

SPIRITS OF STEEL

CHAPTER ONE

But the child who had experienced that happiness existed no longer; it was like a reminiscence of somebody else.

—LEO TOLSTOY

2090 CE—THE PLANET DENEb-7

General Pallav Kóbor, Provost Marshal of the powerful Wessel Armed Forces of the planet Deneb-7, draped his two-meter frame over the railing and peered into the darkness. He scanned the veil of the Milky Way, searching for a dim yellow star that was not more than a pinprick in the velvety black expanse of space. Such an insignificant object, so faint, just another inconsequential star amongst the four billion that orbited a supermassive black hole at the centre of the galaxy. But for him, that little yellow dwarf star was a beacon, pointing the way home.

A surge of melancholy swept over him, a longing to see the familiar evergreen-carpeted slopes of the Black Hills once again. To feel the tug of a brown trout on his line as he wrestled it out of French Creek, and to relish the taste of a cold beer on a hot summer's day while listening to country music on the front porch with his father.

Reaching for a tumbler of warm lesh, Pallav took a sip of the fermented alien beverage. He pulled a face, plunked the cup down and draped his arms over the balcony railing. Far below in the darkness glowed the city of Styria. Towering edifices dominated the landscape, their translucent walls rendered opaque for the scant hours of the Denebian night.

His gaze took in the empty, arched walkways that spread for kilometres across Wesselan's capital city, linking the buildings into one massive complex of businesses, shops, and dwellings. Soon the metropolis of Styria would be humming with workers, rushing on their daily slog to the offices and stores that peppered the capital. But for now, all was quiet.

A sharp tug on the archaic wristwatch that had once been his great-grandfather's caused the big man to start in surprise. By his side stood Jolanta, his alien stepdaughter, looking up at him with her luminous opal eyes. He scooped up the sleepy nine-year-old in his arms, then glanced at the time on his watch. It had taken his astrophysicist wife, Tara, just one afternoon of tinkering with the old timepiece to modify it for the shorter days on Deneb. Glancing through the balcony doors, he saw her curled up on the sofa. The soft glow from a light tablet illuminated Tara's face, and the halo of a Thought-Melding Interface perched atop his wife's sleek dark curls transformed her into a golden angel.

Set +1. Three hours until sunrise. And she's still at work.

Kissing his daughter on her forehead, he swung the little girl down. Then with a pat to her back, he sent the once-orphaned child back to bed. As Jolanta scampered away, Pallav turned and gripped the railing to stare at the spot where the star Sol was barely visible.

Forty-something light-years away. Might as well be in another universe. Another life. Another time. God, I miss it.

Lost in thought, he tried to close the distance that separated him from Earth. With a faraway look in his eyes, Pallav reminisced with fondness about the time when he headed security for the North American Space Agency.

Life was great then... good team, a job as rewarding as they come. Nice house, kids doing well in school... yes sir, life was better than great. Up until the point when Tara colluded with Dr. Daniel Radu and his gang of pirates... she wasn't just in on it; she was at the top of it, right alongside that sneaky bastard. Kidnapping the entire team, then hijacking the Space Ark Mayflower. There I was, in charge of security, but unable to do anything. Just one of the unwilling passengers on a three-year journey across the galaxy. What was the alternative, anyway? We'd all have ended up as victims of the Chimera bactovirus if I hadn't been tricked. Yup, it's a good thing Tara outfoxed me that time.

He thought of their two biological children, Luke and Isabella. Both teens, effortlessly adapting to their new lives. A sliver of a grin crossed his rugged features.

Such is the gift of youth. Mind you, I had a soft landing, too. Parachuted right into a plum position with the Wessel Army. But for Tara it was rough going in the beginning. Ah well, she's all right now that she's found her niche at the university. The planet Deneb-7's our new home now.

Pallav wondered if the Chimera pandemic had finally been extinguished on Earth. If his younger sister still lived with their parents on Willow Creek Road in Custer, South Dakota. He pictured looking out the kitchen window with the distant Black Elk Peak poking through the thick pine forest that grew outside their back door.

Taking another sip of warm lesh, his thoughts turned to the *Rooted in Poverty* rebel faction that had spread like a cancer across the United States of North America. He wondered if RiP had flung the survivors of the pandemic into wretched lives of misery and terror.

Pallav emptied his glass; the warm liquid burned as it coursed down his throat, but he knew that no amount of lesh could drown those thoughts from his mind.

Dwelling on the past is the surest route to madness.

Seeking to banish his morose reflections, the big man reached for his military light tablet that sat on the patio table. There, hundreds of holomails, in glistening glyphs of red and black, awaited

his attention. Reports from the labour camps dominated the screen. Commandants boasting about the productivity of their Geiten inmates, crowing about their security records. For a moment, his chest filled with pride and a twinkle lit up his pale-green eyes.

Damn straight! No one's ever going to escape from one of my camps. I've personally overseen every aspect of their security systems and training.

A sour reality replaced his sense of achievement, for deep in his heart, Pallav knew that the labour camps were abominations. An evil that he had forged. Perfect in their wicked depravity. He peered into the empty glass and frowned.

There was nothing else I could've done. My kids deserve a secure future in a nation with a strong economy, not burdened with debt. The Geiten began the war that destroyed our productivity, and now they're paying for their folly. Vae victis—woe to the vanquished.

And they had been defeated—the Geiten—the proud nomadic people of the Empty Quarter. Their government had evaporated like the morning mist, leaving only the savage power of the Black Hide rebels to rule the Geiten tribes. The very ones the Wessels referred to as sub-Denebians. Parasites. Vermin. A plague on the planet.

It had been difficult for Pallav to understand, until the night he'd agreed to help Luke revise for a history lesson. He'd scratched his head in confusion, uncertain of his newly won ability in the Denebian language, skeptical that his translation of Luke's homework was entirely accurate.

But his son confirmed his doubts. Luke rattled off textbook answers while Pallav's stomach churned. The lad's teenage voice cracked as he proudly recited his lesson from memory: "The Geiten are an inferior Denebian race that reject modern advancements and technology. They live according to the perverse traditions of their ancestors."

Luke's lip curled in disgust as he continued the recitation to his father. "Geiten males herd the rough-hided quadrupedal geiten, while females focus entirely on the family. They refuse to work in factories or businesses. Instead, the land is their headquarters and the numerous marketplaces that dot the major cities, their offices. With the Black Hide rebels now sheltering within the Geiten settlements and hamlets of the vast desert, the glorious Wessel nation will never be safe from their terror."

His son had looked to him for confirmation, but with Pallav stunned into silence, Luke took the light tablet from his father to check if he had missed anything. Unable to congratulate his son's textbook-perfect recitation of "history", Pallav kept his opinions to himself. For he knew that it was not the simple Geiten people who were the enemy, but rather the Black Hide—that ragged band of extremists who called themselves rebels in the name of freedom and equality.

Shaking his head in disgust at the memory, Pallav turned his attention back to his own light tablet and scrolled down until he came across the labour camps' productivity figures. He snorted in surprise.

Gomalan's scheme's actually beginning to turn the tide. It won't be long until we're able to discharge the debt relief that those damned bean counters in the Interstellar Financial Fund imposed on Wesselan. I never dreamt that the Economic Reform Programme would be so effective, but how could it not, when it's being run by sadists and psychopaths who somehow managed to rise up the ranks?

A veil of mist rose from the River Sirga, floating on the gentle night breeze until it engulfed the big man. He coughed. The tendrils of the pearly fog transported him back in time to a blustery night on the borderlands. The taste of dust still lingered from when he stormed across the desert in an armoured ACOLEV; the roar of the colossal Meganeur airships as they screamed down from the clouds to release their capture drones still echoed in his ears.

The cold mist floated over the city and wrapped itself around him. How similar it seemed to the rising cloud of dust that shrouded the throngs of Geiten who had stampeded to escape the descending drones that night. Shrieks of the victims still echoed in his mind. When Pallav closed his eyes, the steely capture nets, filled to bursting with the wailing captives, leapt out from the bowels of his consciousness to torment him.

Another cough and the vision slowly dissipated. A chill slunk in with the night. Fresh, cool air crept up the hillside, and Pallav rubbed his muscular arms against the cold. Reaching for the empty tumbler, he stepped back into the warmth of the family room when, with a high-pitched chime, a message flashed up on his light tablet.

It can wait till the morning.

Absentmindedly, he scooted in next to his wife and threw an arm around her. Engrossed in her work, the diminutive brunette barely batted an eye at the big, burly man who was her husband.

"Burning the midnight oil, darling?" He pressed his lips against the crown of Tara's head, her hair perfumed with the blossoms of the desert Gilly tree.

Tara nodded wordlessly, then pushed an errant curl behind her ear. "I still have to get through a couple more assignments," she replied, then raised an eyebrow at her husband when his light tablet began to vibrate. "You going to get that? Seems urgent."

Reluctantly, Pallav reached for the device. After an iris scan and a thumbprint, the light tablet flashed up. Before him, the holoimage of Colonel Arwin sprang to life. With the colour drained from his face, the normally dapper Fyjer Liaison Officer looked haggard. His bloodshot eyes darted around Pallav's living room, and with an exasperated sigh, he lifted his arms up as if in prayer.

“Tell me he’s with you.”

Pallav and Tara exchanged confused glances. Depositing her light tablet on her lap, Tara raised an eyebrow and tilted her head. “I’m guessing you mean Fynn, right?”

Arwin looked hopeful, but his optimism was dashed when Pallav shook his head. “He left hours ago. Said something about going to the office before daring to re-enter the lion’s den.”

Into the glimmering holimage stepped Arwin’s daughter. Worry marred Langrena’s face; tears tracked down her dusky cheeks. “He should be home by now. I called the office, but there was no response.” She rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand while their dainty pet calixofor wove its way in and out of her legs.

Wrapping an arm about his daughter, Arwin tucked her head under his chin and made little soothing noises. “He’ll come back,” he cooed, patting her gently. “You’ll see; Fynn just needs some time. Try and get some sleep, sweetheart. We’ll find him.”

We? Pallav thought in despair.

Oh no, no, no... I don’t want to get dragged into a domestic in the middle of the night. I’m too old for this!

As Langrena made her way off-screen, Arwin shot the big man a pleading look. “You up for a little trip out to Sirga Aerospace Wing? ‘Get fly-boy home safe’ mission?” Arwin’s black velvet eyes grew as large as dinner plates, and Pallav swore that the rugged, powerfully built man’s lower lip stuck out in a pout worthy of his two daughters.

Bone-tired, Pallav hesitated while trying hard to keep a straight face. The big man slouched on the sofa. His eyes burned, his back ached, and all he wanted was to throw his tired frame into bed. It was late and Deneb’s night was short. A trip out to Sirga Aerospace Wing would cut into the Denebian five-hour sleep cycle that he already found inadequate. Glancing again at his wristwatch, he was about to admit defeat when an idea struck him.

“Sorry, pal, but I’m going to have to pass on this one. I promised Tara that I’d help her go through these assignments.”

His wife shot him a look of amazement, as if Pallav could even understand, let alone grade the assignments that Professor Tara Kóbor, one of the top astrophysicists in the galaxy, had assigned to her postgraduate students.

Ah, hell... It’s just one little white lie.

Pursing his lips, Arwin glanced off-screen to ensure that Langrena was out of range. “Listen, I wouldn’t be asking unless it was important. Lanny’s worried sick. When Fynn left, she had a premonition. You know, the kind that makes you shiver, even in the heat of the day.”

Tara's nails bit into her husband's arm, but stoically, Pallav maintained a look of utter sincerity. "Fynn's most likely fallen asleep going through all the reports and returns that cross a Wing Commander's desk. Tell her there's nothing to worry about."

The pressure on his arm increased until Pallav was sure that Tara's fingernails were puncturing his skin. She glared at her husband, eyes shooting daggers at him.

I get it, darling. You want me to ride out on a white stallion and storm the castle. But I'm not up to playing the valiant knight this evening. Not to find that warbird wizard sawing logs in his office. I got a hot date with my pillow that I'm going to keep.

Ignoring the pain, he simply smiled at Arwin. "You tell Lanny her stick jockey's probably out for the count with his head on a stack of paperwork. Probably drooling all over his desk too. She can smack him around in the morning; God knows he deserves it."

The big Fyjer's shoulders drooped. "I suppose you're right. Sorry for the disturbance."

He sketched a shallow bow to the Kóbor, then paused for a moment with an inscrutable look on his face. "So, the frame you've got hanging on the wall in your office... the one you said was from an Earth institute? If I remember correctly, I believe it translates to a 'university degree' in Military, Security, and Strategic Studies. Now, I'm no expert in xenolinguistics, but I never realized you were an astrophysicist as well, Kóbor. Hmmm... you learn something new every day, don't you?"

Both eyebrows rose in surprise on the provost marshal's face as Arwin's holographic image dissipated in a veil of shimmering motes. Tara released her grip on her husband's arm and then turned to him with a look of bemusement. "He's right, you know. You sure do."