

Prologue

Three hours before dawn, the alarms across Surfer Town blared out from the loudspeakers, the same as they did every morning three hours before dawn, come winter, spring, summer and fall, it never varied except for public holidays like New World Day and Apocalypse Memorial Day and Harvest Festival, when every Silosian citizen receives a loaf of bread and a pot of honey in symbolism of the first post-nuclear winter harvest.

Thundersky knuckled the sleep from his eyes, little knowing, that before the day was done, his life would be changed forever.

He lay on his bed in his small gray twelve by twelve – his concrete world, more tomblike than homelike. Too cold in winter, too hot in the summer, only during the spring and fall was the temperature ever just right. He rubbed his eyes again and the fog in his mind started to clear and the gray sharpened into focus.

Beyond the Utopian cities, in the barren radioactive wastelands, were those who refused to be governed by the Scholastic Order. The Dusteater Factions as they were known, were factional and were often at war with themselves over disputed territories. Some were at war with the Utopians, through acts of piracy, kidnapping and terrorism. They were a bothersome itch, but were too weak and too poorly equipped to pose a threat against the technologically advanced Utopian colonies.

Last year, Dusteater terrorists from the Virginia Dusties managed to get incendiary explosives into bio-dome #3 and detonated them, killing fifteen mudsurfers, two scholars, four novices, eight hundred birds and thirty animals, and destroyed over fifty acres of coffee crop, which had left a shortage of an already rare commodity and the monthly coffee rations were reduced by two thirds, being replaced by syntho-coffee, which was a poor substitute for the real thing. Only one of the bombers was caught alive and he was tried and sentenced to death at the infamous Penal Genetic Research Center for medical and biological experimentation.

The Dusteaters weren't the only wilderness people. There were the Scavengers, who survive by scavenging the ancient ruins of Old World, looking for useful things to haggleback to the Utopians for Medicinals and uncontaminated grain and seeds for their farmer colonies. Harmless and on the whole, a peaceful nomadic people.

But then, there were the carnivorous Ferals, whose very name instills fear, even in the fearless. They live in small tribal groups in mountainous regions and forests, completely uncivilized and cannibalistic.

And then there were the Godders. Religious fanatics and almost as feral as the Ferals. Predominantly in places like Texas and Nevada, Pennsylvania, parts of old New York State and parts of old Maine.

There was a commotion in Rattler Culpeper's twelve by twelve next door. Voices and knocking about.

Thundersky went out into the dark narrow corridor that ran between a dozen twelve by twelves. People glanced through Culpeper's open door, peering in morbidly at Culpeper, lying dead in his bed as they made their way to the communal showers and to work detail.

A man Thundersky didn't recognize was sanding half in and half out of the room talking to someone on his com. Thundersky approached and looked in.

There were two medivacs in there and Redrock Willie from next door but one. It transpired that the man in the doorway was a supervisor from the droneport, where Culpeper worked in air traffic control and he was informing his superiors that they would be needing another ATO.

Culpeper was sat upright in bed, his shoulder slouched forwards, his head slumped over his lap, his body slightly skewwhiff against the wall, not moving. The room smelled of vomit, and there it was over the bedcovers and in Culpeper's lap, vomit and blood from an internal hemorrhage.

The supervisor had found him this morning after Culpeper failed to show up for his shift.

'... Last I heard him,' said Redrock Willie, 'he was coughing his goddamn guts out.' He looked at Thundersky. 'Ain't that right? Did you hear him last night?' Thundersky nodded. 'Yeah.' He realized that he and Redrock Willie had been hearing Culpeper's death throws. And when he went suddenly silent, that had to be the moment he died.

'Advanced metastasizing cancers of the lungs,' said a medivac. 'Nothing anyone could've done.' He was running his hand scanner over Culpeper's body, performing the autopsy. 'Dead four hours and twenty-seven minutes,' he said reading the data. 'That puts time of death at one thirty-nine this morning.' Thundersky looked up and saw the gaunt faced supervisor looking at him. He gave Thundersky a vague smile and looked away.

'Poor sonofabitch didn't even get to have a clocking out party,' said Redrock Willie disappointedly. He enjoyed a good clocking off party. Plenty of food and drink and sex.

The medivacs lifted Culpeper's limp body into a long black biohazard coffin on a mag-drive hover-gurney and sealed it.

'Off to the incinerator for poor Culpeper,' Redrock said, looking around the twelve by twelve for useful scavange. He'd have a drink on Culpeper one way or the other.

Back in his small gray twelve by twelve, Thundersky sat at his little aluminum table and turned on his data-pad and logged into his public access account and went into the library system and downloaded Damien Washington's "Superstrings, Volume IV. Bending Time and Gravitational Distortions," and Arti's database on the latest Antimatter propulsion research, which included a

theses on antimatter propulsion by Damien Washington's son, Grand High Scholar Blackstone Washington.

Thundersky had one very special talent, a talent he did not share with anyone. He had an extraordinary ability to read at an unnaturally fast speed. Tolstoy's "War and Peace," for example, took him just forty-five minutes to read from beginning to end.

Reading quantum mechanics took longer, he poured over the theories and the science like a biologist studying new microbes, making detailed notes on his data-pad and pondered the issues and wrote out his own theories with mathematical formulae and design schematics for an antimatter manifold injector system based on using anti-hydrogen to a hydrogen nuclear fusion pulse engine capable, theoretically at between forty and sixty percent the speed of light, making our nearest stars reachable in less than a hundred years of interstellar space flight, using cryogenic technology to place a human crew into stasis.

This was his reason for living, the reason he got up in the mornings. The reason he had applied to the tech college in Sub City, where he could share his theories and put them into practice.

Someone knocked at the door.

He knew who it was. 'It's open,' he called.

As he thought, it was Blue, a smile on his face. His even white teeth gleamed at Thundersky as he held up a bottle of berry wine.

'What's the occasion?'

Blue came in and closed the door. 'No occasion,' he said. 'I did a favor for a guy over in the plant. He gave me this and some Venusian Red as a thanks.'

'Who can afford to give away Venusian Red?'

'Supervisor Saturn Smith.'

'The big queen with the broken nose?' Thundersky wondered what sort of favor Saturn Smith got from him?

'That's him. He gave me this.'

'You know where the cups are,' Thundersky said.

'It's good stuff.'

'So what was this favor you had to do for it?' he asked, watching Blue reach for the cups up on a shelf over the water faucet and little aluminum sink.

'Nothing like you're thinking,' he said with a cheeky laugh as he brought the cups over and set them down at the table beside Thundersky. 'I helped him carry a big ass trunk full of Old World shit he haggled back from the Scavs back to his habitat.' He opened the bottle and poured, half filling the cups.

'What Old World shit?'

'You know. Shit. Personal communication devices, kidling toys. He collects all that Old World shit. Fuck knows why. His habitat's like a Scav's trailer. You ever been in his habitat?'

Thundersky shook his head vehemently; he wasn't likely to ever go there either, and certainly not alone. Saturn Smith had a notorious reputation for groping

young men in their private parts, and that would be like a lamb to the slaughter. And the thought of those grubby little fat hands and those stubby fat fingers reaching for his crotch instead of a “*how do you do*” made him shudder. He thought of that flabby jaundiced face with its crooked nose, and those thick colorless lips, slimy like slugs, puckering towards him like a pouting vagina. God no, he gasped inwardly with revulsion.

Blue took a swallow of wine. ‘He’s got it good over there. Ninety by a hundred and fifty with a bathroom and a kitchen and two bedrooms. It’s a babbledicking palace.’

Thundersky took a swallow of wine. He could taste fermented blueberries, grapes and a hint of honey; sweet and heady.

‘He’s senior supervisor. Someone worth knowing,’ Blue said.

‘But at what price, Blue. Did he ask you to suck his cock?’

‘No. But he asked if he could suck mine.’ He smiled without divulging any more.

‘I saw Roebuck the other day,’ he said. ‘I barely recognized him. “*You’re not long from clocking off,*” I thought. He was coming out of a euthanizer’s office.

Booking an appointment I guess.’

Thundersky nodded slowly. ‘Metastases,’ he said. ‘It’s everywhere and the Omega Nine’s stopped being effective,’ he said heavily. ‘He still drags himself in to work every morning. I think it takes his mind off of things. One morning he just ain’t gonna be there no more.’ He thought about Culpeper next door and felt a sudden emptiness in his belly, a tearfulness. A sense of impending doom that he could not escape – a doom that awaited them all. It wasn’t so much the fear of death, as the fear of the sicknesses, the cancers, the radiation. It was the fate that awaited most people in the post-apocalyptic world.

‘Think he’ll have a clocking out party?’ Blue asked him.

‘He’s not mentioned it. But yeah, I reckon so. I hate those things. I don’t think I’ll go.’

‘Yeah you will. We both will because he’s our buddy. And he’s your supervisor. A last farewell with his friends.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘That’s how it is in this fucked up world, Thunder.’ He took a swallow of wine, then shook off the melancholy of death and smiled. ‘We got a couple of decades before we clock off,’ he said. They were young, still teenagers. Forty-five, and that’s how old Roebuck was, seemed a long way off from eighteen.

‘We’ve gotta get off of this planet before it’s too late,’ Thundersky murmured, then took a big swallow of wine.

(Theory viable. Running simulation).

‘What?’ Thundersky frowned.

‘*Huh?*’ Blue said with a frown.

‘Did you say something?’

Blue shook his head. ‘Huh-ah.’

‘I thought I heard a voice.’

‘You been overdoing it on the skunkweed-shit tea?’

Thundersky glared at him. ‘You didn’t hear that?’

'No-oo,' Blue said 'Heard what? What did it say?'
Thundersky thought for a moment. He shook his head and shrugged. 'I d'know. Something a simulation.'

Blue considered him a few moments. Then he shook his head. 'As I said. Too much skunkweed-shit.'

Thundersky smiled with uncertainty. 'Must be,' he said quietly.

'I forgot. What were you talking about? Oh yeah. Spaceships. Well, all I can say is, you better pull your thumb out of your ass and build it,' Blue mocked.

There was a hard knock of a fist at the door.

They both looked round startled.

'*Who the fuck...?*' Louder, 'Who is it?'

'Medical Scholar Graywolf Adam, Genetic Research Center. I'm here to see citizen Thundersky Reece.'

Thundersky and Blue exchanged a worried look.

'Are you Thundersky Reece?' the voice said, muffled through the door. 'If you are, I'd sooner not talk through the door.'

Thundersky moved to the door and opened it to see gray haired scholar standing in the corridor the other side, clasping his data-pad. A typically fine and healthy example of a person who lived deep underground in Sub City.

'Thundersky Reece?'

'*Ye-es, sir?*'

The scholar stepped into the twelve by twelve. He looked at Blue sitting at the table holding his cup staring back curiously at the scholar.

'Happy day, citizen,' Graywolf said.

'Happy day,' Blue replied uncertainly. He stood up and moved to the door. 'I'll come back later, Thunder. When you're less busy.'

Thundersky nodded and Blue left.

'I hope I've not ruined your evening,' the Scholar said superficially, looking at the bottle of wine on the table. 'There's an anomaly with your last genetic tests.'

Thundersky was struck by a sudden terror and a knot as big as a fist tightened in his belly.

Cancer! Oh God. He's here to tell me I've got the cancers.

He gulped. '*Anomaly?*' His voice was dry and crackled – the fear growing inside of him like a fire taking hold of dry grass. He was only eighteen. Too young surely?

'... Would you mind coming to the center, where we can run some more tests? The full works, including a physical exam.'

God, it must be serious! Coming in the evening, after hours.

'Am I dying? You can tell me. Have I got the cancers?' he blurted out.

The scholar chuckled. 'Is that what you think?' He shook his head. 'It's nothing like that.' He nodded. 'Yes. I can see why you might think so. But it's not. You're completely healthy, Thundersky Reece. But there are some unanswered anomalies. As I said. Nothing to worry about. Nothing detrimental to you. Just

anomalous.' He smiled. 'We just want to run a couple more tests. That's all.' He smiled again.

It was the sort of smile that disturbs rather than reassures. A smile filled with deceit. A smile that made Thundersky feel very uneasy.

'... If you'll come with me,' the scholar said, 'It shouldn't take long. An hour. Two at most.'

Thundersky did not move. 'Why can't you do it here?' he asked. 'Don't you have a test kit with you?'

'We need to test you in the facility, where the equipment's more sensitive there. The field testers are fine for random testing, but that's about all.'

'But it's late. I have work in the morning.'

'Yes, yes. Everything's taken care of. You can have the day off. Our chief medical scholar wants to give you a complete physical. But I promise you, it's nothing to worry about.'

Thundersky was more worried about ending up under the GRC, where they conduct the human experimentations on prisoners.

'If there are no mutations, I can't see what other anomalies there could be, Scholar...?'

'Graywolf.'

'Yeah. Scholar Graywolf. Maybe I could come in tomorrow?'

Graywolf shook his head. 'Tomorrow's not convenient. You have to come with me now.'

'And if I refuse?'

'That wouldn't be the wisest course of action, young man. Especially given your recent application to the tech training college. How would it look if your record showed that you refused to cooperate with the GRC?'

Thundersky stared blankly at him. It wouldn't look good at all, he decided.

Chapter One

It was a five minute ride on the elevated magrail to Downtown Silo City. The magrail stop was almost opposite the sprawling Intsoglass block of the Genetic Research Center (GRC) on the corner of Main Street and Sub City Plaza.

The closer they got, the nearer to terror Thundersky felt. Condemned prisoners must feel something like this, he told himself, the knotting in the guts, the palpitating heartbeat, its heavy thud pounding against the wall of his chest like a hammering fist – adrenalin surging through his body in waves of fear that slicked his face with cold sweat.

Graywolf sat opposite him in the magrail car, a slight curl on his closed mouth that resembled a smile, staring fixedly at Thundersky like a man who had all the answers but was refusing to say; getting some sadistic pleasure in seeing Thundersky, antsy with inner turmoil, feeding vampirically from the fear oozing from his wide gray-green eyes.

When the shuttle stopped, it was as if his viscera had come to life, heaving sinuously as an overwhelming dread came over him.

Security was tight outside the GRC, it always was. A prime target for Dusty terrorists. A black clad sentinel took retina and DNA scans with a hand scanner and the little red light on the scanner above the little square viewer that listed their names, turned green and the sentinel let them pass and they entered the facility through the plaza entrance on the east side.

Graywolf led Thundersky Reece across the lobby, where other scholars and techs were crossing this way and that, clasping their data-pads, heading for their laboratories and offices, and to the bank of elevators to the seven upper floors and the infamous three subterranean-levels where criminals, mostly Dusty terrorists were condemned to death through medical experimentation. They say you can live for years down there, permanently sick and infected with viruses, cancers and radiation, while the medical scholars tested new medicinals and vaccines. It was all supposed to be very humane, but the rumors that came out of that place, suggested anything but humane.

More sentinels, wearing red Intsofiber jumpsuits, denoting them as the uniformed branch of the infamous Silosian Security Services, were posted all over the building, every inch was under constant surveillance, everybody's every move meticulously recorded by the security nanites in the Intsoglass walls. The GRC was a place that never slept, even now, after nine in the evening, it was just as busy as it was at nine in the morning.

Graywolf led Thundersky into a medical examination room on the ground floor, where another scholar was waiting.

She was a robust woman of fifty or so, big boned and big breasted with short auburn hair that had started to gray. As a rule, mudsurfers such as Thundersky didn't live long enough to get gray hair. The scholars, however...