

# 1

Gabriella was horribly lost and she knew it. She had seen a white rabbit. Rabbits were such a rare sight. She had become excited and followed the creature in a merry chase, not caring that she had crossed through the chain link fence before losing sight of it. The hole in the fence was barely noticeable. Gabriella saw it only because the rabbit had used it. She was only just small enough to squeeze through.

Now it was coming on dark and Gabriella found herself in a deserted city. Houses that were once tall and stately crumbled around her. Abandoned cars, most now burnt-out shells, sat on the cracked, empty roads; silent, eerie sentinels to the deepening night.

Worse still, though only eight and a half, Gabriella knew of the horrors that waited in the dark beyond the fences of civilization. She had learnt all about them in school. Once she realized where she was, she ran frantically back through the winding, deserted streets trying to find the fence.

It was nowhere in sight.

Exhausted and afraid, Gabriella sat down in the middle of the road, tears streaming down her face, making small tracks through the dust that had settled there. She clutched her perfectly coiffed doll close to her chest.

With the sun starting to fade, the shadows had begun to stir. The horrors that lurked in them shuffled back and forth, waiting for their chance to emerge safe from the sunlight that burnt their flaking skin.

Terrified, Gabriella sat, unable to move, and stared with wide eyes as the first of the horrors shuffled from its hiding place in the

shadows of an abandoned house. It turned its head and became rigid as it met Gabriella's horrified gaze. Screaming, Gabriella scrambled to her feet, turned and ran. An eight-year-old, however, could not match the speed of one of these diseased once-humans.

The creature shrieked and gave chase. In just five strides, it caught Gabriella by her hair. Squealing in pain and abject terror, Gabriella struggled as the creature dragged her to the ground, hissing and spitting at her defiance.

More horrors joined the hunt as the sun's light vanished from the streets. One grabbed her leg. Still shrieking, Gabriella struggled hard, slipping from their grasps twice. Each escape proved short-lived.

One, stronger than the others, caught her at the hip. With both hands it lifted her from the ground by the thigh. Hanging like the doll she still grasped in her hand, Gabriella tried to kick herself free, to no avail.

The hungry horror opened its mouth, revealing a row of shattered green teeth. Gabriella squeezed her eyes shut, expecting those terrible teeth to rip through her leg at any moment. Instead, she tumbled to the ground.

It took her a moment to realize that, despite landing hard on her forearm, she remained largely unharmed. She looked around. The horrors were distracted momentarily, their blank eyes matching their stupid expressions.

Gabriella looked behind her.

A raven-haired woman fought Gabriella's attacker with glowing short blades that somehow extended from her forearms. Seeing an opportunity, Gabriella started to crawl.

A mistake.

The movement caught the attention of one of the slack-jawed horrors. It lunged at Gabriella. The girl shrieked as the creature tackled her to the ground. It stood, lifting her by her hair. Gabriella kicked the thing full in the chest and heard the crack of its brittle ribs, but it barely paused as it lifted her to take a bite from her cheek.

Again Gabriella fell to the ground before any harm could be done. She looked up to find a glowing purple blade protruding from the creature's chest. It spasmed as the blade withdrew. Then, with a swift purple flick, the horror's head fell to the ground and rolled

into the gutter. The raven-haired woman bent and picked Gabriella up at the waist.

“Hold on,” she breathed in the girl’s ear. Then they were running, fleeing away from the safety of the fence as everywhere the shuffling monsters closed in.

With the irradiated horrors now streaming from the houses into the darkening streets, the woman changed her tack. Her run turned into a swift and deadly dance, spinning around one horror here, beheading another one there, on and on. The jerking and spinning nauseated and disorientated Gabriella until she felt certain she would be ill.

After almost an hour of ducking and dodging, twirling and sidestepping, the crowd of horrors thinned. Then they were free, running headlong down an empty street. The horrors did not follow. Gabriella glanced back. They stood as if hindered by an invisible wire, howling after what might have been a good meal but not daring to take a single step further.

The running woman slowed, then stopped. Breathing hard, she set Gabriella down on a burnt-out car.

“Are you all right?” she asked, her English oddly accented.

Gabriella pulled her doll close to her and nodded.

“Did they bite you?”

Gabriella shook her head and smiled shyly. The woman smiled back, her violet eyes crinkling pleasantly at the corners.

“You’re beautiful,” Gabriella whispered. Then she burst into tears and reached for the woman. The woman immediately picked her up and held her close.

“There, there,” she soothed. “It’s all right. They’re gone. They can’t hurt you now.”

Gabriella nodded but continued to bawl, pulling the woman as close to her as possible and trembling.

“What’s your name?” the woman asked, when Gabriella calmed a little.

“Gabriella,” the girl answered, hiccupping between sobbed syllables.

“A beautiful name. And how old are you, Gabriella?” the woman murmured. Still holding Gabriella close, she started walking.

“Eight and one half.”

“Truly?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, you are very brave for only eight and one half. I bet you’re tired.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Lucky for you, it just so happens that I live not too far away from here. There will be some warm supper and a hot shower. There is only one bed, but we can share it, all right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“All right,” the woman said.

By the time the pair reached their destination, night had fully descended. Fishing keys from her pocket, the woman unlocked the front door of the building and stepped in. Unlocking another door, she slipped inside what was, in fact, a fairly spacious single bedroom apartment. The woman set Gabriella on the couch and went back to the door to lock it and take off her shoes.

She muttered something and all around the room candles jumped to life. Gabriella looked around her in wonder.

“I’m sorry about the candles. I can get no electricity from here.”

“How did you do that? Are you magical?”

The woman laughed softly. “Magical? Perhaps. There is a light that surrounds everything and everyone. I know how to bend my own light with my mind to make the candlewicks catch. Perhaps one day I will show you how.”

Gabriella simply stared at the woman, her eyes as large as platters. “You think I could do that?”

“Of course you could. I can see your light. It is very strong.”

After a short pause in which Gabriella tried to understand just what the woman meant, she asked, “Why do you live here?”

“Because it is my home,” the woman answered with a shrug. She walked to Gabriella, knelt down and began to methodically check her over for injuries.

“That’s going to be a nasty bruise,” she noted of Gabriella’s forearm with a smile. “Other than that, you’ve just a scraped-up knee and a bruise on your thigh. Looks like you’re going to be all right after all.” The woman smiled up at Gabriella, who smiled back shyly over the top of her doll’s now considerably messier hair.

“And who is this?” the woman asked.

“Sherrie.”

“Sherrie?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Another beautiful name!”

Gabriella giggled.

“Well, I think you ought to have a bath and clean yourself up before dinner, yes?”

Gabriella nodded and the woman stood, extending her hand to her. The girl took it and hopped down from the couch. She walked a short way down the hall to the first door on the left. The woman opened it to reveal a small bathroom with a bathtub at the far end.

“We may not have electricity,” the woman said with a smile, “but we do have plumbing, and I can heat the water.”

“With your light?”

“Yes, with my light. Come on, I’ll show you how it works.”

Before long, Gabriella sat happily in the bath, soaping herself down and playing with the bubbles. Meanwhile in the small kitchen, the woman pulled out some pre-frozen soup from a freezer-turned-ice-box and placed it in a pot. Sighing, she added a small amount of water, then opened the front of an old-fashioned wood stove. She refilled the wood and blew the embers into a small fire.

Satisfied it would stay lit, she shut the door and walked to her room. She had injuries to look after.



Lieutenant Bennejin “Skylark” Skye stared blankly at the wall of the transport he shared with the newly formed United Space Corps Strategic Division Team 6. Bored did not cover precisely how he felt. Earth patrols were rarely a treat.

Pulled from the streets at eight, he had seen more excitement in his first eight years than the twenty that followed. Still, it was required of the United Space Corps to do tours back on the home world, and it was nice to step out of the recycled air of a spacecraft occasionally.

“Bored, Lieutenant?” Unit Commander Brody asked, a smirk twisting his grey moustachioed lips.

“I love my job, sir,” Lieutenant Skye replied absently.

To most, Commander Brody came off as an arrogant, jumped-up

street kid with a bullying streak wider than the Bering Strait. They never understood his particular brand of humour. It was street humour.

Lieutenant Skye did. Perhaps for that reason, he and Commander Brody looked out for each other. In a world filled with privileged snots who bought their commands, Skye and Brody were some of the few who earned it.

Unit Commander Brody grinned. The transport stopped in Docking Bay 96 at the USC Vancouver Headquarters with a resigned whine. The team stood. The door slid open and the sudden noise of a bay bustling with personnel filled the transporter. Following Commander Brody, Lieutenant Skye and the rest of Team 6 marched wearily from the transporter towards the barracks.

“Commander! Commander!” an administrative lieutenant called, chasing Commander Brody. The team halted behind the commander, who waited patiently for the man to reach their position.

“Sorry, sir,” he said. “Rest will have to wait. You and your team are expected in room 501 for a briefing.”

“We’ve just done a tour, Lieutenant,” Commander Brody said.

The lieutenant shrugged, then marched away. Rolling his eyes, the commander trooped his team to the elevators.

“Man, I just want a shower,” Lieutenant Binks said.

“You’ll get it, Lieutenant,” Brody said. “After.”

Binks grunted. “Yes, sir.”

Five floors whipped by at incredible speed, stopping with a stomach-dropping jolt.

“Gods, I wish they’d fix that,” Brody grumbled. He stepped from the elevator and led his team to room 501. Not bothering to knock, he entered, saluted, then paused in surprise at the sight of a paler than usual British Ambassador.

“Gentlemen,” Captain Michaels greeted. “I know you’ve had a long night. Please take a seat.”

The team virtually collapsed into their chairs, exchanging glances with one another and stealing peeks at the ambassador.

“This is Ambassador Clegg, as I’m sure you’re aware,” Captain Michaels said.

“Am I to assume special ops, sir?” Brody asked.

“Almost,” the captain said. “With a great deal more at stake.”

“Oh?”

“Ambassador Clegg’s daughter has gone missing. We fear she may be beyond the fence.”

“She’s dead, then,” Brody said a matter-of-factly. The ambassador winced.

“We don’t know that,” Captain Michaels said.

“Yes,” Brody said, “we do. Nothing living survives out there. If the corpses didn’t get her, then the daemon sure as hell did. There’s no way she’s alive.”

Captain Michaels scowled at Commander Brody and indicated the ambassador, who now looked close to tears.

“Of course,” Brody quickly amended, “miracles happen.”

Captain Michaels rolled his eyes and cleared his throat. “I understand that yourself and one of your team members are both street orphans. Am I correct?”

“Yes,” Commander Brody said guardedly. It was a touchy subject for both himself and his lieutenant. Prejudices against the desperate and destitute of the ghettos often kept either of them from promotion.

“Is it true that part of your initiation into the street gangs is you had to survive one night beyond the fence?”

Brody shook his head, but Lieutenant Skye answered, “Yes, sir.”

Commander Brody turned to his lieutenant in surprise. “Did you?”

“Yes,” Skye answered. He looked down at his fingernails, then balled his hands into fists to hide their tremble.

“What the hell? I heard about that, but no one I know ever did!” Brody stared at Skylark with wide eyes. “What gang made that a requirement?”

“Gang is perhaps a strong word,” the lieutenant said. “More like a hungry rabble of kids trying to be tough. There were five of us,” he said. “Only two made it back.”

“So,” the ambassador said quietly, “it is possible.”

“For an eight-year-old who survived on the street, yes. For a girl who has never been anywhere without a nurse? It’s a different story.”

“Lieutenant!” the captain barked.

Lieutenant Skye looked at him a moment, then turned back to the ambassador. "Sir," he finished.

The ambassador smiled slightly. "It's all right, Lieutenant. I'm aware of the chances of... of my daughter's survival. But I have to do something."

"So if I'm getting this right, you want us to go beyond the fence and look for your daughter?" Commander Brody asked.

"Or... or her body," Clegg replied, unable to keep the tremor of grief from his voice.

"Right, off we go again, I suppose."

"Not at night," Lieutenant Skye said. "You'd need the entire Corps to take those bastards on at night. They're not nearly as active during the day."

"Why not?"

"Radiation has made their skin sensitive to light. The sun can burn them to ash."

"I've heard the same from the turret guards," Lieutenant Binks added, only to be silenced by the glare of both his commander and the captain.

"The fuck happened out there, Lieutenant?" Commander Brody demanded.

Lieutenant Skye shrugged. "I was late getting back in. They chased me as the sun came up. Two couldn't find shelter in time. I watched them burn from safely behind the fence."

"So, you are uniquely qualified then, Lieutenant," Captain Michaels said.

Skye frowned. "I wouldn't say that I was, Captain," he said.

"You know more than the rest of us. That puts you in command."

Skye looked up sharply. "Sir?"

"Your command, Lieutenant. I expect you and your team out there the moment the sun comes up, got it?"

Glancing uncertainly at his commander, Skye nodded. "Sir, yes, sir."

"Commander Brody?"

"Sir?"

"Your assistance has been requested to help quell a gang in Sector Y346. You are to report to Commander Garson at dawn tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."



“Good. Dismissed.”

The team stood and saluted as both the captain and the ambassador left the room.

“We’re all dead,” Binks said.

“Poor bastard,” Skye said, his eyes on the haggard figure of the ambassador as he slunk away.

“All right. Shower and bed folks,” Commander Brody said. He looked across and grinned. “By your leave, Lieutenant.”

Skye raised one eyebrow and curled his lip at his commander in distaste. Brody walked away wearing a grin that was closer to a sneer.

“Man, sometimes I hate that guy,” Lieutenant Binks said.

“Don’t take him too seriously, Binky,” Skye answered. “You lot do what you want, I’ll see you in the mess at 0500 sharp.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Binks said with a sharp salute.

“Stop it,” Skye said, walking away. Binks laughed and the squad disbanded for the evening.

Sleep did not come easily to Lieutenant Skye that night. A past he had buried long ago invaded his rest. Memories he had suppressed kept him tossing and turning, his jerky reactions yanking him violently out of his half-sleep, leaving him slick with sweat and fighting back tears.

That night beyond the fence was the single most terrible night in his life. It had left him a trembling leaf for three days before the military police picked him up and took him to base. So tense had his underfed body been that the MPs did not change his crouched position despite lifting him. He rose in the air, hunched over his knees like some bizarre human boulder. He sat like that in the truck the entire way to base, until he fainted from hunger. It took a week after his eyes opened again to get him to acknowledge anyone at all.

He did not want to go back.

When sleep finally did find him, it arrived in short bursts and each time ended with Skye almost falling out of his bed as he fought the mutants behind the fence in his dreams.



“You look like hell,” Binks said when Skye arrived at the mess. “Sir.”

“Shut up,” Skye answered. He rubbed his eyes. “Everyone ready?”  
“Yes, sir,” the five squad members replied. They eyed him suspiciously.

“Guys, I’m fine.”

Binks grinned but said nothing. They marched quietly to the transporter dock.

“I’m not sure about this,” Corporal Green, the only female member of the team, whispered to Binks in a broad Australian accent.

Binks looked over at her. “You got a problem with Skylark, you got a problem with me,” he replied.

Ahead, Lieutenant Skye smiled. USC Strategic Team 6 might be a new formation, but he and Lieutenant Binks went back a long way together—all the way to basic training. As long as Binks was on his team, he was sure someone would always have his back. Their transporter at Platform 89 was nowhere in sight.

“Yo, did they leave without us?” Binks asked.

“Late getting in,” a docking administrator said, checking the schedule that flashed on the podium at the edge of the dock. “They radioed in just a few minutes ago.”

“We got to get us more transport pilots,” Binks grumbled.

“They’re doing what they can,” Lieutenant Skye said. He squinted down the length of the dock. “Final weapons check.”

The team set to work, checking over their weapons and ensuring everything was in working order. Lieutenant Binks was not the only one to see Skylark’s hands shake, but he was the only one to address it. He and Bennejin had gone through both basic and senior training together, as well as flight school and infiltrator training. Though Binks came from a wealthy family from northern Vancouver, he and Bennejin had managed to work past their vast differences.

“Nervous, Skylark?” he asked conversationally.

Lieutenant Skye nodded, knowing full well he wouldn’t be able to lie to Binks.

“I’ve been there before, Binky. I don’t want to go back.”

“Well, they’re allergic to sunlight, right? And we’ll be there during the day, right?”

“There is less than twelve hours of sunlight, fewer than that, even, because the buildings provide shelter from direct sun. Long

shadows are just as dangerous as nightfall. And we have no idea where the girl is. It's a lot of area to cover."

"You're full of good thoughts."

"We're going to be there past nightfall, Binky," Skylark said. "You best be prepared."

"What happened out there? When you were little?"

Not for the first time, Skylark refused to talk about it. He simply shook his head.

"Transport's coming," the docking administrator said.

Skye and Binks looked up. The transport came hurdling down the docking channel.

"She's going to crash," Binks said.

Skylark said nothing. He watched the speeding transport with a frown and pursed lips.

"Seriously," Binks said. "She's going to crash."

The transport braked so hard sparks leapt from the rails in the channel. The team stepped back from the edge of the channel, wincing. They expected the transporter to smash against the buffer at the end of it. No such crash occurred. The side door of the transporter opened and the pilot stood by the door control, a maniacal grin painted on his heart-shaped face.

"Good morning!" he said, a slight Scottish accent creeping through his good cheer. "It's going to be a beautiful day!"

USC Team 6 stared incredulously at the man. The docking administrator shook his head and keyed in the time of arrival.

"All aboard!" The pilot left the door and returned to his seat.

"You heard him," Skylark said. He and Binks entered the transport last, exchanging a glance before so doing.

"Damn caffeine runners," Binks muttered darkly. The left side of Skylark's lips turned up in a lop-sided smile.

"Alrighty? Everyone in?" the pilot asked over the speakers.

"All in," Skylark answered.

"Excellent!"

The door of the transport slowly lowered, then locked with a whining hiss.

"All right, boys," the pilot said.

"Fuck you," Corporal Green muttered. She rubbed her shaved head and shot a look at her commander. Skylark laughed softly.

## SKYLARK

“This old girl is the safest transporter in the USC fleet, and I’m the best damned pilot you’ll ever meet,” the pilot’s voice said over the communications link.

“I call bullshit,” Binks said.

“We’ll have you to the fence in a little under an hour.”

Skylark looked up at the ceiling of the transporter. It was a two-hour journey to the fence.

“Right,” Binks said. “They stick us with the crazy pilot.”

“Of course they did,” Skylark answered. “Weren’t expecting special treatment, were you?”

Binks shrugged. “Just something better than rock bottom would be nice.”

Skylark smiled. “This isn’t rock bottom,” he said. “Trust me.”

Binks looked over at his friend. “What are you thinking ’bout?”

“That poor girl,” Skylark said. “And the chewed-up bones we’re going to find.”

There were a thousand more questions Binks wanted to ask, but he knew better. Despite the lieutenant’s blue-eyed charm and good humour, something lurked beneath—something profoundly sinister. Binks didn’t want to bring all that to the surface. Years of observation told him that Lieutenant Bennejin Skye wasn’t all that far from the edge. Perhaps that was why women flocked to him. Good looks only got one so far, but add something slightly dangerous, and you’ve got a potent sexual cocktail.

“You remember that hot Latina pilot you were banging in flight school?” he asked instead.

That brought the desired reaction from Skylark. The lieutenant grinned.

“What was her name?” Binks asked.

“Jen.”

“Man, that girl had a butt on her. Never forgave you for getting her.”

Skylark snorted. “And you had Miriam. How could you be jealous?”

“Oh yeah! That was her name!”

“You guys are disgusting,” Corporal Green said.

“Easy, Honey Badger,” Binks said with a smile. “Just reminiscing about beautiful women.”

Corporal Green glared at Lieutenant Binks, then turned her back on him.

“Jen was gorgeous,” Skylark said. “Crazy, though.”

“The pretty ones always are,” Binks agreed.

“Pigs,” Green grumbled to herself.

The team settled into easy silence. Skylark looked them over. A recent formation, Team 6 had yet to settle into a rhythm. Newest to the group was Jacqueline Green, a tough carrot-top with a shaved head, an Australian accent and a temper. Everyone had taken to calling her Jack. Never having attended flight school, she had not been awarded a call sign, but she had been the top graduate of infiltration training last year. She had never seen a fight though, and her inexperience was telling.

Aside from Binks and Skylark, Corporal Matt “Doorman” Shae and his brother Corporal Frank “Spike” Shae made up the rest of the team. The twins were indistinguishable from one another and Commander Brody had stopped bothering to try. Skylark had not yet quit trying, but he often got it wrong. The twins were also excellent soldiers. Though they lacked infiltration training, they were able to pick up the necessary manoeuvres very quickly and worked exceptionally well together.

Spike looked over at his new commander and nodded. Skylark nodded back, then returned his attention to the ceiling of the transporter. The engine grumbled in an alarming fashion, but the pilot seemed unconcerned and so Lieutenant Skye tried his best to ignore it. Instead, he concentrated on using a technique one of the USC psychologists suggested he try. He focussed on his breathing and attempted to empty his mind. In so doing, he could slow his heart and put his worries away, enabling him to face battle evenly and without emotion.

Anyone who had fought with him considered his strange, mechanical control of emotion inhuman, but not one complained. They knew you needed to be something other than human to fight and return to the fight. There was no one better to have at your side than a dry-eyed, calm soldier. No one had ever seen Lieutenant Skye so much as flinch in combat.

“We’re here, boys!” the pilot said. “Hold on tight!”

No sooner had he spoken than the transporter lurched, throwing Spike and Jack from their seats.

“Jesus Christ!” Doorman said, pulling his brother up.

“Sorry!” the pilot said, sounding anything but. The lights in the transporter flickered and it lurched twice more.

“The fuck?” Binky demanded.

“Hey,” Skylark barked into the communication device near his seat. “Who taught you to fly?”

“Your mother,” the pilot answered.

“Fucking transport pilots,” Binky said.

One final lurch, a great deal of squealing and the transport stopped. The door popped open.

“Welcome to the fence, boys,” the pilot said.

“All out,” Skylark ordered. The team jumped from the transport to the dock with great haste.

“You’re welcome,” the pilot said as the door closed.

Like a shot, the transport fled the docking station. Skylark watched it go, shook his head and turned back to the station. Though small, it was well structured and very well defended, looking more like a prison than a docking station. The fence, a barb-wired monstrosity, stretched from beyond the turreted compound far into the distance on either side. All around the compound sat the slums, a ghetto of starving children, cracked-out mothers, missing fathers—a festering pustule of violence, famine, and disease. It was once Bennejin Skye’s home. It looked alien to him now, but the sounds and smells dragged unpleasant memories to the fore. Skylark scowled as he fought them back.

“Commander,” a docking administrator greeted. He reached his hand out to Lieutenant Skye.

“Lieutenant, actually,” Skylark said, taking the man’s hand.

“Ah, yes. Sorry. Follow me, if you please.”

Signalling his group, Skylark followed the administrator into the compound.

“Have you located where the girl might have gotten through?” he asked the administrator.

“We believe so. There is a small hole just north of the compound. It doesn’t look large enough to fit anyone through, but it’s the only thing close enough.”

“Is that how you got through?” Binks asked.

“No,” Skylark answered. “We climbed.”

Binks looked up at the looming fence. “Christ.”

The docking administrator shot Skye and Binks an inquiring look, then continued. “The guards have refused to open the gate until the sun hits the fence,” he said apologetically.

“They’re smart,” Skylark answered.

“We were expecting you much later,” the administrator said.

Skylark smirked. “We were expecting to arrive a lot later.”

“Sent you with H-Man, I suppose.”

“Don’t know. Is he a crazy Scot with little regard for transporter capabilities?”

“Sounds like him.”

Skylark grinned.

“I can offer some coffee and a small meal while we wait on the sun.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“This way, then.” The administrator took a sharp turn and Skylark and his team followed. They emerged from one of the tunnels leading to and from the docking station into a large room busy with civilian police, military police, and compound staff at breakfast.

“Is that sausage I smell?” Binks asked, his eyes growing large as he breathed in the scent.

“Stand down, Binky,” Skylark said softly.

“Find a seat, gentlemen. I’ll come for you when the guards are ready to open the gate.”

“Thank you, Administrator...?”

“Anders. Sorry. I should have introduced myself earlier.”

“We’ll live.”

“I have to get back to work. Make yourselves at home.”

“Thank you.”

Lieutenant Skye led his squad to an empty table and sat down. Not long after, staff brought cups of coffee and plates. Binks barely waited for the plates to be placed on the table before he snatched his up and stood.

“What?” he demanded when Skye turned to him in surprise. “I’m hungry!” Binks turned to join the queue for food. The rest of the squad followed. Skye contented himself with the hot coffee. It was

good coffee, real coffee, not the freeze-dried shit they served in space.

“Well if it isn’t the Space Corps,” an MP said.

Lieutenant Skye opened his eyes and looked up.

The military policeman stood at Skylark’s table, his arms folded across his chest, an unpleasant, smug smirk on his face. Skylark stood.

“How are the namby-pamby space cadets these days?”

Binks turned back to the table to see the stand-off between his commander and the MP. He looked down at his plate.

“Shit,” he hissed. He put the plate down on the bench and turned to the woman behind him. “Yo, hold my place.” He left the line and headed for the table.

“You’re speaking to an infiltrator,” Skylark answered, tapping the small round pin beneath the star with wings that marked his training as a space fighter pilot. “You sure you want to start something?”

“Lieutenant,” Binky said, drawing the attention of both men. “Is there a problem?” Tall and muscular, Binky was an intimidating presence.

Skylark felt the other members of his team gather around him. He looked the MP over with disdain. “No,” he said finally. “I don’t think there will be.”

“Frangella!” a senior MP barked from the middle of the mess hall.

The MP in front of Skylark jumped and snapped to attention as his senior officer approached.

“Are we having a problem, Frangella?” the man demanded irritably.

“No, sir,” the MP replied. “Just a chat, sir.”

“Well take your chatter where it’s wanted.”

“Yes, sir.” Frangella marched smartly away, but not before throwing daggers at Skylark with his eyes.

The senior MP sighed. He turned to Skylark and extended his hand. “Major Frank Hallow.”

Skylark took the man’s hand. “Lieutenant Skye. We’re here on a retrieval mission, sir.”

“I heard. The British ambassador’s daughter. Very sad. What I want to know is how the hell she got out of the damned compound.”

“Kids can be surprisingly inventive, sir.”



The major snorted. He narrowed his eyes at Skylark. "Wait. Dark hair, blue eyes... Skye...? Bennejin Skye?"

Skylark blinked in surprise. "Yes, sir."

"Damn, boy! You got big!"

"Sorry, sir?"

The major grinned. "You will not remember me, son. I'm the one who pulled you off the street twenty years ago. Now you're Space Corps? And an infiltrator. You've done well."

Skylark smiled slightly, not expecting the sudden warmth coming from Major Hallow. "I had help. Would you like to join us for breakfast, Major?"

"Yes, actually. It's not very often we see a success coming from the streets around here."

Skylark and Major Hallow sat, the major accepting a steaming cup of coffee from a nervous cadet. The rest of Skylark's team departed, hoping to retrieve their places in the food line.

"So, you made it through," the major said. His brown eyes twinkled. "You're a tough little nut."

"Seems so, sir."

"Enough with the 'sir.' I get that from the bootlickers all the time. Call me Frank."

Skylark observed the man in front of him briefly, his eyes giving nothing away in their searching gaze.

"All right, Frank."

"Thought about you a lot after the psychs took you away. Underfed and shaking like a leaf in that little ball you made yourself. Didn't think you'd make it, to be honest. Lots of street orphans don't."

"A lot don't have a reason to."

"And what was your reason?"

Skylark shrugged. "No idea. I'll find out, I suppose."

"Ah, a philosopher!"

Skylark smirked. "Sure."

Frank laughed and leant back in his chair, grinning. "So, tell me about yourself, son."

"There isn't all that much to tell."

"Hell there isn't. You know, I was going to go for the Space Corps when I signed up for service."

"Why didn't you?"

"I kept finding kids in the street that needed food and shelter. Had to stick around and help. And I didn't pass the test."

Skylark smiled.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," Frank said.

"Do you see many kids come through?"

"Less and less. Rising birth mortality rates, fewer kids being born, fewer making the first few months, fewer surviving the street. It's hell out there."

"Always was," Skylark said quietly. He took a sip of coffee and let the aroma fill his senses for a moment.

"Good, eh?"

"Very."

"Do you get the real stuff in space?"

"Nope," Skylark said, shaking his head. "Freeze-dried shit."

"Then I'm glad I didn't pass that test."

Skylark laughed.

"Uh," Binks said from behind his lieutenant.

"At ease," the major said, waving his hand dismissively.

"This is Lieutenant Binks, Binky," Skylark said.

Binks nodded at the major. "Sir." He sat down.

"Lieutenant."

Conscious of the ranked MP in front of him, Binks was heroically well-mannered while eating his breakfast. Skylark watched him a moment, smiling his lop-sided smile.

"I should get back to work," the major said, standing.

Skylark and Binks stood immediately, Binky's mouth half full. They saluted. The major offered a sloppy one in return. He then extended his hand to Skylark.

"It was very good to meet you, Lieutenant Skye. Again."

"And you, Major Hallow," Skylark said, taking the man's hand and shaking it firmly. "And thank you. For everything."

"You know, I can retire happy now," Frank said, grinning. "There's not a lot of thanks you get for hauling starving children into the back of a truck. I'm glad to know I helped even one get out."

"I'm glad to be out."

"Good luck out there, Lieutenant. Keep safe."

"Yes, sir."

The major walked away and both men sat down again.

“You not eating?” Binks asked, as he stuffed his face with scrambled eggs.

Skylark shook his head. “Not hungry.”

Before Binks could admonish his friend, this being the second day without food for Skye, the rest of the team arrived and sat.

“What’s with the major?” Jack asked, before remembering that Skylark was now her commander. “Sir.”

“Someone I owe, is all,” Skylark answered.

“Cryptic,” Jack said, pouring ketchup onto her eggs.

They ate quickly, knowing their hour would soon be up. Sure enough, the docking administrator approached before Binks was even halfway through his meal. “The guards are ready now.”

“Thank you,” Skylark said. He stood, his team following suit.

“Leave the plates, the cadets will clear that up.”

“As you like.” Skylark turned to Binks, who was still shovelling food into his mouth, though he stood. Lieutenant Skye scowled at him.

“I’m hungry!” Binks said.

Shaking his head, Skylark moved off, leaving Binks no choice but to put down his fork and leave the table.

They followed the docking administrator through the facility, moving up several flights of stairs before they stepped out into the central courtyard of the compound. It was a surprisingly beautiful space set against the starkness of the rest of the compound. A treed park stood to one side with a paved area and benches. In the centre stood a statue dedicated to Brigadier-General Russell, who died heroically in the war against the daemon. Blooming flowers surrounded the base.

They passed beneath its shadow before coming to the gate. The gate looked much like the rest of the fence. Twenty feet tall and covered in barbed wire, it made a crude sight after the beautiful courtyard.

“All right, gentlemen,” the administrator said.

“For fuck’s sake,” Corporal Green muttered.

“Maybe he can’t tell you’re a girl because you’re wearing Space Corps armour,” Doorman said helpfully.

“Which has fucking breasts,” Green pointed out.

## SKYLARK

“And they’re lovely,” Doorman answered. Jack punched him on his armoured shoulder. He and his brother laughed.

“You may approach the gates. They will open only wide enough to let you pass, and only when you are three feet from it. Good luck, gentlemen.”

Skylark turned to the administrator and shook his hand. “Thank you. See you soon. I hope.” He put on his helmet, lowered the visor, prompting his team to do the same, and walked up to the gate.

“We travel north to the hole, and start our search from there,” he said as the gates creaked open.

“Yes, sir,” his team answered in unison.

Together, they walked through into no man’s land.