting minutes, and the sight of it gave her a touch of indigestion. Then they shifted trajectory and began orbiting the moon. Their speed had reduced by this time so that they circled Luna only once, and her stomach calmed. The cabin fell silent except for the background music, some classical symphony.

"Whooeee, Dreagan!" She laughed, eyeing the genius. "Nice brakes! Is that standard landing procedure?"

"Kinda fun, huh?" he asked with a big, handsome grin.

"Best roller-coaster I've ever been on!"

"You don't scare easily, do you?" he asked, waving a hand over the console.

"You asked that before," she said, avoiding his question. "I thought you were letting the ship land itself."

"I am, Kitten," he muttered watching his instruments. "Just keeping an eye on things."

Is that what he thinks I am? His sex kitten? She thought. "Don't call me that," she muttered.

On the huge front monitor she could now make out the three-dimensional outline of the new spaceport below them, and as if he read her mind, Dreagan mentioned that they were passing over it. But they were still high above the gray surface, and the moon spun slower as they descended, their speed decreasing rapidly.

"This is amazing," she heard herself mutter as they passed over a solitary transparent bubble on the satellite's surface. Samantha recognized Star's home bay, the original spaceport.

As the internal engine of the ship growled loudly, the vessel stopped just south of her bay, suspended about one hundred meters above the ground and the same distance from the bubble. In the monitor she could see the great clear dome's door yawning open to receive them.

Effortlessly, the preposterous craft glided into the bay, settling next to the familiar Operations tower. While space-suited men scurried onto the tower roof to bring up the gangplank, the dome rolled closed. Samantha sat observing all this from the interior of the ship, perplexed and awestruck. She was developing a headache.

The interior lighting blinked momentarily, and she turned to regard the man who worked silently at the computer console. His dark features, shadowed by the angle of his head, struck her as most unusual and definitely attractive. Immediately, she suppressed that, knowing that a personal involvement would only complicate the business at hand. The words of her own supervisor rang in her head, warning her not to become emotionally or romantically involved with this man. The cost that the HazeGrey had demanded in payment, should she disobeyed his decree, was her career --far too dear a price. She truly liked her job and wanted to keep it.

"Ready to leave?" Dreagan asked, straightening and catching her eyes with his dark, deep-set ones.

"I'm sad to see this end," she admitted, reaching to unbuckle her safety harness.

When she looked up again, he told Star to open the inner hatch. She slipped from the seat and was making for the door when the man turned back to her and smiled. His features softened briefly as he watched her approach.

"Maybe you'll come on another test flight," he said quietly and reached to take her hand. "I've always flown alone. Kind of nice to have company."

Jon Dreagan bent slightly, raising her hand. Gently pressuring her palm with his thumb, he turned her hand and brought it toward his lips. Samantha stiffened slightly, unsure of how psychologically stable the man was. Soft, warm lips kissed the inside of her right wrist, sending waves of sensuous shivers through her. Dark eyes laughed up at hers.

"I'd like that." She gasped, torn between delight and duty.

"Like this?" His caressing continued.

"Mmm. I'd like to ... ah ... go on another flight with you."

Heat followed the soft lips edging into her palm.

"Dr. Dreagan!" Sam said loudly.

He dropped her hand suddenly and turned his back on her, facing the airlock.

Sam stood speechless, forcing her trembling body to be calm, while Dreagan told the computer to open the outer lock.

* * *

Five empty champagne bottles sat in a tight pattern on the briefing room table. So did Uncle Dan'l, himself a bit tight. The few remaining ground crew, as well as Dreagan, all seemed to be in various degrees of drunkenness. The men celebrated the successful test flight, while Samantha tried to numb the returning visions of a woman's dismembered body, from her earlier workday. She knew Dan'l understood. He'd simply stated quietly when they first met after the flight that he'd heard about her bloody day and would understand if she got drunk. She'd be taken home.

Dreagan climbed to his feet and gazed down at his big blond engineer who some considered his closest friend. Washington stayed sober, drinking great quantities of water and laughing while they killed the last of the champagne. She'd been watching

the large man, familiar with his background, and found herself having a difficult time liking him. She knew she'd have to evaluate her reasons at a more rational time.

"Anybody seen Carlos?" Dreagan called, playfully pushing Cal's booted feet off the table.

"Here, sir."

Immediately, an older man stepped into the room. Dressed in a Trade Black uniform with Security Master's insignia, Carlos should have retired years ago by Earth standards. The lighter gravity of their moon had provided a new haven for the elderly, making it easier for the physically weak to stay a functioning part of their society. According to the files, Cal Washington was one of those who would have been wheelchair-bound planetside.

Jonathan Dreagan slapped Cal on the shoulder then glanced in her direction.

"Cal, see that my AshenGrey gets safely to her cubby. Her place is on your way." He nudged Dan'l then gestured for Carlos to get moving. Then he pointed a finger at Washington. "Precious cargo, General. Take care of her. Good night, troops. Come on, Dan'l, I'll drop you off at your place."

Samantha watched Washington struggle to maintain a poker face.

Those three men headed out the door, followed by the last two ground crew and the dark-haired apprentice, Todd Abrams. Getting to her feet, she carried two of the bottles to the trash recycler and zapped them, wishing this particular invention of Dreagan's could be marketed. Its high-energy consumption kept it from being economically feasible for mass distribution.

As Sam wondered what Dreagan would be saying to her uncle, another bottle was thrown into the recycling unit by the huge blond engineer.

"If you move, I'll get the rest," Cal said from his seat at the briefing table.

She sidestepped quickly to avoid being hit by the flying plastic cups, as Cal Washington expertly tossed item after item into the bin. His face lit with childlike glee. She moved for the door, now uncomfortable.

"Where's your cart?" she asked after the last of the trash had hit the beam.

"We'll take the duty van," he muttered in his deep voice as he pulled himself onto his feet with an ease that belied his physical condition. "Out with you, little woman, so I can lock up."

* * *

The ride home went quickly. She'd had no idea how tired she really was, until it all came on her at once. The champagne only amplified her fatigue. Washington kept quiet, driving at maximum limits, maybe more, while she considered making a fast trip planetside to clear her head of the Cockran case and prepare for the Dreagan Triad. No doubt the Biggies of the Board would force a trial, she'd decided, wondering who'd sit the prosecution's bench.

Washington spoke, but she missed what he'd said, and asked him to repeat.

"Lost in thought, huh?" he chuckled in a rich voice. "I asked what you thought of your flight."

"Sorry, thinking about the Cockran business. The flight? Wow! Where to begin? Fantastic isn't a strong enough word. Neither is incredible or wondrous." Here, she laughed and glanced at the driver of the van. "Maybe in a few days I'll find the best words, huh?"

Washington chuckled low.

"Did Jon tell you I wouldn't fly in it?" He asked.

"Really!" Her professional interests woke and, intrigued, she asked, "But, didn't you design its new power plant?"

"I did. But I don't care to risk the fragile safety I have here on the moon," the curly-haired man explained. "I have Carlton's Syndrome."

"I've seen what that disease can do," she told him, not adding that she was already aware of his condition. "An extremely regrettable illness."

"Well, if I'm injured there's no hope of my body mending itself. I can't take the chance."

She understood, and said so, as he turned the small van up the grade that lead to her housing complex. Wondering why he seemed to try to justify himself to her, she turned in the seat to study the huge man.

"But don't you wish you could fly in the Star?"

"That's The DreaganStar Project to you. And NO! I won't fly in it." His hostility startled her and yet left her curious. "I refuse to," Washington added quietly. "Jon understands most of the answers to your question of WHY."

"Most of them?" she asked, intrigued as he skidded the van to a halt. "But do YOU know all your reasons?"

"That's not your concern."

"It was an unbelievable two hours. Thank you for your part in it."

"Sure. And yeah, I know all my reasons for not flying in that death trap. It's not that safe, you know."

"What makes you say that?" She released her seat belt.

Washington's square jaw worked in the silence for a moment, then he turned toward Samantha, a pained look on his face.

"I didn't mean for that to come out the way it sounded, AshenGrey," he stammered quickly as he leaned too close. "What I meant is that you've got to understand that it's an experimental, faster-than-light vessel. That's a whole new world that nobody, not even a genius of Jon's caliber, can imagine. It's just not that safe. Understand?"

His attempt at intimidation registered within her rather than his correction of a misunderstanding. But she assured him that she did understand that he wanted her to grasp the dangers of the research they were conducting. Then, she swung out of the van, saying good night to the big engineer and made her way, head spinning, to her cubby. Only after she'd closed and locked her front door did she hear his electric cart move away from the complex. She liked the feeling of security, but she found herself not wanting to be escorted anywhere by that man again. Her instincts said that there was more there than the man let on.

CHAPTER 3

POSTFLIGHT

Seven days later Sam finally talked to Jon Dreagan again. She had taken some leave, went planetside and spent days roaming through the high Montana Rockies on horseback. The Earth's gravity was difficult to bear after Luna's, and she needed to fight it to work out her frustrations. Exhaustion would then force her into hours of restive thought. Three days of this work hard, think hard cycle under the rural Montana sky, melted away more tension for Samantha than two weeks at the casinos of Luna colony Tranquility. She'd learned early that talking to Daddy usually sorted out her thinking, and Mom's physical presence brought feelings of love and security. And, she knew that living for long periods on Luna caused difficult gravitational adjustments, when returning to Earth in later life.

Once her parents had passed on, she admitted to herself, she'd have no real reason to be planetside again. Daddy had no desire to extend his life expectancy by moving to the moon and enjoying one-sixth the weight of his body and the relief that would give him. Weightlessness scared him to death, he'd told her. He was just that way. Mom, on the other hand, confided that she'd be up there with Samantha if not for him. She was just that way. Nice people.

When she returned, Luna felt wonderfully like home to her fatigued muscles. It was almost as if she had spent the time at a holistic spa, but she had no intentions of attacking her assignment just yet. She considered contacting Dreagan, but ran a check on his name in the Media Library instead. Her hermit-like client had been seen about Proteus twice, the Media reported. The photo showed a man in the background who looked suspiciously like Cal Washington. Apparently Jon Dreagan had taken Star's crew out and celebrated the night away. She was pleased that his stabilization problem had been solved and surprised herself. Her conscious desire was not to become emotionally involved. Dreagan's mood swing from passionate to aloof just before they'd