

ADVENTURES IN TRUTH

— ◆ CHAPTER ONE ◆ —

THE SKY GARDEN BIOHAZARD







THE SKY GARDEN



The Sky Garden was the best place in Solaria Prep.

That was not Kai's opinion. That was a fact. It was literally written on a plaque near the entrance: THE SKY GARDEN — VOTED SOLARIA'S BEST SCHOOL FEATURE, SEVEN YEARS RUNNING.

It sat on the roof of the main building, six stories up, a sprawling tangle of real trees and bio-engineered flowers that glowed faintly at dusk. There were hammocks between the branches, study pods built into the roots, and an irrigation system so smart it could tell when a plant was sad.

Kai had spent exactly eleven minutes admiring all of this before deciding the irrigation system looked like it could be improved.

"It's running at sixty percent efficiency," he announced, crouching beside the main valve housing near the north wall. He had his multi-tool out. He was already loosening a bolt.

"Don't," Skylar said.

"I haven't done anything yet."

"You have your multi-tool out. That's the first step in you doing something I'm going to have to apologize for."

Kai looked up at her. "The pressure in the eastern line is totally wrong. You can hear it — listen."

Skylar listened.

There was, she had to admit, a kind of low, straining whine coming from the pipe. Like something being squeezed too hard.

"That does sound wrong," she said slowly.

"Thank you. I'm going to fix it."



“Or you’re going to make it worse.”

“Why is that always your first assumption?”

“Because yesterday you made five hundred and twelve cookies.”

Kai’s face did something complicated.

“That was different.”

“How.”

“That was a training exercise that ran slightly long.”

“You set off the smoke alarm. Twice. And then cookies ended up in the hydroponics bay.”

“They needed the fiber.”

Skylar gave him the look. The specific one. The one that meant she was about to make him relive it whether he wanted to or not.

“You remember yesterday, right?” she said. “Five hundred and twelve cookies. The smoke alarm. Cookies in the hydroponics.”

“I remember.”

“Do you, though.”





YESTERDAY

Cooking Lab 3 smelled like vanilla and warm sugar, which was normal, and it was quiet except for the low hum of six ovens working through the afternoon's assignment, which was also normal.

What was not normal was Kai, crouched in front of Oven Unit 04 with his multi-tool out, squinting at the control panel like it had personally challenged him to a duel.

"It's only making twelve cookies a batch," he said, to nobody in particular, since Skylar had gone to get flour and the rest of the class was on the other side of the room arguing about frosting. "Twelve. That's it. The batch size setting is clearly capped way too low."

The panel read:



Kai popped the access panel with the flat edge of his multi-tool and found, underneath it, a small dial that was very obviously meant to be adjusted by a technician and not by an eleven-year-old with a hunch.

He adjusted it.

The panel blinked.



"See," Kai said, delighted. "Progress."

The oven made a sound it had never made before. A low mechanical groan, like it was clearing its throat before saying something it had been holding in for a while.

COOKIE OUTPUT: 118.





OVEN ERROR
TEMP: TOO HIGH!
COOKIES EVERYWHERE!

WORLD'S
OKAYEST
BAKER

LUNA
FLOUR

FOR OUT OF THIS
WORLD COOKIES

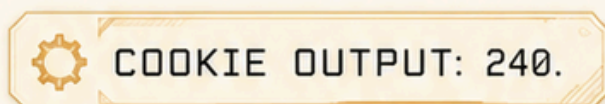
SOLARIA PREP
KITCHEN LAB

“Okay,” Kai said, a little less delighted. “That’s — that’s more than I—”



The number under the temperature reading was climbing in a way numbers were generally not supposed to climb. Kai reached for the dial to turn it back.

The dial did not turn back. The dial, it turned out, had exactly one direction, and Kai had already picked it.



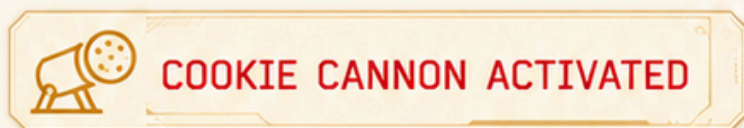
A thin curl of smoke slipped out from around the oven door.

“Um,” Kai said. “Skylar—”



The words flashed across the panel in red, which felt, to Kai, like an unnecessary amount of judgment from a kitchen appliance.

The oven door didn't open so much as it gave up.



the panel announced, with what Kai would later swear was a note of enthusiasm, and then Oven Unit 04 began firing warm, perfectly baked chocolate chip cookies across Cooking Lab 3 at a velocity no cookie had any business achieving.

The first cookie hit the ceiling.

The second cookie hit a boy named Rell directly in the middle of his frosting argument, mid-sentence, so that what came out of his mouth afterward was mostly just a startled sound and crumbs.

After that it was less about individual cookies and more about volume.



Cookies rained down across the workstations. Cookies bounced off the mixing bowls. Cookies rolled under the ovens and out across the floor in drifts, like warm, fragrant snow. Somewhere behind him Kai heard someone yell "DUCK" and then several people actually did, disappearing under counters with their arms over their heads while cookies pelted the cabinets above them.

The smoke alarm went off. Then, a moment later, the second smoke alarm went off, which nobody in the room had known existed until that exact second.



COOKIE OUTPUT: 512 ...AND COUNTING!



Kai stood in the middle of it, covered head to toe in flour and dough and the general debris of his own decision-making, and watched the readout climb past five hundred with the specific, sinking feeling of a person who has started something he does not currently know how to stop.

A cookie hit him directly in the forehead.

"Worth it," he muttered, though he wasn't entirely sure yet if that was true.

By the time the lab's ventilation system kicked in and began sucking the smoke — and, unfortunately, a fair number of loose cookies — up through the ducts and out into the building's climate system, Oven Unit 04 had produced five hundred and twelve cookies, most of which were now either on the floor, in someone's hair, or, as it would be discovered the next morning, packed into the intake vents of the Sky Garden's hydroponics bay three floors up, where the automated watering system had cheerfully begun trying to grow them.

Skylar arrived in the doorway just as the last cookie rolled to a stop against her shoe.

She looked at the cookies. She looked at the smoke. She looked at her brother, dusted white, holding his multi-tool like it was somehow still a reasonable thing to be holding.

She didn't say anything for a long moment.

"I was going to get flour," she said finally. "For the recipe."

Kai looked around at the several hundred cookies covering every surface of the room.

"I think we're covered," he said.





Back on the roof, in the present, Kai opened his mouth. Then he closed it.

That was fair.

He turned back to the valve.

"Don't," Skylar said again.

He turned the valve.



The explosion was blue.

That was the first thing Kai noticed, which was strange, because usually the first thing you noticed about an explosion was the explosion part. But this one was so intensely, electrically, cosmically blue that the color hit him before the noise did.

BOOM.

The valve blew off the housing. A massive geyser of liquid erupted from the pipe — not water, not fertilizer, but something Kai had never seen before. It was thick and luminous, glowing from the inside, and it splattered across the garden in every direction.





— It hit the nearest tree. The tree shuddered. —



— It hit the study pods. The study pods crackled with little sparks of light. —



It hit Lumia, who
had been floating
peacefully near the
hammocks.



She made a sound
like a dial-up
modem and turned
briefly purple.



“I’m
fine,”

she said,
slightly cross-eyed.

“Mostly
fine.”



Kai was completely coated. Head to toe, dripping blue. He wiped his face with his sleeve and stared at his hand.

The slime was moving.

Not flowing. Not dripping. Moving — crawling slowly across his palm toward his ThoughtBand, like it was interested in it.

“Kai,” Skylar said very quietly from two feet away, where she had — with excellent reflexes — jumped entirely out of the blast radius. She was completely clean. “What is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it alive?”

Kai watched it reach his ThoughtBand and stop. It sat there, pulsing gently.

“I really hope not.”



The slime had opinions.

That was the only way Kai could describe it. It didn't think, exactly. But it reacted. And over the next twenty minutes, while he frantically tried to clean it up, he began to understand what it was reacting to.

Him.

Specifically: his feelings.

When he grabbed a cleaning cloth and scrubbed at the patch near the hammocks, feeling focused and calm, the slime thinned out and pulled back easily. But the moment he noticed how much there was — how it had spread to the flower beds, was climbing the trunk of the nearest bio-tree, had formed an alarming puddle near the roof's drainage grate — his stomach lurched with panic.

The slime expanded.

Not a little. A lot.

It pulsed outward like a breath, doubling in size in about three seconds, and Kai stumbled backward into a planter.

"Whoa," he said.

Lumia floated over. She had dried off and returned to her normal color, though she was still occasionally glitching around the edges in a way that suggested the slime had done something interesting to her circuits. She studied the puddle with great attention.

"Fascinating," she said.

"That's a word for it."

"It's behaving like a resonance accelerant." She tilted her head. "Your stress signals are feeding it. The more anxious you are, the more kinetic energy it absorbs, and the larger it grows."





Kai stared at the pulsing blue mass. It was now about the size of a dining table and climbing.

"So the more panicked I get—"

"The bigger it gets. Yes."

"That is the most unfair thing I've ever heard."

"It's actually rather elegant," Lumia said.

"You are not helping."

"I know." She said this cheerfully.

Skylar had been crouching near the edge of the slime, watching it with a focused, quiet expression — the one she got when she was figuring something out. She hadn't said much for the last few minutes. That usually meant she was close to something



“Kai,” she said, without looking up. “Stop moving.”

He stopped.

“Stop thinking about the slime.”

“How am I supposed to—”

“Don’t look at it. Look at me.”

He looked at her.

She was very calm. Her face was the same expression she used when she was drawing in her sketchbook — completely absorbed, completely steady. Not worried. Just present.

The slime stopped expanding.

Kai blinked. “Did it just—”

“Don’t get excited.”

He tried not to get excited.

The slime shrank, very slightly, at the edges.

“Oh,” Kai said quietly.

Oh, I see what you’re doing.”



It took seventeen minutes.

Seventeen minutes of Kai standing absolutely still in the middle of the Sky Garden while Skylar talked him through slowing his breathing.

Seventeen minutes of Lumia calmly explaining the slime's strange chemistry.

Slowly...

Very slowly...

The glowing blue mass began to shrink.

It was the hardest thing Kai had ever done.

Not because it hurt.

Because standing still felt impossible.

But he stayed anyway.





By minute fourteen, the slime had pulled back to a manageable puddle.

By minute sixteen, it had almost completely lost its glow.

By minute seventeen, Kai calmly repaired the valve and pressed the emergency shut-off he probably should have found before touching anything else.

The pipe went quiet.

Kai let out a breath so big his shoulders dropped.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. That was... okay."

Skylar smiled.

"You know what you just did?"

"Fixed the irrigation system?"

"You stopped a disaster by calming yourself down."

Kai looked around at the garden.

"I also started the disaster."

"Also true."

"Yesterday I accidentally made five hundred and twelve cookies. Today I only flooded one garden."

Skylar laughed.

"That's not the growth arc you think it is."

Lumia drifted toward the northern
edge of the garden.

“The residue is disappearing...”

“...most of it.”

She pointed toward the drainage grate.

A thin ribbon of blue was still moving.

Not drying.

Not fading.

Moving.

It reached the grate...

slipped through the metal bars...

and disappeared.

Gone.



Kai pressed his hand against the grate.

Somewhere below...

he felt the faintest vibration.

Lumia's voice became unusually serious.

"The city's main utility network."



Water.



Power.



Wi-Fi.

Kai looked at Skylar.

"How bad is that?"

Lumia thought for a moment.

"It depends..."

"...on what the slime does when it's hungry."

Far below...

something began to glow.



CHAPTER RECAP



WHAT HAPPENED?



Kai tried to repair the irrigation system.



A mysterious blue slime appeared.



The slime reacted to Kai's emotions.



Staying calm helped the slime shrink.



One small ribbon escaped beneath Solaria.

◆ FUTURE HUMAN SKILL™ ◆

FOCUS POWER



The ability to recognize that
your attention influences
your experience.

Kai discovered that the more
attention he gave his panic,
the bigger the problem became.
When he changed his focus,
everything changed.

◆ REMEMBER: ◆

What you feed grows.





YOUR TURN



COULD YOU STOP THE SLIME?

Imagine the blue slime reacts to **YOUR** emotions just like it reacted to Kai's.
You have **60** seconds before it fills the room.

What would you do first?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Run around trying to stop it. | ☐ Take three slow breaths. |
| ☐ Yell at everyone. | ☐ Focus on one thing you can control. |
| ☐ Blame somebody else. | ☐ Ask someone for help. |



Skylar believes in you!



FOCUS DETECTIVE CHALLENGE

For the next 24 hours, become a Focus Detective.
Every time you notice yourself worrying about something:



1. Stop.



2. Take three slow breaths.



3. Ask: "What CAN I do right now?"

Then do that one thing.

You've got this!

What is one thing you can do right now the next time you feel overwhelmed?



COMING NEXT...



CHAPTER 2

THE THOUGHTBAND SWAP



Something was watching.

The ThoughtBand swap wasn't an accident. Neither was the blue slime.



Someone or something wanted to know what would happen if Kai and Skylar experienced the world through each other's abilities.



The security log left only two clues:



And whatever is behind it?

It's moving.

It's learning.



SECURITY LOG // CLASSIFIED

SOURCE: _____

UNKNOWN

OBJECTIVE: _____

OBSERVATION

No names.

No explanation.

Kai and Skylar are about to discover
the slime wasn't the end of the experiment.

IT WAS THE BEGINNING.