

# Blue Sky

Marc Neuffer

*Don't breathe. Don't twitch. Keep your slicer ready.*

It was a rookie move, being so far into this twisted underground of deserted warrens and passages. Casey's guts twisted and fright flew electric as she pressed against the wire mesh barrier, regretting going down an unfamiliar maintenance tunnel. The smell of lubricant and the harsh scrapes of slithering tendrils across bare metal chilled her sweat-soaked skin. Twenty meters away, the hulking thing was sniffing along her carbon dioxide trail.

*Need space. Need time.*

Her breathing filter hung around her neck. The upper strap had failed, fatigued by too many days' exposure to acid air. Fingers inched to her vest pocket, knuckle creep by knuckle creep, for a decoy canister. In the dim light, two rats ran across the toes of her boots. Casey's natural response was to crush their little skulls; they ate her food, gnawed wires. But rats were harmless compared to what was seeking her. She didn't flinch, let them pass as they fled certain death.

A thundering reverberation and subterranean shaking showered her in dust and rust flakes. Hoping the roiling noise would cover her movements, she tossed the canister around the corner, discharging a carbon dioxide fog to divert the searcher.

Casey ran. One hand held the mask against her face. The other bumped along the dank wall to her right. This was an inbound access, slanting downward. If there were any traps, she knew those would be on the left. She'd been through other

tunnels like this, decks littered with shredded mechanical bodies. The searchers never caught on.

Casey bumped into a ladder welded to the bulkhead. An open hatch, too small for the searcher to ooze through, was close above. The glimpse she'd had of her pursuer confirmed something was building more of these creepers. The new units were a better design, shiny, not cobbled together from old parts.

Once through, she slammed the scuttle shut, not caring about noise as she spun the dogging wheel tight. Wiping sweat from her eyes, she squatted and set to work repairing her mask. Every harvester had a healthy dread of acid lung, a debilitating, wasting walk to premature death. Before moving on, she reached for her canteen and discovered it missing from the rig slot.

Too far from a clean water source, she had to turn back early. Mitch would be pissed about the lost bottle, but the treasures in her bag should soften that anger—she'd avoid a beating. Casey stood, read the sensor pack screen, set her bearings, and started for home. She hoped there'd be enough water to rinse off the three-day grunge from harvesting in the dead zone. *Probably not*, she guessed. Not for one like her.

Except for the searchers, Casey liked not having to rely on anyone. When away from home, exploring and gathering, she considered the dead spaces her private domain.

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"Whatcha got?" Mitch was never one to welcome a harvester home, never one to lose sleep over those who hadn't come back. Distracted by the bauble Casey held out, he didn't spot her

missing canteen. She shifted, hiding the empty harness slot from his probing eyes.

“Some hand tools, a few manuals, and this control circuit board for a fabricator.”

“Does it work?”

“How would I know? Everything’s dead, except some lighting.”

“Watch your mouth.”

Casey knew she was edging toward insubordination and a face slap, but she was too drained to care. “The machinery’s in decent shape but needs a jack crew to bring it home.”

“Anything else?”

“Some canister caps and a roll of plastisheet. The thin kind.”

“In three days, that’s all you recovered?” He stared her down until she dropped her head. “All right, log those in and give ‘em to Leroy.”

“Water stocks?”

“Still low. No washing today. The tankmen are due back tomorrow. They found a source deeper in, cleaner. Now, get going.”

Out of Mitch’s sight, she took a detour through a passageway choked with boxes, crates, and barrels, looking for a welcoming face. Rig Master Wanda had taken this urchin under her wing when Casey’s mother failed to return twelve years ago. Sliding open the metal gate to Wanda’s territory was like finding an oasis. Even the air tasted better here.

“How was it?” Wanda asked.

“More searchers. New ones, quicker.”

“Crap. Did you tell Mitch?”

“Hell no! He’d want me to bring one back. I’ll trickle it down to the clave.”

“How was the air? Any better?”

“Worse. I used up six purifier packs. Was on my last one when I reached home.”

Wanda slid a slate over to her. “You’re due for a replacement rig. Take off your harness so I can do inventory.”

Casey unbuckled and unstrapped, then slung her rig on the counter. “Got any new boots?”

“Not much call for your small size, but yeah, I put a pair aside for you. Best ones to come through here for some time.” She examined Casey’s rig, checking off each item. “Where’s your bottle? You need to turn it in.”

“Lost it in a chase.”

Wanda reached into a bin and pulled out a crushed canteen. “I’ll throw this in. The boys in repair will never know.” She tapped the slate. “Sign the inventory.”

Casey pressed her thumb on the scratched plastic. “Thanks. I’ve got too many work-off points as it is.”

“Who, Mitch?”

“Don’t say anything to him. Just make things worse.”

“If it keeps up, I’ll recycle one or two of his kidneys or toss a fragger under his bunk.” Wanda grabbed a new rig from the shelf and dropped it on the counter. “Need gloves?”

“No. These are still okay, thanks,” said Casey.

“Don’t mention it, especially to Mitch. He’s got something going on, and it won’t be pleasant for anyone but him. You headed to Dev’s?”

“Yeah. We’re still cohabbing.”

Wanda’s nose scrunched. “You might want to wash the stink off first.”

“Mitch said no washing until the tankmen come back.”

“He’s lying. Bet he’s auctioning off your clave’s supply. We have plenty. Use the shower here. I got some of that nice soap again.”

“That’d be great. Hot?”

“Warm. Heater needs a new coil, but you won’t freeze your ass off. See if you can find a replacement on your next run. Dev’s place have water?”

“No, not rated for it.”

“Towel rags are in the bin. If you have time, toss your clothes in the tumbler. They stink as bad as you do.”

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In the darkness, Casey rested her head in the nook of Dev’s bare shoulder as they caught their breath.

“We think we’re near to breaking through,” he said. “Lots of damage and scrap in the way. Closed off deliberately.”

“Bones?”

“Yeah, some. Gnawed.”

Casey liked listening to Dev talk about his jack crew work, enjoyed the close rhythm as his chest rose and fell. When they were together, she could push aside worrisome thoughts and terrible memories. Casey reached between the wall and the thin

pallet. "Saved this for you." She found Dev's hand and put a veggie bar in his palm.

Dev shifted. "This from your harvesting duty rations? Supposed to turn those in. You'll be in trouble again."

"They're to keep up our enzyme levels. I'm small, don't need so many. Nobody frisks us, and Wanda doesn't care. Anyway, I don't like the red ones. Too salty."

"Want me to wake you before my shift?"

"Yeah, I want to talk with Emma."

Casey fell asleep in the safest place she knew.

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Dailyclave gatherings weren't joyful occasions. They served as communal feedings, exchanges of gossip, and wonderings of what happened to those missing or still harvesting in the empty.

"Jad, you seen Emma?" Casey asked.

He raised his chin. "Over by the serving line, last I saw, talking to Bender."

"He's not part of ourclave. What's a toolman doing here? Was he eating?"

"Relax, he's not taking any of our food. I think he's trolling for a new cohab."

Casey found Emma and Bender in huddled conversation. Didn't seem like a cohab negotiation to her, so she dropped her tray in next to them and sat on the bench. "What's doing?"

"Not much. You?" Emma's head swung around, checking who was nearby and might be listening.

“Got back yesterday from a three-day. New searchers again. Fast, not clunkers. Pass it along.”

Bender’s brow narrowed as he leaned in. “Where were you? What sector?”

“L. Up in the junker region.”

“L section,” Bender said. “I told you, Emma.”

Casey moved closer. “Bender, what do you know?” For her and the other harvesters, new information about the upper spaces, any sliver of detail, might mean the difference between returning or being listed as lost.

“Tell her,” Emma said. “Too many are wondering.”

Bender’s eyes took the same trip Emma’s had, looking for eavesdroppers. “L, M, and N sections, the dead empty. Squad clave sent in six of theirs four days ago. Nobody’s come back. The squads aren’t talking, but my sister heard from a friend who cohabs with a squaddie. Something’s going on.”

Emma shuddered. “The machines.”

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“Dev, where’s your group tunneling?” Casey asked.

“N3 quad, not far up. Why?”

“Emma and Bender think strange things are happening in the M, right next to where you guys are working.”

“In the M? Naw. All crushed, according to the records. Bet the air’s too polluted even for masks.”

“My section is only one over, on the other side.”

“Long way between L and M. Probably solid rock between them.”

“So why is someone setting a perimeter with searchers? More aggressive ones.”

“Someone? Come on, Casey. Those mechs are just holdovers, maintained by some automated repair unit up there. Can’t be more than a few left now. Haven’t found any in the N wedge.”

“I’ve seen new searchers. Shiny, bigger.” Casey propped up on her elbow. “Dev, one almost got me last time out.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before? Put in for a section transfer.”

“Mitch won’t approve it. Listen, I got have a two-day before I go out again. Take me to where your crew’s pushing through.”

“Have to be third shift when no one’s working.”

“Fine with me. I’ll bring my sensor gear.”

“We got some units on-site,” said Dev.

“But nothing portable. I want to do a deep snoop.”

“Okay, but nothing dangerous.”

“Sure. Just a look-see.”

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Dev swung his leg over a warped support beam and reached back for Casey’s hand. Stark shadows moved in the shifting light of their headlamps. Metal creaked.

“This is as far as we can go. Too much blockage ahead,” said Dev.

“I’ve been in tighter crawls than this. I’m gonna check it out, see how far back I can get.”

Before he could object, all but Casey's feet disappeared under a tilted structural block. In a few seconds, she wiggled further in, out of sight.

"Come on, Dev," Casey's voice echoed back. "There's a void tall enough to stand in. Only four meters from you. Careful of the snags."

Dev crouched. Casey's light shone at a narrow bend. In a flat elbow and knee crawl, he maneuvered around it.

"Nothing here. Why'd you want me to come through?"

"Over here, behind this slab. A hatch. Doesn't seem damaged."

"Don't open it. You don't know what's on the other side."

Casey held up her sensor probe, waved it at him. "That's why we have this. Standard kit for harvesters."

"Won't tell you what's on the other side with the hatch shut."

"Yes it will, soon as I make a hole."

Dev shook his head. "You can't drill through. Too thick."

"Sure I can. I've done this before." Casey tapped her finger. "Right here, next to the dogging lever. Thin spots on each side of the door where the internal cam mechanism slides. Should punch through easy. I need you to dribble some lube while I drill."

Casey squatted and leaned in, centering her tool in the small divot she'd punched in the metal. She increased her drill speed, being careful not to snap the thin bit.

"Squirt some lube. This is just a pilot hole." A patient minute later, the drill hit air. Casey mounted a larger spiral

cutter. "One more after this to make a hole large enough for the probe. Put your mask on." Casey reached into a vest pouch, handed Dev a small gray cylinder. "Hold this."

"What is it?"

"Plug goop. Have it ready when I break through."

Casey began drilling again. Once through, her eyes studied the sensor readout. Three greenies: Negative explosive gases, negative acid, positive breathable.

"Everything's okay. Pressure's equal on both sides." She enlarged the holes to accommodate a fiber-optic scope. Pushing it through, she peered into the darkness. The next probe was a microphone. She listened—nothing. Sliding a switch sent a series of high-frequency sound waves into the void on the other side. As her sensor pack analyzed the return, she sat back, waiting.

"Crap!"

"What? What?" Dev demanded.

"Calm down. Check behind the wall plate."

Dev jerked his head around. "What?"

"The manual equalizing valve is sheared off. We didn't need to go through all this. I wondered why the pressure was equal and the atmosphere was the same on both sides. You ready? My readings show a short tunnel. Must be an airlock."

"All right, but be careful. Want me to lead?"

"No, I've got more experience in this sort of thing."

Casey heaved the dogging lever with a shoulder shove and swung the hatch inward.

She stepped over the threshold, scanning with her headlight, and spotted the equalizing valve at the next hatch. "Put your mask back on." With a quick open-shut, she ran more air samples. "Some airborne dust and rust, but nothing bothersome." Before Dev could object, Casey opened the hatch to a long corridor.

She stood ready to slam it shut if her sensor pack detected a searcher or movement of any kind. Their headlamps showed a dusty hallway, ending at a T intersection. Casey hesitated, then rolled a sensor ball along the passageway, aiming for a rebound into the right-hand passage to monitor both ways.

"Infrared clear, no motion. Let's go."

To the left of the T was another hatch. The right, like a dark maw, opened a huge, multilevel space. Casey set a thick bead of glue on the left hatch to keep anyone or anything from getting through without making a racket. She left the remote in the passageway, set to alert before they moved to the metal cavern.

From the entry, the pair swept the interior with light. Casey tossed her last sensor ball. The place was empty except for catwalks around the upper five floors. The open passages on each level made Casey's skin crawl. Any of those could hide searchers. She waited, listened, watched the readouts, felt Dev's breath on her neck. She was used to waiting. He wasn't. Ignoring Casey's hissed warning, he stepped over the hatch coaming and strode into the room, his footsteps echoing.

At the center, he turned to fill the upper levels with light. "All clear. Dead as a tomb." Casey wished he'd picked another word. She joined Dev as he shone his light straight up a hundred meters, illuminating a segmented dome ceiling.

Casey hugged herself. "Too big. I don't feel safe here."

"Looks like the roof retracts. What do you think?"

"I've never seen this sort of construction. Not a trace of acid air. Must be an open connection to our ventilation system." Casey backed up, close to the tunnel entrance they'd come through, her eyes sweeping the upper levels. "Or this section has a working one of its own."

Dev pointed to a series of stairs. "Want to go up?"

"No, too hard to climb down to an escape route. We'll take the passage opposite the way we came."

Dev walked to the other passage. "Some lighting systems are still powered farther on. Air's flowing in that direction too."

She followed, jogging across the cavern's floor.

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Casey stopped, moved her hand behind, placing it against Dev's chest. They'd walked this path for two kilometers. "Wait. Smell that?"

Dev sniffed. "No."

She checked the remote they'd left behind. Still clear. "Something's not right. Take a knee against the bulkhead. Make yourself small." She kissed a second sensor ball before tossing it into the dark corridor. It was her last one. The rolling sound and her rushing heartbeat filled her ears.

Checking the sensor's video, Casey released her breath. "Now we know what happened to the squaddies. Place is blown to bits, and so are they. Must have been the rattle and shake I felt a few days ago." Casey used her pad to rotate and move the ball. On the viewscreen, six bodies lay sprawled on the deck. The walls were charred black, and a pipe had pulled

free from its brackets, the ruptured ends ragged and bloomed out. "All shot to hell, too. They used kinetic rounds."

Casey traced the broken pipe back to where they stood, seeing a hydrogen icon stencil every five meters.

"Whatever it was, someone missed. Hit the gas line. Boom. I don't see any debris from what they thought was there. Might be further in. Can't get a remote connection to their gear. I'm going in."

"No, wait."

"You can stay, but I'm not leaving my last remote. We may need it. Besides, this happened days ago. Sensors say all clear."

The pair slow-stepped into the carnage and knelt by the first squaddie. He lay facedown, the back of his rig melted. Dev rolled him over, exposing a weapon, gear belt, and puffy, red-skinned face. "Ever seen this face?"

"No, but I don't hang with squaddies."

"I'm taking his weapon. We may need it."

"You know how to use it?"

"Had some training a few years ago, when I thought about joining up. His rig's got three ammo canisters. Should we bag a weapon for you?"

"No. Wanda slipped me a few fraggers when I told her where we were going. I wanted someone to know in case we didn't come back. I'm gonna try a line-link to this guy's rig."

Casey heard Dev gag as he rolled over the other squaddies. Except for the first one, furthest from the blast, the squaddies' gear and bodies were burned, blackened. White-faced, Dev came back to Casey. "No signs of them being in a close fight. You got anything on the vid?"

Casey ran a jack line to the fallen squaddie's rig, and Dev studied the video screen over her shoulder.

"Fast forward. Find when they entered this passage," said Dev.

They watched the video of the last man in line. Everything seemed normal until a squaddie yelled, "Contact, front!" and began firing. His teammates jumped to hug the walls on either side, firing at something. Then a huge shake and fireball erupted. Silver metal flashed across the screen and was gone.

"What were they shooting at?"

"A searcher, I'll bet. The others started firing, hit the gas line. Everything before was normal-normal. Must have made a hell of a hot flash-out."

"Let's move on."

Dev hesitated. "They *were* shooting at something."

"That was days ago. Come on." Twenty meters along the passage, they found scattered metal parts.

"Look at the size of that pincher," said Dev.

Casey kicked the claw to the side. "One of the new ones. It got away."

They moved on, moved up, far into the dead zone.

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"Good a place as any to sleep." Casey wiggled through a ventilation slot to a plenum inlet large enough to stretch out in.

"Jacker boss is gonna be mad I'm not working," said Dev.

"I got you covered. Had Wanda put you on the medical list for three days."

“Three? You planned for us to be gone three days?”

“Said I got you covered. We need some rest.” Casey wagged her eyebrows. “Or do you want to fool around first?”

“I’m not taking my clothes off for anything until we’re back home.”

Casey grinned. “Don’t say I didn’t offer.”

“Do you even have a plan? I mean, an actual plan? We’ve been moving upward all day.”

Casey checked the feed from the remote she’d left on the deck outside. “That’s the plan. As long as we can find water, up we go. Settle in. I’ll take the first watch.”

Casey chewed a carb bar, keeping her eyes glued to the sensor pack screen. She didn’t wake Dev when a trio of small searchers marched past their night hole. The last one clutched a dead rat on its back.

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Dev rubbed his sore legs as Casey wiped grime from the hatch window. Bringing her face to the glass, she said, “People! There are people in there.”

She stood aside to let Dev peek through the round viewport. The well lit scene was strange to Casey. Their gear, equipment, and clothing looked unfamiliar. New. Not cobbled together from salvage. Not patched and repatched.

Dev moved his face from the small window. “I don’t recognize their clothing. Everyone’s wearing the same thing, geared out the same. I count ten. You?”

“Yeah, six men, four women, no children. They’re eating. I didn’t see any weapons, but they have crates marked explosive.” Casey grabbed the hatch wheel.

Dev placed his hand over hers. "I don't think we should go in. They could be dangerous."

"I don't think so. They don't move around like squaddies, and four of them are old. Stay here, keep your weapon ready." Casey swung the hatch open.

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Hinges squealed. Hector turned. He was surprised to find two ragged, dirt-smudged people standing by an open hatch. One of them held a gun. He lifted his hands to shoulder level while others sought cover behind equipment boxes. Four ran for the opposite passageway.

"Hello. Care to join us?" It was the only thing Hector could think to say, knowing this place was supposed to be deserted. No squatters or resettlers were within two thousand miles of this squashed place. Hector eyed the nervous young man near the hatch, watching the shifting weapon, pointed down but ready.

The young woman took a few tentative steps forward. "Who are you? What clan? What are you doing here?"

"My name's Hector. We're exploring these ruins for the historical society. How did you get in here? How long have you been hiding in this wreckage?"

The pair looked at each other, then back at Hector. "I'm Casey, and this is Dev. This is our home."

"Please, come sit. Would you like to eat? We have food prepared." Hector spread his hands. "Join us?"

Casey sniffed the air, stepped closer. Dev edged a step back to the hatch.

Hector turned his back, called to his companions. "Come out, everyone. You're hiding like frightened children." Hector hoped his words would fortify his group and soothe the visitors. Casey continued toward Hector. A friendly sign. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

Casey tilted her head. "All my life. Nine generations, I guess. Since the collapse."

"Collapse? You must mean the asteroid strike."

"Yeah. Were there other survivors? Outside? The planet didn't die?"

Hector's eyes widened. "Originals," he called out, "Kate, these are originals! Next time you go topside, call this in." He turned back to Casey. "Several billion survived. Lots of quake damage, but most people moved before the impact, spread out away from the coasts. Some sheltered in prepared undergrounds like this one. How many of you are in this mash-up?"

"Almost fifteen hundred." Casey hung her head. "There used to be more."

"We can take everyone to a better place," Hector offered.

Scratchy mechanical sounds came from an upper level as a huge searcher slithered from a dark passage. Casey ran toward the hatch as Dev fired, shredding the monster.

"Hey, hey!" shouted Hector. "Stop shooting, stop shooting!"

"A searcher!" Casey screamed. "Those things are deadly. Haven't you seen them before?"

“You mean the quads? We use them to clear heavy debris and jack up passages. We use smaller ones to keep the vermin away during explorations. Lots of rats in here.”

“Those things have been killing us! Did you bring them? Why?”

“Killing? Not possible,” Hector said, countering Casey’s explosive statement.

Casey hesitated for a moment. “They’ve been killing us since the collapse, every chance they get. They kill on sight.”

“Not ours. We brought them in only three weeks ago.”

Turning to Dev, Casey said, “That was one of the new ones I’ve seen on my last runs.”

Hector’s eyebrows raised. “Have any of these harmed anyone?”

“We always run. No one’s been killed in a few years.”

“Yando, bring me a delta unit.” The woman Hector motioned to opened a case, removed a small blocky thing, and handed it to Hector. The cube unfolded in his hand. Stumpy legs emerged, followed by tentacles, waving, sensing. “See? Harmless, except to rats and such. Here, take it.”

Casey backed away from the miniature horror.

Hector put the crawler back in its box. “Have you ever been outside?”

Casey shook her head. “No one goes outside. Everyone knows it’s a wasteland. Broken bare rock, glassy surfaces, radiation. Nothing alive. Safer here.”

“There’s no radiation hazard. Never was. But you’re right about this sector. Life is coming back at the edges, a long way

from here." Sensing their unease, seeing their wary eyes, he asked, "Would you like to see?"

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Hector took the young pair up a new lift to the surface. Casey gasped. Her knees weakened when she saw the blue sky. Overcome by the expanse, she grabbed for Dev to steady herself.

"Don't look up," Dev said, his voice shaky.

For a minute, they stood together in silence near the edge of a recently carved ledge, ten steps from the deep shaft they'd ascended.

Breathless, Casey held tight to Dev's arm and whispered in his ear, "This place isn't for us. Too big. I don't feel safe."

"You gonna be okay?" he asked.

Her eyes went skyward. "Where does it end?"

Dev took a step closer to the rim, assessing the steep drop. He turned back to Casey. Her eyes passed information before they sought the ground again. He nodded.

Dev asked, "What's that? This thing under the ledge?"

Hector moved closer to see what Dev was pointing at. As he leaned over, a push from behind unbalanced him. Casey's second shove sent him tumbling to the craggy rocks below.

"Back down?" asked Dev.

"Yeah." Casey held Dev's hand as they stepped onto the lift.

"Might need to shoot a few." He jacked in a new magazine. "The rest can carry equipment back for us. We can stash it in

the dome room and make them show us how to control their searchers. After that . . .”

Casey nodded. “After that, we bury them in rubble. With those explosives, we can bring down five levels. They’ll never dig us out again.”

Casey had bigger after-that plans beyond the immediate day. She smiled at the thought of tentacles wrapped around Mitch’s neck.

As they descended, Dev kissed Casey’s hand. “Let’s go home.”