

PROLOGUE

Strawberries

“They’re finally ripe!”

Scabs split, ulcers wept, chemicals itched, and sunburns chafed as I shuffled up the rise separating the Johnson home from my destination, toolbox in hand. Sweat poured into my wounds and set them afire, but I pressed on. *Today is strawberry day!*

I topped the rise separating the Johnson hovel from the greenhouse I’d built from the remains of pre-Destruction buildings. *Destruction: an absurdly simple word for global ecological collapse millennia in the making and sealed by nuclear exchanges between states.* Gathering the materials was a labor of obsession. Distilling and redistilling water to wash enough dirt to fill the greenhouse forty centimeters deep became an exercise in tedium. Planting and tending took only a few weeks, by which point I was more than a little impatient. Why? To prove that one could farm healthy crops using solar power and clean water instead of the acidic rain captured by the many hydrators dotting the family homestead.

Today was the day I’d taste the fruits of a year of hard labor. I smiled, anticipating the sweet tang I hadn’t tasted since childhood. My smile faded to a puzzled frown as the door opened. My frown became a scowl as I saw my neighbor and friend Rutherford Samuels leaving with two fistfuls of my hard-won triumph and blood-red juice running down his chin. My jaw dropped. On post-Destruction Earth, stealing food was tantamount to murder.

“Thief!”

He looked at me wide-eyed for a long moment before turning to flee, but I was already in motion. My body burned as I pushed for speed. A jolt of pain inflamed my rage when my thigh smacked a corner of my toolbox. I snatched up a heavy wrench. Rutherford glanced back, tripped, and fell. I howled as I lifted the tool above my head and swung it at his skull. Rutherford recoiled from my onslaught. Time slowed. I watched in horror as he twisted his body out of harm’s way. Then I felt and heard a crunch. Rutherford screamed as the wrench shattered his

kneecap. I staggered backward then collapsed to my knees, chest heaving as I watched him crawl away whimpering.

“What kind of acid is this?” I called after him. “If you want to kill me, then stab me instead of taking my food. You’re my neighbor—my friend. How can you betray me like this?”

I looked at the smushed pile of berries Rutherford had dropped and rolled over. The anger faded as my pain subsided enough for me to crawl forward. I popped the only intact strawberry in my mouth. It tasted flat and dull, nothing like the strawberries I ate on Mars as a child, back when life made sense. Guilt and shame overcame me. *I maimed my neighbor for this?*

“Damn you, Rutherford! All this and the berries aren’t even good?”

Nobody would blame me for defending my food supply, least of all Rutherford, because tolerating one theft risked inviting more. Knowing that didn’t help as I knelt there wondering whether I should try to help him or finish the job. We’d been neighbors for over a decade. *I thought we were friends. These berries aren’t what I’d hoped, but they prove I can help everyone in Omapeka and beyond—including you.*

A sonic boom from a passing sub-orb rattled my greenhouse. The sudden noise and red strawberries against the grays and browns of Omapeka reminded me of Aunt Gertrude Kellem, mayor of the Chryse Planitia Pleasure Colony on Mars. She gave me a toy MSF Interceptor for my fifth birthday and told me I’d be a pilot someday. Instead, I was a half-starved post-Destruction dirt farmer breaking bones over a few handfuls of strawberries. I stared up at the contrail, yearning to fly, to get off this barren rock, to return to Mars and the life I once knew.

I remembered seeing her in a well-manicured meadow on my fifth birthday: a portly woman with brown curly hair, too much rouge on her cheeks, and lavender glitter framing her green eyes. I also recalled her turquoise jacket straining to remain in place against her pink blouse. *She stuffs herself with all the abundance Mars has to offer while thoughtlessly sending me computers and thousands of data cards on every topic imaginable. What the hell happened to get my family dumped on this poisoned rock?*