

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?*

CHAPTER ONE

Earth

“Wake up, fertcan.”

I opened my eyes. Morning light streamed through holes in the rusted corrugated sheet metal that formed our home, casting jagged patterns on the dirt floor that mimicked the dry, cracked earth outside. Every creak of the walls sounded like a warning. Wind pelted the house with sand and debris. The air carried a metallic tang, gritty dust, boiling vegetables, and a whiff of petroleum. My computer and many hundreds of collected data cards contrasted with the squalor.

“You were thrashing in your sleep.” My younger sister Eva stood in the doorway. The once-beautiful Martian toddler with blonde hair and bright blue eyes was now a young Earther woman covered in the same rashes, lesions, and thinning hair as everyone else.

I rose and folded my rough, threadbare blanket into a hooded cloak. Scabs split open. My body itched. *Oh, to be five years old again with a skinned knee from running and playing instead of weeping blood and pus from chemicals and unfiltered sunlight!*

“I had the space dream again,” I said. “Floating in space next to a gargantuan ship with a big fin sticking up. I reach out to touch the hull, but it veers off behind a planet.” I pulled a pair of boots over my swollen feet. “No idea what it means, but it beats reliving the Rutherford incident. Can’t believe it’s been almost two years already.” *Different day, same script.*

“Breakfast is almost ready. Oh, and happy birthday.”

The pain lessened. *Today is Monday, August thirteenth, 2564. It’s my eighteenth birthday. I am a man.* I dabbed a layer of protective mud on my face and exposed limbs. “I hope the second half of my life is better than the first.”

“Aunt Gertrude rained you another package. And let me help you with that abscess on your arm.”

“Why?” I waved my free arm at my computer and thousands of data cards whose number grew with every arriving sub-orb. “Take *Practical Intra-System Maneuvering* and *Ganymede HX Series Console* for example. What possible use do I have for these beyond entertainment? I can fly to Mars in my sleep, but can’t clean soil or purify water. If Aunt Gertrude wants me to be a pilot or do something specific, then she has a funny way of showing me.”

I winced as Eva lanced the boil and squeezed out a ball of pus that she wiped on a corner of my cloak. “Ah, that’s better. Thanks. I’m glad somebody enjoys this kind of thing.”

“I’m trying to do whatever good I can, and things like this are easier than trying to set Rutherford’s knee. As for Aunt Gertrude, at least she likes one of us, because I can’t remember the last time she gave anyone else a gift. Come eat, then let’s get to work.”

Earth is all Eva knows. She was too young to remember the Pleasure Colonies, green grass, and healthy foods. I envy her relentless idealism and fascination with medicine. Rutherford can walk today because of her.

I followed her into the central room. This was the only room with glass windows instead of bare openings covered with sheets of metal, wood, or fabric for privacy. A sheet of translucent, sun-warped plastic served as our inner door, its corners pinned with metal bars to keep the wind from ripping it free. Father sat at the table oiling our hydrator tools. I eased myself into a brittle plastic chair across from him. Wrinkles crossed his face. Blisters covered his bald scalp. He looked at me with yellow eyes.

“Happy birthday, son,” he wheezed. “Take today off and work double tomorrow if you want.”

“Does it matter?”

“Speak up, Son, you know I can’t hear too good.”

I picked up a caliper and used the cleanest corner of my blanket/cloak to wipe grit from its hinges. “Does being eighteen mean I get to marry Lynn and start my own farm?”

“Yes, and about time. Go mod your own hydrators since you’re the expert.”

“My mods work, and you know it.”

“And if you’re wrong? No hydrators, no water.”

“Stop,” Eva said, emerging from the toilet room. “Can we go through one day without this endless argument? Just today? Please?”

I squirted oil on the caliper and worked it into the hinges. I finished and stood up too fast, grimacing as sheets of fire raced down my back. I limped to the toilet, slammed the door, and lowered myself onto the rough wooden seat above the stinking fertcan that collected our offerings.

“Breakfast is served.”

I finished my business and returned to the central room, where Mother ladled vegetables into chipped bowls. The stunted turnips and cabbages looked and tasted as lifeless and caustic as the soil that that birthed them. Still, I chewed slowly to extract what nutrition I could and washed it down with warm cooking water from a pitcher. I wiped my hands on my hood when I finished.

“David, why don’t you take the sailcar into Omapeka and get your package?” Mother said. Clumps of yellow hair jutted from beneath her headscarf. She pulled a few coins from her apron and pressed them into my palm. “I’ve been saving these. Get some meat for your birthday supper.”

Father snatched them away. “No sense wasting money on meat. And stop encouraging him to fill his head with Gertrude’s acid.”

“That acid’s my only escape.”

“You know where the door is if you want to escape.”

Same script, increasingly different day. “Fair enough. I’m taking the sailcar into town to register a farm at the land office.”

Father leaned across the table. “You—” He broke into a coughing fit.

Something about this particular exchange cut deeper than usual. I reached for his shoulder but stopped short. *He doesn't want pity, least of all from me.*

Eva rose. "David, help me fert the garden before you go. You promised."

"If I must." I stood, kissed my mother, and followed Eva into the toilet to retrieve the fertcan. No Omapeka home was complete without one. *To think we owe our lives to these wretched buckets.* She grabbed the box of hydrox compound and poured some in the canister. I gasped.

"No wonder the east patch is so alkaline! Watch."

"But the instructions say—"

"Whoever wrote those instructions needs a wrench to the head." My hand stung as I scooped half the white powder back out. "This is plenty. Trust me."

We stirred the mixture of shit, piss, and hydrox into a pungent slurry, then headed outside. I spat in my palm and watched my saliva fizzing as it reacted with the hydrox. The burning eased. My data cards described the plants and animals that once filled these plains. I pictured waist-high grasses and purple-flowered shrubs blanketing the landscape. *As if my nightly dreams of Mars and a strange spaceship aren't torture enough!*

Memories of lying on my back in a lush meadow, blades of grass tickling my neck, faded to real browns and grays. Ranks of hydrators stood idle in the morning light, rusting vertical tubes with meter-wide catch basins at their bases. Grains of windborne sand stung my face. Tomorrow, I'd be back at work replacing corroded pipes and valves while making furtive adjustments to wring more, cleaner water from those accursed machines. "Let's get at this so I can sail into town."

I knelt by a plant and scooped a dollop of slurry from the fertcan. My eyes watered and my stomach roiled from the stench that never fully washed off. *A gardener on Mars showed me a handful of rich, moist brown soil with an earthworm as he told me how soil is life. Here, soil is lingering death.*

Each plant received its portion of fert as we worked our way across the field. Missing or half-eaten plants surrounded a hole halfway down the row, each bite mark laughing at weeks of wasted labor. My hand burned again as I scooped a handful of turned soil. *Too much hydrox, Eva!* I dropped the contaminated dirt and spit in my palm again to neutralize the caustic soil. Something moved in the hole.

“Gopher!”

“Where?” Eva peered over my shoulder.

I pointed, my skin breaking with the movement. Eva speared a section of pipe into the burrow. I grabbed her arm. “Soil is life. Let him be.”

“You don’t want the meat?”

“Not this time,” I said. “Rutherford grows his food and chose to steal ours. This creature has nothing else to eat.”

Eva nodded, lowering the pipe. We finished ferting the plants.

“You really need to lay off the hydrox, Eva. It—”

Eva scoffed. “I know what it does. I also know the instructions were written by experts, not my brother who thinks he knows any better.” She pointed at the sky. “Looks like rain’s coming!”

I squinted at the distant thunderheads and shook my head at their empty promises. *Our lives hinge on occasional showers of clean rain that wash away built-up salts, but today won’t be such a day.* “That’s virga, Eva. It evaporates before hitting the ground.”

“Remember the strawberries?”

I hung my head. “Those fucking strawberries were my one indulgence in life. Meanwhile, people on Mars gorge on anything they can get their flabby paws on.”

“So you never stop saying,” Eva said with a shrug. We kept walking. I saw our mother struggling with two jerrycans as we approached the house. I caught up with her and took the full cans.

“So much water,” she said with a gap-toothed smile. “Praise the hydrators!”

Mars supplied hydrators, parts, and just enough electricity to keep most of them running most of the time. Spending every day servicing hydrators while balancing acids, bases, and salts to prevent starvation was the best way I knew to keep a population both docile and dependent. I rejected this status quo by dedicating myself to squeezing every possible drop from the grotesquely inefficient machines. *The last thing Mars wants is for Earth’s millions to rise up, overrun their outposts, and maybe even invade. Aunt Gertrude must know this. So what is she playing at?*

Mother understood my thinking. Thanking the hydrators was her way of thanking me without lifting the veil of acquiescence.

I smiled. “I told you reworking the condenser inputs was a good idea!”

“Horace is working the north side of the ridge. Take the sailcar before he returns.”

“Thanks!” I set the heavy cans down, grinned, and made for the sailcar. I boarded and unfurled the sail for the thirty-klick ride to Omapeka and my package but hesitated before adjusting the lines. *Do I really want to know what useless data card, computer, or other trinket Aunt Gertrude sent this time, when all it will do is rub my nose in how abominable things are? Still, I have to know.*

I shook my head as I pulled in the lines. The sail caught the wind. The lines went taut, the mast flexed, and the sailcar groaned as it began moving. I sailed out of sight of the house before winching in the sails. The sailcar canted onto two wheels and accelerated. I spread my arms, relishing the cool wind.

A familiar cluster of corrugated buildings came into view surrounded by its own hydrators and feeble crops. I giped the sailcar towards it. A figure watched me approach.

“Hey, Lynn!” I called, releasing the sails and braking. “Come to town with me.”

“Happy birthday, David!” Lynn said, leaning in for a kiss. “Why town?”

“Package.”

“Again?”

“I know. But the short break from work will be nice.”

“Good rain,” Lynn said as she climbed aboard, laughing as the breeze tousled her matted brunette waves and dulled the ever-present smell of fert. Her narrow mouth and widely spaced eyes resembled Aunt Gertrude’s, except Lynn’s face was drawn and gaunt. *Obesity isn’t exactly endemic on post-Destruction Earth.*

“Let’s get married and go to the land office.”

“What makes you think I’ll marry you?”

“Like either of us has better options?” I grumbled.

“What? David, you know you’re my man.” Her tone was light, but doubt lingered in her eyes. “C’mere and give me some lovin’.”

I trimmed the sailcar for hands-off running, then embraced her. She giggled and hugged me back. I kissed her. Giggles became moans as our kisses intensified and our hands explored each other. Evolutionary instincts trumped burns and aches, and we made love—if two half-dead people creaking across the flats in a sailcar can call it that. The same instincts also made me misjudge the wind, as we arrived sooner than expected.

WELCOME TO OMAPEKA, KANSO-NEBRASKA PROVINCIAL CAPITAL, TEXAHOMA PEACE AND CO-PROSPERITY SPHERE—POPULATION 2,003, proclaimed a sign as we cruised past the city limits and finished rearranging our clothing. Martian colonies were clusters of cylindrical buildings beneath domes that mimicked pre-Destruction Earth skies and smelled of flowers. Omapeka consisted of three hundred shanties cobbled together from

whatever materials their owners could scrounge. This settlement sat beneath a polluted sky that shimmered with heat and particles of dirt, hydrox, and fert.

I parked and furled the sail at Town Hall and Sundries, a mud-brick structure roofed with metal sheets and salvaged planks.

“I’m going to the library,” Lynn said as we climbed down.

I kissed her cheek. “I’ll wait here when I’m done.”

Her hand trailed down my arm as she walked away. I watched her go, then entered the dim, dusty shop. *Shop is a generous term; these shelves never hold anything worth buying.*

“Hey, David.” The shopkeeper emerged from the storeroom. “Your aunt rained you another package. She must think you’re something!”

He said the same thing every time a sub-orb ‘rained’ me another useless computer or data card from on high. I accepted the parcel. Drops of crimson dripped from the shopkeeper’s scabbed arm onto the white wrappings. I studied the address:

Hon. Gertrude Kellem, Mayor

Chryse Planitia Colony

Mars 4

“I hope she finally sent me *Practical Intra-Fertcan Mixology*,” I quipped. I nodded in thanks as I exited and leaned against the sailcar to wait for Lynn.

“Old man Faulker is dead,” Lynn said when she returned. “His son runs the library now.”

“He was only thirty-six. My data cards say that pre-Destruction Earthers lived a hundred years.”

Humans: the only species I know that slashed its own life expectancy by two thirds. And for what? Lynn cradled my face in her hands. “Look around, David. Do you want eighty-two more years of this?”