

Eden

By: Nathan Grimm



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Act I

"—breaking news out of Tokyo as catastrophic flooding submerges the city; millions desperately evacuating inland—"

Click.

"—billionaire philanthropist Elim Shamir announces historic partnership with international space agencies; ambitious new project unveiled for permanent lunar colonies and potential Mars habitation—"

Click.

"—European markets collapse entirely; hyperinflation sweeps the western bloc, plunging billions into immediate poverty—"

Click.

"—scientists at ZioTech Industries announce revolutionary breakthrough; successful long-term stabilization achieved in human cryogenics, paving way for extended deep-space voyages—"

Click.

"—government peacekeepers retreat in London; fires rage unchecked through the night as swathes of residential areas burn—"

Click.

"—Elim Shamir pledges all ZioTech Industries resources toward construction of massive 'ark' ship capable of transporting five hundred colonists to a new world; plans revealed for four additional vessels—"

Click.

"—Tel Aviv silent tonight after the IOF brutally suppresses pro-Palestine demonstrators through the continued use of white phosphorous on residential areas; casualties are assumed to be in the hundreds of thousands—"

Click.

"—global lottery announced by ZioTech Industries to select colonists for ark voyages; billions worldwide register hoping for escape—"

Click.

"—catastrophic famine wipes out entire regions of tillable soil across Brazil; aid organizations overwhelmed—"

Click.

"—leaked documents suggest Elim Shamir accepted billions in secret payments from wealthy elites, securing their passage aboard ark ships; lottery criticized as smokescreen for labor force—"

Click.

We believed we could outrun humanity's mistakes by speeding up the clock—that while the world healed itself, we'd sleep away our sins, like a fever burned off by a long nap.

Vapor hisses. Frost cracks along glass.

Private Malik 'Radio' Musallet takes his first long breath, consciousness seeping back slowly as thawing initiates.

Beside him, identical caskets glow softly; hypersleep chambers waking their occupants.

We thought we'd escaped fate. But all we'd done was trade one chain for another.

High above Earth, a massive ship drifts through the black; it's hull dark, frosted, and scarred. Sunlight traces faded white lettering on its starboard side.

Genesis.

Lights flicker across the vessel's surface. Corridors brighten. Machinery whispers back to life.

Inside, the last vestiges of humanity wake after centuries of slumber.

First Sergeant Leah 'Top' Bellomo stalks the aisle, a lit cigarette hanging from her lips. Smoke curls lazily as she eyes her waking squad.

"Anytime today, ladies. Or are we waiting for mommy to fix breakfast?"

Radio grunts, pushing himself upright from the pod. Around him, panels flash medical readouts—heart rates, blood pressure, etc.

"Golly gee, would you Top? I'd like that." Private Bradford 'Joker' Barrett mutters making no attempt to hide his sarcasm while stumbling from his pod.

Top then halts sharply in front of him.

"Oh, I see Joker's still got his sense of humor after all these years."

She grins while holding his gaze. *"Well I got just the thing for ya Joker."*

"Room, atten-tion!"

The bay echoes with collective groans and moans as everyone braces for what was coming, all of them shuffling half-dazed to toe the line.

Top smiles cruelly.

"Half-right face. Front leaning rest position—move!"

She then drops with them, still smoking her cigarette.

Radio grits his teeth, muscles burning and bones popping as he waits for the next command.

"Down!" Top barks.

Everyone's body kisses the deck in near unison.

"Up!" She continues.

Everyone of the soldiers then pushes themselves up, *"One, First Sergeant!"*

This goes on for a while.

A near eternity, and Top hadn't changed one bit. Say what you will about her personality, but she always led by example.

Steam fills the locker room as soldiers step from showers, skin red from scalding water.

Radio pulls fatigues from his locker, sliding into them stiffly. Around him, squadmates dawn their duty uniforms and lace boots while trading tired jokes.

Corporal Ethan 'Doc' Harlow finishes tying his boots just as Specialist Javier 'Boomstick' Reyes swings open his locker, steam still rising from his tattooed shoulders.

Doc pauses suddenly, sniffing suspiciously at the air.

Boomstick notices and glances sideways. *"What's wrong with you, white boy?"*

Doc grimaces dramatically. *"Three hundred years, and you still woke up smellin' like curry and asshole."*

Boomstick narrows his eyes. *"Dude, I'm Mexican."*

Doc shrugs. *"Tomato, potato; same difference. You're brown and you smell bad."*

An awkward silence hangs briefly.

Boomstick then bursts out laughing, and the rest of the squad quickly follows.

He then nods. "Okay, Doc, gotta admit—that's a good one."

Doc smiles. *"Thanks, brother, been sittin' on it for a couple centuries."*

Civilians wouldn't get it. They'd call it racist. Ignorant. In here, among brothers, it meant trust and affection, earned through sweat, blood, and dark humor—the kind of bond that lets you say the worst shit imaginable, knowing the guy beside you will laugh and then take a bullet for you five minutes later.

The dining facility hums with tired conversations and scraping trays as the squad pours in, grabbing plates piled with gray, processed slop with as much consistency as snot.

Radio slides onto a bench, dropping his tray across from Corporal Paola 'Woof' Barrientos. She looks up briefly, offering him a faint greeting.

Radio returns it just as quietly.

Woof continues to eat, eyes fixed downward. She pauses occasionally to glance at a worn, crumpled photo tucked discreetly in her off-hand: a smiling man holding a young child, their faces faded by time and touch.

Radio then motions toward the crumpled memory. *"So how long after the colony's up will they make planetfall, you think?"*

Woof glances up again, sliding the photo into her pocket. *"They were slated for the third Ark," she says. "It'll still be another year or two before their ship makes it back."*

Radio listens like a friend.

A year or two wasn't much—not compared to centuries—but for Woof, it was hell. Some soldiers carried pictures, others carried memories—both much heavier than any alice pack or ruck sack.

Top's sharp voice then quickly cuts through the chatter and fare.

"Room, atten-tion!"

Chairs scrape, soldiers snap upright, silence dropping instantly as their first sergeant stands rigid near the entry.

Lieutenant Milton steps inside, pausing awkwardly at the threshold; his eyes dart nervously over the room.

Milton's uniform is perfectly pressed with boots polished to a shine, but his stance is slightly off, uncertain—like he's practiced the part, but never truly played it.

He clears his throat. "At ease," he says, voice wavering slightly.

None of the junior soldiers move though Top glances at him then clears her throat.

"Uh...I mean, please—carry on," Milton corrects himself awkwardly, waving a hand and accidentally knocking over a stack of empty trays.

They crash loudly to the floor, echoing painfully in the silence.

Joker snorts a muffled laugh and Top immediately shoots a withering glare in his direction. "Ah, fuuuuck..." he whispers.

Milton awkwardly tries to regain composure, fumbling briefly while pushing his glasses onto the bridge of his nose before grabbing a tray and food for himself.

Top sweeps her gaze around the room, voice cutting sharply through the lingering tension. "Well? You heard the commander—as you were, motherfuckers."

Just as everyone settles back into their chairs to resume breakfast, her voice cracks through the room again, sharper this time. "Joker! Get the fuck over here."

Joker sighs heavily, rising from his seat. Boomstick pats him on the back before he shuffles away. "Good luck lil buddy."

Together, the first sergeant and her subordinate exit the dining hall, disappearing into the corridor.

Moments later, Joker's weary voice echoes faintly back through the hall: "One, First Sergeant... two, First Sergeant... three, First Sergeant..."

Every unit had a Joker—someone who pushed boundaries just so the rest of us knew exactly where the lines were. But a green lieutenant like Milton? Those lines got blurred real fast. We'd find out soon enough if this new commander would figure things out, or if he was just another ribbon chaser.

Miles below Genesis, Earth waits patiently beneath shifting clouds. Vast forests reclaim rusted mega-cities stretching to the horizon. Oceans glitter over forgotten shores—while high above, their ark glides through the void.

Captain Hudson stands at the center of the Genesis's bridge, hands clasped calmly behind his back with eyes fixed on Earth through the main viewport.

Around him, crew members murmur quietly, monitoring consoles alive with steady streams of data.

At the opposite end of the bridge, doors slide open and a thinly suited man, steps onto the deck pausing briefly as he takes in the scene.

"Mr. Shamir," Hudson says evenly. *"Welcome back to the world."*

Shamir smiles faintly through a yawn, moving beside Hudson. *"Thank you, Captain. How's our planet?"*

"Good question." Hudson keeps his gaze trained firmly on Earth. "Mister Petrov, let's have it."

The science officer checks his console, carefully reviewing the data.

"Atmosphere appears stable, Captain—approximately 78 percent nitrogen, 21 percent oxygen, trace gases normal. Mean surface temperature around 15 degrees Celsius. Biosignatures are..."

He pauses. *"Diverse."*

"An unclaimed fortune awaits." Shamir nods slowly. *"And what of our expedition team?"* Before Hudson can reply, the bridge doors slide open again.

Lieutenant Milton marches onto the deck. *"Captain, the expedition team is assembled in briefing room three."*

Hudson then turns away from the viewport, exchanging a brief look with Milton, then Shamir. *"Well, gentlemen, shall we?"*

He steps forward, with Milton and Shamir following as they exit the bridge.

Smoke drifts beneath the harsh overhead lights in the briefing room.

The overall expedition team consists of seven soldiers including Lieutenant Milton and First Sergeant Bellomo. Six were present.

Most lounge casually—some smoke, some joke, some sneak quick pulls from concealed flasks to ease their nerves.

Top leans comfortably against the wall by the door, equally engaged in socializing until the door slides open abruptly.

"Room, atten-tion!"

Conversation dies instantly as all the enlisted men and women snap to their feet with eyes locked straight ahead.

Captain Hudson steps calmly into the room, followed closely by Lieutenant Milton and Mister Elim Shamir.

Hudson surveys the squad briefly. *"As you were."*

The squad sits down in unison, eyes focused intently on their commanding officers.

Milton shifts awkwardly behind Hudson, tugging at the hem of his jacket or adjusting his sleeves unnecessarily.

Captain Hudson moves to the front of the room, stopping behind the podium then leans against it.

He briefly meets the eyes of each soldier and when he speaks, his tone is calm, conversational, with just enough humor to ease the room.

"First things first—I hope you all slept well, given it's only been about three centuries. I trust you've enjoyed a hearty helping of that processed snot the mess hall insists is food."

The room echoes with quiet laughter, tension momentarily dissipating.

Hudson's smile fades into quiet sincerity.

"Right now, we're parked in orbit above Earth—our Earth. But let me make something clear: this isn't the planet we left behind. Three hundred years have passed. The world we knew has healed, evolved, adapted. Our job, your job, is to go down there and find out exactly how."

He pauses, letting the weight settle.

"This mission is about more than just boots on the ground. You're conducting the first area recon and site survey for humanity's new home. Map the terrain, log the wildlife, and identify potential threats—because once we commit, there's no turning back. We get exactly one shot at reclaiming our home, and it begins right here with you."

He looks carefully over the recon team again, exchanging brief but deliberate glances with each soldier, ensuring his message lands clearly.

Captain Hudson wasn't flashy. He didn't bother with self-righteous speeches or motivational propaganda. He spoke plainly, treated us like adults, and gave it to us straight.

That's why when he talked, we listened.

He then turns to Shamir, raising an eyebrow slightly.

"Anything you'd like to add?"

Shamir glances at Captain Hudson then he steps forward. His eyes then sweep across the soldiers.

"Understand something clearly..."

"This is not a mission I funded for the sake of exploration or adventure—it's one of necessity. Humanity's last chance lies with us. Centuries ago, we left our home behind to save our race; to save our legacy. Now we return to reclaim what was given to us by God. Do not let our sacrifices be in vain."

Divine purpose: the 'go-to' line that the wealthy often sold to the poor.

Convince us we're doing God's work, and we'll foolishly run headfirst into hell without stopping to ask whose heaven we were really building or even if we'd be allowed in it.

After an awkward silence Shamir step back and Captain Hudson speaks again, *"Any questions?"*

In the silence that follows, Joker slowly raises his hand.

The captain then sighs. *"What... is it, Joker?"*

"Uh, yes, sir, just one question..." Joker replies, straight-faced. *"How do I get outta this chicken-shit outfit?"*

Laughter erupts instantly.

Even Top fights to suppress a reluctant grin, while shaking her head.

Only Shamir seems caught off guard, staring in stunned silence at Joker's blatant disrespect.

A well-placed one-liner from a well-known movie could cut through even the stiffest tension—transforming stone-faced soldiers into kids at the back of a classroom, if only for a moment.

Hudson raises his hands.

"Alright, settle down," a lingering smile still tugs at the corner of his mouth.

"Watch each other's backs, do your jobs, and come back safely."

Hudson looks toward Milton, who steps forward awkwardly.

Milton clears his throat before speaking, fumbling briefly with his data pad.

"Time is now..."

He checks his watch and clears his throat again.

"...Zero-seven-thirty-zulu. I want full PCCs and PCIs at zero-eight. Comms checks and PACE Plan by zero-eight-fifteen. Final manifest will be, um, at zero-eight-thirty in hangar three."

Everyone watches the green lieutenant fumble through his briefing, tripping over words and checking his data pad like a life raft.

"We lift off no later than zero-eight-fifty, so, um... let's not be late. Understood?"

Everyone stares silently, cigarette smoke lingers heavily in the awkward quiet.

Captain Hudson then shoots a glance at Top. She immediately catches his meaning and steps forward.

"Room, atten-tion!"

Everyone immediately snaps upright in unison as Top's gaze narrows.

"Our commanding officer just asked you all a question. Do you understand?"

Bodies stiffen then the squad's voices respond quickly, clearly, and together: *"Yes, sir!"*

Top turns sharply to her lieutenant, giving him a short nod.

As Captain Hudson, Elim Shamir, and Lieutenant Milton then exit the briefing room, Top continues:

"Alright ladies. Our gear ain't puttin' itself on, now move it, people!"

Instantly, the room bursts into controlled chaos as everyone files through the narrow doorway in an orderly fashion.

Gear lockers slam open, and armor and equipment snap swiftly into place—muscle memory in motion.

The calm before the storm. We'd done this a hundred times, over three hundred years ago.

Top stalks the aisles, her eyes quick and unforgiving, correcting gear-checks with rapid-fire instruction.

Radio loads more batteries sluggishly into his pack.

Boomstick checks the terrain projection on his wrist-mounted display.

Doc quickly double-inspects the integrity of his medi-kits, giving each strap a reassuring tug.

Woof secures extra ammo, checking pouches twice out of habit.

Joker, being Joker, glances quickly at Top—her back is turned.

He then pops his helmet off, aims the mounted camera at his face, flashes an open-mouthed grin, sticks out his tongue, and quickly flips the bird.

Those that notice chuckle.

Doc then grips Joker's shoulder. *"You tryna get demoted a second time!?"*

Joker shrugs, slipping his helmet back on with a smirk.

"Psht—what the fuck're they gonna do, kick me out?"

More laughter.

Boots ring sharply off the grated floor as the expedition team files into the hangar.

At the center of the deck waits their dropship, angular, sleek, imposing beneath harsh lights. Her engines hum quietly, poised like a predator ready to pounce.

They board swiftly, taking their seats as quickly as possible, safety harnesses clicking into place not long after.

Top and the Lieutenant board last.

Milton moves quickly to the front and takes his seat, as Top moves up then down the center aisle, rapidly double-checking each soldier's harnesses and gear before moving to the next.

The dropship's engines begin to climb steadily in pitch, the low hum quickly sharpening into a throaty whine that resonates through the deck plates.

A brief crackle of static comes over everyone's earpiece, followed by a calm, steady voice: "We good to go?"

Lieutenant Milton's cuts in. "First Sergeant?"

Top secures her harness tightly, securing herself into her chair "Squad's locked in tight, sir. We're green."

Milton does the same, keying comms as he settles into his seat.

"Hercules, this is Expedition Actual, you're good to go; let's, uh, let's get this show on the road."

I always hated transition phases—the waiting, the uncertainty. Like that split second before jumping from a plane.

Is this the day my equipment fails, and gravity finally wins?

The dropship pilot speaks again, "Copy that, Expedition Actual. Hercules is secured for launch, Control standing by for your go."

A moment later, another response crackles crisply through everyone's headsets:

"Confirmed, expedition team. Confirmed Hercules. You are go for launch. Slingshot will engage in t-minus ten seconds."

Colossal hangar doors begin sliding open, splitting open the belly of the Genesis.

"Ten... nine... eight..."

Mechanical arms retract as floodlights spill out from within, illuminating the dropship perched above the abyss between the colony ship and Earth.

I always hated transition phases...

Joker grins then breaks the silence.

"Well, it's been nice knowing y'all."

The dropship shudders.

"Three... Two... One..."

The dropship lurches violently as Genesis reverses the polarity of its magnetic clamps, slinging the craft clear of the bay doors and hurling it violently toward an alien Earth.

Everyone but the pilot, Hercules, tenses.

Panels flicker as the hull rattles and atmospheric turbulence batters the craft.

Blurred streaks of white, gray, then fiery orange spark along the hull, as flames lick the reinforced glass.

Radio braces instinctively as the vibrations soon become violent shudders.

"Passing stratosphere now," Hercules says.

Another fierce jolt, and the flames fade abruptly, replaced by a dazzling blue sky and distant white clouds.

Below, skeletal towers rise from an endless emerald canopy—steel bones strangled by vines and trees piercing through shattered rooftops.

Glassless windows stare blindly, gaping open like empty eye sockets.

Rusted cars lie half-hidden beneath thick ivy and wild grass.

Flooded avenues shimmer beneath collapsed bridges.

Birds scatter from sagging wires as the dropship breaks the sound barrier, the searing of her engines disturbing decades of stillness.

A calm voice cuts over the radio: *"Copy, Hercules. We're continuing to track you on our scope."*

Lieutenant Milton exhales. Around him, the squad begins to settle—then it hits.

A piercing electronic whine tears through their radio—sharp, shrill, straight through the ear.

Radio flinches. So does everyone else.

"Fuckin' EM-spike; hold on." Hercules curses.

He flicks a switch, and the sound cuts out abruptly and another alert blinks across his console.

"The LOS-link with Genesis is gone and our guidance systems just took a shit," he mutters.

"We're in the dark."

Milton keys his mic. *"Source?"*

Hercules taps a flickering readout: *"Looks like residual ionization—probably from an old high-atmo detonation."*

Nuclear weapons, the crowning achievement in humanity's self-destruction; brought to you by cowardly men who thought distance absolved them of accountability; designed to kill from afar while leaving someone else to deal with the fallout... even centuries later.

The pilot looks briefly over his shoulder again.

"Should I abort the drop-off, Lieutenant?"

Milton's jaw tightens as more turbulence hits the dropship.

"Proceed as planned. Once we touch down, break for high orbit and try to reestablish contact with Genesis. We'll recon a staging area as planned."

Hercules gives a thumbs up. *"Copy that."*

The dropship streaks low over the treetops, engines whining against the wind. The thick canopy below parts in waves as it slices closer through the haze.

The radio static breaks as he speaks.

"Found you a nice insertion point, sir. Looks flat enough for my fat ass. Bringing her in. Drop off in thirty-seconds."

Milton nods.

Top unbuckles her harness then stands; steady and sharp: *"Alright, ladies, it's showtime. Thirty seconds. Get Rea-dy!"*

Harnesses quickly unbuckle—metal clicks lost beneath the whine of engine wash and squad preparation.

They rise as one, movements practiced, deliberate. like a well-oiled machine of disgruntled badassery.

A low rumble pulses through the hull as the dropship dips into a clearing.

Hercules' voice crackles through the comms. *"Touch down."*

The ramp lowers with a sharp hiss of hydraulics, light spills in, wild and green.

Top steps forward, rifle raised while Milton takes up the rear.

"Follow me!" she shouts.

The squad moves—tight, smooth, sharp.

A sudden rush of wind and noise erupts as the dropship lifts, engines whining as it climbs into the atmosphere; leaving them behind.

Captain Hudson stands silently on the bridge, arms crossed over his chest, studying Earth through the main viewport.

Below, the planet drifts deceptively peaceful.

Shamir paces back and forth, casting frequent glances at the communications station. His movements are abrupt, anxious.

The comms officer shifts between channels methodically, trying to isolate a clear signal amid a chaotic flood of interference; each new attempt only deepening her focus and frown.

"Do you know what you're doing, or do we need to get someone else up here that can do better?!" Shamir finally snaps.

Airman Jacobs sighs, shaking her head while shifting through static. It was difficult enough without having to listen to an inexperienced civilian chastising her work.

"Calm down, Mister Shamir," Hudson says.

"There's no one else that can do better, now let my airman do 'er job."

Shamir glares at Hudson who stares back at him unintimidated.

After another moment, Hudson glances over his shoulder. *"What're we dealing with, Jacobs?"*

She looks up meeting his gaze.

"Honestly, sir, I don't know. It could be residual EM interference, solar flare disruptions, ionic anomalies—or faulty equipment."

She then shoots Elim Shamir a pointed look.

"My team wasn't given the necessary time to run proper systems diagnostics before the mission."

Hudson's eyes narrow slightly as something catches his attention—a tiny glint rising steadily from Earth's surface. He leans toward the viewport, studying the speck carefully.

"Ask and ye shall receive..."

Woof moves cautiously on point through the dense green.

Behind her, the squad follows in a loose wedge formation.

Radio stays close behind Milton at its center, then briefly glances up as something catches his eye.

Small. Graceful. Chirping.

When I was a kid, birds were practically extinct—something you'd only see in museums or private zoos. Pollution choked their lungs, chemicals poisoned their food, and deforestation took their homes. Most wildlife couldn't keep up, couldn't adapt. By the time my generation took the reins, birds had become rare luxuries, exotic pets, or fading images on crinkled photos. Seeing them now felt... surreal.

Radio forgets where he is for a moment as he stares at the flock, while distant birdcalls echo softly around them.

"Musallet," Top snaps, interrupting Radio's reverie with a cold glance. *"Fall in."*

Radio straightens instantly, burying his lingering wonder as the squad pushes forward.

Woof suddenly drops to a knee, fist raised. Her eyes pierced through the foliage ahead. *"Movement,"* she whispers into her mic.

Top moves forward, peering through the dense vegetation.

A moment passes in silence before she comes in over the net. *"Everyone, get on-line, now!"*

The squad moves immediately, spreading into a line formation, weapons at the ready.

Through the tangle of greenery, shapes begin to emerge, tall, elegant, gently swaying in rhythm.

Radio's breath catches, replacing tension once again.

Ahead, bathed in dappled sunlight filtering through reclaimed skyscrapers, a herd of giraffes slowly moves down an overgrown avenue, necks weaving among vines and foliage.

Woof murmurs softly, almost to herself, *"They'd love this."*

A baby giraffe, curious and unafraid, wanders closer to the group. Boomstick glances around, quickly breaking a leafy branch off a nearby tree.

He slowly offers it, extending his arm carefully.

Both Boomstick and Doc watch with wide smiles, chuckling as the young giraffe clumsily accepts the offering, nibbling awkwardly.

Milton shifts uncomfortably, eyes darting between his soldiers and the animals. Even Top seems momentarily caught off guard, a rare softness showing briefly in her face.

The lieutenant's hand drifts hesitantly toward the transmit button on his chest, clearly unsure if he should speak. He waits for a beat longer, visibly wrestling with himself, before finally pressing it.

"Alright, uh-area seems secure," he says. *"Let's keep moving."*

Smiles fade gently as weapons slowly lift again, the momentary wonder dissolving back into relative discipline.

Startled, the young giraffe jerks its head upward, ears flicking nervously.

The creature then bounds awkwardly back toward the herd, disappearing swiftly into the shadows and towering legs of their kin.

"Well, that was fun while it lasted," Doc says quietly, rising with a grunt.

High above, glass shards glitter silently along the skeletal remains of a tall building overlooking the avenue.

A shadow settles quietly at the edge of a jagged window frame.

Through the cracked aperture, a single, unblinking blue lens rotates gently, focusing on Milton's squad as they form up and retrace their steps.

Metallic fingers, scarred from centuries of wear, curl slowly around the broken concrete edge and the shadow tilts its head.

The sun dips lower, now half-hidden behind broken buildings, bathing the street in muted gold that slowly bleeds into darkness.

The squad pushes forward through the city ruins, weaving single-file between rusted husks of abandoned vehicles.

Vines cling like veins to hollowed-out storefronts, their shattered windows framed by ivy and moss.

Distant creaks and metallic groans echo, like ghosts settling into their graves.

Somewhere unseen, water drips steadily into stagnant pools, each drop punctuating the silence. The air hangs thick, heavy with the scent of damp earth and rust, tinged faintly by the sweetness of wildflowers reclaiming the pavement.

Radio steps carefully over a broken red street sign, its faded red face now barely visible beneath decades of corrosion.

When we stepped over that stop sign, none of us thought about it—maybe it was nature's quiet way of telling us to turn back; perhaps even God's.

Either way, we didn't listen. We just kept pushing forward, like a starving mouse hunting for cheese.

Milton halts the team at the base of a skyscraper, one of the few still mostly intact. He eyes it uneasily and nudges his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Um...Top, let's stop here for a moment," his voice wavers slightly. *"Get our bearings."*

Top nods, keying her comms. *"Alright boys, give us a security perimeter."*

The team fans out, taking cover behind rusted cars, concrete rubble, and dense vegetation—scanning the broken landscape around them.

At the center of their perimeter, Milton kneels and activates a holographic projection from the device on his wrist.

Top crouches beside him, scanning the terrain data closely.

Radio stands just behind Milton's shoulder, quietly observing as the lieutenant traces their path against the topographical data.

Milton hesitates, glancing upward briefly before looking back at the map.

"If we, um, if we can get high enough," he says.

"Perhaps we can reestablish comms with Hercules. Then maybe, he can relay us back to Genesis."

Top follows his gaze up, squinting against the sunlight reflecting off broken windows and gleaming metal.

"Yes sir, but that's assuming the way up isn't completely fucked," she says flatly.

The lieutenant looks back for a second: *"Only one way to find out, first sergeant."*

Milton closes the map projection with a shaky breath. *"Let's move."*

Top keys her comms as the three rise to their feet.

"Stack up, people—we're moving inside. Woof, Joker, you're on point. Everyone else fall in behind in pairs, watch your angles."

Woof moves instantly, rifle raised as she carefully steps through a shattered window into the darkened lobby; Joker shadows her closely.

Glass crunches beneath their boots, echoing through the hollow interior as the rest of the squad follows.

Top speaks again: *"We're looking for a way up, keep your eyes open and stay frosty."*

Radio pushes forward beside Milton opposite Top, their rifles angled toward the flanking halls branching off the lobby.

Their eyes sweep from cracked marble floors to peeling walls, ivy-choked columns, and darkened corridors.

Doc and Boomstick take up the rear, as the squad moves deeper into the building.

Woof raises a closed fist and stops beside a bank of elevators, her voice a low whisper, *"Doorway just ahead, possible stairwell."*

Top glances at Milton.

"Check it," she responds.

Woof moves forward with Joker tight at her shoulder. She reaches the doorway, pauses, then pushes it open. The hinges let out a dry, metallic rasp.

It echoes sharply through the dead silence of the stairwell, every scrape magnified by the quiet.

Woof steps through carefully, rifle level, covering the stairwell landing. Joker moves tight at her shoulder; weapon angled toward stairs and upper floor.

"Looks clear, pushing up."

The squad files in behind. Rifles cover corners, landings, and blind spots as they ascend.

Boots glide carefully over dust-caked steps while the beams from their helmet and rifle-mounted lights slice through the darkness.

After a few flights up, the building suddenly jolts.

Concrete groans. Dust showers down from above. The squad freezes, bracing against walls and railings as the stairwell shudders.

A muffled roar rumbles from somewhere deep below—a primal, guttural sound that rises through the structure, vibrating like distant thunder beneath their feet.

Silence returns quickly.

"What the fuck was that?" Joker says loudly.

The building trembles again; a deep, rhythmic vibration resonates through the stairwell, rattling the brittle concrete and steel.

Deep, muffled scraping echoes from far below, punctuated by sharp unnatural cracks and groans. Gradually, the sound recedes, fading into tense silence followed by another more distant roar; as if whatever it was, was moving away.

"What the fuck was that!?" Joker shouts.

Milton swallows, nudging his glasses. *"I—I don't know. Could've been seismic activity."*

"That wasn't structural, man—that shit sounded alive."

A tense silence settles over the squad, eyes glancing nervously toward one another then into the darkness below.

Doc clears his throat. *"Could be tectonic shifting, underground gas pockets rupturing... three centuries is a long time for nature to reclaim what's hers, fellas."*

Joker shakes his head sharply. *"Bullshit, man. Earthquakes don't fuckin' roar."*

Top then quickly cuts through the chatter with gritted teeth.

"Lock it the fuck up—all of you. Whatever it was, it's gone now. We have bigger fish to fry, now keep it fuckin' moving."

The squad settles instantly, professionalism overriding their simmering uncertainty.

Rifles then raise again, eyes refocus upward, and the team quietly resumes their climb.

Radio takes one last look into the abyss, as they push forward.

Stepping past that stop sign was our first mistake. Ignoring the roar beneath our feet was the second. Joker was right. Something was waiting below us, something we weren't ready for.

The squad reaches the top landing, emerging carefully onto the skyscraper's roof.

Evening sunlight floods their vision and a gentle wind drifts across the rooftop, rustling overgrown weeds and grass pushing stubbornly through cracked concrete.

Milton steps forward, adjusting his glasses as he surveys the silent, sprawling city below. He retrieves a small pair of binoculars from his kit, raising them toward the sky.

High above, Genesis drifts like a distant star.

He then lowers the binoculars, turning to Radio.

"Let's, uh, see if we can get Hercules on comms."

Radio shrugs off his pack, kneeling to open his comm pouch. Carefully, he lifts the headset, remembering the sharp feedback from earlier, and slowly he cycles through frequencies.

Each channel screams back the same high-pitched electronic whine from earlier.

He lowers the headset, grimacing.

"Negative, sir. Long-range comms are still fucked."

Milton peers up again through his binoculars, watching Genesis drift slowly above. His brow furrows as he contemplates their next move.

After some moments he's interrupted by Woof.

"Lieutenant," she says scanning the horizon through her scope. *"You might wanna see this."*

Milton lowers the binoculars and moves to her side. *"What is it?"*

Woof gestures with a subtle nod toward the horizon.

Far across the city, faint plumes of smoke curl up slowly into the evening sky.

We'd dropped onto Earth ready for anything, or so we thought.

But standing on that rooftop, watching smoke rise from a city that was supposed to be dead, I realized we hadn't prepared for the one thing humanity had always been best at: surviving.

The recon team remains still atop a partially collapsed overpass, hidden behind rusted steel beams and thick weeds.

Below, the primitive settlement sprawls quietly across a city block, firepits flickering between shelters of scavenged wood and faded fabric.

Bronze-skinned figures move quietly between the fires; the women with long white hair cascading down their backs, the men with shorter hair cropped roughly at the shoulders.

Intricate teal tattoos pulse gently across their bodies, tracing unique patterns that nearly glow in the dark.

Their eyes glint silver in the firelight, irises catching the glow like polished mirrors—bright, reflective, almost metallic.

It was beautiful, unsettling, alien.

Radio finds himself entranced.

I was drawn in by the glow of their tattoos, the shimmer of their eyes. It was hypnotic, captivating even—like a song you can't stop humming, or a dream you can't shake once you've awoken.

He watches one of the women pause near a firepit, her tattooed fingers carefully adjusting a woven basket. Her hair shimmers like silk as she moves. She was more than beautiful.

Joker's voice cuts softly through the quiet, edged with disbelief. "Are we sure we're still on *Earth*?"

"Lock it up", Top snaps, still locked on the camp below.

Her voice then drops lower, and she speaks again, "*They seem human enough, just... different.*"

Milton moves anxiously beside Radio, nudging his glasses higher on his nose as he peers cautiously down. "*Incredible. Three centuries... some form of genetic drift, maybe?*"

Doc shakes his head slowly, rifle lowered slightly as he studies the figures below.

"*Not naturally. I'm just enlisted man so take this with a grain of salt, but they look engineered. Like, I'm not gay or anything, but even the dudes look... perfect.*"

Boomstick laughs. Top doesn't.

"*Stow that shit Boomstick, this isn't the time or the place.*"

Boomstick then clears his throat awkwardly.

A resonant squelch suddenly shoots through Radio's headset, pulling his attention away from the figures below.

He frowns slightly, adjusting dials on his comms remote.

The feedback shifts strangely, pulsing, distorted, and deliberate.

"Sir," Radio says, "*I'm getting somethin' on channel three.*"

Milton glances at Top. Both adjust their team radios to the proper channel and listen.

A brief hiss—then Hercules' voice punches through, tense and annoyed.

"*..dition Actual, this is Hercules... how ...py, over?*"

It sounded as if he'd been talking into the ether for some time.

"*Expedit... Actual,*" Hercules tries again, "*Genesis is req...ting immediate—*"

Milton keys his mic, visibly relieved.

Instrument panels glow softly, bathing Hercules in muted blues.

Outside the dropship, stars glitter coldly above drifting clouds as night slowly overtakes the sun.

"Hercules, Hercules, this is Expedition Actual, I read you lima-charlie, how me, over?!"

He exhales, keying his mic with relief. *"Expedition Actual, Hercules. Solid copy, it's about fuckin' time—standby."*

Hercules quickly adjusts comm settings, configuring the dropship's radio to retransmit signals between low and high-band frequencies.

He then keys the mic again.

"Genesis, Hercules. I have the expedition team on the net. Channel's yours."

Captain Hudson's voice comes through calm, steady, carrying a subtle note of relief beneath his normal authoritative tone.

Each word strains through electronic noise, crackling faintly, like distant embers popping in a dying fire.

"Expedition Actual—Genesis... Had us worried there... a minute. What's... status—what... SITREP?"

Milton keys his mic, leaning forward slightly.

"We made planetfall intact, sir; currently holding position about fifteen kilometers from drop off point—"

He pauses briefly, eyes flicking toward the smoke rising from the distant horizon. *"—we found something interesting down here, sir. Survivors."*

On the bridge of the Genesis, Hudson exchanges a slow, meaningful glance with Shamir, his brow tightens with immediate curiosity.

"Did he say survivors?!" Shamir asks.

Hudson then steps closer to the comm panel. *"What do you mean... survivors?"*

Lieutenant Milton's reply filters through the static, tinged with a mix of wonder and unease.

"Humans, sir, but... different."

Shamir leans toward Hudson. *"Can we access their helmet cams?"*

Hudson glances toward Jacobs, who immediately shakes her head.

"Negative," she says. "Routing through Hercules on the lower spectrum limits bandwidth—we're lucky we've got voice, sir."

Hudson hesitates, ponders, then keys the mic again.

"Threat assessment?"

Milton clears his throat.

"No, um, immediate threat observed. They're primitive but definitely organized. The population here looks small, maybe... fifty individuals at most; no visible signs of advanced weaponry or technology."

Shamir's voice suddenly pushes through the static, as if leaning too close to the microphone.

"What do they look like, Lieutenant? Can you describe them? Give us specifics."

Milton continues.

"They, uh, they look tribal, sir. Their hair and eyes are white; they're covered in tattoos that seem to have a sort of bioluminescence. But they don't seem to pose any threat, sir."

As the lieutenant continues, Woof adjusts herself uneasily. *"I've got a bad feeling about this."*

Boomstick briefly looks up from his scope with a faint smirk and mocking tone. *"You always say that."*

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

He chuckles softly to himself, returning his gaze to the scope—his smile then evaporates instantly.

Through the magnified lens, Boomstick watches as one of the primitives stares directly at him. Her tattoos pulse rhythmically, like a heartbeat counting down.

"Erm, Lieutenant—I think we've been made..."

Before anyone on the team can react, surrounding bushes rustle sharply and tattooed shadows quickly explode forth from the growing darkness around them.

A sudden, brutal impact catches Radio across the temple, flooding his vision with haze and stars.

He feels himself falling, and the world spirals into a soundless void as consciousness slips from his grasp.

We were supposed to be recon—sharp, vigilant, badass combat operators. And we let ourselves get caught flat-footed by tattooed cavemen with sticks all because our curiosity got the better of our experience.

On the bridge of the Genesis, Hudson leans into the comm panel as static bursts violently through the speakers. He grips the console tighter.

"Expedition Actual, Genesis—say again."

Nothing.

In the dropship cockpit, Hercules quickly toggles switches, cycling signal strength as the comm signal fractures, becoming distorted bursts of static.

He curses softly under his breath, as his fingers rapidly dance across the instrument panel.

"Hercules, what's happening? Why'd we lose comms?"

Hercules shakes his head as frustration creeps into his tone.

"Signal's green, Genesis. It didn't lose anything—it was cut off on their end."

A thin layer of static lingers, echoing across the command deck.

Captain Hudson straightens slowly, fixed on the comm panel for a moment before turning to meet Shamir's anxious gaze.

Neither speaks.

Shamir then storms off the command deck.

Act II

Radio's eyes flutter open to a pulsing ache behind his temple.

Darkness gives way to lit candles and soft white paint illuminating earthen walls etched with intricate details and patterns.

Wake-up calls were supposed to be bad coffee and shitty jokes—not a concussion and thorny vines digging into your wrists.

He tries to lower his hands, but the bindings hold them firm above his head. Panic hits briefly before he steadies himself, focusing instead on quiet breathing around him.

Top sits awake, alert a few feet away, watching shadows at the far end of the chamber.

Joker's head lolls to one side, blood crusted at his temple.

"But I don't wanna go to bed," he mumbles.

Top sharply drives her knee into his side.

Joker jerks awake with a pained wheeze, eyes snapping open. *"What the hell, I'm up! Shit."*

"Shut the fuck up," Top snaps, her gaze never leaving the shadows.

Nearby, Lieutenant Milton squints, visibly struggling without his glasses.

He shifts restlessly, attempting to make sense of their surroundings. His voice carries like a whisper.

"Everyone sound off; how're we doing?"

"My head's fucked sir," Joker mutters, blinking hard. *"And now my damn ribs,"* he adds, briefly glaring at Top.

"Minor scrapes, Lieutenant," Doc answers, testing his bindings.

"Awake and pissed off," Woof grunts.

Radio clears his throat, wincing at the pain behind his eyes. *"A bit fuzzy, but I'll manage, sir."*

Boomstick stirs sluggishly. *"Alive... and sober."*

A quiet scraping interrupts them.

Across the chamber, a wooden door slides open, revealing silhouettes against moonlight and campfires glow. The figures enter quietly, slender forms marked by softly glowing tattoos, pulsing in rhythm with their breathing.

Leading them is the woman from earlier.

She moves forward, examining each soldier carefully, finding suspicion and aggression reflected back—until her silver eyes meet Radio's.

His expression reflects... curiosity.

Intrigued, she approaches, studying his features as though seeking answers in his eyes.

Radio holds her gaze.

The woman slowly kneels before him, reaching out carefully, lightly tracing the patches and seams on his uniform.

Radio's pulse quickens, but he remains still.

Milton blinks harder, clearly frustrated at his impaired vision.

Joker, despite his discomfort, manages a weak smirk, *"What's she gonna find down there, Radio?"*

The woman's eyes flick briefly toward Joker before returning to Radio.

She leans slightly closer; her voice tinged with a faintly musical accent.

"Who... are you?"

Radio hesitates. *"My name is Malik, but my friends call me Radio."*

"Ra-di-o," she repeats.

Our first contact, and all I can think about is how soft her voice is.

A moment passes, and she then places her palm gently against her chest.

"Asha."

"Asha," Radio echoes.

She smiles, and tension briefly eases between them.

Milton, hearing their exchange, clears his throat. *"Radio, careful."*

Asha turns toward Milton, noticing his strained expression.

Slowly, she gestures to one of the figures behind her, a younger male with similar glowing tattoos.

The youth steps forward, presenting something delicately in both hands.

Asha gently takes it, then moves to Milton, offering it to him.

Milton pauses, cautiously leaning forward.

She places the object carefully on his face. He blinks rapidly as his vision sharpens.

It was his glasses.

"*Thank... you,*" the Lieutenant murmurs.

Asha returns her attention to Radio. "*You are... warriors?*"

"*Yes.*"

Her eyes narrow. "*Why come?*"

"*To explore,*" Radio replies carefully.

Asha tilts her head, intrigued. She then rises, stepping back toward her companions.

With a final glance toward Radio, she signals to the others, and they exit, leaving the squad alone once more.

A strained silence settles briefly before Top breaks it. "*Diplomatic doesn't mean trusting, Radio.*"

Radio meets Top's hard stare.

"*Diplomatic also doesn't mean confrontational, Top. These aren't exactly Spetsnaz or Mossad bootlickers.*"

Top's jaw flexes. "*Just... be careful with what you say.*"

Milton, glasses somewhat awkwardly in place, surveys the chamber, taking stock of every detail he can.

"*Erm, Radio's right. If they wanted to harm us, they'd have done it already.*"

Woof's voice cuts in. "*Or they could be sizing us up.*"

Milton falters. "*Point taken, Corporal.*"

Radio shifts around briefly to face Woof then Milton.

"They aren't showing any aggression and we're still breathing, so..."

Joker coughs weakly, holding up his hands. *"And still tied up."*

Radio meets his eyes. *"What do you expect, we were spying on them."*

Joker hesitates. *"Yeah, fair enough,"* he mumbles.

Milton adjusts his glasses as best he can. *"Well let's use this for what it is: an opportunity to gather intel. We're clearly not going anywhere."*

An awkward quiet briefly falls over them until Boomstick chimes in.

"They speak English, or at least some version of it. It's broken, but understandable."

Milton nods slowly. *"That might indicate a shared lineage, or at the very least they've encountered remnants of our society."*

"So what—these glowing hippies are all that's left of humanity?" Joker asks.

Milton shakes his head. *"Three centuries is a long time, private, especially considering a post-collapse cultural de-evolution."*

Moments later, the door opens again. Asha returns alone, carrying a woven basket.

She pauses at the threshold, calmly looking over the soldiers before proceeding.

"Food," she places the basket on the floor before them.

Inside are various brightly colored fruits, roasted nuts, and salted meats.

Top eyes the basket. *"Why feed prisoners?"*

Asha smiles, moving closer while gently loosening each soldier's bindings.

"Not prisoners. Guests."

"Guests typically aren't tied up," Joker mutters as he pulls his hands free.

Asha shows faint amusement. *"Precaution."*

Radio carefully selects a small fruit, bringing it hesitantly to his lips.

Asha watches.

Eating strange fruit given by glowing strangers. Fuck it, earning a bit of trust was worth potential food poisoning. Humanity's done dumber shit for worse reasons.

He bites, chewing slowly.

"*It's good,*" he says, offering reassurance.

Asha smiles. "*Trust. Important.*"

Radio meets her eyes while chewing, "Yes."

Trust was complicated; it could take a lifetime to build, seconds to destroy.

Milton clears his throat, reaching for dried jerky. "*Asha, can you tell us—where are we?*"

She considers his question. "*Home. Our village. Safe here, away from them.*"

Boomstick frowns. "*Them?*"

She turns slowly, eyes reflecting the candlelight.

"*Cherubim.*"

Doc's expression darkens. "*Cherubim?*"

Asha meets his gaze, explaining, "*Yes—the soulless.*"

She then blinks, caught off guard by his confusion.

Her eyes flicks between their faces, seeking recognition, finding none.

"*You no hear of them?*" Asha asks, genuinely baffled.

Woof shrugs. "*Should we have?*"

"Yes," she exclaims.

Her eyes shift hopefully to Radio. "*They haunt the forgotten places; servants to Yehova.*"

Milton stiffens. "*Yehova?*"

"Yes," she says, even more in awe. *"Yehova, The Breath, the Maker—the voice that commands all."*

A stillness fills the room, finally broken by Joker. *"The maker? As in, God?"*

Asha tilts her head. *"Ga-wd?"*

Radio clarifies. *"Our word for the one who created everything."*

Her expression brightens. *"Yes. Yehova is Maker. Yehova is Ga-wd."*

Top's curiosity is tempered immediately by suspicion. *"If these Cherubim are Yehova's servants, why are they dangerous?"*

Asha struggles briefly to explain.

"Cherubim do not feel, do not think. They only obey Yehova's voice. To them, we are..." she searches carefully, *"Eloi."*

Milton tenses. *"Eloi?"*

Asha continues. *"Yes—Eloi. Erm, children."*

Boomstick's confusion deepens. *"If Yehova thinks of you as his children, why would his servants threaten you?"*

Asha hesitates.

"Cherubim protect Eloi from unknown... You are unknown."

An uneasy hush settles over the squad. Milton shifts uncomfortably.

"You thought they'd see us as threats?" Radio says.

She continues. *"When we saw you weren't Cherubim, we brought you here—hid you from their eyes."*

"Why?" Radio asks. *"Why risk yourselves to help strangers?"*

Asha's eyes shine faintly. *"Because we are... curious."*

Curiosity—the double-edged sword that drove humanity to fly too close to the sun, never realizing our wings were on fire until it was too late.

The squad settles around the bowl, cautiously eating in silence at first.

Boomstick breaks the quiet, chewing slowly with a faint smile.

"Gotta admit," he says, "Beats the hell outta that snotty horse shit, back on the ship."

Doc chuckles. "You say that now—wait till your stomach starts complaining, especially considering how long it's been since we've had solid food."

Boomstick shrugs and takes another bite. "Eh, worth it."

Radio observes Asha closely, noting how carefully she watches them as they ate.

Finally, she speaks. "Where is your people come from?"

He hesitates, searching her face before answering. "It's less about where, and... more about... when."

Asha's expression clouds slightly. "When?"

Radio searches for the right words. "We've been sleeping for a very long time on a very big ship called Genesis."

She tilts her head, visibly confused. "Long time?" Then understanding lights her eyes. "You mean...the passing of many suns?"

Radio nods. "Yes."

Asha's gaze sharpens. "So... you come from the Before?"

Radio nods again.

She smiles slightly, as Radio's attention is pulled toward subtle movement at the doorway.

A small face, eyes with wonder—eyes without the silver sheen of the older eloi—peeks cautiously into the chamber.

Radio pauses mid-bite, meeting the child's gaze.

Asha notices immediately, rising and moving toward the doorway. She kneels quietly, whispering something gentle to the child in a language none of them understand.

The child's eyes linger briefly on Radio and the others before slipping back into the darkness outside.

Asha returns, a faint smile touching her lips. "Young even more curious."

Radio notices the children holding at the door for a moment longer.

She gestures to the food again. *"Finish. Please. Elders—they wait outside to meet you."*

Joker bites into an apple, while Woof tears into a leg of chicken. The others follow suit, driven by a desire for solid food drowning in taste.

Top stays quiet, while eating slowly; her gaze focusing on every shifting sound and shadow.

The meal ends quicker than Asha expected.

Eating in the military you learn that it isn't about enjoying the food, it was about getting it in then getting it down as quickly as possible. It wasn't there to savor; it was there to fuel.

She rises from her knees then gestures for the door. *"Come."*

The door opens and Asha gestures for them to follow.

They file out, stiff and wary, ducking beneath a low lintel and stepping out under pale moonlight.

Outside, the entire village has gathered.

Dozens of faces—old, young, all wide-eyed—press in a loose circle around the hut, their bodies cast long shadows in the firelight.

Children peek out from behind their parents' legs; their eyes, too, are dark, ordinary, untouched by the silvery glint that marks the adults.

Asha doesn't hesitate. She moves forward, and the crowd parts before her; a narrow lane forming through a mass of bodies.

The villagers edge back, murmuring to one another as these outsiders pass, enveloped by a constant ripple of foreign words and anxious stares.

As they near the largest fire at the village's center, the crowd falls back, forming a wide ring.

Three elders sit in the fire's glow, each sitting on their own intricately designed wooden chair, the only chairs in sight. Age and faded ink map their faces as strings of bone and beads adorn their necks.

The central elder holds a carved staff, hand curled tightly around it.

All three watch in silence as the squad approaches. The pulse of their tattoos was weak, though they were anything but.

As Asha presents them in their tongue the crowd hushes and she then steps aside, head bowed.

Milton awkwardly moves forward. *"I'm Lieutenant Milton. This is my team. Thank you... for your hospitality."*

The central elder grunts then leans forward, eyeing Milton then the other soldiers.

"You... from Before?"

Milton raises an eyebrow. *"Yes. We are... from before."*

The elder studies him for a moment, then speaks again. *"Why here? Why come?"*

"We're here to explore and find a new home for ourselves. To survive."

The elder's eyes narrow. He then scoffs, shaking his head. *"You from the before—you no survive. You infect, you consume, you destroy."*

The fire crackles between them as an awkward silence permeates.

Milton steadies himself. *"We do not bring the before with us. We are survivors, like you."*

The elder's face hardens as he gestures with his staff. *"Our fathers and mothers lived the before. You did not."*

The lieutenant hesitates then answers, *"There are different ways to survive."*

The elder shakes his head. *"Easy to run. You see heart in who stay, put out fire. Not who flee after start it."*

Milton opens his mouth to answer, but Top cuts in, her voice respectful but unyielding.

"We know what the Before did: we saw it ourselves. We're not here to repeat it."

One of the elders, a woman with a cloud of white hair and tattoos circling her throat, studies the squad, then finally speaks—her words softer, but no less wary.

"In the before, strong always break weak, say good things—easy words. But heart not same as mouth. You ask trust but hide truth."

They were calling us out, plain and simple. We could dress it up however we wanted, but they were absolutely right—we bailed when things got hard.

Now we were foreigners, trying to stake claim on land that wasn't ours to take.

The squad exchanges uneasy glances, searching each other for an answer that none of them can find.

The elders then trade sharp syllables, their eyes never leaving the outsiders—reading every twitch, every blink, and every hesitation of doubt.

Asha steps forward, cutting through their debate.

Her words are quick, edged with something close to frustration, as one of the elders leans back, folding his arms.

The central elder then angrily drives his staff into the ground with a dull crack. The sound stops everything—Asha, the mumbling crowd, even the crackling fire.

He tightens his grip on the staff and fixes on the squad with a cold stare.

"You bring only death. At first light, you take your tools and your weapons. You go. No come back. Your fate Yehova choose."

Milton waits for a beat as silence once again befalls the gathering, then he speaks. *"We... understand. But if possible, could we at least have our equipment now? We need to contact our ship. Let them know we're okay."*

The elders look at each other silently—then the central elder nods once.

"You can have gear now."

Milton offers a mild smile. *"Thank you."*

No one else says anything as Asha, again, gestures the outsiders to follow.

At the doorway of their hut, four villagers set down their packs, rifles, the radio—everything the squad had carried before.

The squad collects what was theirs, then quietly, awkwardly, they file into the hut.

Once inside they inspect their equipment and functions check their weapons.

Asha lingers in the doorway for a moment as the other villagers slowly disperse.

She turns to leave and Milton clears his throat.

"Asha, could you—would you stay for a moment? Maybe help us to... understand what happened?"

She pauses, then quietly steps inside while closing the door behind her.

Milton pulls off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. His hair stands in sweaty clumps where his fingers rake through. For a minute, he says nothing.

Top doesn't wait for him to find his nerve. *"Radio, see if you can get Genesis or Hercules on comms. Let 'em know we're not pushing up daises."*

Radio nods, though his focus flickers. Asha stands just inside the door, watching him with unreadable calm.

He powers the radio on, switches to cypher text, double-checks the SOI, initiates the frequency scanner, then keys his hand mic—half his mind on the task, the other on Asha's eyes.

Milton tries to address Asha. His voice is a little rough around the edges, *"What do... they mean when they said Yehova would choose our fate?"*

She doesn't answer right away. Just keeps her eyes on Radio. Candlelight catches in her eyes. Radio feels her peer into his soul. Not judging—just seeing.

He tries to look away; but can't.

There was a softness in her that I hadn't earned, and I didn't know what to do with it.

Funny how a man can survive through some of the toughest, most grueling shit imaginable yet still get rattled by the right woman's gaze.

The squad's voices are distant, muffled. For a second, the whole room could've been underwater.

Top slapping Radio was just enough to grab his attention; back to the radio, back to his job.

He calls out over the net. Static, then nothing.

Asha finally speaks though her focus doesn't waiver.

"Sometimes, Yehova choose. Sometimes, Cherubim find. You come from sky, so why no simple go back?"

Top leans against the far wall with her arms crossed: *"That... isn't an option for us."*

Doc then looks up from checking his kit.

"You know, maybe we're making a big deal outta nothin'. All this talk of this 'Yehova' and these 'Cheriboom'—feels like superstition. Every culture's got its boogeyman. Back home, we had Bigfoot, the Chupacabra, etc."

Joker then chimes in as well, *"And the IRS..."*

Boomstick, Doc, and Woof laugh.

Top doesn't.

"What you dismiss as superstition could easily be explained as leftover military tech, Private. Do you have any idea the level of death our political leaders were funding before we left? We have NO CLUE what's waiting for us out here. These people... they're our lifeline."

The hut settles into an awkward silence as everyone ponders her words; she'd even grabbed Asha's attention.

Milton after a moment then speaks up. *"What are your people's... stories of Yehova? Of his Cherubim? Who... or what, is he?"*

Asha thinks for a moment as all eyes in the hut settle upon her.

"Cherubim... they watch us. Yehova make them, for Eloï. They keep danger away—bad things in forest, sickness, dangers from the before. When Cherubim come, is warning. Maybe danger is close. Maybe Yehova test us."

She glances at the floor, then back at the soldiers.

"Cherubim not like us. Only protect. If we do wrong—break rules, Cherubim come, and stand. They not hurt Eloï, not punish. But... elders say if Cherubim stand, Yehova see and Yehova judge.."

Asha's voice softens.

"Under the eyes of Yehova, the Cherubim walk: Eloï listen, Eloï respect, Eloï obey."

Hours pass.

Time moves at a crawl when you're on watch, especially in the field, especially at night.

The village is quiet, most fires burned out to ash, engulfed in the kind of dark that makes you feel small if not for the silver of moonlight.

Inside the hut, the rest of the squad slept.

Joker curled up in the corner, Doc sprawled on his back, Boomstick snoring loud enough to rattle the mud. All of them snuggling up with their rifle as if their weapon were a long-lost lover.

Outside, Radio sat in the dirt with his back against the wall, holding a lit cigarette between his lips, and his rifle across his lap.

The night was full of small sounds—crickets humming in the grass, distant dogs barking at nothing, a low wind rattling the thatch.

He listened, letting it all wash over him. For a moment, it was almost peaceful.

A kind of quiet he hadn't known in years, nothing urgent, nothing coming apart. He could almost forget the mission, the old world, the reason they were out here at all.

Then, on the horizon, he notices something: Three white lights. Low, steady, blinking in rhythm—too deliberate for stars, too organized for fireflies.

He squints, watching them grow larger, the soft pulse of their glow cutting through the dark. The crickets fade out, their chorus replaced by a familiar, mechanical whine.

The sound builds, sharper with each second, eating up the quiet until it's all he can hear.

The drones close in, drifting just above the huts.

Top suddenly bursts out, rifle in hand, hair wild, eyes fixed on the sky. She shoulders her weapon, pressing the trigger just barely.

Radio grabs her arm, *"Under the eyes of Yehova..."*

She hesitates, briefly looking at him then up at the lights. The tension between tighter than a tripwire.

The drones hover a moment longer, then peel away—slowly rising and banking east.

Top lowers her rifle. Radio lets go of her arm, his heart still pounding.

For a moment, neither says a word.

When the crickets start up again, it sounds almost like relief.

Finally Top breaks the quiet, *"Those... weren't ours."*

She keeps her eyes on the empty sky, every muscle still wired.

"Get some sleep. I got it from here."

Radio hesitates, gives the horizon one last look, then nods.

He stubs out the last of his cigarette, brushes the dust from his pants, and steps inside.

The hut is dark, crowded with the soft weight of bodies and smell of chives.

He finds a corner, slides down, then props the radio pack behind him. It's a poor excuse for a pillow, but better than nothing.

He pulls his rifle close and wraps the sling around his arm.

Sleep doesn't come easy, but his exhaustion eventually wins.

Just once, I'd like to wake up and breathe—no alarms, no gunfire, no reason to reach for my rifle.

Screaming splits the morning. It yanks Radio straight from sleep faster than a bucket of cold water. Then gunfire—close, precise, intentional, rips the dawn apart.

Boomstick pushes himself upright, Doc rolls to a knee, and Joker curses under his breath, clutching his rifle as he jerks up.

They hear the echo of more screaming—men, women, children.

Top suddenly bursts through the door. *"Move!"* she barks. Radio and Doc don't wait. They're out first, rifles up, hearts pounding.

The village is in chaos.

Armed men move from hut to hut, shouting, threatening, and dragging Eloi out of their homes one by one, forcing everyone toward the open ground at the center of the village.

They wore white uniforms with blue trim—clean, pressed, almost clinical.

Every action they take looks drilled, rehearsed, and routine. They didn't see people—just obstacles.

Asha is dragged past by two men, her heels digging lines in the dirt. She twists, fighting to break free, eyes wild.

She then looks back over her shoulder, screaming, "Ra-dio!"
Radio doesn't think. He moves. Joker is right beside him.

They quickly slam into the gunman trying to drag her away; knocking him to the ground.

Radio and Joker then stand over the downed man. The squad forms behind them—Milton, Boomstick, Top, and Doc—all with rifles raised.

Doc then shouts a warning as more of these uniformed men close in.

A wall of white uniforms coalesces around them as rifles raise to counter their aggression.

For a heartbeat, nobody moves. The whole village holds its breath; one wrong twitch away from a bloody massacre.

I recognized their uniforms as soon as I saw them: ZioTech mercs; Elim Shamir's personal army. Well-equipped and well-trained psychopaths with a predilection to turn war into a game.

The mercs don't flinch.

Their leader—a square-jawed man, scar down his cheek—steps forward; his boots crunch across dirt and rock.

He's the only one of them that looks too comfortable.

Three hundred years ago these animals had a reputation for shooting women and children in the head simply for sport.

Milton steps forward cautiously. "*L-Lieutenant Milton, Genesis Expeditionary Team,*" he stammers, forcing an air of authority that doesn't quite land.

"Identify yourselves."

The merc leader eyes him up and down, chewing slowly on a wet pouch of tobacco, every movement a deliberate power play.

"*Commander Elias Kade, ZioTech Security,*" his tone drips with a combination of arrogance and contempt.

"Relax, Lieutenant—we're just here to pull your asses out of the fire."

Milton clears his throat nervously. "*If we're your objective, what's with all this... aggression toward the natives? These people helped us.*"

Kade glances casually at the Eloï, herded together at gunpoint.

"Our objective also includes bringing back a few of these primitives for assessment and study."

Milton then tries to assert himself. *"Captain Hudson wouldn't approve of—"*

Kade rolls his eyes while cutting him off with a dismissive wave.

"You leftover military types are all the same, you just don't get it. The old world is dead friend, as are its politics and authority."

He lets the statement hang, meeting Milton's eyes with a cold stare.

"We all serve at Mister Shamir's pleasure, Lieutenant. If he says jump, we simply ask, how high."

The ones who prided themselves on never questioning orders were always the first to flex their authority. That kind of loyalty wasn't about trust—it was about the pervasion of ego.

In the end, following those types blindly just made it easier to be led off a cliff.

Hercules suddenly sweeps in low. The dropship's engines scream overhead before it settles in a grassy clearing near the village edge.

Dirt, leaves, and debris whip violently through the air, forcing everyone to brace and shield their faces.

Top steps directly into Kade's path.

"Commander," she says, just loud enough to pierce the whine of Hercules' engines, *"You put those people on that ship, we're all dead."*

Kade pauses, as his eyes shift to Top then the diamond on her collar.

The moment hangs, stretched by the dropship's turbines. Kade's mouth curls into a cold, humorless smirk.

"I have my orders, but your concern is noted, First Sergeant."

He spits tobacco juice near her boots then signals sharply to his men.

"Load 'em up!"

The mercs shove past Milton and his expedition squad while herding some of the villagers forward, indifferent to their cries and pleas; some even had to be dragged.

Radio's pulse pounds sharply against his ribs when he spots Asha again—her silver eyes find his, bright with disbelief, confusion, and beneath that, wounded trust.

He can see what she's thinking clearer than the morning sky.

'You're just... letting this happen?'

At the village's center, the Eloi Elders stand among those who were being left behind, watching in silence. Their eyes move slowly from Milton to Radio, with the same quiet judgment they'd given last night.

We swore we weren't like the ones from the Before, yet here we were—standing silently complicit, while their people were dragged away to an uncertain fate.

Milton turns to face his team, with frustration mounting behind his eyes.

"If we escalate this now, we lose any chance of helping the Eloi. I can confront Shamir back on the Genesis. There's no way Captain Hudson signed off on this."

Top's eyes narrow; she was angry.

"Lieutenant, respectfully—that's fuckin' bullshit. If we stand here and do nothing, they'll never trust us again."

Before Milton could respond, Boomstick broke ranks, storming toward the nearest merc dragging an Eloi child by the arm; the kid stumbles helplessly behind him, crying.

"Hey, fuck-face!" Boomstick shouts, *"Let the kid go—now."*

The merc turns slowly, loosening his grip on the child as he squares up.

"What the fuck did you just say to me, soldier-boy?"

Boomstick didn't flinch, stepping even closer. *"You heard me you psycho piece of shit."*

The merc sneers, shoving the boy into the dirt.

He squares his shoulders, then slams his palm into Boomstick's chest.

"Mind your business you fuckin' boot."

Boomstick launches forward instantly, driving his fist into the merc's jaw with a savage crack. They tumble into the dirt, kicking up dust while trading blows.

Another merc charges forward, grabbing Boomstick from behind, wrenching him off his comrade.

"Motherfuckers!" Doc shouts, rushing toward the brawl.

Both the Expedition Team and the Mercs quickly move in to back up their respective people. Lieutenant Milton shouts uselessly into the chaos as Commander Kade aggressively pulls some of his own men away.

Radio took one step toward the fray—then froze. Something catches his eye, something he'd seen before.

Just above the tree line, three drones hover. Watching. Waiting.

He opens his mouth to shout—but before he can form a single word, the center of the mosh pit explodes violently. The blast rips outward, a storm of flame and shrapnel that tears through flesh and shatters bone.

Radio is hurled back, the ground punching the breath out of his lungs while a wave of heat washes through him.

As he recovers, he rolls painfully onto his side, mouth filling with blood and dirt. He lifts his head slowly—then freezes.

Boomstick's intestines spill out onto the smoldering ground in a glistening heap of red, but he was still clinging to life.

A few feet away, the merc he'd been fighting was facedown, his skull shredded open with bone and brain matter staining the dirt.

Radio's stomach clenches violently. He'd seen plenty of broken bodies before; plenty of death—but not like this.

The world surges back into focus around him. The village erupts into panicked chaos as Eloï scatter in every direction.

Gunfire barks sharply, tracer rounds slicing through the smoke and dust.

"Get to cover!" Top shouts.

Doc is already sprinting toward Boomstick as fast as he could.

Top drops hard behind a charred hut, unloading a controlled burst toward the tree line. Radio turns, following her aim. That's when he sees them...

A line of figures emerge from the trees. Sleek, metallic bodies, with faces utterly devoid of humanity. They march forward in perfect unison, an unstoppable wave of steel... and Yehova's will.

Mercs shout frantically as tracers spark against polished metal, doing nothing to slow the advance of the machines.

"Pull back to the dropship!" Kade bellows.

Radio feels his pulse hammer as he sights in, squeezing off a few well-placed rounds. Each strikes true, yet the metallic figures push forward, undeterred, and unfazed.

He watches with horror as one of them then raises its rifle, firing a single explosive round into a merc's chest before detonating, showering blood and bone fragments across the knoll.

"Fuckin' move!" Top screams, grabbing Radio by his vest and hauling him backward.

Radio stumbles, nearly losing balance as they sprint for the dropship.

Doc quickly lands in the dirt, scrambling for a tourniquet. But before he can even touch Boomstick, a round punches clean through his head killing him instantly.

He collapses on top of his friend; on top of his brother.

"No!" Radio screams.

Top grabs his harness tighter, pulling him back. *"They're gone! Move your ass!"*

Radio fights her grip. *"We can't... just... leave them behind!"*

Before he can break free, Top stumbles as a tracer punches through her thigh, darkening her fatigues instantly. She drops hard, biting down on a scream.

Radio's pulse pounds like artillery in his ears—until he realizes Top isn't pulling him away anymore. She was pulling him down.

He looks at her for a moment, then drifts toward Boomstick and Doc, then the metallic army slowly bearing down on them.

Radio feels something deep inside himself fracture as he then turns away from his fallen brothers, tightening his grip around Top; now he was the one dragging her toward the dropship.

"Just fucking go," Top growls. But Radio shakes his head, locking his grip harder.

More tracer fire zips past them as Joker stands at the ramp, desperately laying down cover fire. Milton grabs Top's harness, trying to haul her up, but her limp weight is too much.

The engines roar deafeningly, as the dropship trembles to lift off. Dust and debris whip around them.

Radio struggles to push Top up as the dropship slowly rises.

Then, suddenly, another pair of hands grips Top's harness helping to push her up onto the ramp.

Silver eyes meet Radio's.

Asha.

Together, they heave as Milton pulls, finally able to drag Top over the lip, dragging her fully onto the deck. She groans weakly, gripping her bleeding thigh.

Radio braces against the wind, as Hercules rises. He makes one desperate lunge upward. Joker drops his rifle, grabbing Radio's hand struggling while pulling him up onto the deck.

He rolls across the ramp, and Joker slaps his shoulder, yelling something lost beneath the screaming engines. Radio barely registers as his eyes lock instantly onto Asha below them.

She holds Radio's stare for a heartbeat, then glances back toward her people resting behind the approaching wall of metal.

She hesitates only an instant before her eyes return to Radio.

Without another moment's pause, Asha leaps up toward the dropship, soaring through the widening gap as if gravity itself had let her go.

Her knees bend only slightly as she lands on the deck. Her hand touches down for balance, as the dropship jolts upward into the sky.

The ramp then seals shut, cutting off the chaos below.

Joker slumps against the bulkhead heaving, as Milton frantically applies pressure to Top's punctured thigh.

Two ZioTech mercenaries waste no time. They snap cuffs on Asha, then the rest of the expedition team.

Kade crosses his arms while watching his men work.

"You're all under arrest for assaulting my men and aiding and abetting the enemy."

Radio's gaze flicks to Asha as his arms are forced behind his back, *"You should've stayed on the ground."*

Asha shrugs; she was where she needed to be.

Just as the last set of cuffs clasp around Milton's wrists, he looks around and his stomach drops.

"Where's Woof?!"



Act III (Unfinished)

Two ZioTech mercenaries drag Asha down a white corridor escorted by another two, armed mercs. Their boots *thud* in unison as they drag her along.

No one says a word.

A security door hisses open. They shove her through.

The room's small. Cold.

A table and two chairs, opposite each other, sit at its center.

A mirror fills the wall opposite the door. She can see herself in it, reflected by the flood light overhead.

Asha's skin glows a sun-kissed brown. White hair spills over sharp cheekbones, silver irises rimmed in a brilliant sheen. Teal tattoos coil up her limbs, pulsing like soft moonlight.

Beautiful in a way that feels... alien.

Stepping closer to the glass, Asha's suddenly startled by crackling from overhead followed by the hollow sound of a muffled human voice.

"Take a seat, please."

She startles, glancing up, then around the corners of the room.

Her eyes flick back to the mirror, searching for the mouth behind the words.

She's sees nothing but her own reflection.

The view pulls back as she tries to peer through—past the glass, past her silhouette—revealing a narrow room beyond.

The door slides open.

A thinly suited man steps in.

Hooked nose, narrow eyes. Black and silver hair.

Another man follows, carrying two water bottles and a sealed bowl.

He sets them the table but never lifts his eyes. When he's done, he fades to the wall, hands folded in front of him.

The first man doesn't rush.

He stands at the table, looking at Asha like she's a puzzle piece dropped in the wrong box.

"Elim Shamir," he says. Voice soft, practiced. *"It's a pleasure to meet you."*

He gestures to the chair.

"Please. Sit. Drink."

He takes the seat opposite, folds his hands, and watches her over steepled fingers.

Asha's gaze drifts over Shamir, then slides past him to the man by the wall trying to make himself invisible.

He keeps his head down and hands clenched.

She looks back at Shamir, *"Why he afraid look at you?"*

Shamir smiles for a beat but doesn't blink.

"Because he knows his place and because... his way of life depends on my success."

Asha tilts her head and recoils.

"What life you mean?"

Shamir's eyes sharpen.

They share a long, silent stare. The room starts to feel smaller.

"I'm trying to figure out what to do with you, Asha. That is what the expedition team called you, yes?"

She nods uncomfortably.

"You see, Asha, of all your people we rounded up, you were the only one to come willingly; I heard you cleared nearly thirty feet, jumping into the dropship? That's quite impressive."

Shamir takes an exaggerated sip from his glass then continues.

"This was also after half of men were wiped out by remarkable constructs that seemed hell-bent on protecting your village."

He reaches for the bowl at the center of the table.

"I went over the expedition team's feeds, you see and there was something I saw that I've seen many times before that I didn't see in any of your people except for you. Do you want to know what that is?"

As he pops off the lid, Asha raises an eyebrow.

Shamir slowly fishes out a freshly cut apple slice, offering it to her politely.

"Curiosity."

The brig smells of bleach and stale sweat.

Radio stands at the bars, eyes locked on the empty walkway outside. He hasn't moved in an hour.

Joker's slouched on the floor, back to the wall, bouncing a scuffed tennis ball in a steady rhythm—*thunk, slap, thunk*.

Milton lies on the bunk, pinching the bridge of his nose. A single tear slides toward his hairline. He makes no move to wipe it away.

Joker finally breaks the silence.

"Hey, y'all know what's bad about having sex with twenty one year olds?"

Radio looks back at him, deadpan. *"Bro... not right now."*

Joker just arches his eyebrows, shrugs, and goes back to bouncing his ball.

Suddenly, the main hatch hisses open.

Footsteps then echo down the passage, growing louder as they got closer. The cell's lock disengages with a sharp metallic clack and the door slides aside.

Captain Hudson steps in with a less than happy demeanor.

Radio and Milton snap to attention as instinct burns away fatigue. Joker stands as well but is a bit slower in doing so.

Hudson looks them over. For a moment, he says nothing. His eyes hang on Milton, then cuts to Joker, then Radio.

"You have any idea the fuckin' mess you've made?"

Joker doesn't miss a beat.

"All due respect, we weren't the ones draggin' civilians outta their homes, sir. Just in case you forgot we also lost three of our people."

Hudson's proceeding glare could of melted steel. *"Top's not here to say it, so I will, Private—SHUT THE FUCK UP!"*

Joker immediately clamps his mouth shut.

Hudson looks between the three of them again. *"One of you two wanna try your luck?"*

Lieutenant Milton lifts his head.

"Permission to speak freely, sir."

Hudson glares at him, but doesn't say no.

Milton then presses.

"Shamir's mercs hit that village like it was Abu Ghraib."

He keeps his eyes on the grizzled captain.

"Is that the job now, sir? Abducting innocent civilians? Because that's not what I signed up for."

Joker then leans forward and chimes in again. *"WE, sir. That's not what WE signed up for."*

Milton lets his words hang a beat, then continues.

"Sir, you used to say-'how we win matters.' D'you still believe that or was it just something the senior brass said to fill up lecture halls with ignorant college kids?"

Hudson's eyes narrow then he looks over at Radio.

"What about you, Private? You got anything to add that these two haven't?"

Radio hesitates, then after a long moment finally asks. *"How's the first sergeant?"*

Hudson's glare doesn't waver, but there's a flicker of something—fatigue, maybe.

"She'll be alright—couple more minutes and she woulda been fucked; ya'll got back just in time."

"So... what'd she tell you?" Joker asks.

Hudson shrugs. *"She hasn't said anything yet. She's knocked out."*

"Can we see her, sir?" Milton asks.

Hudson lets out a long breath, the fight finally bleeding from his shoulders.

"Yeah," he mutters, glancing between the three of them. *"Let's go."*

He steps aside, nodding toward the open cell door.

Joker snags his tennis ball, Milton marches forward, and Radio falls in behind them.

Top comes to, as the world slides into focus through a wash of harsh, sterile light.

She's cold, wrapped in a hospital gown no thicker than paper.

A heart monitor beeps steadily somewhere behind her head. She has an IV taped to her arm.

Top blinks, trying to clear the sleep from her eyes.

Then a face looms into her field of view grinning like a moron.

She groans.

"Ugh. Barrett the last thing I wanna see waking up is those busted-ass teeth."

Joker's grin falters. *"Well shit, nice to see you too, Top."*

She rolls her eyes then scans the rest of the room.

Milton sits in a chair by the bed, hunched forward. Radio leans against the wall with his arms crossed. They were all watching her.

She looks between the three, then squints. *"Where the hell are the other stupid motherfu—"*

Milton, Joker, and Radio then glance at each other uncomfortably as her memory catches up.

"Nevermind."

Top's eyes then shift to the grumbling man changing her dressing—Doctor Kelley; he has a thinning gray hair and a bedside manner as warm as a morgue freezer.

He notices her stirring, sets his hand on her shoulder—gentler than his tone, flicks a penlight, then flashes the light in her eye.

"Follow the light. Good."

He shifts the light to her other eye.

"Again."

Satisfied, he clicks off the light and checks her chart.

"You know where you are?"

She nods. "Yeah."

Kelley's eyes widen as he waits, but she says nothing.

The doctor watches her for a second longer, then scratches a note as he removes himself from the room. "Alright, I guess I'll just go fuck myself, I'm only the ship doctor."

The door hisses shut behind him as he ducks out of the compartment while continuing to grumble.

Top waits a beat then looks at her Lieutenant. The room holds quiet, except for monitors beeping in the corner.

"So... what now, sir?"

Slowly, Earth rises into view—a sphere of green and sapphire hues wrapped in swirling clouds and looming storms.

Sunlight catches briefly, sliding along Genesis' hull, while illuminating faded white lettering and scarred and frosted steel.

Behind distant observation windows, silhouettes shift quietly. Some pause, gazing downward at the world they once called home.

Captain Hudson stands at the bridge's main viewport. His eyes reflect the faint blue glow of the brilliant planet below him and instrument panel readouts across the deck.

Footsteps echo softly from behind him; measured, unhurried.

Elim Shamir steps by him, pausing nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. Both study the distant planet.

Hudson's shoulders stiffen slightly.

After a moment, Elim speaks. *"So, I hear you released your men?"*

Hudson continues staring forward. *"Yes."*

Elim briefly glances at him sideways. *"And you didn't think it necessary to consult me first?"*

Hudson exhales slowly, eyes never leaving the viewport.

"There wasn't anything to consult."

Shamir's eyes darken while Hudson's shift from the planet to him.

"My men acted in accordance with the RoE, while yours not only instigated a conflict with my soldiers—they very likely precipitated the engagement with those machines."

A heavy silence settles between them for a moment as Hudson turns back to the viewport.

"I've seen the feeds, Elim. Everything down there could've been avoided had your Commander Kade reined in his ego."

A faint predator gleam catches in Shamir's eye. *"You do realize I have more pieces on the board, yes?"*

Hudson chuckles.

"You've got more pubic hair," he says. "But my dick is bigger."

The captain's eyes then go cold.

"If you want to play this game, son... I promise it won't end the way you think."

Elim smiles, gaze flicking around the bridge as some of the crew stare uncomfortably from their stations.

"Captain... we may not agree on each other's methods, but our goals remain the same; let's try to keep our eye on the prize."

Hudson doesn't look away from Earth's distant glow, but he does offer a subtle nod.

"Excuse me, sir."

Hudson turns from the viewport, his face softening slightly at the sight of his communications officer. *"What is it, Jacobs?"*

She clears her throat, shifting between the two men. *"I think I've solved the problem surrounding the EM interference."*

Shamir immediately leans forward as his own focus changes. *"You found a way around it?"*

"No..." Jacobs says, trying to restrain herself. *"But I'm pretty sure I know what it is."*

Hudson crosses his arms. *"Keep goin'."*

Her disposition brightens.

"Alright, let's think of HF radio signals as skipping stones across water, right? Normally, these signals hit the ionosphere and bounce back down to the surface, effectively 'skipping' along Earth's atmosphere and curvature. This allows the signal to cover great distances."

Shamir arches an eyebrow impatiently. *"Okay?"*

She shoots them both a quick glance then continues unfazed.

"The thing is, if you pump enough power behind that signal, it doesn't just skip—it saturates the entire ionosphere. Basically, you're flooding the whole orbital perimeter in constant electromagnetic noise. Now, at first glance it looked random, just static. But when I analyzed its modulation, I saw a pattern."

Hudson leans slightly forward. *"But... patterns aren't natural."*

"Exactly, sir," she nods.

"It's deliberate. Artificial. Someone down there isn't just blocking comms—they're continuously broadcasting. It's an intentional, persistent signal."

Shamir rests his hands in his pockets then tilts his head. *"You think it's what's controlling those homunculi on the surface?"*

Jacobs nods quickly. *"Yes, sir."*

Hudson crosses his arms. *"So, if we shut down that signal..."*

"We'll shut down the machines," Jacobs finishes.

Shamir nods. *"So, you've been able to trace the signal, then?"*

Jacobs hesitates slightly before answering.

"Sort of. Given the amount of power being pumped through the entire orbital band, triangulation is nearly impossible. But I can narrow it down to a small radius, maybe a kilometer or two—but beyond that, whoever goes down there will have to get eyes on it themselves."

Hudson considers their options. Shamir shifts subtly, sliding his hands deeper into his pockets.

Jacobs continues. *"There's something else, sirs."*

Hudson's focus tightens. *"Go on."*

"I can't be one-hundred percent certain... but I think the signal originates underground—" She pauses, and her voice drops slightly. *"At least several hundred meters down, sirs; maybe deeper."*

Hudson then looks at Shamir, *"I think it's time we learned more about this... Yehova."*

Asha moves slowly around the small room, letting her fingertips graze the cold metal table, then the edge of the chair.

She circles once, fixed on the wall-length mirror.

When she gets close, she taps it gently. Her own face looks back at her, half-lit by the sterile overhead flood.

She studies her reflection.

The silver in her irises catches the light—at first just a dull shimmer, then, for a split second, it flares, like mercury stirred by a searing current.

She leans closer, searching for something in the glass beyond herself.

The door hisses open. Suddenly, Asha's focus breaks.

Her eyes immediately snap away from her reflection, and the silver flare fades instantly.

Two men enter.

The first, she recognizes instantly, same tailored suit, same cold predatory eyes; they'd met only hours before.

The second man is older. His eyes are different from Shamir's—there's steel in them, but also a weathered kindness that comes from years spent shouldering burdens heavier than rank or title.

He looks tired.

An awkward silence passes between the three for a beat, broken as Shamir then eventually speaks.

"Asha, this is Captain Hudson."

Hudson offers his hand, but she just looks at it awkwardly, like inspecting a tool she's never used.

Puzzled, he looks hesitantly at Asha then Shamir.

"Hu-son?" she repeats.

He clears his throat, letting the gesture drop. Then he nods instead, meeting her eyes. *"It's nice to meet you, Asha."*

Shamir gestures for her to sit then he takes his seat across the table.

Hudson stays on his feet, arms folded, chin resting on his hand.

But Asha doesn't sit.

Instead, she circles around them, like she was sizing up some new intrusive animal. She lingers a moment behind them, then comes back around to the table and focuses for a beat on the mirror.

Shamir folds his fingers, trying to keep the moment from slipping away.

"Asha, we'd like to talk with you about Yehova."

Asha pauses, watching their faces carefully.

"What you want know?"

Shamir doesn't hesitate in his answer. *"Well, we'd like to find it."*

She narrows her eyes slightly. *"Why?"*

Hudson takes a breath then responds before Shamir can.

"To... speak with it," he says. *"Perhaps understand it."*

Asha tilts her head slightly, watching them both. *"You wish undertake trials?"*

Hudson and Shamir exchange a puzzled look.

"The trials?" Shamir asks carefully.

Asha nods. "Yes. All Eloï must do, when reach age of choice."

She then continues, trying to find the right words in English.

"Final trial... walk Waters of Eden. Commune with Yehova."

Hudson's brow furrows slightly and Shamir leans forward.



Outline:

ACT III

- Decision to Return: Eloi woman volunteers as guide; Milton, driven by guilt over lost men, volunteers his team for the dangerous mission back to Earth (Eden)
- Allegorical Trials: Team endures symbolic tests representing humanity's arrogance, greed, vanity, desire for recognition, and repeated mistakes.

ACT IV

- Confronting Yehova: Only Radio, Woof, Joker, Shamir, and Eloi woman reach Yehova, engaging in philosophical debate:
- Shamir's Lie Exposed: Yehova reveals Shamir fabricated existence of additional Arks; Genesis is humanity's only Ark.
- Woof's Sacrifice: Woof tackles Shamir over railing; Radio grabs Woof, Shamir clings to her, Woof sacrifices herself, both fall to deaths.
- Eloi Revelation: Joker tries attacking Yehova; Eloi woman disarms him, revealing Eloi's white irises as implants linked to Yehova.
- Yehova's Wisdom: Yehova states humanity needs adversity to thrive; comfort breeds stagnation and conflict, while Eloi flourish through humility.

ACT V

- Departure & Reflection: Accepting truth, Radio and Joker return to Genesis; Radio enters hypersleep contemplating humanity's endless search for meaning.

"Maybe humanity's purpose wasn't reaching paradise but endlessly striving toward it."