Chapter One

SY. 1001.010905

A-Central

 Premier Suron Topan stepped out of his car and took a deep breath of the morning air. Not that he actually needed to. His android form supplied all the oxygen his brain required. But, the thought was there and the act was performed.

 He headed for the building, unaware of the gun-sight lined up on his back.

 He never reached the doors.

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The Dickess Estate

 The smell of Beverly’s hair was in Yaska’s face as the alarm went off- combined with the buzz of the video-tel. Yaska groaned and tried to bury his face in his lady’s hair.

 “Oh…” Bev reluctantly moved aside. “Better answer the beast, Luv’.”

 A second groan escaped the Commander.

 He answered the ‘tel as Beverly turned off the alarm. Tony’s image appeared on the screen. “Yeah, Tony?”

 It took Tony 2 tries to say it. “Topan’s been shot.”

 It took a moment for that to register with Yaska. “Is he alive?”

 “Dr. Horkan says ‘Yes’.”

 Yaska sighed in relief. “Seal the city, Tony. As of now, the town’s under martial law- no one leaves.”

 “Boss, you can’t- “

 “Chapter 12, section 9 of the Security Charter,” the Commander said. “In the event the Planetary Premier is incapacitated by unnatural means, the Security Commander has the authority- and the duty- to assume control until the situation is resolved or a new Premier is chosen.

 “Do it, Tony.”

 “All right. Where will you be?”

 “Grosen General, then A-Central.” Yaska then shut off the ‘tel and turned- to see Bev waiting with his clothes in hand.

 Moments later, he was dressed and out of the house.

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The *DSC Nilagela*

 April sat down at the Mess table- her breakfast in front of her along with a portable terminal she had set to record the ship’s log. As she reached for her juice with one hand, she activated the device with the other.

 “Standard Year 1001.010905;

 “This morning, finds us just outside the Alnix System. According to all the information we have, this is where my Aunt Susan and Uncle Sam ran into trouble 14 months ago.

 “Captain Garner has parked the squadron outside the system as scans are taken to determine if there are any other ships in the area besides us.

 “Garner’s hope that Kameele could add to the information supplied by her ship was only moderately founded. Alnix-9 was her home until two years ago when the Exciles began raiding her world for minerals and slave labor. Kameele’s family and their shipmates were escaping from the labor camps on another world in this sector- Dirus- 3- when they were attacked.

 “During the past month, Kameele seems to have adjusted to life on board. Officers in all departments have volunteered an hour of their off-time to give her an Alliance-oriented education. Since all on board are experts in their fields, the instruction should be of the highest quality.”

 “Hello.” April looked up from her meal and turned off the terminal as Kameele sat down at the table- her vegetarian breakfast on the tray in her hands. The cadet uniform she now wore- yellow shirt and jumpsuit, had out of necessity, replaced her old clothes some weeks back.

 “Good morning,” the Captain greeted. “How go the studies?”

 “Good,” the blue-skinned girl answered. “I like them.”

 April smiled. “I’m glad. Captain Garner wants to enter orbit in about four hours. He’s left it up to you whether or not you want to go down to the surface with us.”

 “I want to see it again,” Kameele said. “This may be the last time.”

 The red head laid her spoon aside. “Well, I’ll tell you, Kitten, don’t expect nice neat cities ready to be lived in. Chances are, the cities are all rubble and dust. You have to be ready for that- and expect it.”

 As the girl nodded, the intercom buzzed. “Control Center to Captain.”

 April walked over and activated the wall unit. “Dickess here, Mr. Harden.”

 “Captain Garner has given the order to move in, Ma’am.”

 “Do so, “April ordered. “I’ll be in Center shortly.”

 “Yes, Ma’am. Control Center out.”

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Chapter Two

Liminien, Dragoon

Grosen General Hospital

 Yaska entered the building and his telepathy instantly locked on Dr. Horkan. He found the older male just coming from a treatment room. “Doc?”

 “Your godfather’s brain is undamaged,” the doctor told him. “His android form- specifically, that part of the system that allows movement, took most of the damage. His brain is getting oxygen and he is conscious. There’s not much more I can do- Dr. Edrics is on his way to make the repairs.”

 “Could you record a blast- “ he broke off as the doctor handed him the very recording he was asking for. “I thought your systems were still down?”

 “From a portable unit Dea sent over,” the doctor replied.

 Yaska nodded as he accepted the disc. “Can I see him?”

 “He can’t talk.”

 The Commander’s eye brow rose. “I don’t need speech.”

 \*

 Premier Topan’s android form lay face down on a treatment couch. As Yaska entered the room, his eyes went to the charred back and exposed circuitry. (“Godfather?”)

 (“Yaska? Glad yo know *someone* can still reach me. What’s going on, son?”)

(“I’ve invoked Section 9. The city’s locked down. Dr. Edrics is on his way. The entire security force is just waiting for word.

 (“Do you know what happened?”)

 If Topan could still shrug, he would have. (“I got out of my car, headed for the office- and everything went black. Not much help I it?”)

 Yaska had to concede the point.(“No sir. But we’ll find him.”)

 (“Take care of our planet, Yaska.”)

 (“Don’t worry, sir. It’ll be here when you’re ready for it.”) With that, Yaska then left the room- passing two hospital security guards as he did so.

 \*

 Two floors down, Dr. Horkan had joined Mylan and the two watched as the computer maintenance crew completed their month- long examination of the system. The Chief of staff spoke as the head of the team came from the computer room. “Well, Saul? What’s wrong with it?”

 The Human shook his head. “Nothing.”

 “That can’t be,” Mylan complained. “It gave us the same test results for two different patients.”

 Saul Windon spoke to the Wayison female as he watched his crew pack up their equipment. “You sure it wasn’t the same patient using two different names?”

 “Yes, we’re sure,” Horkan stated. “One of the patients is Jennifer Dickess.”

 “One of the Commander’s daughters?” The technician shook his head. “I don’t know then. But this system’s in A-1 condition.”

 Horkan sighed and nodded. “All right. Thanks, Saul.”

 As the team moved off, Mylan turned to her superior. “If the system is in perfect- “

 “I don’t know,” The Dregan male replied. “We’ve looked at it from every possible angle-“ His eyes suddenly widened. “Or have we? Gather everything you can find on Scalone- from Jenny changing him to female form right up to those test results. I’ll do the same for Jenny. Be in my office in two hours- if not sooner.”

 “Yes, Doctor.” the two then went their own ways, each set to their own task.

 \*

 Elsewhere in the city, the sniper moved down the street, the gun he used, hidden under the cloak he was wearing. Coming to an alley, he started down it, constantly looking behind him as he did so. A garbage bin stood to one side. The gun was thrown into this.

 He turned to look around once more- and saw a Dregan female walking down the street. In the process of his turn, the hood of his cloak fell back. At the ame moment, the female saw him.

 The Excile was on her in an instant.

 \*

The Dickess Estate

 Daniel came downstairs in the uniform of an Academy cadet. Today was the first day of classes. He entered the dinning room, to find Jenny, Zeft and Beverly at breakfast. There was somebody missing. “Where’s Dad?”

 “Somebody tried to kill the Premier this mornin’,” Bev told him as she drank her coffee.

 “But he was going to take me to school today,” Daniel complained. He turned to his sister. “ Jen-?”

 She held up her hands to stave off his request. “Sorry, Pal. I’m grounded till they get my test results straightened out.”

 Beverly looked from sister to brother. “I can take ya. I have ta go into the office anyway.”

 The boy thought about that for a moment and then nodded. “Okay.”

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 Chapter Three

 The Excile sniper slowed as he neared the public docks. With his hood back in place, no one could see enough of him to tell who or what he was. He stopped at the sight of the security members stationed along the walkway.

 There would be no escape that way.

 He turned and slowly walked away.

 \*

 Zan turned away from the garbage bin as Yaska drove up and got out of hiscar. One look at the rifle and the female Dregan’s corpse was all he needed. He turned to P-10 Leader. “Talk to me.”

 “A street person was looking for recyclable material she could sell,” the Princess reported. “She called us the moment she found them.”

 “Get the rifle to A-Central and the body to the morgue,” Yaska told her. “Tell them to run every test they can think of.”

 She nodded. “Right away.”

 \*

The STC

 The Excile came to a stop- his eyes on the closed gates and the guards in front of them. He swore under his breath. If he’d killed anyone else, he would have been off planet by now.

 “Hey you! In the cloak!” The male pulled a gun from under his cloak and fired as he ran from the members of P-6 that had spotted him. They gave chase till one died with his chest fired and the survivor lost their quarry in the Interplanetary Market.

 \*

The *DSC Nilagela*

 All eyes were on the Central Monitor as Alnix-9 grew larger- and closer. April looked over to where Kameele stood by her side, her eyes on the transmitted view of her homeworld. “Still want to come?” the red head asked.

 The girl looked up at her- and nodded.

 April took her hand. “Come on then. We have to join Captain Garner and the others aboard the *Solstice*.” The Captain then spoke to her First Officer as he stood on the lower deck. “Mr. Harden, until I return, you’ll take your orders from Captain Meddleston. If he orders you to Break and Run, then Mister I expect you to Break and Run. Is that clear?”

 After a moment, Harden nodded. “Yes, Ma’am.”

 April looked down at Kameele. “Let’s go, Kitten.”

 \*

Liminien, Dragoon

A-Central

 Tony rose to his feet as Yaska entered the office. “our boy’s been sighted, Commander.” P-1’s Sec-Com then reported on the encounter at the STC.

 “Any idea who he is?” Yaska asked as he approached his desk.

 The Human cold only shake his head. ‘No. That hooded cloak pretty much hides everything.”

 The intercom buzzed. “Yes, Dea?”

 “Zan is here, Yaska.”

 “Send her in. “He and Tony both turned toward the office door as the Confederate Female came in. “The blast pattern from Premier Topan’s attack matches the rifle we found in the garbage bin, “ the Princess said right off.

 “And what have you found out about the rifle?” Yaska asked.

 “It’s Excile in make,” P-10 Leader stated. “Metallurgical and chemical analysis matches with elements in the fighter that crashed in the jungle 3 months ago.”

 Yaska looked from one to the other and said two words; “Find him.”

 \*

Chapter Four

Alnix-9

 The scoutship touched down and taxied to a stop. Once the hatch was open, two security guards jumped out as if their lives depended on it. Garner, April and Kameele followed with Captain Wirden bringing up the rear. The six moved off into the ruins that had once been a city.

 Unconsciously, Kameele reached out and took April’s hand.

 The ruins stretched as far as they could see. One wall, sometimes two, were all that were left of some buildings as piles of rock and rubble blocked the smaller side streets completely.

 One of the guards called out and the others headed toward him and his find.

 A space suited form whose chest had been blown away.

 April turned away the moment she saw it.”April?” Kameele called to her, her hand going to the Human’s arm.

 “That’s an Alliance space suit,” April told her. “That’s my uncle lying there.”

 Kameele looked back at the body, then up at her friend. They hugged each other as Captain Garner came up beside them. “April, I- “

 An alarm cut the senior Captain off as it sliced through the air calling everyone’s attention to the scout. “The automatic relay from the *Solstice,”* Garner stated. “Something’s entered the system. Everyone back to the ship.”

 They ran back to the scoutship as fast as they could. Within moments, they were headed for Space.

 \*

Liminien, Dragoon

 The Excile moved through the shadowed alleys- his eyes open and alert for any sign of a security uniform. He reached Frontier blvd. And hesitated. Where could he go? The city was sealed tighter than a vacuum bottle. He’d seen fighters over head and knew that even if he *had* gotten into the STC and stolen a ship, it would have been shot down.

 His only remaining choice was to hide right there in the city. But where?

 An energy burst exploded at his feet and he spun to see 3 members of Patrol Two coming toward him. He ran toward the river as the patrol used radios to call ahead. The Excile left Frontier Blvd. For 25th Street, then 72nd. An energy burst struck a nearby street lamp.

 He smiled- his long snout splitting to reveal to long lines of teeth- as he spotted the warehouses on the river bank.

 Patrol One joined P-2 as they began searching the area. With the exception of cars on Jaction Ave., there was no noise as the patrol moved along.

 The assassin watched from the second floor of an abandoned warehouse. He remained as still as a stature- letting silence do what running could not. He stayed there long after the security force had been lost to view.

 The Excile left the warehouse and moved off- away from the patrols. He’d only gone a short way, when he spotted a cab sitting by the curb- the driver eating his lunch. The Dregan male was never aware if his natural enemy as the assassin raised his pistol and fired it’s last burst.

 Within moments, the body had been dumped and the car driven away.

 \*

The *DSC Nilagela*

 April and Kameele hurried through the corridors as crew ran to their stations and the red alert siren screamed on every deck. “Report!” April ordered as the two entered the Control Center.

 Harden looked up as she and Kameele stood behind the Captain’s Console. “Scans show 8 Excile warships entering the system. One of the artificial satellites in the system must be some kind of sensor relay- a sentry.”

 April looked over and down at O’sar. “Anything from Captain Garner?”

 “Neg- wait. Message coming in now.”

 “Garner to all ships. We’re at 2-to-1 odds. Break and Run- repeat, Break and Run- and good luck.”

 The *Nilagela’s* red headed captain looked around the Control Center. “You heard the man. Break orbit. Come to course 096, full speed.”

 “Acknowledged,” said the navigator as his hands flew over his console.

 The 4 Alliance starcruisers scattered- each with 2 enemy ships on their tails.

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