

DESCENT INTO DARKNESS

PROLOGUE

YEAR 2085 CE – WESSELAN, DENEb7, DENEbIAN SOLAR SYSTEM—CYGNUS CONSTELLATION

Colonel Pallav Kóbor, newly promoted Inspector of the Wessel Defence Force, coughed. The stench of the smouldering remains of the Great Plains Army Base lingered in his nostrils, its taste still acrid, rising like bile in his throat. Blinking, he tried to banish the horror from his mind's eye—the tendrils of thick black smoke snaking from twisted funeral pyres upon which vehicles and equipment had burned with such fierce intensity that they were rendered unrecognizable. And on top of it all—the telltale aroma of roasting humanoid flesh, so reminiscent of the grilled steaks that he used to throw on the barbecue for his wife Tara and their two teens in the time he thought of as “the Before”.

That was when days lasted twenty-four hours, and he could sit out on the back deck with a cold beer listening to old country tunes while the sun sank behind the moss-covered oaks. Five years ago and how his life had changed. In the Before, he was NASA's Chief of Security in the United States of North America. That was until his wife decided to partner up with Dr. Daniel Radu and kidnap him and his colleagues from the Space Ark Project and before they were unwillingly transported thousands of light-years from Earth to arrive three years later on alien shores. Except there were very few shores on the desert planet of Deneb7, and most of them were located in his new homeland, the powerful and warlike nation of Wesselan.

Power, recognition, prestige: they were all his here in this new world. Yet for everything there is a cost, and Pallav struggled to banish the memories of the terror that he had unwittingly released, to fight the ghosts of yesterday and to be the man they thought he was. And so he coughed again seeking relief, while Tara handed him a handkerchief and their little Wesselan foster child Jolanta stared up at him with her great luminous opalescent eyes.

“You gonna be okay?” his wife asked, narrowing her eyes knowingly.

Pallav shrugged. He could never trick her. Tara: the beautiful dark-haired, doe-eyed love of his life. The Nobel Prize-winning astrophysicist who married her high school sweetheart and carried him along on her astronomical rise to fame. All the way to NASA, where her research discovered those very special Earth-like planets nestled in the Goldilocks zone of their stars: rocky orbs where water flowed all wrapped up under a nice, cozy atmospheric blanket so that humans could set up shop in comfort.

And humanity needed that. It wasn't long after Tara's discovery that Earth shuddered in Her death throes. Entire countries had fallen to the relentless assault of the oceans, the scaled denizens of Neptune's realm now sole inheritors of the once-prosperous cities where human feet had trod what had been terra firma. As the waves lapped against the vacant buildings, slowly caressing them with their watery embrace, millions upon millions of people streamed into the heartland of the continents where they sought refuge against the unyielding onslaught of the oceans.

A reprieve. A temporary victory. For Earth had not finished punishing Her children for the transgressions humanity had unleashed upon Her. The years marched forward, a mere blink of an eye for the rocky planet third from the sun, while deep within the continents new cities erupted from the heat-scorched land like a pox on Her skin. In Her feverish state, the fiery breath of the wounded Earth rushed over the globe, searing and desiccating crops in the field before they could sprout to life. So once again, humanity set off in search of land in which life could be sustained.

Across the Atlantic, a continent of promise beckoned to the displaced masses: the mighty United States of North America. For time immemorial, its vast northern reaches had remained pristine and unsullied by human development. The blistering heat that had seared other nations into ashes and cinders created a blossoming of bounty for the Great White North. Unfettered from its carpet of snow and ice, development in the north boomed, and the country of Canada eagerly welcomed its southern neighbours in the millions. Enjoying prosperity and peace, the two great nations of North America merged to become the world powerhouse of the mid-twenty-first century, and there was no way that they were going to surrender their privileged lifestyle. What had been a land of opportunity morphed into Fortress America: firmly shuttered, locked and hostile. Migrants go home. The world's overpopulated? Let nature take Her course – isn't that what Malthus wrote?

Fear turned to desperation; desperation turned to rage. It didn't take long before terrorist groups grabbed the reins to take control, and suddenly a life-or-death battle erupted against a deadly bioengineered Chimera bacteriophage that blazed across the globe. All the while, the leaders of the world plotted to abandon humanity in the very Space Arks that the three most powerful alliances were building to shuttle tens of thousands of citizens to a newly constructed colony on Mars.

That was when the shit hit the fan, when Pallav's brainy little angel of a wife had teamed up with that asshole, Dr. Daniel Radu—the project manager for the United States of North America's Space Ark programme—to basically abduct the entire team of the USNA Space Ark *Mayflower* and pirate the massive intergalactic craft to safety on a journey of over two thousand light-years. Oh, and to warm Radu's bed all the while Pallav lay wide awake in their cabin, feigning sleep until she finally

slipped back under the covers reeking of that bastard, sending him into a spiral of hatred and revenge.

Somehow, he'd managed to keep his fury under wraps during the interstellar journey until the mammoth Space Ark *Mayflower* was pulled from the skies to its final resting place on the parched desert floor of Deneb7. There it collapsed, a battle-scarred Godzilla fighting in the arena for survival in a torrent of dust and stone in the Cauldron: the most wretched corner of that blistering hot planet, where not even Tagarian snakes or sleek Denebian lizards chose to dwell. His wife's choice for an innocuous place to make a landing unseen didn't quite turn out the way they expected. Not at all. Instead, the *Mayflower* found itself helpless when, out of the blue, a gossamer-fine gravity web engulfed the Ark, its crew compelled to watch impotently as the full force of the Denebian war machine lined up in welcome.

And what a welcome wagon they were – the combination of the armed might of the three great Denebian nations! Pallav watched half in horror and half in appreciation as Wesselan's vicious Stryker Skykillers plummeted down from the clouds, shrieking like bloodthirsty demons, while Fyjerlan's armed drones, accompanied by Geitenia's mechanized infantry, swarmed like army ants over the lip of the Cauldron to form a defensive perimeter about the beached leviathan.

Yet he had not been alone in his appreciation. The Denebian Commanders were wide-eyed in awe at the alien craft's refusal to surrender. It had been a futile fight they knew, for gravity knows no master, but the determination of the *Mayflower*'s crew had earned them the Denebians' respect and obtained a choice position in Wesselan's Armed Force for both Pallav and Major Fynn Vogel, the *Mayflower*'s senior helmsman. That and a friendship with Gomalan, the Wesselan Armed Forces' High Commander, who took Pallav under his wing and unknowingly provided the very canvas upon which Pallav could paint his revenge.

For knowledge is power, and that is exactly what Gomalan had handed to the angry human giant who had once been NASA's Chief of Security: the Styrian Treaty with its arcane clauses and decrees. And buried deep within the ancient document was the very dagger that could be cruelly wielded to finally sever his wife from the clutches of that vile adulterer, Radu. For the ancient Denebians had crafted the Treaty with the threat of alien colonization in mind, limiting space migrants to the Denebian nation in which they first landed. That is, unless they possessed special skills that were hotly in demand, like those of Pallav and Fynn.

But adultery wasn't on the Wessel's special skills list, as Pallav so indelicately put it to the Wesselan High Commander, a hint of a vindictive sneer snaking across his broad-boned face. That would leave Radu and his two brats on the wrong side of the border – in Geitenia, backwards Geitenia where lives are lived in darkness, and superstition is perceived as a valued tradition. It was

all very legal and aboveboard—the best kind of revenge—and so while Pallav and Fynn and their families had settled in luxury in Wesselan, the rest of the crew were forced to remain in Geitenia, bringing with them the seeds of change while they eked out a living among the tribespeople of Urkyn.

And that wasn't all that they brought. No, the humans had another housewarming gift for their kind Denebian hosts. There was a little stowaway that had crept aboard the *Mayflower* before launch. Silently and deadly, it had taken the life of Daniel's wife Poppy before the Space Ark's science team cracked the genetic code of the Chimera bacteriophage.

Although the Nolan-Fong serum had saved the lives of the *Mayflower's* crew, the humans would never be rid of the vestiges of that bioengineered disease that coursed throughout their veins. Dormant, the bacteriophage sat idle, waiting for a chance to rise up again in a murderous rampage.

Even so, it was a gamble that Pallav was willing to take to save his marriage and wreak his revenge – that the Denebians would be immune to human diseases. So Pallav had committed the unthinkable, destroying all mention of the deadly disease from the *Mayflower's* medical databanks so that the crew could find refuge on that little rocky orb that circled seventh in orbit from the star Deneb. And with that little act, that swipe of the screen, the hulking man from Custer, South Dakota condemned the planet of Deneb7 to years of darkness, fighting an alien designer disease that silently slipped in and out of society, leaving in its wake a trail of death and destruction.

Pallav had seen firsthand the fruits of his deception, and the sights still haunted him. The guilt ate at his soul. For the Denebians had not been immune to human diseases. The very young and the elderly had the resilience to overcome the ravages of the Chimera bacteriophage while the workers fell like flies. Pallav shuddered when Gomalan told him how he'd been bedridden with a nasty strain of the Denebian flu. At first, just a little headache, the aged warrior related. Then his whole body was aflame while he coughed until his ribs ached and blood began to pool under his skin. The High Commander and his wife Magdar spent some time in bed while his ageing mother nursed them with homemade kytel soup and cloudberry tonic. A couple of days later, as if nothing had happened, Gomalan returned to his office in the Wesselan Defence Headquarters a few kilos lighter while the flower of the nation lay suffocating in pools of their own blood and secretions.

"It's the Geiten," the High Commander had snarled and seeing the questioning look on Pallav's face, Gomalan sighed and clasped a meaty hand on the big human's shoulder.

"I keep forgetting you're not one of us. You see, the Geiten living in Wesselan are a danger to our way of life. Just take a detour on your way home tonight and fly past Little Geitenia – you'll see what I mean. They live like rats, sharing filthy hovels with their mangy animals. A bloody health hazard! I don't know why the Surgeon General doesn't deal with them. But mark my words, Pallav,

these creatures bring disease to Wesselan. They're the cause of this virulent strain of the Denebian flu. And between you and me, I know the Chief of Police's working on a solution."

It took all his power for Pallav to hide the horror from his cold green eyes while Gomalan railed about the Geiten of Wesselan. Rounded up in the middle of the night, torn from their slumber, the Geiten were thrown into a riot of confusion that reigned in the streets. Shoved into awaiting transports, their screams could be heard as the vehicles lifted off, taking their charges to Collection Centres where they would be kept under protective police custody.

Indignation rocked the planet. Their kin in Geitenia rose and formed an alliance with the Fygers, who had their own grievances to air with the Wessels. Fyger Starhunters swooped from the skies to enact a fiery vengeance. Burned-out hangars and cratered runways were a testament to a bevy of unprovoked air strikes on Wesselan Aerospace Wings. Even the River Panni dam had been attacked, that source of dissent in a world where drought held the planet in its grip for most of the year.

But the worst damage, the sights and smells that stole into Pallav's dreams at night, had been to Great Plains Army Base when high explosive and plasma-incendiary rounds had torn into the Firehall and the Base Hospital where thousands of soldiers lay hooked up to ventilators and fighting for their lives. Because of him – all because of a few stupid little swipes on the touchscreen that he had made back on the *Mayflower* to get even with Radu.

Pallav had opened Pandora's Box, and now it was up to him to solve the mystery of how the Wessel Armed Forces bases with their unassailable protective measures had been destroyed by an army of ignorant shepherds and their small-fry allies. And he was itching to get started.

CHAPTER 1

A JOURNEY BEGINS

People cry, not because they are weak. It's because they've been strong for too long.

–JOHNNY DEPP

“Pallav? You all right?” Tara’s voice broke him from his reverie, and he pasted on a phony smile.

“Sorry, darling, I was a million light-years away. I’ll be fine,” he promised. Sweat trickled down his back in the unrelenting heat of the Denebian day, his disruptive-pattern shirt already sticking to his body as he shrugged into his rucksack.

“Daddy, I’m gonna miss you.” The chirpy singsong voice of little Jolanta gave him cause to smile at the child as she held out her arms to him. Swooping her up, Pallav dropped a kiss on the little girl’s rosy-brown cheek, her eyes glistening with tears.

“And I’m going to miss you too, little one.” Hugging the orphaned girl to his chest, he burrowed his face into the cloud of dark hair that was as soft as a feather before pinching her cheek and gently setting her down. Guilt pierced his heart at the sad, resigned look on the child’s face. Had it not been for him, Jolanta would be snug as a bug with her biological parents and not in lockdown high above the capital city living with a pair of humans.

Poor little thing... she’s known so much loss in her short life, he thought. Surrounded by death as the human Chimera bactovirus raged across Deneb, Jolanta had been cruelly abandoned by her mother after Tara retrieved the fallen child from the cobblestoned marketplace in the centre of the capital city. He could still picture his wife walking through the door with the tiny tot in tow. Shocked, surprised, but then captivated, Pallav let the child into his heart. It wasn’t like his two teenagers wanted him around anymore. No, Luke and Isabella were busy charting their own course in the Wessel world, with Gomalan insisting that they attend the best boarding school in the nation.

Taking advantage of his position, Pallav had initiated a thorough search for Jolanta’s parents only to get confirmation that they were amongst the thousands in Styria who had succumbed to the pandemic. Since her arrival, the young orphan had been his little shadow, never leaving his side, following the big man’s movements with her luminous opalescent eyes. He smiled inwardly at the thought of Jolanta climbing into her little cot and begging her new daddy for a bedtime story. Guilt-ridden, he realized that he’d miss her more than his own children who were so immersed in

their new lives that even their weekly holotalks were rushed and awkward. Laughing at himself, Pallav knew he was totally under the child's spell.

"I promise to be back in time for market day, so no tears, okay?" Taking the little urchin's chin in his hands, Pallav stared into her eyes. "And you have a promise to make to me too, young lady, don't you?" The little brown head nodded up and down, serious eyes acknowledging the responsibility her adopted father had assigned to her.

Tara laughed at the two conspirators before being encased in a giant bear hug from her hulk of a husband. "You be careful, Pallav. If what you think's actually going on, you're putting yourself in a world of danger."

Shrugging, Pallav pulled her closer. "Don't you worry about me—I can take care of myself." A well-muscled hand smacked his father's Glock 19 9 mm that lay sheathed in his thigh holster. Then absentmindedly, Pallav confirmed that the small but lethal Wessel-issued Adyms Mk II blaster sat snug against his waist while Tara stood before him, her brow furrowed.

"But sabotage? Pallav, we've only arrived on Deneb, and there's a wealth of knowledge that you and I are missing. Sometimes I wonder if Gomalan gave you this assignment because we're both dispensable—humans, undesirables." Pulling away from her husband, Tara glanced out the crystallite windows to stare vacantly at the alien landscape. The morning rays of the star Deneb dazzled and danced in bursts of brilliance on the glass-walled buildings while off in the distance, the sluggish waters of the River Panni snaked slowly through the capital city. And far below their aerie perch, she could see Wessels zip along the perfectly straight autowalks on their way to work. It seemed like any other morning, but today a new danger had wormed its way into the lives of the Kóbor family.

"Now why would you think that?" Pallav's brows furrowed in confusion. "This is a golden opportunity. Gomalan trusts me, and I get results. It's as simple as that. And Tara? It's like I told you—the only people who despise us humans are the Geiten. Just think of that bastard Redlan and how he treated the others."

Tara lowered her head in shame, remembering how her crewmates were eking out an existence in Geitenia while she and her family were housed in luxury in Styria. How the Geiten of Aessen had abused her and Fynn's wife Erica, and how the young pilot had been brutally attacked – it filled her with revulsion.

"The whole thing's still so raw," she started. "My time in Urkyn... you know, it was horrific." Tara shivered as she thought of Daniel and the love she had left behind before looking once more at the bustling capital city that sprawled as far as the eye could see. "Thank God Wesselan's a world apart."

Pallav shook his head. “But it’s not. The Geiten have been living here for centuries—intermarrying, working, studying. But always maintaining their distinct identity and trying to impose their ways here. If my hunch is right, then the attacks on Wesselan are being coordinated by an underground Geiten faction that somehow managed to infiltrate our military installations. Maybe even the government. I don’t know how deep this goes. We all need to be cautious, Tara.”

Glancing at the archaic wristwatch that Pallav still insisted on wearing, he clasped a hand on Tara’s shoulder. “I’ve got to get going. But everything you need to know’s on the list inside the medicine cabinet.”

On tiptoes, Tara stretched up to throw her arms around Pallav’s neck, and as their lips touched, worry threaded its way into her thoughts, unable as she was to close her mind to the dangerous storm through which her husband must travel.



VILLAGE OF URKYN, GEITENIA—DENE7

Golden sand shimmered as the midday sun beat down on the little girl who stood quietly beside her parents, impatiently shifting her weight from one tiny foot to the other. Her lively green eyes stared in anticipation at her father, and she pulled on his sleeve, demanding attention. Nagib’s face was pale, more from distress than from the raging pandemic fever that had left him weak and wobbly but lucky to be alive. For many of the men had succumbed to that strangest of strains of the Denebian flu, men who were in the prime of their lives, while he and his family had been spared the ultimate fate.

Ignoring his young daughter, Nagib surveyed his surroundings, his gaze taking in the rows of scaffolds upon which the flower of Urkyn lay in eternal repose. But still there was no sign of Logi or her son. Shrugging his skeletal shoulders, the gaunt man looked down on his little daughter and his lips parted in a sympathetic smile. After all, he thought, it’s the bride who’s supposed to be late on the day of her promising.

“Daddy, he’s not coming,” Brynn insisted, her little bronze face as radiant as the starflowers whose blossoms carpeted the scrubby hills that surrounded the village of Urkyn.

The clicking of Charra’s tongue was followed by a pinch to the girl’s ear, and Brynn swallowed a gulp of pain as her mother knelt to face her.

“You better hope that Alonz shows up. His father agreed to this match before he walked the star trail to take his place amongst the ancestors.” Releasing Brynn’s ear, Charra wiped a tear from her daughter’s cheek and patted her shoulder.

“He’s the best match we could make for you, my daughter. Alonz comes from a good family whose geiten are renowned for their black hides. One day you’ll understand that the geiten are the key to our survival. They give us meat, milk and hides. And the black hides are the most coveted of all, my child, so by being contracted to Alonz, riches will flow to you and your offspring. Your future will be secure. Now, no more tears; it’s bad luck to cry on the day of your promising ceremony.”

Nagib looked overhead at the sun and shook his head. “I’m starting to think that Brynn’s right, Charra. Maybe they’re not coming after all.” His wife threw her hands on her hips and swivelled to face her husband.

“We wait, husband. And you’d do better to wipe that dirt smudge from your tunic.”

With her chin pointing at him defiantly, Nagib knew he was beaten and lowered his head timidly. “She’s only nine, Charra. And she’s so full of life. Can’t this wait a few more years?”

“What are you, stupid or something?” his wife fumed. “It’s for this very reason, wasn’t it, that we made the match in the first place. This daughter of yours has too much spirit, and I blame you for encouraging her. If we wait any longer, her behaviour will shame us, and then no family will want this girl who doesn’t know her place in the world.”

Frowning partly in frustration and mostly in impotent anger at his wife, Nagib turned his back on Charra. My fault? As if this wife of mine knows her place, he fumed, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his billowing tunic. But still, he knew that Charra was a good woman, one who had bore him strong children and had nursed him through the illness with no complaints. And she looked the other way when he stayed high in the hills with his flocks, long past the hot days of summer after the other shepherds had driven their animals back to the valleys and winter villages where the Geiten congregated during the short months of the Cooling. Truth be told, he knew Charra did not love him, nor did he care much for her. But theirs was a partnership built for survival, and in that they had succeeded in their match. Only he held hope in his heart for more than this for his daughter, the sprite who touched his heart with her dear ways.

Around them, the circle of villagers started to rustle impatiently like the tall grasses in the wind, everyone wondering if sickness had carried away the young bridegroom and his mother, or if they had fallen prey to the bloodwolves that had recently learned to appreciate the taste of Geiten flesh. And mingling amongst the Geiten of Urkyn was a cluster of beings who, from a distance, could pass for foreigners from any one of the planets that made up the Interstellar Collective for Peace and Security.

Earlier that year, when Ru the God of Fire was washed away from the land by the Tears of Ur, the Geiten of Urkyn led their flocks on the long trek from the rich alpine pastures to their wintering

quarters, as their ancestors had since the beginning of time. There they would congregate, contracting marriages and transacting commerce. But this year, a surprise lay in store for the good tribespeople, for waiting in their winter village was the Clan Mayflower— the human refugees who had been granted asylum in Geitenia. And there they were – bringing with them their foreign ideas and disruptive ways.

Lestos Marag, his weathered face bearing the stamp of the harsh life of a shepherd, stood silently next to the leader of the Clan Mayflower, Dr. Daniel Radu. The erstwhile project manager for the Space Ark programme watched the old man's grandson, Shalo, hard at play with his own two lads. Lewis, a carbon copy of his father at eight years old right down to the blond flattop and piercing blue eyes, squatted in the dust playing marbles with his younger brother Max. All about the circle, the laughter of the Geiten men resounded as they relived the day of their promising ceremony, while the women of the tribe chatted around the young bride-to-be.

Daniel surveyed his little group as the villagers awaited the arrival of the potential groom. Ebony skin glowing like obsidian, Reeta Nuako rested her head on her husband Abeiku's shoulder. Their young daughter Lark slept soundly in her arms while her mother-in-law Dashawna tried to keep track of her ever-rambunctious grandson Teuvo. Her husband Dodzi shielded his eyes, stared out at the horizon and shook his head, then whispered to Daniel, "We've been waiting for over an hour. Perhaps you should make a recommendation to let the children wait in the shade."

Flame-haired Barb Nolan, widow of the famed microbiologist Dr. Vance Nolan, prodded her son Pat in the ribs as the young man and his friend Renzo debated over the lack of opportunities in their new homeland.

"You got good eyes," she said, pointing to a ridge that skirted the village. "Tell me what you see over there?" Pat squinted in the sunlight, but the shimmering sands gave up no secrets.

It was Renzo, the twenty-one-year-old son of the Mayflower's nurse Dom Calvo, who first spotted the small caravan slowly making its way down the sandy ridge and through the stunted shrubs. A tall woman led a boy by the hand, followed by a large dog who skipped nimbly amongst the rocks, accompanied by a helmeted and robed man. The woman waved to the villagers, and Charra waved back. "See, I told you," she said sharply to her husband, "they've come after all."

And slowly the three members of the Geiten of Thalia approached the little congregation. Bowing to Nagib, the tall, dark man peeled off into the village hall where the priestly Taklich began his preparations for the ceremony. Dirt-caked and sweat-stained, Logi and her son Alonz stepped into the circle of villagers while their dog danced about and the boys gathered around to rough its mangy hide with dusty hands.

Taller by a head than Charra, Logi was as dark as the ebony charrstone that littered the scree slopes of the Tagar Mountains. Eyes that twinkled like the night sky crinkled and smiled as she hugged her friend in a tight embrace, her voice cracking with emotion.

“It’s so good to see you healthy,” she started, “after all the death that’s run through our nation. But did you fall ill, Charra? Or your family? Oh, I have a hundred questions for you! But now we’re here... and there’re things that we have to discuss.”

Nagib pulled his wife from the tall woman’s embrace. “Indeed there are, Logi—but not with Charra.” His eyes were hard as he looked over the boy Alonz who was to be matched with his daughter. For the young teen was smaller than he had expected, puny in fact, and with a look of misery that hung about him.

“I thought... I meant... women things with your wife...” Confusion gave way to sadness as Logi continued. “Nagib, before my husband died, he told me that everything had already been arranged for the promising ceremony. He authorized me to bring our son to your village so that he could be raised by men and learn the ways of our people.”

Nagib’s emerald eyes bored into her as he pointed to the boy Alonz. “How old is he?”

Logi blinked in surprise. “Alonz has lived through thirteen seasons of the Cooling. I have told my son that he is to dwell in your peha and to be obedient to the rules of your clan. He has learned his role well and is ready to be promised.”

Taking Charra’s hand, he pulled his wife away from prying ears. “This boy is sickly, ill-featured—look at him! And that isn’t the deal I made with his father. If he lives with us, their black-hided geiten stay with Logi. So unless her older brother Geneen is generous, Brynn and this Alonz will get nothing when I tread my way on the path to the ancestors.”

Charra’s nostrils flared, and she grabbed her husband rudely by the bicep. “Do you want to shame us?” she railed. “This woman is a widow. And she is my friend. How can you even suggest repudiating the contract that was made? No, Nagib, this will take place. But leave me to deal with Logi, for I agree with you for once. We will not take Alonz in.”

Husband and wife nodded their heads in unison, and Charra smiled at Logi in triumph. Taking young Alonz by the hand, she rewarded him with a cold smile. “You may tell your Taklich that we are ready. Now go while I speak with your mother.”

Thick black eyebrows knit together as Charra spoke quietly with Logi. “My friend, we will not take your son into our peha, for this was not agreed upon by our men. You understand, I hope, that what they agreed to beforehand must be honoured. My husband insists that Alonz return to your village until our children are old enough to be joined in the eternal union, whereupon she will become your daughter. That is, if you wish this match to proceed after all.”

Curling her lip with frustration, Logi clicked her tongue at Charra. “How is Alonz to learn the ways of the men if he dwells with me and the old mothers? Really, Charra, do you not see?”

The smaller woman stood her ground as she squared her shoulders and planted her hands on her hips in a sign of stubbornness.

“It is decided, Logi.”

Charra smiled at the sight of Alonz and Brynn. Softening, took her friend’s hand in hers.

“They are both very young and have many years before the eternal union takes place. Years will pass, and your son will learn the ways from the old men of your tribe. And my Brynn—she is as beautiful as a summer sunset. She will give your Alonz strong sons and comely daughters. You will find no better match.”

Logi slowly nodded her head in agreement as the Taklich strode into the circle. The two youths stood side by side, while the parents took up their places behind them.

Roasting within the kyttel gown that her mother had painstakingly sewn for her, Brynn squirmed in discomfort, her face questioning as her father’s eyes bulged in their sockets.

“What now?” he whispered, embarrassment evident on his face.

But Charra would have none of it and smacked her daughter squarely on the head while pushing her forward towards the Taklich, who ignored the young girl.

As the religious man droned on about how the gods created females to serve mankind, to be obedient and bear the sufferings inflicted upon womanhood with steadfastness, Brynn watched a pybar soaring high in the sky on its red and green silken wings. Floating on the currents, it glided upwards through the clouds, circling on the winds as it surveyed the blistering lands below where fleet-footed lizards ran between the rocks, seeking shelter from its steely gaze in cool crevices. Erupting like a flash of lightning from the heavens, it dove earthwards, talons sharp in outstretched claws, ready to pounce on a sleek lizard basking happily in the midday sun, unaware of its fate. And then, suddenly, a shriek tore through the still air as the life was snuffed from the little creature that lay broken in the predator’s bloody claws.



WESSELAN ARMED FORCES HEADQUARTERS, STYRIA

The silver chip lay on his desk, taunting him. Look at me! Access me! See the secrets that I bear within my silicon circuits.

Gomalan threw the Surgeon General a look of desperation and mopped his face with his sleeve as the horror of the situation loomed over him.

“You sure about this? I mean, there can’t be any room for error.”

A flutter of the eyes, a slow nod. “Absolutely one hundred percent certain, High Commander.”

Taking the little wafer in his fingers, Gomalan played with it as he calculated his next move. “And who else knows? That is, besides you and me.”

“Well, that’s just it. Automation generates the results from the samples, which are then reviewed individually by the Chief Flight Surgeon. Any anomalies are usually brought to the attention of the member, and a decision is made on flight status, which is then transmitted to the Squadron Commander. But of course, not in this case. Col Eng, our Chief Flight Surgeon, actually brought these results to me immediately, wondering what to do. And now I’m here. Because this is something that can change the course of history.”

Gomalan closed his eyes and begged the gods for a flash of insight. But none came. Narrowing his eyes, he made a decision that he hoped he’d not have reason to regret. “Tell no one of this. And order the Chief Flight Surgeon to absolute silence. If this gets out, I’ll have her head and yours. Understood?”

“Understood, sir. Now what are we going to do about this?”

Pocketing the little chip, Gomalan stood up from his desk and pulled himself to his full height and loomed menacingly over the smaller man. “I’ll let the president decide and get back to you. In the meantime,” he said, making a slashing motion with his hand, “absolute secrecy.”

Watching as the Surgeon General disappeared down the polished halls, Gomalan tapped his wristcuff and was surprised at how calm his voice sounded as he spoke to his aide-de-camp. “Two things. I need a meeting with the president in about an hour. Urgent. Don’t take no for an answer. And second thing. I want Reyhart in my office ASAP.”

Gomalan fingered the chip and wondered if it would be easier to destroy it and to erase all knowledge of the horror it carried. But that would be cowardice, and he knew that before he met with Wesselan’s aged President Meryx, he had to be absolutely sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the results were conclusive.

With a push of a button, the magnetic steel doors to his office began to snap shut while the windows smoked over, shutting out the sunlight and any prying eyes. As the holoscreen rose from the floor, Gomalan prayed that there had been some mistake, that there would be something he could find in the details to deny the allegations that the Surgeon General had lobbed like mortars

and had exploded in his mind with deadly destruction.

But there it was, floating in front of him like the wreckage from a ship in space.

Vogel, F.A. Service Number R71 541 390

Lt Col, Wessel Aerospace Force

Squadron Commander, 19 Fighter Squadron Styria

Routine Physical Assessment Results. NORMAL

Anomalies Present.

DNA not consistent with Denebian life forms

Antibodies present to current Denebian Pandemic

DNA of current Denebian Pandemic microorganism tailored to match genetic diversity of patient – suspected designer disease of human origin

Flying Status: UNFIT

Notes: Suspected Patient Zero of current Denebian Pandemic—alien infectious disease.

Recommendation: Collection Centre for Treatment or Disposal.