

FIRES OF FURY

PROLOGUE

The petite brunette rolled over in her sleep and curled into a ball. Beside her, a man stirred and tugged on the covers. The nights were getting colder now that the Fires of Ru were giving way to the Cooling. The man's feet hung over the edge of the bed, and he fumbled with the blanket in a futile attempt at covering his toes. It was no use, and now he was awake. With a sigh, General Pallav Kóbor, Provost Marshal for the Wessel Armed Forces, reached for his wristcuff to check the time.

Set+3, hours to go before sunrise.

Pallav threw his head back on the pillow. With the rays of the Moon of Haldane shining through the window, he watched his wife sleeping peacefully.

Damn, Tara looks like an angel when she's asleep. But her conscience is clear. It wasn't her who hacked into the Space Ark's medical banks and erased all traces of the Chimera bactovirus. Not her fault either that the Denebians are susceptible to human-designer diseases. And she's not the one responsible for a pandemic on the very planet that offered us sanctuary.

Mind you, she's not totally innocent. Tara knew all along that Dr. Daniel Radu was planning on pirating the Space Ark Mayflower. For goodness' sake, she was helping him! Probably sat at the kitchen table back in Nasaton, New Florida, plotting our escape route from Earth to the planet Deneb-7. Well, if I'd been more on top of security, they'd have never gotten away with it. And where would that have left us, hmmm? Dead and six feet under.

But Radu and his scheming ways have nothing over the biohackers who developed the Chimera bactovirus. Imagine not having the foresight to insert a suicide gene in their Frankenbug? Incompetence and conspiracies! Even in our elected politicians. Those bastards were feeding us lies about vaccines just to keep us under control, while they'd have been spirited off to safety in the Space Ark, leaving the rest of us behind to await the arrival of the Grim Reaper. I'm actually grateful to Radu for sticking it to them.

Swinging his legs over the crumpled covers, Pallav got to his feet and quietly padded into the kitchen. Pouring himself a glass of water, he made his way to the balcony and stared into the night. The skyline of Styria was aglow in the moonlight. Tall skyscrapers linked together by crystallite walkways and arches filled his field of vision. Down below, the River Sirga shone like a ribbon of silver and Pallav glanced past its glimmering surface and to the east. There, the graceful Iskra Bridge spanned the river's languid waters. At the forks of the Sirga, the great dome of the Cathedral of the Mother Goddess was lit up like a giant Easter Egg.

The Wessels were his people now and Styria, Wesselan's capital city, the new home for his family. The country boy from Custer, South Dakota, who loved to hunt and fish and lived to uphold the laws of the United States of North America, now defended the government of a nation over forty-six million light-years from Earth. And it wasn't easy.

Peace had reigned for decades before the humans arrived from a dying Earth and begged for asylum. But along with the *Mayflower* crew, a stowaway had also crept from the battered starship. Invisible and undetectable, the deadly combination of an Ebola virus and an anthrax bacterium known as the Chimera bactovirus slunk out of the starship and into its new hosts. Like a scythe cutting through ripe wheat, what the Denebians thought was a deadly variant of the Denebian flu swept through the local population, killing and destroying the economy.

I unleashed the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse on the very people who took us in and gave us refuge.

Buried feelings of guilt bubbled to the surface, and from his fortress-like house high on Beaumont Ridge, Pallav looked to the sky for answers. In the stygian darkness of the night, the stars twinkled like precious jewels. Stars so different from those he had seen on Earth; stars whose gravity bound the other planets in the Interstellar Collective for Peace and Security together.

Useless organization, Pallav grumbled under his breath. They've done nothing to stop this pointless war. We've crushed the Coalition... our Skykiller warbirds razed the Fyjer capital, and their government's fled into the Jundar Mountains. The Geiten president is dead; the country's leaderless.

Muscular arms draped over the balcony and Pallav folded his body over the railing. Below Beaumont Ridge, the marketplace was empty except for the feral Denebian strays that skulked between the stalls. All was quiet, and Pallav contemplated how in a few short hours, Geiten merchants would be setting up their wares for the day.

Geiten just like those who lived in Urkyn... where that bastard Radu and the others of the Space Ark had made their home. Until Gomalan decreed that that shabby little hamlet was harbouring the Black Hide and everyone... no, everything... had to be destroyed in retribution. That's the fabrication he fed to General Ravenna. Even she was surprised, knowing that the simple shepherds of Urkyn were blameless. And after all, an order's an order. But I knew the truth. It had nothing to do with the Black Hide and everything to do with the presence of my crewmates. For we humans were the source of contagion. And Gomalan? He had figured it out.

The High Commander needed Pallav and Fynn, for within their veins flowed the antibodies to the Chimera bactovirus and salvation. And milk them he did, until their bodies were almost drained. But the others who came to Deneb-7 on the *Mayflower*? They were expendable. And what better way of ensuring the genocide of the humans on Deneb than sending Pallav on a wild goose chase while bombers and soldiers advanced on the little hamlet. Yet Gomalan hadn't counted on his new Provost Marshal stumbling upon the Top Secret Frag Order that signed the death warrant for his crewmates.

I had no choice. I had to act against Gomalan. I did the right thing. Except for Erica... she was collateral damage. But she knew the danger when she agreed to pilot the Meganeur so that the others could get away safely from Urkyn.

Out into the distance Pallav looked, far past the southern shores of the Sirga and across the broad Panni Valley to where the glow of civilization faded and the stony desert emerged. Kilometres away from the bright lights of Styria, and hugging the shores of the mighty River Panni,

lay the Geiten nation. Pallav visualized poor Geiten shepherds squatting in front of smoky fires, eating skewers of the tough geiten meat while in the background, flocks of animals bleated and the wind blew through the gaudily decorated skin shelters. He laughed maliciously, picturing Radu and his brats surrounded by clouds of biting insects and the swirling sand. Then his thoughts cleared and Pallav bowed his head in shame.

They're all gone now. My colleagues from the Mayflower. Taken away one night, only hours before the bombers and the soldiers stormed the village. At least they're safe on Cepheus-9. Now the only humans left on Deneb are my family and Fynn. Poor Fynn. He's lost everything. His wife. His unborn child. The only happiness the guy can find is at the helm of a warbird taking down the enemy. If only I could turn back time, I'd erase the mistakes I made. For I know now that jealousy and revenge lead one on a perilous journey.

A quick glance at his wristcuff caused Pallav to groan at the passage of time. Already the inky darkness of the sky was giving way to the predawn shades of violet and indigo. He shivered in the cold and rubbed his hands together, then blew through his fingers. The blistering heat of the Fires of Ru was coming to an end and with the rains of the Cooling, the planet would bloom into life once again.

Except not the Fyjer-Geiten Coalition. It's dead now. Dead like President Meryx, the man I swore to serve and protect. A lonely old man who treated Fynn and Erica like his own flesh and blood. Who gave Fynn comfort and hope after Erica was killed in what he believes was a terrorist attack. But I know the truth, and it's on my conscience.

A flash in the distance caught Pallav's eye, flames of orange and blue licking the darkness. He could just about make out the shape of a cargo starship as it lifted off in the distance. Squinting, Pallav tried to determine the launch site.

That's odd. The skies are closed for interstellar travel until the war's over.

Fumbling with his wristcuff, Pallav linked into the Operations Centre of the Wessel Armed Forces and found the Duty Team sitting in front of a holoscreen playing arcade games. The big man smiled, remembering his time as a junior officer back on Earth and the strange calls that would come in during the wee hours.

Like that idiot who called at four in the morning to say he had a toothache and wanted me to get the duty dentist in at once. Or when the Public Affairs Officer from base called me to tell me that soldiers on exercise in Europe were using Monopoly money in a brothel. Those were the days!

His hologram waited silently while the young Duty Officer scored a direct hit on the holographic image of an enemy tank. Beside her, the Duty Sergeant grumbled and leaned further into the screen. It took all of Pallav's strength not to laugh.

I'm interrupting a very quiet night, it seems. Well, I suppose I'll just submit a report and let this wait for the morning, he decided, when suddenly his presence was noted. The captain jumped to attention and saluted, almost knocking over the sergeant who looked on with fear in his eyes.

"Sir. I'm sorry, sir." The lieutenant fumbled with her tie and ran a shaking hand through her hair. Picking himself off the floor, the sergeant quickly made his departure, leaving the lieutenant alone with the giant alien known to all as the fearsome Provost Marshal of the Wessel Land Forces.

“Passing the time?” Pallav did not wait for the woman to respond. “There’s no harm in that.” He looked around the Operations Centre, saw the half-eaten dry sandwiches and cartons of warm geiten milk and shuddered. *If Napoleon was right, and an army marches on its stomach, it’s a wonder we’re winning this war when we feed the troops like that.* “Was there a special authorisation granted for a starship liftoff today?”

The lieutenant looked perplexed for a moment, then grappled with the holoscreen. Shuffling through files, she pulled up a document and scanned it quickly, then shook her head. “Negative, sir. Nothing for today or tomorrow.”

Curious. Well, Space Guard will intercept whoever they are before they get themselves and their starship destroyed. And in the morning, Air Marshal Corliss’s staff are going to have to investigate this one.

“Sir? Is there any action I need to take?”

“None whatsoever, Lieutenant. You’ve confirmed my suspicions.”

Sheepishly, the sergeant peeked out from behind a partition and emerged to flip on the holocaster. Scrolling through the channels, he paused at the Denebian News Network. There it was in front of them, captured life-sized in the brilliant motes of the holocaster. The news of the deaths of the traitors—senior officers who collaborated with the Black Hide in the assassination of President Meryx. A recap of Meryx’s last words, of an offer of peace to Fyjerlan, without a mention of Geitenia. An interview with Colonel Fynn Vogel flashed on, and Pallav noticed how the lieutenant’s eyebrows shot up in admiration at the hologram of the freckle-faced warbird ace.

“You know, he renounced the title of heir-designate. Said he belonged up there at fifty thousand meters, raining down revenge on the Coalition. That his solution to peace would be hammering the nails in the coffin of the last Geiten.” Pallav watched the young lieutenant’s face blanch and sympathetically, his hologram tried to pat her on the shoulder. “It’s a good thing for us all that Gomalán is the new Head of State.”

For a second, the trio stood in front of the holocaster where the reporter was gushing over Fynn’s role in the Second Denebian War. But Pallav had heard it all before, for he had lived it.

He knew that it was over. The decision to accept the proffered peace lay with Premier Lowena, for Fyjerlan was crushed, and alone, Geitenia could not take up the torch.

War or peace, what will it be? The morning would come, and he would find out no sooner. There was nothing left for Pallav to do, except to climb back under the covers and snuggle close to his sleeping wife.

Fumbling with his wristcuff, Pallav began to delink from the Defence Holocom System when he noticed the sergeant shoving his fist into his mouth. As his hologram shimmered away, Pallav distinctly heard a male voice through the static. “Don’t know how you kept a straight face, Ma’am, with General Kóbor standing in front of you in his flowery boxer shorts.”

CHAPTER 1

WHITE FLAG, BLACK HEART

“When one with honeyed words but evil mind persuades the mob, great woes befall the state.”

—EURIPIDES

2088 CE – STYRIA, WESSELAN

“Well, well, well... now what do we got here?” Head of State Gomalan vigorously waved a transparent card at his staff, then punched out a thin crystalline wafer and brandished it triumphantly overhead. “My, my... A Fyjer holo-chip. What a surprise! Do the honours for us, will you, General?”

Handing the chip to his Provost Marshal, the seasoned warrior-turned-politician signalled for his human protégé, General Pallav Kóbor, to light it up. A warm glow filled the War Room and two silver columns rose from the floor. A holoscreen sprang to life and caught between the columns, the images of two women shimmered and materialized. Formally dressed in long form-fitting tunics, both displayed the lofty stature that characterized the Fyjer race.

The elder woman’s fine-boned face bore the marks of strain. Her once flawless porcelain skin was now grey and dull, her luminous golden-brown eyes ringed with dark smudges—reminders not only of her battle with the Wessels, but also with the new strain of the so-called Denebian Flu. Lowena, Premier of the Fyjer Nation, the proud leader of her people was now laid low with the weight of the words she was about to pronounce.

Behind her stood the Supreme Commander of Fyjerlan’s High Command. Amber eyes ablaze, blood-red hair flowing down her shoulders in a sea of waves, Gwynne’s face bore the mark of defiance. Intractable in defeat, the warrior woman waited, legs planted defiantly shoulder-width apart, while her premier accepted the terms of shame.

Lowena’s image blinked, and she composed herself before staring directly ahead, eyes now hard with the task at hand. Her voice was emotionless and calm as it echoed throughout the Head of State’s War Room.

“I, Lowena, Premier of Fyjerlan, on behalf of the citizens of my nation, acknowledge and accept the Wessel terms for the conclusion of the current struggle. Recognizing the complete and utter destruction of our armed forces, we concede defeat and offer Fyjerlan’s unconditional surrender.”

The blood-haired woman stepped forward, her face flushed with anger, her eyes slashes of contempt. “As the rays of the Mother Goddess Deneb depart and shadows fall across our lands, know you that today, on the 15th of the month of Maius, our warriors will lay down their weapons. Wesselan has won the capitulation of Fyjerlan, and our military forces still in the field will leave the theatre of operations as prisoners of war. These are my orders and I, Gwynne, the Supreme Commander of the Fyjer Forces, have relayed them to all commanders of both land and aerospace armed forces.”

Gomalan laughed, a sound both victorious and menacing, while Pallav glanced at the other members of the War Cabinet, all seated in back-breaking hard chairs about the long conference room table. The same look of arrogance graced the face of Wesselan's Foreign Minister, who rose to his feet. With a flourish, Talyx swiped a manicured finger across the holoscreen to retrieve the instrument of surrender. Men and women, politicians, and military leaders alike, crowded around the document. That something so ordinary as a simple scrap of vellum could relay a decision of such significance astonished them.

Colonel Fynn Vogel, Commander of Styria's renamed Sirga Aerospace Wing, ambled over to join Pallav at the edge of the gaggle while Wessels craned their necks and shoved to get a glimpse of Fyjerlan's instrument of surrender.

"You think that it's then? Over in – what – a matter of months?" Fynn whispered. Freckles blossomed across the bridge of his nose and his clear hazel eyes shone with vitality. Once designated to become Wesselan's president, Fynn had abrogated the honour, instead returning to the skies at the head of a squadron of Stryker Skykiller warbirds intent on dispensing his own brand of justice in a deadly shower of bullets and missiles.

"They never stood a chance," Pallav mumbled sotto voce, his conscience battling his fascination with the superior wonder-weapons of Wessel technology.

"Now we wait for the capitulation of Geitenia," Fynn replied, slapping Pallav on the shoulder. "No way those scum'll fight on all by their pitiful selves." A savage smile spread across the baby-faced combat ace. "Then we can start the big cleanup."

Clean up? Pallav raised an eyebrow in surprise, but before he could whisper the question into his fellow Earth-refugee's ear, Gomalan signalled for them to take their seats.

A smile graced the rugged features of their silver-haired leader as he addressed his War Cabinet. "Talyx, I'm tasking you with coordinating the signing of the Fyjer's surrender. Here's how it's going to work—we take the high road—show 'em how very noble Wessels can be." The big man smirked while his ministers' eyes widened in confusion. Muttering filled the chamber.

"No, no – now listen up," he said, waving away their irritation. "Our fight was never really with the Fyjers."

General Ravenna, Commander of the Wessel Land Forces, shook her head at the folly of her superior officer. "Not sure how you can say that, when it was the Fyjers who launched the majority of successful strikes against us."

"Bah," he retorted, "the real problem's with the Geiten. Now Premier Lowena, she's come to her senses. But Bakril? The Interim Leader of the Geiten nation's gone to ground. He knows what's in it for him and his race of pond scum if they surrender."

The Minister of Information stared up from his light tablet. "Wouldn't put it past him to be supporting the Black Hide." Goffa pursed his thin lips disapprovingly before turning his attention back to the latest holoreport.

"Probably is the Black Hide," Marshal Corliss, the latest Commander of Wesselan's Aerospace Forces, retorted before Gomalan slashed the air with a meaty paw.

“Enough of this!” he shouted. “Let’s deal with one thing at a time. Talyx, sort out the surrender. Let Lowena know that in order to guarantee the peace, our troops are to occupy the lands west of the Wessla River valley and along the Motzen irrigation canal leading to the Jundars. That includes Phost, of course.”

The Foreign Minister screwed up his face. “You really think that the Fygers’ll agree to that? I mean, their capital city?”

The room erupted in chaos and Fynn noisily ground his teeth in frustration. Impatient to return to base and feel the surge of power in his Stryker Skykiller as together they streaked over Geitenia in search of prey, he suddenly rose to his feet and cleared his throat.

“Phost... pffft! After we went in, it took me weeks to get the grit outta my mouth and the stench off my flight suit. That place was blown apart, nothing left but piles of smouldering rubble and decaying bodies. Let the Fygers have it; there’s nothing left of Phost now.”

Rumbles about the room ceased as wearily, Gomalan stood and began to pace. “I see that I haven’t made myself clear.” The Wessel war leader stopped behind Pallav and clasped his friend on the shoulder. “Wesselan’s gonna help the Fygers rebuild their nation. Starting with Phost.”

This time the room was thick with expletives, but ignoring the outburst, Gomalan continued. “We need ’em on our side if what I plan’s gonna happen. And the Geiten – they have a very important role to play in this too. Lowena’s bound to jump at this very generous offer, and let’s just say whether Bakril’s dead or alive isn’t gonna matter.”

“Got it,” Talyx said. “I’ll contact Ulven with terms. That is, if the Fyger Foreign Minister’s still breathing.”

Nodding approval, Gomalan waited for Talyx to depart before putting into action the first act in scene one of his master schemes. “But Geitenia, Geitenia. Haven’t heard hide nor hair of them,” the Head of State continued.

“And you won’t, sir,” Goffa said. “My little spyders have put their webs out, and you won’t guess what they’ve reeled in.”

Pallav narrowed his eyes and stared angrily at Goffa. *Bastard! Must have overheard my discussion with Ravenna, and now he’s taking credit for it.*

Suddenly, all thought of sympathy with the Geiten was forgotten as Pallav elbowed the pint-sized minister in the ribs. While Goffa sucked in air to catch his breath, Pallav jumped the gun. “Before Bakril went walkabout, he nominated the Geiten Defence Chieftain as his replacement. Thing is, Armen and his generals went into hiding as well.”

“Leaving the entire nation of Geitenia without a government,” Goffa injected, giving Pallav the stink eye.

“So who’s left to negotiate with?” Corliss asked. Fynn shot his commander a look of disbelief, cringing at the thought of bringing to a close the war that allowed him to avenge the deaths of his wife, unborn child, and mentor.

“Who said anything about negotiating?” Gomalan replied. “I mentioned we needed them, and we do. Ravenna, would you mind? Bottom drawer of my desk, under my boot shine kit, there’s a bottle of very old Vulpeculan brandy. Get it, will you?”

As the amber liquid poured into tumblers, Fynn leaned over to Pallav. “Need ‘em? You’ve got to be kidding me,” he whispered. “Negotiate from the barrel of a gun, I say.”

Fynn’s lowered voice floated across the room, and the big eyes of the participants staring at him signalled that his opinion had been unwittingly shared.

Gomalan scowled through narrowed eyes. “You got something to add?” For a moment, Fynn glared back before a heavy thump on his leg caused him to jump.

“No, no...” Pallav lied, squeezing Fynn’s thigh, willing him to silence. “We were just saying that it’s a bit early for us humans to be drinking.”

The Wessel leader knitted his brows together before exploding in laughter. “Never knew you to pass up a drink, my friend.” Rising from the table, Gomalan raised his glass high while his eyes bored into the two humans. “To our future,” he toasted, “one in which our nation will fulfill our people’s destiny. To Wesselan.”

Glasses clinked, and the words were repeated around the room, and Pallav found himself throwing back the fiery brew while he pondered the cryptic look on his friend’s face. As the glasses emptied, so did the War Room. All scurrying away to task their underlings to hammer out the details that would carve up the Fyjer lands and disarm their vanquished foe.

At a nod of the Head of State’s grizzled head, Ravenna hung back while Pallav delayed until he was sure that Fynn no longer lingered in the corridor. For he knew that his comrade from the *Mayflower* would be all too ready to question and disagree and rush off to engage in some act of savagery that would only lead to more retaliations by the Black Hide. All without knowing, all with the anger consuming his soul. Pallav waited until he could hear the sound of Fynn’s quick footsteps receding before finally he stood and walked over to the old warlord.

Grabbing the bottle in his hand, Pallav poured out three more shots of the smoky amber brandy. “So tell me... what exactly do we need the Geiten for? This important role you mention...”

“Ah yes, this is where you both come in. Especially you, Kóbor with your Security Forces, and of course Dorch, our Minister of Infrastructure. All part of the master plan.” The corner of Gomalan’s lips rose in an attempted smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. A wave of his calloused hand caused the holoscreen to shimmer to life and as Gomalan swiped his fingers across the console, a litany of numbers danced midair.

“Ravenna, you’ve seen all this before.” Motioning to the entrance to the War Room, he gave her a meaningful look. “Take a peek into the corridor and check that there’re no hangers-on. Then lock the door behind you and come back, will you please?”

“Check this out,” the old warrior said, pointing a finger at two columns of figures that jumped out from the rest. Larger than life, they floated mere inches from the Head of State and his Provost Marshal. “Ever since you humans touched down on Deneb, pockets of that blasted disease keep breaking out. But we Wessels, we’ve been lucky, all thanks to you and our freckled-face warbird ace.” The Head of State winked at Pallav, who looked on horrified. “On top of that, there was the war started by the Fyjer-Geiten Coalition, and now our economy’s in a free fall.”

Fumbling in his pocket, Pallav pulled out his hated reading glasses and stared at the numbers while Gomalan sipped at his brandy. Ten numbers translated to ten years, starting just before the Space Ark *Mayflower* was reeled in like a fish by gravity webs.

The door creaked shut, and the latch snapped into place before the sound of Ravenna's footsteps announced her return. "So, what're we looking at?" she asked.

"Demographics," Pallav replied, fiddling with the crooked temple of his glasses. With a raised finger, he began to trace the rapid rise of the figures caught in the shimmering holobeam. Eighty-one million... eighty-nine million... until suddenly the figures plummeted like the temperature on a winter's day back in Pallav's hometown of Custer, South Dakota. The big alien knew that it was no coincidence that it happened just after the *Mayflower*'s arrival. "Sixty-four point seven million?" he blurted out.

"Yup, our nation's bleeding out. We lost over twenty-two percent of our labour force over the last few years. And you know damned well that translated into a downward economic spiral. Pretty much planet-wide too. Except in Geitenia," Gomalan added.

The Head of State threw his still muscular frame into his chair and motioned for his generals to join him. Rustling through the drawers in his desk, Gomalan pulled out a file and spread its contents on the long table that dominated Wesselan's War Room. Thumbing through the sheets, he drew out a glossy image and shoved it in front of Pallav.

Tidy rows of low buildings sprang from the barren desert and sprawled off into the distance, while a faint halo arced above the empty encampment. Separated from the surrounding terrain by a wide, deep ditch, the model settlement seemed unusually stark. The structures in their bleak environment exuded a sense of desperation and hopelessness, and Pallav stared in contemplation, unable to process what would drive Wessels to willingly dwell in such sterile accommodations.

But to Gomalan, his human friend's thoughts remained inscrutable: those pale green eyes that never revealed emotion, the broad-boned face that seemed eternally locked and guarded well its secrets. "Well, whatdya think?" he asked when Pallav continued to stare without comment. "It's just a concept at the moment. Minister Dorch's staff're putting together a working model, but I wanted your opinion. At first glance, you think this'll meet security requirements for the labour camps?"

Pushing the slipping reading glasses up the bridge of his nose, Pallav scrutinized the image more carefully. *So that's what this is supposed to be – a beefed-up successor to the Collection Centres.* A chill crept down his spine as he took in a halo-like structure more closely. Its function became clear as did the ditch that ran the circumference of the encampment. Nearly invisible, the halo suspended high above the settlement was the support for gossamer light filaments that would ensnare a person like a fly in a spider's web and fry them on contact. No juicy meal for the little arachnid minders, only a charred corpse that would dry in the desiccating desert winds. A burnt offering to the gods of war. Or in this case, the lords of the economy. Pallav suppressed a shudder.

"I'll need to see the detailed plans—once you have them—complete with occupancy rates, internal structures and logistical infrastructure," the big man answered, a knot growing in the pit

of his stomach, and questions swirling about in his mind. “Just so I’m clear on this – what’s the purpose of these camps?”

Raising an eyebrow, the Head of State chortled. “I thought that’d be clear. Look, thanks to the Denebian flu and the war, our workforce has been drastically reduced and Wesselan’s on the hook to the Interstellar Financial Fund for debt relief to cover the costs of rebuilding the Fyjer-Geiten infrastructure after this last infernal conflict.” Gomalan stared at his hands and grumbled in disgust. “Damned Collective and their stupid rules.”

It was starting to make sense to Pallav, for he had lived through the dark days when the United States of North America had almost bankrupted itself by developing into an unassailable fortress against the climate migrants who were so contemptuously called invaders.

“And all of our defence bells and whistles cost money,” Ravenna added. Pallav raised an eyebrow. Family horror stories kept alive through the years rose up from the dust of time to swirl before his eyes. His grandmother’s voice whispered in his ear, and he felt cold shivers run up and down his spine, remembering the tales of how his distant grandsire had been sentenced to the brutal Siberian *katorga* penal labour camps. Pallav blinked, dismissing the vision to the darkest corner of his soul. *So long ago, he thought, so far away. It can no longer haunt me.* Hoping he was mistaken, Pallav threw out a lifeline, not sure if it was for his own or Gomalan’s redemption. “But these camps—”

“—Will house the Geiten who’ll inject some muscle into our flagging economy. We’ll build more of ’em all across Wesselan, and we’ll finally get some honest work out of ’em. And we’ll get results – control the Geiten, boost our production, pay off our debts in record time. Not much wrong with that scenario now, is there?”

Pursing his lips, Pallav turned to the shimmering numbers that were still floating before him. With his stomach churning and sweat running down the back of his tunic, he analyzed the figures once again while wishing he could turn back time. Back to that night when he erased the medical records of the Mayflower crew. To the day that he accepted a position within the Wesselan Armed Forces. To a time when he was still honourable. For this, he knew, was anything but. He could taste the bile rising in his throat, knowing full well that he would do his duty. There was no other way.

Wiping the sweat from his eyes, Pallav concluded that he didn’t have to believe in the mission to accomplish it. *Coward*—the word warbled over and over again in his brain like an earworm. And it irritated him, this compliance with authority. Yet without obedience there would be no discipline and the world would be awash with chaos and disorder. Reluctantly, he swallowed his dishonour to attack the task before him with scientific precision.

His eyes once again focused on the numbers in front of him and they formed up in his mind, tallest on the left, shortest on the right, ready for inspection. “Geiten make up approximately twenty percent of the population of Deneb, but the combined effects of the pandemic and war had far less impact on their capacity – a reduction of what, nine percent?”

“They breed like hog-nosed bregas, and they let the Fyjers bear the brunt of the battles. That’s why,” Ravenna interjected.

“The numbers do seem to indicate something of that nature.” Highlighting another column, Pallav inched ever closer to the holoscreen. “And while the Geiten increased in numbers, the population base of both Wesselan and Fyjerlan shrank significantly. So, this is your solution then? Bring in guest labourers?”

Dark eyes aglow with mirth, Ravenna self-consciously rubbed at the scar that ran across her cheek, unable to meet his eyes. A few short coughs burst from her lips, and clearing her throat apologetically, she slipped onto the balcony to make a quick escape.

Something’s wrong, he realized as the doors slid shut. *Really wrong. Do they actually think that Geiten would voluntarily cross into Wesselan where they’re considered no better than parasites? To live and work in these pitiful encampments? And for what? To help the Wessels get their economy back on track? Unless...*

A meaty paw thudded against the Provost Marshal’s back and Gomalan laughed until tears coursed down his wind-burnt cheeks. “By the gods, Pallav! Guests?” Another bout of laughter erupted while Pallav looked on, his face decidedly green.

“Meryx was a good president— a good friend to me too, by the way, but he simply didn’t have the guts to take it one step further. We’re destined to be masters over all of Deneb and take what should rightfully be ours. But we won’t stop there. Oh no, I’ve got bigger and bolder plans. We’re gonna go for broke. I need both of you to work together on this and in a few months, these barracks’ll be teeming with Geiten that... how can I put it... we ‘find’ from within the borders of Fyjerlan and our nation and ‘invite’ them to work for us – with free housing, of course.”

With a whirr, the shimmering numbers caught in the beams of the holoscreen began to evaporate like wisps of smoke and the twin columns receded into the War Room’s floor. “I take it you understand the situation a bit better now. And why I badly need both your input and Ravenna’s. Her troops’ll fill these camps, but Pallav, you’re gonna make sure that they’re as unassailable as a gravity web. You’re the catalyst that’ll make our dreams a reality.”

His glance darted to the woman on the balcony who paced back and forth like a lioness in a cage. “And Ravenna? What’s she have to say on all this?”

Wristcuff to her ear, Ravenna’s dark hair whipped about wildly in the wind like the tempest that was raging within Pallav. Gomalan peered onto the balcony, relieved that the Commander of the Land Forces seemed totally absorbed by an animated conversation.

Old school, verbal without holopresence, Pallav registered with suspicion.

“You need to beware of that one, my friend. You get in her way and she’ll crush you like an overripe cloudberry under those little combat boots of hers.” The Head of State saw the surprise register in his Provost Marshal, and he waved off any dissent. “Don’t think she feels she owes you anything for that rescue mission of yours either. Ravenna didn’t get to where she’s at because of a pretty face or a willing body. She’ll do whatever it takes to get ahead. And if that means getting rid of a recalcitrant Provost Marshal...”

Nodding silently, Pallav once again turned his attention to the balcony and watched the raven-haired woman abruptly cut the transmission. Feeling his eyes on her, Ravenna unleashed a brilliant smile his way that made him swallow nervously.

Lowering his gruff voice to a whisper, Gomalan dashed to provide an answer to his Provost Marshal before Ravenna's return. "She's in, by the way. All the way, as it stands, if it'll give her a shot at the High Commander's position."

Could that be it, he wondered, trying to untangle the puzzle that was Ravenna. The doors to the balcony swung open, and Ravenna re-entered the War Room. "Does the human understand?" she asked in a voice like honey, while her eyes travelled across the collar of Gomalan's tunic, visually caressing the silver stars on the uniform that the Head of State still chose to wear.

After all, she'd be the logical choice, Pallav conceded, closely analyzing the woman who bore the scar on her cheek as a sign of honour. *Combining the offices of President and High Commander into the position of Head of State is quite unorthodox, and Gomalan's been under a lot of pressure lately.*

Another tear-inducing laugh burst from the Head of State. "He'll do his duty," Gomalan chortled, patting Pallav companionably on the shoulder. "Won't you, my friend?"

As Pallav turned about and ever so hesitantly nodded, the aroma of roasting meat wafted through the ventilation ducts, cutting off further discussion and signalling the time for the midday meal. "Why don't I get some hot plates sent in and we can flesh out our approach over lunch?" Opening a brown bag, Gomalan brandished a soggy sandwich that lay squished in a clear wrapper, its contents overflowing and mangled. "Otherwise," he groaned, slamming the offending morsel onto his desk, "I gotta eat this."