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The Cookbooks of Colony Nine

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Introduction

We learned to hold a ladle before we learned to hold a vote. The first council chamber in Colony Nine was a canteen tent that rattled in the dust wind, and the first ordinance was not a charter but a recipe scaled to feed four hundred and three. We arrived with breath fogging inside our helmets, our mouths full of the last crumbs from a world that would not follow, and we made a promise that felt like a spell: we would not be strangers to one another as long as we could share heat. This book begins with that promise and the meals that kept it.

The Cookbooks of Colony Nine is a ledger of hungers and a map drawn in steam. You will find here recipes written in the grammar of scarcity—measurements by palm and pinch, substitutions born from necessity, timing set by sun angle and condenser drip. Between them you will find what we could not stop from spilling over: small histories of how a pot becomes a parliament, how a flavor becomes a flag, how a kitchen table is the last barricade and the first altar. It is a culinary memoir, yes, but also a novel you can taste, where characters reveal themselves by what they save for others and the lies they tell their own tongues.

If you have come for instructions, you will get them, though sometimes they will look like testimony. A broth will be annotated with who was forgiven that day. A flatbread will carry the imprint of a palm that signed a petition. The directions might say simmer until quiet, because the quiet we needed could be cooked if we all stood around the pot and listened for it. We cooked with algae and bone chips and leaves like old paper. We cooked with memory, which is the most volatile ingredient and the most forgiving.

In a place that had no laws older than a week, cuisine became law because it could be enforced by appetite. We rotated oven time like we rotated water rations; we assigned the last crust to the oldest hands by decree and by love. Someone banged a ladle against a kettle and called for order, and for a while it was the only sound everyone respected. We wrote the Ladle Rules on cloth when we had no slate: no hoarding leaven, no lying about yield, no refusing the last bowl to the newcomer. In those early months our justice rose or fell with the dough.

But food was also our grammar of dissent. When we could not write banners, we changed the menu. A stew without salt would pass from room to room, and everyone knew what could not be said aloud about the brine fields. We smuggled spice like contraband stories, trading a mouthful of heat for a memory of a coast we would never smell again. We invented feast days not to forget famine, but to remember that a song tastes better when sung with hot tea.

Comfort was neither soft nor simple. It was hard-won, mined like the water we drank and the sugar we harvested from gray leaves. We cooked for the dead because the living needed the ritual of it, the way steam makes a face appear in the air and then disappear as if to say this is how all warmth goes, so hold it while you can. We baked letters under ash so they would not be confiscated. We fed each other even when it meant going without, because hunger shared is a rope, and a rope can pull a ship to shore.

Migration did not end at touchdown; it continued each time we decided which of our old foods belonged in our new lives. Seeds in pockets became seeds in jars labeled with names of rivers you could not find on any map here. The soil at Nine tasted like iron and dust. We learned its grammar and it learned our tongues. From that marriage came flavors that had no ancestors, a cuisine without permission that nonetheless remembered every kitchen that came before it.

You can read this book as a kitchen companion, as an archive, or as a witness. It will not tell you everything—it cannot—but it will show you the path we cooked into the ground, one dish at a time. If you choose to cook from it, consider your own scarcity and your own abundance. Consider who is not yet at your table and set another bowl. Taste for salt, taste for courage, taste for the story that wants to be told next. In Colony Nine, we learned that survival is a recipe you keep rewriting, and that the last line is always the same: serve hot, serve together.

CHAPTER ONE: Touchdown Stew: First Night on Red Soil

We had not yet named the dust, but it named us anyway as we stepped from the lander onto the iron skin of Colony Nine. The ramp hissed like an apology, and the air outside tasted of filings and old coins, sharp enough to make you want to swallow your own tongue. We had rehearsed the handshake, the pledge, the raising of a hand to a sky that refused to look back, but nobody had taught us how to stand in a silence so loud it pressed against your teeth. Our boots sank a finger's width into the ruddy grit, and for a moment it felt less like arriving than like being swallowed halfway. Someone behind me whispered that it smelled like a kitchen after a fire, and I thought then that we had already begun to misunderstand our appetites.

Our helmets fogged with breath we could not afford to waste, and our pockets were fat with the last crumbs from a world that would not follow. Those crumbs would later become currency, then legend, then a pinch of shame we learned to chew slowly. We had been told that hunger on a frontier is a polite guest, but the truth is that it kicks the door in and rearranges the furniture while it waits. As we unclipped belts and let tools clatter onto a surface that had never known tools, the first law of the place revealed itself: hold still long enough and the ground will teach you how to bend. I saw a woman run a thumb along the rim of her helmet and taste the red dust, as if trying to decide whether it was spice or sin.

The canteen tent was flapping like a lung that could not quite catch, and inside we found the makings of what would pass for law. A kettle hung on a stand made from landing strut scraps, and a cook with hands like split gaskets stirred something that claimed to be broth. This would become a pattern. In Colony Nine, you learn to hold a ladle before you learn to hold a vote, because a pot can tip faster than a council can form, and the results are harder to deny. We counted heads by the clang of cups, four hundred and three, and the cook banged a ladle against the kettle to call for order. It was the only sound everyone respected, partly because it meant food was coming, and partly because it sounded like a heartbeat we could borrow.

The stew that night was mostly water and promises, with scraps of protein that had crossed light-years in sealed pouches. It had been labeled emergency ration, but the cook treated it like a confession, adding slivers of freeze-dried greens that turned the broth a bruised purple. We called it Touchdown Stew, though the name came later, after we learned that naming things helps you keep them. At the time it was simply the hot thing we lifted to our lips, careful of the steam, careful of the lies we told ourselves about flavor. The heat made the tent shrink around us, and the dust outside

seemed farther away, as if we had cooked ourselves into a pocket of our own making.

I sat next to a man who introduced himself by the number on his bunk tag, though his mouth said something else entirely. He stirred his bowl clockwise, the way his mother had taught him, though he did not know if she was still alive to correct him. We ate in shifts, not because there was not enough to go around, but because the bowl was too hot to hold with bare hands, and we needed excuses to linger. Each sip carried the metallic tang of the red soil we had tracked in, a reminder that we had brought the planet with us, whether we wanted it or not. By the time the pot was light at the bottom, the tent smelled like family, which was both a comfort and a theft.

After the bowls were rinsed with water that would later be regretted, we gathered in smaller knots to decide what we had just done. Someone suggested that a stew could be a charter if it was thick enough, and that a ladle could be a gavel if it was wielded with care. We argued about whether the cook had the right to skim the top for himself, and by the time we settled on shared skim, we had written our first ordinance without realizing it. The skin on the broth would be divided by age, with priority to the hands that had greased the lander and to the newest among us, who looked as if they might dissolve if not fed promptly. It was a small law, but it stuck, like rice to a pot.

Outside, the dust wind began to recite its nightly liturgy, a low moan that had no vowels but plenty of insistence. We left the flap open a hand's width so the stew could breathe and the tent could learn to sway. Someone set a cup of broth on the ground for the dead, though we had not yet buried anyone, and the gesture felt both foolish and necessary. It was the first time we used food as a flag, planting a hot white flag in the red soil to see who would salute. No one came for the cup, but it sat there steaming, a tiny moon we could orbit while we figured out how to sleep.

In the bunks that night, I listened to the colony digesting itself. Stomachs grumbled like generators, and dreams leaked into the air as if they were broth we had spilled. I dreamed of a kitchen that kept shifting its walls, a place where doors opened onto deserts and ovens cooled into tombs. My mother was there, or someone who wore her voice like an apron, telling me that stirring is just a way of waiting, and that waiting is a way of surviving if you do it loudly enough. When I woke, my mouth was full of the taste I had tried to wash away, and the red soil that had clung to my tongue felt like a promise I had not yet made.

The next morning we inventoried what we had brought and what we had lost. The lists were written on foil that tore if you looked at it too hard, and the entries blurred into each other like the horizon. We had seeds in pockets, labeled with names of rivers that could not be found on any map here, and we had spices that had survived by pretending they were medicine. We had cookbooks with pages stuck together from fear, and we had recipes memorized by people who were hungry for the places they had left. The cook told us that we could not eat memory, but he said it while chewing

something that looked suspiciously like hope.

We set up stations for husking, for soaking, for pretending that we knew what we were doing. A woman with a scar along her wrist taught me how to rinse the red dust from greens without losing the grit entirely, because some grit was necessary to remind you that you were eating something that had fought to live. She said the soil at Nine tasted like iron and divorce, and that if you cooked long enough, it would learn to love you back. I believed her because I had seen how quickly the colony learned to argue, and how slowly it learned to starve.

By the second day, the stew had a schedule. It was stirred at sunup, at midday, and at the hour when the shadows looked longest, which we called the liar's hour. Each stir required a different story, and each story required a different lie about where we were. The cook kept a tally of who had stirred and who had ducked, and the tally became a map of trust, thin as the skin on the broth. When someone missed their turn, the rest of us stirred longer, as if motion could make up for absence, and the stew thickened with the effort.

We learned quickly that measurements were a luxury of worlds that had not learned to want. A palm of salt meant the width of a hand, but only if the hand belonged to someone you trusted not to cheat. A pinch of spice meant the amount you could steal without being noticed, and a simmer meant the length of time it took to decide whether to speak or keep quiet. We wrote these rules on cloth when we had no slate, and we signed them with smudged thumbs. No hoarding leaven, no lying about yield, no refusing the last bowl to the newcomer. It was a small justice, but it fit in the mouth.

As the days unspooled, the stew began to change shape depending on who was stirring. Some made it watery, perhaps out of fear that it would run out, and some made it thick, perhaps out of fear that it would not. Arguments broke out over whether the bones should be cracked for marrow, and whether marrow could be considered theft from the future. A council formed, not of the elected, but of the stirred, and we met each night around the kettle as if it were a hearth that could hear us. The cook let us take turns banging the ladle, and each of us learned how loud our voice became when translated into metal.

Outside, the planet continued to offer nothing but lessons. Dust storms arrived like uninvited guests and stayed too long, and we learned to cook in masks, our mouths full of filters and half-truths. The stew took on a taste like static, and we pretended it was texture. When the supply pods arrived, we greeted them with a mixture of gratitude and suspicion, as if they were relatives who had come to stay forever. They brought algae bricks and protein cakes that tasted like decisions, and we folded them into the stew, folding our old lives into the new.

There was a night when the cook added a handful of red soil to the pot, claiming it was for minerals, but we all knew it was for memory. We drank it down with faces that betrayed nothing, and later we walked outside to spit into the dust, only to find that the dust had already claimed us. It was the night we decided that cuisine would become law because it could be enforced by appetite. We rotated oven time like we rotated water rations, and we assigned the last crust to the oldest hands by decree and by love. Someone banged a ladle against a kettle and called for order, and the order held, at least until the pot cooled.

By the time the first month had bled into the second, the stew had become a map of who we were becoming. Newcomers brought new ingredients, hidden in pockets and in silences. A man from the northern arcades slipped in a pod of fermented seeds that made the broth sing with a sour sweetness, and for a week we argued over whether the song was an improvement or an invasion. We compromised by singing back, and the stew grew more complex, as it should. It began to taste like a conversation, which is to say it began to taste like work.

We had not yet buried our dead, but the stew had begun to mourn for us. Each pot carried a portion for the absent, and each portion was smaller than the one before, as if the dead were learning to eat less as they learned to need less. The cook said that grief was an ingredient you never ran out of, but that you had to be careful how much you added, or it would turn the broth into a mirror. We added it anyway, and we drank our faces back, distorted and steaming, and we called this communion.

On the night we celebrated the first quarter, we made the stew deliberate. We added threads of green that we had coaxed from trays under lights, and we called them banners, though they wilted quickly. We passed bowls not by rank but by chance, and we tried to let the liquid decide who needed it most. A child reached across two adults and dipped a spoon in, and nobody corrected her, because the stew splashed like laughter and we needed the noise. In that moment, the tent felt less like a shelter and more like a throat, and we were the sound passing through.

The next morning, the red soil had stiffened into crust around the edges of the camp, and we scraped it into containers to use later, because we had learned to save even the scraps of land. The cook announced that the stew would now have a name on the menu, and that the menu would be the law until further notice. We nodded, because we were tired of arguing with our throats, and we sat down to write the first line of the cookbook that would not stay closed. The page fluttered in the wind, and we weighted it with stones from the landing site, as if gravity could keep us honest.

As the sun sank, turning the dust into a bruised purple that matched the early broth, I realized that Touchdown Stew had not been a meal so much as a pact. It had said that we could change the taste of this place if we were willing to keep stirring, even when

our arms ached, even when the story in the pot refused to make sense. It had said that the last bowl would always be smaller than the first, but that it would still be a bowl, and that it would still be passed. We had not yet learned how to live, but we had learned how to feed the waiting, and that was enough to begin.

That night, as I lay with the smell of the stew still in my hair, I dreamed again of the shifting kitchen, but this time the doors opened onto other people, not deserts. They brought bowls with their own names written on the rims, and they asked if they could stir. I woke to the sound of the kettle singing softly, and I knew that the planet was listening, too, learning our flavors, deciding whether to let us stay. We would have to keep cooking, and we would have to keep lying to the pot about how much we could bear, because the pot already knew, and it was patient, and it was ours.

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