

## CHAPTER ONE

The boys in the cafeteria of Sector D32 encircled Gideon Wells. Some of them threw food while others pumped their fists in the air shouting, “Fight, fight, fight,” followed with “Berserker, Berserker.”

“Fight, fight, fight.”

“Berserker, Berserker.”

Berserker—Gideon knew the name well. It was his nickname. Although he didn’t like it he admitted to himself that it suited him and his temper perfectly. He wiped the chunks of potato, bean and kale stew off his grey uniform and glared at the three boys now threatening him. No surprise it was Caleb and his sidekicks Nick and Thomas.

Like the other boys in the Finger Lakes New York Quarantine, Gideon was no stranger to fights. But unlike the others, Gideon won his fights provided it was one against one. He had fought and beaten Caleb twice this year already. But today Caleb had friends with him. Three against one was not easy no matter what level black belt in Krav Jitsui somebody had. Gideon took a deep breath. Today was going to be a bad day.

As the circle of chanting boys closed in around him, Gideon could see the bloodlust in their eyes. He could feel their energy and anger fill the cafeteria. It was contagious, worming its way into him like a virus. He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth.

“Fight, fight, fight.”

“Berserker, Berserker.”

The situation in Quarantine was always the same for Gideon. The only thing that changed was the name of the bullies. Today it was Caleb telling Gideon that his father was a coward for abandoning

him and his mother for the Off World mining colony. With a lazy shrug of his shoulders Gideon let that remark slide. But when Nick and Thomas told him that his mother didn't work fast enough creating the cure for the Virus that killed so many on Earth, that because of her, billions of people died, then the pushing and shoving would start.

Didn't people know that her work in finding the cure for the Virus was what ended her life?

The hands of the other boys pressed into Gideon's back, driving the rough, scratchy material of his Quarantine uniform into his skin. They edged him closer to Caleb, Nick and Thomas. Gideon knew he shouldn't fight them; another fight could hurt his chances of getting into the Galaxy Class Pilot program. He looked for a kind face in the crowd but as usual there were no kind faces in Quarantine, especially in Sector D32. Gideon braced himself for the worst.

"Fight, fight, fight."

"Berserker, Berserker."

Pushed into the center of the circle by the crowd of chanting boys, Gideon unleashed his loudest fighting kiai, a guttural scream of "Eeeee-yah." It froze the other three boys just long enough. Gideon thought of his mother's funeral as he punched Caleb in the nose. The resulting crunch told Gideon he had broken it. Gideon allowed himself a grim smile as Caleb crumpled to the ground, his nose bleeding all over his uniform. The cafeteria erupted with cheers.

"Berserker, Berserker."

"Fight, fight, fight."

Gideon turned to face Nick just as Nick's fist smashed Gideon in the mouth, splitting his lip. The taste of his own blood ran across his tongue, fueling his rage. Gideon spit a mouthful of blood onto the tiled floor.

Nick moved in for another punch but Gideon easily sidestepped him and gave him a spinning sidekick to the stomach driving the air out of him. Nick sank to the floor wheezing. Images of Gideon's father boarding the Off World transport flashed through his mind as Gideon set himself to finish Nick with a round house kick to the head. Then the familiar, shrill voice of the Headmaster cut through the air.

“Enough! Break it up now.”

The Headmaster and two Enforcers charged into the circle. The Headmaster was a small man who always wore his tattered blue Skaneateles Lake Country Club blazer and a red tie. The blazer had the country club's insignia – a sailing pennant that looked like the French flag – emblazoned over the Headmaster's heart.

The Enforcers wore black helmets and light blue uniforms. The uniforms were mostly covered by black-tiled body armor. The black body armor was the latest in nanotech shielding. The boys in the Finger Lakes Quarantine joked that the Enforcers looked like turtles. But the electrified batons the Enforcers carried were no joke to the boys in Quarantine. The batons had small orbs on the end that crackled and popped with high-voltage electricity. The boys called these weapons Shockers.

“Gideon, I should have known you were the cause of all this.” The Headmaster jabbed his finger into the only potato, bean and kale free spot on Gideon's chest. “It's the third fight this quarter.”

Gideon's arms shook from the rush of adrenaline that coursed through him. He slowly unclenched his fists and took a deep breath. Sweat dripped into his eyes, the salt stinging them. He spit another mouthful of blood onto the floor, cleared his throat and tried to speak but the Headmaster cut him off with a wave of his hand. “Save it, boy. Take him to my office now.”

As the enforcers grabbed Gideon by both arms, the Headmaster pointed at Caleb and Nick. “Stop mopping the floor with your butts and get to the infirmary. After you've been cleared by medical, report

to detention. The rest of you animals clean this place up. It looks like hell in here and stinks even worse.”

None of the boys moved. They stood staring in stunned silence at the Headmaster. The only sound was the buzzing of the overhead lights that seemed to cook the mix of blood, beans, potato and kale stew that coated the cafeteria floor. The air was thick with the smell of blood, sweat and potatoes.

Then a glob of the potato, bean and kale stew sailed through the air. It landed on the Headmaster’s chest, covering the country club insignia. Instead of a red, white and blue sailing pennant, the insignia was now sticky and green. It looked like one of the boys shot the Headmaster with a green paintball. The Headmaster gritted his teeth. He slowly wiped the stew off with a flick of his wrist and turned to the Enforcers. “The boys need a lesson.”

The Enforcers released Gideon and jammed their Shockers into the boys nearest them. The two boys convulsed violently as the electricity ran through their bodies.

“Stop it,” Gideon said. “Those guys didn’t even do anything.”

The Headmaster turned on Gideon. “Perhaps you want to take their place?”

“No, Sir.”

“I didn’t think so.” The Headmaster calmly watched the boys convulse. When they lost control of their bowels he turned to the Enforcers. “Release them, they’ve had enough.”

The Enforcers withdrew their Shockers.

The boys crumpled to the ground in fetal positions.

“Does anyone else need a lesson?” the Headmaster shouted. “Or are you going to clean this place up like I told you to?”

The boys started cleaning, keeping one eye on the Headmaster and the other on the Enforcers.

Gideon looked for Thomas but the boy had wisely disappeared into the crowd, successfully avoiding the Headmaster. Gideon sighed as the rough hands of the Enforcers dragged him to the Headmaster's office—again.

Gideon stood at attention in front of the Headmaster's desk. The office was chilly, reminding Gideon of why the boys in Quarantine called it the freezer. His wet uniform - soaked with sweat, blood and chunks of green stew pressed against his skin like a cold dirty rag.

“Cadet Gideon Wells, what am I going to do with you?” the Headmaster asked. “You have more demerits than anyone in the history of the Finger Lakes New York Quarantine. Just last month you were kicked off the Krav Jitsui team for fighting and what is it with that crazy nickname they gave you? It's not flattering.” The Headmaster's sharp, pinched features and small dark eyes bore into Gideon. Frowning, he looked more rodent than human. It was one of the many reasons why the boys at the Quarantine nicknamed him Weasel.

“No, Sir, most nicknames aren't,” Gideon thought of the Headmaster's nickname and tried not to laugh. “My roommate Adrian gave me the Berserker nickname. I can't help that the other guys like calling me that.”

“Adrian gave you that nickname? Young man, did he tell you what a Berserker is?”

Gideon gave the Headmaster a blank stare. “Sir?”

“What exactly did Adrian tell you about Berserkers?”

“Adrian said it's a warrior that goes crazy in battle, Sir.”

The Headmaster grunted. “That's all? Nothing more? Nothing about Off World?”

“Off World? No, Sir. All Adrian said was that I act crazy like a Berserker sometimes, especially when—.”

“Never mind, Cadet. Tell me about the fight in the cafeteria.”

“I didn’t start it, Sir.”

“Nothing’s ever your fault is it?”

“Sir, it was three against one. How is that my fault?”

“I saw what happened, Gideon. Like the other fights you’ve had, you threw the first punch. Not only that, if I hadn’t stepped in when I did you would have kicked Nick in the head. You could have caused some serious damage to that boy. You could have killed him.”

Gideon shrugged his shoulders. “Then it’s lucky for everybody you stepped in when you did, Sir.”

“I see.” The Headmaster pulled a data pad from off of a nearby table and powered it up. It flashed a file with Gideon’s name on it.

Gideon took a deep breath and stared out the window. The autumn sky was grey and overcast. It was a typical autumn day in the Finger Lakes region of western New York State. The waters of Canandaigua Lake mirrored the grey sky reinforcing Gideon’s dark mood. He scanned the shoreline and rolling hills, taking in the colorful leaves of the elm, oak, and maple trees of the surrounding forests. The red, yellow and orange leaves reminded him of happier times. It reminded Gideon of a time before the Virus came from Off World to Earth killing billions—before the orphaned survivors of the Virus were forced into quarantines, before his parents left him. Like the changing leaves of the trees, his old life was nothing more than a fading memory. Standing in the Headmaster’s office, Gideon never felt so alone. The Headmaster’s voice brought Gideon out of his daydream.

“I see you’re turning fourteen next month.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The Headmaster didn't look up from his data pad. He scanned Gideon's file for several minutes and then after a long, heavy sigh shut it down. He frowned at Gideon, giving the pinched features of his face an even sharper, more weasel-like edge. "You're set to leave Quarantine this summer. Any thought about what work assignment you want?"

"Yes, Sir. I've applied for the Galaxy Class Pilot program. It should be in my file." *The Weasel should know that. What's he playing at?*

"The rules at Fort Drum are a lot stricter than the rules here."

Gideon braced himself for what was coming next. His stomach tightened. "Sir?"

"Gideon, there is only one open slot available in the Galaxy Class Pilot program. Your grades are excellent of course. No surprise there since both your parents were scientists. But your behavior - especially the fighting - is a problem. They won't tolerate an angry boy in the pilot program. They only want mature young men."

"Sorry, Sir, but the other boys, especially Caleb, just don't know when to quit. They push and push about my parents, especially about my mother."

"You think you're the only one to have suffered? Everyone lost somebody to the Virus." The Headmaster pointed to the nearby table where a framed photo of his wife and three children sat. "But we don't use it as an excuse to destroy ourselves or hurt others."

Gideon pursed his lips. He forgot about the cracked lip Nick gave him and frowned as the taste of his own blood coated his tongue. He swallowed and looked at the photo of the Headmaster's wife and children aboard a party boat in front of the Skaneateles Lake Country Club. They looked so happy. Gideon could see that the eyes of the Headmaster's wife and children had a slight purple tinge to them. The first sign that the deadly Virus had begun to take hold. Like most that contracted the Virus before

Gideon's mother invented the cure, all three of them died. Gideon's eyes welled with tears as he thought of how the Virus killed his mother.

First, the haunting purple eyes.

Then oozing welts.

Then endless coughing fits.

Then a final smile followed by a deep painful sigh as her last breath left her.

Then she was gone—forever.

“Gideon, you're competing against Caleb for the last Galaxy Class Pilot slot. Did you know that?”

Gideon tore his gaze from the photo. “What? No, Sir.”

“How do you think it makes your application look when you break the nose of the other guy you're competing against?”

Gideon gasped. “Sir, I swear I had no idea we were competing for the last GCP slot.”

“He knew you were competing against him,” the Headmaster said in an accusatory tone.

Gideon's face flushed hot. He tried to control his temper. “Sir, did it ever occur to you that maybe Caleb was pushing for this fight? That he wanted me disqualified so he could have the slot for himself? That he's been planning this all along?”

“You better watch your tone with me, Cadet.”

Gideon tried to swallow the anger welling up inside him. “Sorry, Sir.”

“You want to get that last slot? Then you have to prove you're mature enough to have it. That you can control your temper and follow instructions,” the Headmaster said. “Everything you've done here at Finger Lakes Quarantine has demonstrated an unmatched ability to excel as an individual, to look out for yourself—to survive. But you've yet to show us that you can be part of a team.”



“Yes, Sir, I promise I’ll do better this quarter.”

The Headmaster shook his head. He reached for a small silver disc. “We’ve gone way beyond that.”

“Sir?”

“This disc is the first message received from Off World since the Virus. We downloaded the message yesterday morning. Its authenticity has been verified.”

Gideon stared blankly at the Headmaster. “Sir, I don’t understand how the first message from Off World in three years is important to me.”

“It’s from your father.”

A lump formed in Gideon’s throat.

“He needs you Off World.”

The news hit Gideon harder than Nick’s punch to the face. Gideon’s mouth hung open in surprise.

“Doctor Wells wants you to deliver some DNA samples to him for his lab work. The trip should be easy enough. You should be able go Off World and return back to Earth within five days time.”

“Sir, I haven’t seen or heard from my father in three years. He abandoned my mother and me. I don’t want to see him.” Gideon’s swallowed the bile forming at the back of his throat. “Why can’t a droid make the trip?”

“I figured you’d say that.” The Headmaster’s mouth curled up at the ends revealing a rare smile. It wasn’t a kind smile. It was more weasel-like than human. “I can’t order you to go. But I do have considerable sway regarding what kind of work assignment you get once you’re released from this quarantine.”

Gideon looked at the Headmaster with contempt. He didn't like being threatened. It made him feel like he was being bullied. He also didn't want to go Off World. Off World was home to the Virus. It was also home to Shape Shifters and if the rumors were true, strange monsters that ate humans. But as bad as those things were, they were nothing compared to seeing his father.

“So, I offer you this, Cadet Wells,” continued the Headmaster. “If you go see your father, deliver the DNA samples to him and return safely, your admission into the Galaxy Class Pilot program is guaranteed.”

“If I refuse?” Gideon asked.

“Then Caleb gets the slot and you'll work on a fishing trawler out of Buffalo. Instead of exploring the galaxy, you'll be exploring Lake Erie.”

Gideon grit his teeth. His father loved fishing. Gideon hated it.

The Headmaster laughed. “Cheer up, boy. It could be worse, I could put you on a dairy farm outside Batavia repairing milking-bots.”

“Do I have to decide right now, Sir?” Gideon chewed on his lower lip, inadvertently re-opening the cut. A trickle of blood tinged the tip of his tongue and ran down his chin.

The Headmaster eyed Gideon's stained uniform and bloodied lip. “Get yourself cleaned up and report to the infirmary, see if they can fix that lip. I will see you back here in my office with your answer tomorrow at 0900. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

