

Chapter 1

When the disease had run its course in the fall of Zero Year we acted like a war had ended. The dead were buried in mass graves. World leaders declared a day of mourning. We met in public parks, singing hymns and holding hands. Those of us left alive were grieving and battered. We had survived a cataclysm of unknown proportions. And then, fools that we were, we tried to return to normal.

History of a Changed World - Angus T. Moss

Wisp felt a tide of worry rush over the people in the vegetable field. The concern he felt had an edge of fear to it. He detoured to the field out of curiosity and because he could sense Nick's presence. It was just after dawn on a drizzly, overcast morning when most of the people at High Meadow were still asleep. He'd been on his way to the cafeteria to catch a quick breakfast before all those quiet minds woke making it too uncomfortable to stay in the building. Barely a week of living here, and he knew he'd gotten too complacent around these amicable people.

He cut through the tidy rows of vegetables, in what had once been a ball field, toward a group of people hunched in the chilly rain. Since it was such a gentle sprinkle, they hadn't set up the storm sheeting over the crops. Nick, Lottie, Harlan and old man Larson stood around the blackened tangle of vines that had once been a tomato plant. Harlan shook his head. Despite being nearly blind, Harlan was proving to be surprisingly capable. Lottie, head of the Growing Committee, looked like she was ready to cry. Her sense of loss was so strong, Wisp wondered if this could be about more than losing a plant.

"What kind of blight?" Nick asked the group in general. He acknowledged Wisp with a glance, his green eyes clouded with concern.

"Must be late blight, don't ya see," Larson said in a countrified drawl. "Early blight comes first. Be already dead iff'n it were early blight."

Wisp looked around for the grandson that always tagged along after the old man, but he might be with the chickens, as that was the main chore for both of them.

"But they were fine yesterday," Lottie said. A solid woman, she had tanned skin and frizzing gray hair cut short. There were notes of frustration about her that were tangled with helplessness and tainted with fear.

"Naw. They had the start of it. A couple yellor leaves. Spreads on the wind, ya know."

"No," Harlan shook his head. "No, it's in the dirt." He stamped his foot in emphasis.

"But the wind blows it up," Larson countered, windmilling his arm in explanation. Harlan gave a shrug of tentative agreement. The two old men seemed sure of the information they were imparting.

Wisp looked down the twenty foot row of staked tomatoes. The first two plants in the row were dead. Their vines black, spotty fruit, the color of muddy water, hung like half-deflated sacks. The next plant had more than a few yellow leaves spattered with black spots.

"What causes it?" Nick asked. He pushed a few stray locks of damp hair off his forehead.

Wisp sensed a layer of resignation holding back a low lying anger in him. This morning Nick looked unkempt. He needed a shave, and his short brown hair looked like it hadn't seen a comb in a few days. That was unlike him. There must be more to his sour mood than the dead vegetables.

Larson raised bony shoulders in a plea of ignorance. "Always had blight hereabouts. My meemaw used to spray hers with milk."

Harlan bobbed his head in vigorous agreement. "Right. Mine did, too."

"But we didn't have any last year," Lottie said in a mournful tone.

"First year luck," Harlan said.

Larson snorted a laugh. "Eh yup, that's it."

"What does that mean?" Nick groused. His irritation hit a tipping point, cascading into anger.

Larson took a step back, watching Nick with a careful eye. Lottie turned an impatient scowl on him.

"First year of a garden is always the best," Harlan explained. "Bugs and diseases haven't found it yet."

"But this isn't our first year," Lottie countered. She folded her arms and took a solid stance as if to physically bar the disease.

Larson raised his hands palm up in a sympathetic gesture. "So you a got a couple free years."

Lottie nudged the first plant with the toe of her shoe. Three rotten tomatoes fell, bursting open to spread dark slime over the ground. "What do we do about it?"

"Rip 'em out," Larson said. "Burn 'em."

Nick turned to Lottie. "Can you handle that?"

Lottie squared her shoulders and set her jaw. "Of course." Her frustration bumped up into indignation. "We'll take them out down to..." She walked along the row to a plant that remained uniformly green. "...about here. Can we plant something else?"

"Nothin' in the nightshade family. They're all susceptible."

Lottie recited all the nightshades she knew, "Tomatoes, potatoes..."

"Peppers, eggplant," Larson peered up at her with a sly look. "Tobacco, um, husk cherry."

"We're *not* growing any tobacco," she said with a finality that sounded like the response to a very old argument. "Maybe I can put a couple of pole bean plants in here."

Feeling a resolution of the agitation, Wisp headed towards the school building, knowing Nick would catch up. He had the feeling that Nick wanted a few last words of reassurance from Lottie. Their hopes for self-sufficiency rested on her success with the crops.

Wisp looked across the converted school's campus. He admired the plan of how the sports fields had been reused for food crops. Despite Lottie's alarm, the rest of the plots seemed untouched by the blight. Shiny green foliage filled bed after bed with lettuces, mustard greens, the red-veined leaves of beets, frilly spikes of carrot greens. Cucumbers and beans clambered up trellises. A damp breeze rattled through shaking drops from leaves and kicking up the scent of wet earth. Despite the arrival of the disease, the fields had a healthy smell.

Nick came up beside him, his pant legs soggy to the knee. They walked side by side past the other vegetable beds. "Neither Larson nor Harlan seemed surprised or worried," Wisp offered.

"It might be normal, but it's another problem to deal with. Something we didn't know about yesterday. And the solution is milk, another thing we can't get our hands on."

"You could ask Creamery," Wisp said. He almost sent a tendril of thought toward the dairy, but it was too far to feel anything useful.

"That's a long ride for supplies we won't be consuming," Nick grumbled. "If they have enough to share. Or want to share."

Wisp didn't call Nick on his half-truth. Creamery had been more than willing to barter their cheese when Nick was there. "How badly do you want or need the tomatoes?"

Nick stopped, looking back toward where Lottie was shoos her consultants on their way. "I don't know. I hope Tillie's on top of this, because I have no idea how important they are to the food supply. What if we do lose them all?"

"I think the Growers Committee can deal with it," Wisp said. "If the disease is indigenous to the area, they need to develop methods to counter it."

"I guess. Do you think Kyle could come up with something?"

Wisp bit back his initial denial realizing he couldn't say if his brother would be interested in the project or not. Kyle and Ruth were spending most of their time looking at the impact the virus and vaccines had had on human DNA. That might seem like more important work, but protecting the food supply could trump it. "It's possible he might know how to fabricate a fungicide."

"I'll ask him." Nick's mood lightened, but he continued to stand in the light rain, staring over the vegetable field. His gaze moved to the road up to Barberry Cove.

In the wistfulness of Nick's emotions, Wisp could almost feel the memory forming of the day that the superstorm hit, and they found all the children out on the road. "You are unsettled."

"I want to get out of here," Nick grumbled. "We promised the Barberry Cove kids that we'd look for their parents. It's been a week and no new information. We got a name for the man we found with the gut wound—Glen. He's still in a coma. We may never get any information out of him. If he even saw anything. His kids are toddlers, can't give us anything more."

"It's one parent found," Wisp said. He felt the need to move, also. He'd made a promise to the children. And maybe it was time for him to be back on his own.

"Right," Nick muttered. "The unconscious father of two kids barely old enough to feed themselves. That's not making me feel any better."

"I have no commitments," Wisp said. "I can leave today." Saying that gave him an odd touch of disappointment.

"I'll tell Angus we need to go," Nick said. A calmness settled over Nick once he made the decision. He started toward the building again.

A spike of fear shrilled across Wisp's senses. "Trouble."

"What?"

The glass doors to the school clanged open as Lily burst through them. From the slight height of the terrace, she scanned the fields before bolting down the three steps towards them. Nick jogged over to meet her, Wisp on his heels.

"Nick, Nick, Nick!" Lily hollered as she ran. "Angus is hurt!"