

PERIL IN PARADISE

PROLOGUE

2088 CE—THE PLANET DENEb-7

A white mist shrouded the city of Styria, cloaking Wesselan's capital in a drizzly veil. Wisps rose and swirled from the River Sirga, their ghostly tentacles curling around the little wooden stalls that lined the market. Shoppers clopped on the ancient cobblestones, their footsteps a soft melody, while the normally noisy call of the vendors hawking their goods was muted by the heavy fog.

Two shapes took form, threading their way carefully through the mid-afternoon crowd. A giant of a man, his tunic bearing the bars and stars of a Wessel general, clutched the hand of a tiny girl. He moderated his steps to keep pace with the child, who skipped across the cobbles swinging her stepfather's arm. The man threw back his head and sniffed the air, inhaling the scent of grilled meat and spicy stewed vegetables, and his stomach rumbled. A string of giggles made him bend down to see his stepdaughter laughing at him.

"Daddy's always hungry," the child said in her singsong voice.

"Uh-huh. That I am. You know this health food kick your mom's on? Well, it sure isn't working for me."

They stopped in front of a little trolley where a swarthy man with the characteristic emerald eyes of the Geiten race was handing out tiny skewers of meat. The big man's stomach growled some more at the scent of the spicy fare, and he bent down until he was level with the child. "You in the mood for an aurox wrap?"

The little girl nodded, dark curls bouncing on her dusky cheek.

With a swipe of a finger, his wristcuff flashed on, and he checked the balance on his payment chip. "Your mom keeps a tight rein on me," he said, patting his muscular torso. "Thinks I'm sneaking food and gaining weight."

He motioned to the vendor, who began to fill two kyorn wraps with spiced meat and vegetables, then handed the steaming snacks to the pair.

"Just don't tell your mom, okay? Otherwise, I'll be eating saltach and tamaat salads for days."

Her big opal eyes widened at the shared subterfuge, and she winked in reply. "It'll be our secret, Daddy."

Cocooned in the mist, the two walked along the banks of the River Sirga before settling down on a bench in the shadows of Styria's Cathedral of the Mother Goddess. There, sitting beneath the cathedral's

arched pillars, General Pallav Kóbor, Provost Marshal of Wesselan's Armed Forces, munched on his wrap and watched the mist swirling over the river.

He looked down at Jolanta, his little alien stepdaughter, and smiled when she laid her head against his shoulder. Just then, a dazzling blue blaze cut through the fog and sparked across the sky. Pallav wiped his mouth on the cuff of his tunic and squinted into the fog.

Eight years ago that was us, he thought, watching the shock diamonds from the starship's exhaust plume. Back when Rocket Man Radu stole our lives and brought us to this wretched planet. But he wasn't the one who selected Deneb-7. That was Tara. My wife, the astrophysicist, who plotted and schemed with that asshole.

Beside him, seven-year-old Jolanta began to swing her legs and hum a tune. Pallav hugged the child, feeling her warmth against his body.

Even so, if it weren't for Tara and Radu, none of us would be alive. He found out the truth. Just like the rat he is, Radu was poking around when the president spilled the beans. That the vaccine for the Chimera bacteriophage was pure bullshit, and the berths on the Space Ark Mayflower were earmarked for him and his cronies on a one-way voyage to the new colony on Mars. Who knows... we'd probably all be dead by now—me, Tara, and the kids—if it weren't for Radu.

A ray of light pierced the haze and bounced off the surface of the placid river. Strands of mist twisted skyward, their tendrils reaching for the heavens. With sudden ferocity, the brilliant Denebian star appeared, vaporizing the clinging veil of fog.

It was so clear what was going on between the two of them on board the Mayflower. Daniel Radu, Captain of the Space Ark and seducer of my wife. But I get it. He's maple-glazed salmon with wild rice risotto. Me, I'm meatloaf and mashed potatoes smothered in gravy. The guy who carried Tara's books home from school back when she was a scrawny little thing with thick glasses. I'm no rocket scientist, just a guy who's sworn to serve and protect. Vows I made back on Earth, in The Before. Vows that I still uphold here on Deneb-7. Hundreds of light-years from home.

Licking the last bit of sauce from his fingers, Pallav got up from the bench and, taking his stepdaughter by the hand, the two began the trek back to their home on Beaumont Ridge. Sunlight reflected from the tall crystallite buildings and onto the gleaming white walkway, while sunflower-shaped spigots that lined the path wafted a cooling spray over the pedestrians. Tunnels arched between the buildings, connecting the city in one vast network. And overhead, thousands of aerocars crisscrossed the skies, zipping along the sky lanes.

At the shrill whistle of a river ferry, Pallav looked up and caught himself thinking how crowded the city had been when they first arrived.

Then we came along and brought the Chimera bactovirus with us, and a quarter of the population perished. The Denebians... they had no idea what was hitching a ride on the Space Ark, and I wasn't about to let them figure it out. Three years drifting through space in that tin can was enough to last me a lifetime. I had to get off the Mayflower and away from Radu. If I hadn't erased the Space Ark's medical databases, they'd have forced us to move on. And anyway, how could I have known that these Denebians would be susceptible to a human bioengineered disease?

Beside him, Jolanta skipped down the path, delighting in kicking a small pebble. Her childish antics made him smile. Jolanta made everything right in his world, this little alien fosterling whose mother had abandoned her when the pandemic had arrived on Deneb. Pallav patted Jolanta's head and was rewarded with a gap-toothed smile.

Maybe one day, I'll tell her the truth. How Radu's to blame. That he couldn't keep his wife in line. Poppy—that was her name. Patient zero, the one who brought the pandemic on board the Mayflower. It might be under control now here on Deneb, but somehow, that damned disease is spreading across the Collective.

A long elevator shaft rose from the cobbles up the bluffs of Beaumont Ridge. Approaching the structure, Pallav bent down, and a blue light scanned his iris, then a pad glowed green for a palm imprint. Following her father's example, Jolanta stepped into the elevator and clutched Pallav's hand. With a lurch, the elevator sprang into action, and they began to rise above the market.

"Over there, Daddy..." she said, pointing across the city. "That's Uncle Fynn's house, isn't it?"

Through the glass walls of the elevator, Pallav spotted a big white house on the northern shore of the River Sirga and frowned, for Fynn's jaunty little Hover-V was still missing from its docking pad. Pallav faked a smile and nodded.

"When he comes home, can he bring Laska over to play?"

Her face looked so innocent that Pallav gulped and felt his stomach lurch.

When Fynn comes home... he's been gone days now. Ever since that argument with Langrena, no one's seen hide nor hair of him. It's like he's holed up somewhere, licking his wounds.

Pallav groaned and rubbed his forehead. An unwelcome thought was growing in his mind. He probed the reaches of his consciousness and sucked in his breath at the sudden epiphany. For Pallav had the realization that he was the common denominator in an equation of horror. Fynn's disappearance. The Geiten labour camps. They were on one side of the scale of justice, with nothing noble or just to balance the terror that he had unleashed.

And Tara... she knows; she's got to. But what she doesn't realize is that I've done it all for her. Wesselan needs the camps to rebuild the nation after the war. Every able-bodied citizen has to contribute—Wessels, Fygers, Humans, and even the Geiten... especially the Geiten!

A sinister laugh erupted from Pallav's lips when he thought of Daniel Radu, the Space Ark's erstwhile captain with a PhD in astronautical engineering, forced to live like a peasant in the Denebian desert amongst the nomadic Geiten tribes. Then his smile turned to a frown, for now the tribes were scattered and the Geiten race labelled as parasites. Systematically hunted to inject life into the war-torn, battered Denebian economy, the captured Geiten now populated the labour camps of the New Alliance. Camps that Pallav had helped create. In his heart, the big man knew they were monstrous, but his mind tried hard to justify his actions. And failed.

Even so, the Geiten aren't idlers. Just simple folk following traditions handed down from father to son and mother to daughter. But what else could I do? Orders are orders.

Resigned, he shrugged his shoulders, for there was no turning back. "After all, herding and wandering don't contribute to the economy. Serve and protect, remember," he mumbled, trying hard to convince himself.

The elevator door swished open, and Jolanta gambolled ahead, while Pallav slowly climbed the hill to his house. He could see Tara sitting cross-legged on their balcony, the glow of a hololink on her face. Equations floated before her in the air, shimmering and shifting as her finger traced out a formula. Professor Tara Kóbor's voice carried across the distance, and Pallav raised an eyebrow in recognition.

Ah yes... the Schwarzschild radius of a black hole. Must be a first-year class she's teaching.

For a moment he stopped and watched his wife in admiration. She was so animated, beaming with an intense happiness at passing her knowledge to the next generation. Pallav could watch Tara all day. He always could.

Tara, my lady of the stars, the light of my soul.

Then her head turned, and he saw her face crumple at the sight of him. Pallav sighed, his shoulders rising and falling in defeat.

It'll never be the same between us, thanks to that asshole Radu. There's no more love in her heart. I feel it. I see it in her eyes. We're together because it's easy. Just like throwing on a pair of old jeans and a T-shirt. Comfortable and worn, maybe got a few rips and stains, but it's all you got. That's what we've become, Tara and me, except sometimes I think she'd like to try on something new for a change.

Slowly, Pallav continued the last few steps to his house where Jolanta waited impatiently, bouncing from one leg to another. Deactivating the security system, he watched his stepdaughter race through the foyer and down the hall into her bedroom. Having escaped from the shackles of her father, the girl leapt onto her bed and activated an instructional touchscreen. Her classwork flashed up, engulfing Jolanta in the Wessel world so foreign to her human family.

He smirked at the child's concentration, then ambled over to the balcony. Class over, Tara lounged in the sun. His shadow fell upon her, and she started. "I need a few minutes to relax," Tara said, her gaze

cold and emotionless. Then with a wave of her hand, she dismissed her husband. Wordlessly, Pallav nodded in response. It hurt him that he was no longer part of her world, and for a moment he wondered if it was the price he had to pay for his transgressions. An eyebrow raised, he shook his head and made his way over to the Kitchen Chef, where he punched in an order for a glass of cloudberry juice.

Don't be a sap. You make your own karma, Kóbor.

Pallav glanced over to the balcony where Tara was now scrolling through the student chatroom on the Studyverse.

She gave up so much to be here. The dream job at NASA, her friends back home... and Daniel Radu. If she ever found out what I did on the Mayflower, that'd be it. She'd be on the first starship to Cepheus-9 and back in the arms of that jerk. She'll never find out, though. I'll make damned sure of that.

With Jolanta chatting with her classmates and the strains of music drifting in from the balcony, Pallav felt like an outsider in his house. At loose ends, he padded to his office and activated the holoscreen. Reaching for his reading glasses, he quickly scanned the headlines.

Education workers on strike... thank goodness the kids are in private schools... Protests in Nual over the Geiten government's response to the New Alliance... damned Geiten, that's all they know to do... Denebian Flu spreads across the Collective... Casualty numbers in the millions in Cepheus...oh God... It's never going to stop.

Pallav suddenly felt pressure building up behind his eyes, and he rubbed his temples. Then it dawned on him. Interstellar travel from Deneb had been closed down by Space Guard. Entry to and exit from the planet were still carefully controlled, with rigorous medical screening for all passengers. There was no way that the Chimera bacteriophage came from Deneb. Not when Head of State Gomalan had milked Pallav's blood until the big man feared his veins would run dry. Not when the therapeutic program starring Pallav Kóbor's very own antibodies had saved the day on Deneb.

This is all because of Radu. That son of a bitch always lands on his feet but, in the process, drags everyone else down. He sure carved himself a nice little niche in the Collective when the crew escaped from Urkyn. Now Radu's living the good life on Cepheus-9, with a cushy job in the Department of Agriculture. They welcomed him with open arms, and he brought them the pandemic. Radu... Typhoid Danny of the Interstellar Collective for Peace and Security.

Pulling off his readers, Pallav laid them on the desk. He looked out the window to the bustling city with its long snaking lines of aerocars and swirling dust from the surrounding desert. He listened to Jolanta reading her schoolbooks in the singsong Denebian tongue. He sipped at the cloyingly sweet cloudberry juice and tried to remember the taste of orange juice, fresh from the fruit off the tree in his Floridian backyard. But it was no use to allow the feelings of homesickness to plague him, for that home no longer existed. Deneb was home now. The dusty, dirty, desert planet of Deneb. Pallav turned back to

the holoscreen and grimaced at the images of white sandy beaches, bracketed by palm trees swaying in the breeze. 'Contamination on Cepheus,' the news ticker read.

Ah, Radu. What have you done now? There's peril in paradise for you, you son of a bitch. If the Collective ever twigs that it was you and the Mayflower crew who brought the pandemic to their planets, you'll be history.

A smile spread across Pallav's broad-boned face, and he lay back in his chair, hands interlaced behind his head. *Here's hoping that the future gives Radu exactly what he deserves.*

CHAPTER 1

SEND-OFF

Life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

—KHALIL GIBRAN

THE PLANET CEPHEUS-9

Dr. Meera, Head of the Department of Agriculture's Exobotany Research, Development and Exploration Centre at the Interstellar Collective for Peace and Security, propped herself up on her elbow and turned in bed. "What were you saying, Warin?"

"I just can't stop coughing," her husband replied, trying to staunch a snuffle. "And my head... it's killing me."

Meera placed the back of her hand on her husband's head. "I think you might be running a bit of a fever. Let me get you an analgesic hypospray."

Warin wheezed and pulled the covers up over his shoulders. "It's nothing to worry about, my little skua. I'll be better in a day or two."

The light came on, and Meera pushed her feet into a pair of slippers. Stopping at the threshold of their bedroom, she glanced over her shoulder. "The old lady in the mail room had the very same thing last week."

A sneeze exploded, and Warin called out, his voice raspy, "My dear, would you grab a box of tissues as well?"

Slippers shuffled on the wooden floor as Meera made her way into the kitchen. With the dim glow of the appliances casting an eerie blue light, she fumbled in the first-aid kit and retrieved a nearly expired hypospray, then plodded back to the bedroom. A pale sliver of moonlight shone through the window and fell on the bed where her husband lay. Sweat beaded on Warin's forehead, and his nightshirt clung to his body. Meera shook the hypospray, then held it against her husband's neck for the prescribed three seconds.

"Hmmm... it could be the Denebian Flu," Warin said between coughs.

Meera got up and opened the window. A draft of cool air wafted into the room.

"Unlikely, my dear," she replied. After fluffing and rearranging the pillows, she burrowed back under the covers. "Travel from Deneb's shut down tighter than a hangman's noose. That old lady

in the mailroom I was telling you about? She said there's a nasty bug running around. Nothing to worry about. You just need to get some rest."

"I guess you're right. And wasn't the Denebian Flu contained anyway?"

Yawn. "I read the Wessels developed an aerosolized antibody-based therapeutic and delivered it across the planet. Now, let's get some sleep; I've got a meeting in the morning."

Toss. Turn. Cough. Sneeze.

"But what if? Oh, I suppose only the very old die from the Denebian Flu," Warin whispered in a hoarse voice. "Right?"

Silence was the only response until the soft snuffles of Meera's snoring began.

"Right?"



Like a robber in the night, the Chimera bacteriophage crept over the Cepheusian archipelago. Silently, swiftly, it began a harvest of life while the governmental wheels of motion slowly ground into action. By the time the Collective realized what the superbug was, it was almost midnight on the clock of Warin's life.

From a long, empty corridor in the hospital, that realization struck Meera like a runaway star freighter. Through a window, she saw her husband's blood-red eyes roll in pain in his blotched face. "It had to come from Deneb," she said softly. Meera bowed her head and sat, unwilling to leave her husband alone in the sterile hospital. Air wafted from the vents above her, reeking of disinfectant. She listened to the sounds of shrill beeps that confirmed his heart still beat in his ravaged body.

"Is it too late for him?" she asked their doctor. Warin's eyes were now closed. His once strong arms lay lifeless at his sides.

The doctor looked down at the floor. "He's one of thousands, you know. It's spreading like wildfire. We're doing everything we can. He's receiving the best of care."

Meera knew what that meant. Warin's body had been wrapped in a red film to halt its seeping. Red—so that she could not tell how much blood her husband had lost. A nurse entered the containment chamber swathed in protective equipment. She turned Warin on his side and gently began to wash his face.

"So, it's hopeless," Meera said, her voice void of emotion.

The doctor shuffled her feet and then pushed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose. "Not necessarily. The Collective's assembling a team of experts—virologists, microbiologists, biochemists, pharmacologists. They're building a task force."

“Task Force Kāne,” Meera replied. She watched the nurse turn Warin over and check the levels in his intravenous bag. Then quietly the woman left the room, walking past Meera without looking at her.

“It had to come from Deneb,” Meera repeated. She was angry with the government. With the doctor. Bitter that she had contracted this very illness from Warin but was now right as rain. Yet her husband lay dying, and this doctor could do nothing but feed her empty promises.

The doctor shook her head. “That is not possible. Deneb was quarantined and a therapeutic was developed that halted the progress of the disease. This simply cannot be the Denebian Flu.”

Meera balled her hands into fists to control her anger. “I’m positive it’s from that planet. The symptoms are identical. And what’s our government doing? Why don’t they negotiate with Deneb? Instead, they arrange for a bunch of scientists to come here to study it.”

This angry outburst made the doctor uncomfortable. She plunged her hands into the pockets of her lab coat and shrugged her shoulders. There were no answers. Not for Meera. Not for the doctor. Not yet.



Brilliant minds from across the Collective, people at the apex of their fields, came together. Operating from within a negative-pressure chamber, Task Force Kāne examined the deadly threat. The team debated and disagreed, investigated and threw up their hands in despair, but they were persistent. Bit by bit, the trail unravelled. Rod-like anthrax bacilli squirmed under high-powered microscopes, peppered with infectious spores the likes of which had never been found on any planet within the Collective. And another surprise was in store for them. For within the long chains of bacteria lurked an extraneous molecule embedded in the endospore’s outer layer.

Pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place when the extrinsic RNA of a viral particle was isolated. By the very nature of the bacteriophage, the team confirmed its alien heritage.

One of the pharmacologists shook her head. “It’s Denebian, isn’t it?”

“You willing to wager on that?” a biochemist questioned, tapping a payment chip on his wristcuff.

“Got to be some kind of biological weapon,” she replied. “Isn’t it always that war-torn planet that brings trouble to the Collective?”

But the head virologist shook his head. “This thing hasn’t got Denebian origins. Not exactly.”

“Then what?”

He scratched at his patchy scalp. “Look at the RNA.” The group clustered about, each jostling the other to get a better look at the mutant. “See?” he continued to a chorus of *ohs* and *ahs*. “This

here's certainly foreign. It shows all the hallmarks of an alien heritage—but not Denebian. It's transmitted via those refugees from the third planet of a star called Sol."

"Well then, it actually did come from Deneb," the pharmacologist replied with a smirk. She elbowed the biochemist in the side.

Rubbing at his ribs, the biochemist scowled. "And what did they do about it, the Denebian Tribal Union? Nothing. Nothing at all."

Pacing behind the crowd, the team lead smacked a fist into her palm. "We've got the science. Now we need to get the politicians on board to defuse the disease." She turned abruptly on her heel and threw her hands on her hips, then addressed her team. "Wrap this up in a quick presentation, and I'll take it to the Chancellor."



Holoporting into Head of State Gomalan's office, the Chancellor of the Collective stood there with the words of Task Force Kāne still ringing in her ears:

If we're to defuse the disease and quickly conquer this Chimera, ma'am, Deneb's the key.

"I need answers," Ephylia demanded.

Gomalan slowly rose from behind his desk. The big warrior-turned-politician narrowed his eyes at the impromptu appearance of the chancellor, his posture anything but welcoming.

Without a further word, Ephylia waved her hand, and the room was bathed in light. Brilliant beams converged, and a replica of the bactovirus floated midair, twisting and turning in a beautiful dance of death.

Betraying nothing, the leader of the Denebian nation of Wesselan merely raised an eyebrow. "So, the Denebian Flu's made its way to Cepheus?" he asked insincerely, his face a picture of innocence. Yet the Wessel Head of State knew exactly what wriggled before him, captured in dazzling colour within the shimmering holobeams.

Waving the image away, Ephylia blinked and shook her head in astonishment. "It's nothing so routine." She scanned the room, taking in the military awards splashed across the aged warrior's walls and heaved a sigh. "Look, I know you're an ex-soldier, so perhaps it's not so obvious to you, but that thing's not the flu, and it certainly didn't originate from your planet."

Gomalan's nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed. "Then why're you here?" he said with barely concealed contempt. "Unless this is a social call?"

"Actually," she went on, ignoring his rudeness, "it's not from any planet in the Collective." Her lips pursed, and her eyes narrowed while Ephylia waited in vain for a response before continuing. "It began on Sol-3. From the humans who sought refuge on your planet. They brought this with

them, this horrific hemorrhagic respiratory disease. And that's what this is all about. The therapies you developed on Deneb saved your people, and we need them now. At any cost, you understand. They'll protect the Collective from this human-introduced disease."

Sinking back into his chair, Gomalan nonchalantly poured himself a couple of fingers of Vulpeculan brandy. "Those humans? They're gone, the lot of 'em," he lied. "We eradicated the bunch of 'em in a raid on a Geiten village years ago. Before they could infect our planet, that is."

Wicked thoughts arose within the burly warrior. Thoughts of unseating the Chancellor of the Collective, dreams of untold power bringing him and the Wessels to the forefront of the interplanetary body. Swirling the Vulpeculan brandy in his glass, Gomalan sipped at the amber liquid, then peered up at Ephylia through hooded eyes. He surveyed the woman, took in her pinched, drawn face and the determined set to her jaw. For a moment, he wavered, almost feeling pity for the chancellor. Then he remembered the debt relief scheme imposed upon his nation by the Interstellar Financial Fund and his mood quickly soured.

"Now that thing you just showed me... the disease you've got on Ceph-9? What'd you say the symptoms were—some bothers with bleeding and breathing? That's not like anything we ever had on Deneb. And nothing we've got in our arsenal of therapies'll be of any help to you. I'm positive that your advisors've already briefed you on this. So, it makes me wonder... Chancellor... why're you really here?"

It was a tiny twitch, and it lasted no more than the blink of an eye, but Ephylia had seen it when the Wessel chief's shaking hand raised the glass to his lips. *He's covering up something*, she realized. She started in surprise when Gomalan slammed his drink down, his fierce face ablaze. Amber droplets jumped across the room, splashing through her holimage, and spilling across the desk.

"I see I can expect no help from Deneb," she remarked caustically. Then, without formality, the Chancellor took her leave. It was from that day on that the hunt for humans began across the Collective.