

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.