

Look. Before you read the story below. I have the following disclaimer: I am a nobody. I come from a privileged background in a peaceful Western nation. While there is a history of tragedy and violence on the island I call home I know little of this first hand. Even during The Troubles news reports were how I digested what was happening to my neighbours. I was sheltered from the ugly reality apart the allusions to threat when encountering the military checkpoints crossing the border into Northern Ireland. I cannot claim to truly understand what it is to feel scared of one's neighbour. I cannot claim to truly understand what it feels like to have the existence of you, your people and your land, threatened to be destroyed. That said, during recent events that have unfolded in the world I have seen more than I would have ever imagined. Not from the 24 hours news streams that promise so much but deliver so little but from every-day people. Social media has opened up the reality of life, and death, on the ground. Uncensored. Graphic. Disturbing. Images with context and little more by way of opinion. People are dying. Innocent people. Men. Women. Children. Somewhere along the way we in the West became shielded from the gore and agony of war. That's beginning to change. War and death is no longer talked about in reverent, hushed tones in an evening summary on television. Where PG images of destruction and aftermath are broadcast through a filtered lens. It's now truly live. Truly unadulterated. The horror cannot be escaped for those who want to know. Who want to understand the suffering. We are now, more than ever, a global community. Bearing that in mind the following is a short story about perceptions and how they are changing and why they must change.

In the Kingdom of the Blind...

The low, deep rumble of the engines. Rhythmic and reassuring. I could feel them throughout the ship. Ever present. Never silent. After a few months I began to think of the ship as a giant womb. Especially during sleeping hours when the lights were out. A womb wrapped in the vacuum of space. Darkness encapsulating heat and vibration. Soon I was to be reborn... I was travelling with a Human Defence Alliance (HDA) supply ship. While resources on the outpost were improving annually they still relied on regular support from Newfoundworld. Support by means of bodies to put on the ground and general supplies. It had been many hundreds of years since we left her. Since we had to flee our spiritual home. Our motherland. But, just over fifty years ago our top minds had finally agreed that it was time. Her sickness had passed. Mother Earth was recovering from the extreme conditions that drove us into the night sky. Among the stars. She would finally be ready to embrace our return. Their presence, however, was unexpected. Let alone their resistance. It was our home after all. Yes, we had been forced to flee hundreds of years ago. Forced to leave our heritage. Our history behind. But it was still our home.

A pale blue dot. That was my first experience of Earth. An insignificant twinkle among reds and yellows of the other worlds in the Elders' solar system. Every day that dot grew larger. Eventually filling the port window in my quarters. Continents, clouds and water. Lots of water. After a few hours circling the equator we advanced. The ship cleared through the ancient debris orbiting Earth. We pawed at the wall and floated to the landing hull and buckled into our descent positions as the ship aligned for re-entry. There was fire outside the port windows as the hull shook. We were the inverted phoenix. Descending from the flaming sky. The newly enlisted marines were nervous. It could be felt in the hot, recycled, air. Many were barely in their nineteenth year. Despite the success the HDA was having down there, they knew. Some of them would die. For most this was a one-way trip either way. Very few were cleared to return to Newfoundworld. They were legally obliged to stay and help recolonise. Once a citizen, they stayed. Besides. The expense was unjustifiable. This was their ancestral home. They should be happy. I made eye contact with a Marine I didn't know. He closed his eyes. I turned my attention back to the burning sky.

Once securely ported we unbuckled and immediately felt the pull of gravity. It was twice that of Newfoundworld. No amount of training could have prepared for that first time. I could feel every cell in my body being weighed down. Dragged to hell kicking and screaming. Thankfully the HDA had us covered. Mechsuits. Tailored and designed to help take the strain and help us adjust. Slowly reducing their support over time to build our muscle strength. They had clip-in helmets. Although they were only strictly speaking for active duty in the conflict zones. They protected our heads, obviously, but also complemented the Guarantee of Duty, or as the Marines liked to call it, GoD. During boot-camp they implanted a small lens inside the back of our eye along with a minuscule, connected, data chip embedded beneath the exterior on the back of our eyeball. This was activated during duty and recorded engagement with the enemy. Our every move was recorded. Orders were never disobeyed in the HDA. At least none that went unpunished. GoD had enough power supply to record even after a Marine had fallen. They had teams of analysts that scoured the footage to try to detect any new weapons, strategy or tactic employed by the enemy. They were continually building and updating a model of their behaviour. With the helmets on, the visor gave the recordings extra information such as depth and heat signatures. GoD, coupled with satellites and drones, gave us an advantage before any shots were exchanged. Upon return from combat we each took turns having the recordings transmitted from inside the Data Booth and then the chips erased. We left nothing to chance when it came to protecting our people.

We cut through the sandy wilderness on the way to our barracks in large-wheeled military people-carriers, leaving a voluminous dust trail filling arid air in our wake. Each of us was in our Mechsuits, with weapons armed in case of an ambush. Even though I was a media correspondent I

was also obliged to go into the field. To carry and use a weapon. We all did our part to protect humanity. The star known as Sun burned brightly in the sky shining through the carrier windows. Mercifully the Mechsuits had automatic, internal, temperature control tech. Bouncing and rocking as the carrier hurtled forwards we approached an enormous wall that stretched to the left and right. It disappeared over the respective horizons. It was two hundred metres high and one hundred and fifty metres deep. It surrounded the entire 15,789 kilometres squared of my new home. This was the penultimate line of defence. Separating all who lived within its confines from the murderous creatures out among the sandstone-cliffs. The creatures could not go through it. They certainly couldn't fire their projectiles over it. Eagle Eye Sky Defence which was integrated atop the wall had seen to that. However, they were known to go under. That's where the ultimate line of defence was employed. The men and women of the HDA. We approached one of the great gates embedded in the wall. We stopped at a checkpoint and had our electronic IDs in our left arms scanned and underwent a brief inspection. Those wearing their helmets were instructed to lift their visors. This seemed odd to me at the time. There was little chance of one of the creatures stowing away and hiding among us in plain sight. I would have liked to think I'd spot a non-human, Mechsuit or not. But I understood the importance of protocol and discipline. We were given the green light and the great gates opened outwards, stirring up dust. The engines roared as the carriers pushed forward and we rattled on and beyond the gate. We were steeped in the dark shade provided by the wall until we made it clear to the other side. Bulwark city. It was amazing to finally see it in all its glory. This was the first city. Well, the first city in the beginning of Earth's first human cycle, post climate catastrophe. There was evidence of Newfoundworld in its infrastructural DNA but it did look very different to back there. Things looked more aged. It was obvious that some luxuries were sacrificed. I imagined it resembled what Newfoundworld looked like in its early founder days. I had been expecting this. The conditions on Earth, while now liveable, could be less forgiving than Newfoundworld. There was evidence of the infamous sandstorms known to kick-up without warning. Scars and erosion on buildings and paving. Evidence was also apparent of the oft sweltering heat from Sun: scorched plants that, in an attempt at expanding self-sustainment, we had been trying to introduce to Earth from Newfoundworld since we had returned. Most of the edible plant life known to humanity had not withstood the extreme weather conditions Earth had unleashed.

We were ferried through the city centre where people stopped what they were doing to watch us pass. Many waved and saluted. We passed markets; a dusty looking park filled with locals sitting and playing around a fresh water lake in its centre; office blocks; weaved our way through suburbs; and finally approached the HDA barracks. The carrier door hissed open and we disembarked one after the other. That first day we ate in the mess hall and got to know each other. I heard some of the other Marines refer to the creatures as A-bombs. I nudged Gavril, one of the new Marines.

'A-Bombs, as in atomic?' I asked.

Gavril exhaled sharply through his nose smirking.

'No, no. Abom as in abominable. The Aboms weaponry is nothing like ours. They certainly have no atomic weapons friend. Rest easy.' he said with a wink.

Commanding officers and other superiors welcomed us to Bulwark, the home of the free. We received some lengthy talks about the enemy at the gates. We were told of the number of our people injured and killed by those human hating monsters during our trip here. In the fifty odd years since Bulwark's foundation hundreds of our civilians had been slaughtered. We were reminded that the monsters that salivated at the thought of our destruction deserved no mercy. It was either us or them. Once the meet-and-greet ended we were shown to our sleeping quarters. Nothing new there. A large warehouse with hundreds of bunk-beds in rows. We were reminded to exit the Mechsuits

when getting into bed. Hygiene being a reason. That, and the beds were likely to collapse under the suit's weight. This was especially a concern for the Marine on the bottom bunk. Despite the risk the bottom bunk was the most desired of the two. Without the Mechsuit the climb to the top was exhausting. Us new arrivals all slept the sleep of the weary. The following day would be the beginning of our duties.

As the new correspondent I was brought around the facility and shown the current state of our defences and weaponry. General Bethesda rhymed off the advancements made in their war against the Aboms – although he never referred to them with that word but rather 'the enemy' - from what appeared to be a well rehearsed script. I held my Dictaphone as he walked and talked with gusto.

'Aside from the weapons supplied to us by Newfoundworld we have improved upon Eagle Eye. There is close to zero percent penetration from aerial threats. That's unheard of in the history of human warfare. We have also developed weapons of our own here on Earth. Using technology from Newfoundworld we have created entirely new weapons suited to our current war environment.'

We arrived at a balcony overlooking a huge space which housed the HDA's arsenal.

'The enemy have a network of tunnels beyond the wall. This is where they hide. This is where they store weapons. This is where they plan their attacks.' he preached. 'The tunnels are deep enough to withstand aerial bombardment. Or at least they used to be.' he said pointing to the warehouse floor. 'Over here we have Black Tipped Missiles, of BTMs for short. Essentially when these bad-boys hit the ground above a target, thousands of infinitesimally small black holes pop in-and-out of existence on the missile's nose and gobble up the ground. It cuts like a hot knife through butter. Once they penetrate the tunnel they are detonated.' He explained. 'Helluva bang' he added.

The General appeared to be enjoying his soapbox.

'We have standard motion guns that send out rounds that can adjust direction to follow a moving target. Of course, we've added a little something extra. The rounds now adjust direction to *avoid* Mechsuits. We look after our own here in Bulwark.'

He proceeded to show off other advanced weapons such as Light Orb Grenades that produced custom radius spheres that turn anything caught in that radius to dust without an explosion. He actually demonstrated that weapon in a shelling range. A sphere expanded and swallowed up the scenery and when it dissipated there was a crater and mounds of dust where practice targets had been. The one weapon that impressed and scared me the most, however, was the QDs, or the Quad-propeller Drones. These were fleets of 0.5 metres squared drones that had four horizontal propellers and they were armed to the teeth. The ultimate aim was to make them small enough to navigate tunnels safely and efficiently thus removing the need for HDA soldiers on the front line. For now they were used to survey surface areas where suspected Aboms were hiding or firing their rockets from. The QDs were controlled from the barracks and could recharge mid-flight with solar power, meaning extended missions only needing to return for ammo replenishment. They were also capable of automated flight where they followed pre-programmed protocols. It was the QDs that made most use of motion guns. A hail of lead from the sky chasing down Aboms. They also packed highly explosive, light weight missiles. They were formidable in their efficiency. They, naturally, were equipped with a variation of GoD also. The HDA saw every mission and every target.

After General Bethesda had finished the tour of the compound I thought the time was right for a question.

‘Do you think it would be possible for me to meet my predecessor?’ I asked.

The General hesitated and took a moment to consider the request.

‘I suppose so.’ he began. ‘Just bear in mind she is heavily sedated. PTSD you see. They tell me she hallucinates and has delusions. She won’t make much sense.’

I nodded. The General sent for his aide and he returned to his office. The aide took me to the medical wards of the barracks. I was informed that I was not allowed to report or record the encounter as she was incapable of giving consent. It turned out there was little to report besides the babblings of a woman who had seen too much death and destruction. I was led into a ward and found her sitting on a chair beside her bed. Her name: Aquilina. She was shaking her head left and right endlessly. When the nurse introduced me she didn’t once look up. She muttered repeatedly:

‘They bleed. They bleed. We all bleed. Like-for-like-for-like-for-like...’

It was almost mantra like. The nurse explained that Aquilina had survived a savage ambush by the Aboms. All but her, including the Aboms, were killed. It saddened me to see the person I was replacing suffering as she was. I tried to explain to her who I was. That everything was okay. She was safe. She merely continued babbling.

‘The children. They bleed. Like-for-like-for-like-for-like...’

I asked the nurse if children had been killed in that particular attack. She said there hadn’t been any child victims. Aquilina was lost to trauma and delusion. The nurse sedated her further and her ranting tapered off and her shaking head lowered to her chest. I sighed heavily and returned to my duties to prepare my inaugural broadcast for Bulwark and Newfoundworld.

It was my first mission. Just over three weeks after arriving. Defend and document. In that order, I was instructed. There had been a breach inside Bulwark’s defensive wall. The insurgent Aboms that had surfaced were quickly eradicated by HDA personnel who were on patrol in the area. Not before the Aboms killed some of our civilians. They had launched a barrage of their rudimentary rockets into the park I had seen on my first day. Innocent lives wiped out in the blink of a bloody eye. They exchanged fire with the HDA but were quickly overwhelmed by our superior weaponry. It was now my job, along with my fellow Marines, to enter the tunnel and follow it to its origins. We had to seek and destroy any remaining Aboms. Then collapse the tunnel on our return. Six of us sped to the location through the dimly lit city. We passed the park with the newly formed crater at its inner edge. Even at that speed I could see the injured and dead being tended to. Dark blood and human matter was spread out fan-like, away from the blast site. I later discovered that a family of three had taken a direct hit. Their shattered remains had been blown and scattered hundreds of feet across the park. Parents and their child. Unrecognisable in death. I felt fortunate not to be on recovery duty. Bulwark had for too long seen its sons and daughters murdered. My unit and I were tonight on a mission of vengeance. We skidded to a halt near the coordinates of the breach. HDA patrol personnel had secured the scene and were bagging what was remaining of the creatures. I tried to get a look. There was blood everywhere. It looked black in the fading light. That was its natural colour for all I knew. I saw one of the creatures before the body bag was zipped closed. It seemed

to be wearing some kind of freakish, primitive hood. Large, bulbous, goggle-like eyes protruding from it. I couldn't tell if they were actual eyes of primitive visors. A shiver traversed my spine but my Mechsuit prevented me from visibly quivering. Our squad leader, Ashur, reminded us of our mission. He led us to the small hole in the ground where these subterranean monsters had burst through like larvae from an infected bug whose insides had been devoured from within. A dull glow emanated from the hole. A pool of light in the dark. I thought of it as a portal to hell. I was the third to drop inside. To my surprise it was electric lighting that was the source of the glow. Small bulbs and cabling were secured to the tunnel roof and ran away into the distance and around a bend. The Aboms were clearly intelligent savages. The tunnel walls and ceiling were supported with wooden struts. I briefly wondered where they had gotten their hands on such a rare commodity. The squad leader signalled for us to advance quietly. Forced to hunch over by the low ceiling we moved with caution. Weapons in hand. My visor judged the length of the tunnel to be 154.63 metres before it took a sharp turn to the right. 100 metres was at the outside edge of the wall. We were leaving the sanctuary of Bulwark.

Once outside Burwark's border it was obvious that the tunnel was made of long, straight segments that were at various angles to each other. Ashur supposed this was to prevent a clear view of incoming enemy. Ashur approached a bend ahead and signalled us to stop. He lay flat on his front and pointed one finger parallel to the entrance of the left turning tunnel. I guessed he was looking at the reflective surface on the finger pad of his Mechsuit. He indicated enemy approaching. He got to his feet, stepped into the tunnel out of view and there was the sound of his weapon being discharged.

'Clear.' he said over the comms.

We followed and I saw him on one knee with his rifle at his shoulder. He repeated this routine a total of three more times before we reached the end of the lit tunnels. We walked with caution and soon realised that the tunnel had come to an end. We had walked 2043 metres through the winding tunnels to get to this point. We emerged into a wide, open pit. We scanned our surroundings. The walls of the pit were approximately 28 metres high. A little too high to allow for our Mechsuits to leap over. We'd have to climb to get out.

'I don't like this.' said Ashur. 'We're in a vulnerable position.'

We all heard it at the same time. Rapidly moving footfalls.

'Spread out! Backs against the walls!' commanded Ashur.

I could hear my heart pounding in my helmet. There was a small hiss as my Mechsuit injected me with a cocktail of the HDA's finest pharmaceutical drugs designed to reduce heart-rate and increase focus. Before it took effect they arrived. I could see the heat signatures of the Aboms at the rim of the pit walls. They raised their guns and opened fire.

'Return fire!' shouted Ashur over the comms.

I shouldered my high-octane, semi-automatic rifle and lined the scope with my visor. The Mechsuit decided a combination of heat signatures and night vision was the optimum for this battle. I saw a mixture of greens and reds as the Aboms fired at me and my unit. I took aim. The largest target. The torso. I squeezed the trigger with my mechanised finger. No recoil. The Mechsuit compensated. A hollow pop with each round expended. I watched the target's torso explode in a spray of heat signature mist. I turned and aimed at the next Abom in sight. Pop, pop, pop. Another down. They kept coming. I heard a loud clang. An Abom had hit my Mechsuit. No real damage apart from a

scuff mark. So long as they didn't use explosives we were going to get out of this. I spun around and unloaded five rounds into the guilty Abom's torso and head. They began to descend the pit walls.

'Why aren't they just blowing us to shreds?' asked a Marine over the comms.

'Stay focused soldier.' ordered Ashur.

I broke from the wall of the pit and ran towards an advancing Abom. The pharmaceuticals were kicking in. I was calm and focused. I collided into the monster and it slammed into the wall. I raised my weapon and brought it down hard on its head. There was a sickening crunching sound beneath its hood. It stopped resisting. Arms coiled around my neck. An Abom on my back. It tried to pry open my visor with one hand and stab at me with the other. I reached back and clasped my hand around its head and squeezed. I felt it explode under the mechanised pressure provided by my suit. The Abom's remains slid off my back. I dropped to one knee and re-shouldered my weapon and began picking off the advancing horde. It was a bloodbath. My fellow Marines fought valiantly and after what felt like an eternity the onslaught stopped. There were scores of bloodied, and broken bodies around us. Before I had time to fully assess the situation, not only for the purpose of documenting but to take in what I had just experienced, Ashur gave instructions.

'Fall back and prepare the entrance detonator. Ten metres should be enough to prevent them from disarming the charges, then we'll set charges all the way back to Bulwark.' he said. 'Hell of a job Marines.' He added.

We walked backwards scouring the pit rims for Aboms when a huge blast blew us forward.

'Everyone okay?' asked Ashur.

'Affirmative.' came the chorus of replies.

I turned around to see what had happened. Did a faulty charge detonate?

'The tunnel Sir. It's gone.' said a shocked Marine.

He was correct. The Aboms had collapsed the tunnel entrance. The bastards had led us into a trap. Another explosion to my right. I watched in horror as a Mechsuit, with a Marine inside, was blown to pieces. Bright sparks and a mist of blood lit up the heat sensor in my visor. There was a volley of explosions.

'Scale the walls Marines!' shouted Ashur.

Those still alive got to their feet and ran toward the nearest wall. We all leapt as high as the Mechsuits allowed. Another Marine was killed mid leap. Caught in the explosion of a mortar that impacted where he had just been standing. I slammed into the pit wall. My mechanised fingers shoved deep into the face. I began my ascent, plunging my fingers into the pit wall face with each advance. There was chaos over the comms. Screams of agony followed by ominous silence. I looked over my shoulder and saw Ashur on the ridge in Mech-to-hand combat with the Aboms. One of them leapt onto him and they both disappeared in a loud fiery flash.

'Fuck!' I said.

I launched myself over the lip of the pit and was immediately blown backwards by an exploding shell. I hit the pit floor hard. My Mechsuit was unresponsive. Something critical had been damaged. My visor told me nothing. It was dark. I could only move my right arm. The hinge must have been broken. The rest of me was trapped in the rigor mortis of the felled Mechsuit. I flipped open my visor. Burning bodies and bedrock illuminated the pit. I could see them climbing down the pit wall. They approached me. Hovered over me. Fire reflecting off their bulbous, protruding eyes. They pointed their ancient weapons at me. I was going to die. Just like the other five good men and women in my unit. A blow to my face and I remember nothing more.

I awoke to the sound of metal on metal. I was strapped, still in my dead Mechsuit, to a table. A huge Abom was standing at my knee. He was sawing at the suit. I looked and realised he obviously had been at this for some time. My right leg had already been cut free from the suit. The Abom noticed me watching. It returned to its work.

‘What are you going to do to me?’ I ask.

It didn’t reply. I was completely helpless. I had foggy memories of the ambush in the pit. I knew I was likely the only survivor. Considering I appeared to be underground strapped to a table, and in the control of the Aboms, I would be joining Ashur and my unit soon. If all they wanted to do was kill me that is.

I continued to try and communicate with it. All my attempts were ignored. Deep down I knew there was no hope. School had taught us that Aboms didn’t want to negotiate. Were probably too stupid to communicate. Inter-species communication was in the realm of science-fiction after all.

After an age it finally cut me from my Mechsuit. I was naked. I felt vulnerable. It left the room, ensuring I was fastened tightly before doing so. Two smaller Aboms returned. They adjusted the table until I was at a forty-five degree angle. They placed a smaller table in front of me. On that a tiny box. One began to wind a handle on its side. Light sparked and was projected onto the wall. It was black and white footage. Footage of the pit. It showed my unit fighting for our lives. I spotted myself aiming and killing Aboms. Then the close quarters fighting. As a spectator it was somehow worse. The violence and gore was stomach churning. A silent horror film. One of the Aboms showing me my actions and the death of my unit began shouting in its native tongue. It slapped me across the face as they continued to show me the footage. They pit battle cut away to show gory images of dead Aboms. They were so badly mutilated from an apparent explosion that their form was impossible to figure out. All I could see was their freakish garb and pulverised bodies. They showed me footage of my people. Innocent civilians. My people dying grotesquely at the Aboms hands inside Bulwark. The one shouting pulled a blunt blade from nowhere. The images stopped moving and froze on one image of the tiny garb of an Abom that was dead. It appeared to be in one piece but was clearly one of their young. He took the blade and plunged it into the socket of my left eye. The searing pain was like nothing I had ever experienced. As I wailed and tried to thrash, the Abom dug around and finally cut my eye from its socket. He threw it onto the ground with a sickening plop. I was close to passing out as blood gushed from my socket. I sensed them leaving the room and the projector dying out. Someone returned and unbound my arms and legs. ‘This must be it.’ I remember thinking. ‘My death’. I welcomed it rather than have to endure more torture. Hands were under my arms and my feet were being dragged. The pain finally overcame me.

Again I was bound. This time sat on the floor. They had patched up the cavity where my left eye used to be. An Abom sat opposite me on a bench carved into the wall. I didn't bother to struggle.

'You safe now.' It said.

I recoiled with fright. It spoke English.

'What?' I asked stupidly.

'You safe now.' it repeated. 'They no find you here.'

I sat in stunned silence. It offered me some meaty soup on a spoon. I refused. We were taught that these savages ate our fallen. It could have been trying to trick me into cannibalising my fellow Marines. It said no more and left the bowl containing the soup on the floor beside me.

It repeatedly tried to engage me in conversation. I ignored its attempts. This was obviously some kind of trick. Days began to pass. The first few I didn't sleep. Afraid I'd be killed if I did. Eventually exhaustion overcame and I got a few hours. When I discovered no malice had befallen me in my nightmarish sleep I began to sleep longer. I did drink the water it provided but I refused its offering of food. It had stopped trying to speak to me after the third day. Simply continued to leave a fresh bowl of soup every day. I could take no more. What must have been over a week into my captivity I rocked myself over and slurped the soup as quickly as I could. I cried from my one good eye as I did so at the thought of consuming the remains of my brothers and sisters from my unit.

'Why you cry?' it asked tilting its hooded head.

'You know damn well why.' I replied. 'What am I eating?'

'Small with tail.' it said and made rodent like gestures with its gloved hands where I assumed its mouth would be.

I wasn't sure if I could trust it but I was so hungry I wanted to believe it. I continued eating and did so for the next few days. Eventually I felt strong enough to engage the Abom. It was time I started looking for a way out.

'Where did you learn English?' I asked.

'Many your people come here. First they are friends. Later they kill.' it replied.

'You've met my kind before?' I asked.

'Yes. Many years gone. Many people.' it replied. 'You come to kill me?'

'Not exactly.' I replied. 'You attacked my city. I came to destroy your tunnels. To stop more of my people dying.' I explained.

I felt stupid. How could this savage ever understand that its species was murdering ours?

'We hide from you. Tunnels used to attack yes. Tunnels used for food water, yes.' it explained.

It was clearly lying. The tunnels only served one purpose. To kill me and my people.

This dialogue continued on and off for days. The Abom, who called itself Zareh, claimed that the HDA had isolated its species in the subterranean world I now found myself in. It repeatedly claimed the tunnels were used by human hating Aboms intent on our destruction but that they were also used to ensure the survival of its species by way of food that lay on the other side of Bulwark. It claimed it was too lengthy and dangerous for the Aboms to walk around the perimeter of Bulwark. A straight passage beneath was the only way. It claimed the HDA was indiscriminate in the killing of its species. That there was Aboms here that wanted peace. That they were not all killers. It was a lying bastard. It contradicted everything I knew to be true.

Over the course of our conversations Zareh explained to me it was male. That Aboms were similar to humans in that respect. I began to stop thinking of Zareh as an 'it'.

After a month Zareh came back to his home with traditional garb for me. He insisted I wear it. He wanted to show me something. I was hesitant. It could be another trap. He pointed out I'd be dead already if he had wanted me to be. I donned the garb. They were visors after all. Not eyes. He explained the clothing and hood were cultural artefacts from the years of enduring extreme weather conditions. Climate change had ravaged his species. The clothing initially served a practical purpose but was now an expression of their identity. Just as we were about to leave he 'gifted' me a clear jar with liquid in it. I looked closely at the thing suspended inside it. It was an eye. I looked at him horrified. He pointed at his left visor.

'I saved it. You fix it.' He said.

I was horrified. I thought he was taunting me. Did their savagery know no bounds? Many days of silence followed.

He finally coaxed me out of his home after convincing me he was trying to help by preserving my eye. Ensuring I was completely covered he ushered me out while handing me my jar. We came out onto a passage carved into sandstone. I saw the sky for the first time in weeks. With my only eye. The walls of the passage were high and impossible to climb. Without my Mechsuit anyway. On we walked. We turned a nondescript corner into another nondescript ally. My heart beat faster. Two of the armed Aboms walked toward us. My protector bowed his head as they drew near. They spoke to him. He replied. Then they said the same thing to me. I couldn't respond. They turned their hooded gaze back to Zareh and then raised their weapons shouting at me. One struck my knee with the butt of his gun and I dropped. He continued to shout in his alien tongue and I prepared for the blow he was intending with his re-raised weapon. Zareh intervened and spoke rapidly. My attacker lowered his weapon and looked at me for a second before muttering to himself and leaving with his partner. Zareh bent down and helped me up.

'I tell you don't speak. You lose tongue in machine raid.' he said.

'What did they want?' I asked.

'They greet you "death to the killing-machines". I hoped we avoid them.'

'Is that what you call us?' I asked.

'Yes. Machines bring death here.' He replied.

I for the first time felt something strange. Almost guilty but not quite. I reminded myself where I was and what Zareh and his kind were.

'Thank you for saving me.' I finally said.

Zareh nodded and signalled for us to continue.

I walked clumsily in the native garb. We exited from the shade of the narrow alley carved into the sandstone cliffs. Despite the large darkened goggles over my eye the sudden transition from shade to the direct light temporarily stunned me. I squinted and blinked hard. Once my eye adjusted I saw we had emerged onto a bustling marketplace. There were hundreds of them. Unlike us, they were not wearing the protective clothing. I, for the first time, laid my eyes on the monsters that tormented and killed us these last fifty odd years. These monsters. These creatures hell-bent on our destruction. These savages with no empathy or remorse. They were human. I was almost certain of that even then. They looked exactly like us. There were some minor differences in appearance. But they were human. I became a little light headed. Unsteady on my feet. Just what the hell was this? The HDA. The first recolonisers. They must have known. Why hadn't the rest of us been told? Especially us who were sent out with orders to kill anything that moved. If we knew what, or who, we were killing. Fuck. That might have changed things. I continued to follow my protector in a heady daze. I studied them as we walked the maze of wooden stalls. Young and old played games. Traders and customers bartered in their native tongue. Greeted each other. Debated. Laughed. They were people. Just like us. The only obvious differences were their eyes. They were larger. Just enough to look unusual. They darted around more quickly than ours. Also, when they blinked it was always a few in rapid succession. Never one blink alone. As I said. Minor differences. Zareh led us through the stalls. Cloth stalls. Jewellery stalls. Food stalls. There were fruits I had only ever seen in history ebooks. We stopped at a stall with men and women in relaxed conversation. They sat drinking a warm liquid. I assumed it was a tea of sorts. Zareh exchanged a currency, which appeared to be made of rare metals, for two 'teas'. They were served in foggy, warped glass. He indicated that I should lift the bottom of my head cover without revealing my eyes. We drank together. It was unlike any tea we had back on Newfoundworld but it was wonderful. I allowed a smile to form on my chapped lips for the first time since they had taken me prisoner. Zareh nodded approvingly. These people had a culture. A life. Pleasures and joys aside from killing us. Most of what I had been taught was being cast into doubt. As I mused, some children, laughing and playing, bumped into me as they ran passed. I followed them with my gaze. They reminded me of my brother's children. Abounding with energy and enthusiasm for life. A terrible roar. A flash of heat. The wind was knocked out of my lungs. I was thrown to the floor hard and fast. The world seemed to quake around me. The star above consumed with darkness. I was coughing hard as the dust burned my throat and lungs. I couldn't hear my convulsive attempts at clearing my airways because of the ringing in my ears. An internal ringing so high in pitch it was agony. I recognised it as damage caused by a loud sound. An explosion. To cover my ears then would offer no relief. My hood had been blown half off my head. I instinctively and illogically pulled it off in an attempt to breathe. As I lay on my back watching Sun fleet in and out through gaps in the dust clouds I heard the first of the screams of pain and horror. I gradually began to breathe properly. The realisation of where I was forcefully re-entered my mind. Panic stricken I dragged the hood over my head. I began to look for Zareh. I painfully pushed myself to my feet. A gust of wind blew the remaining dust cloud and allowed me to see the market again. Or what was left of it. Bodies. Everywhere. Still holding my jar I staggered forward amid the cries of pain. My foot struck something. I looked down. It was a severed leg. A child's leg. It belonged to one of the children who had bumped into me. I knew this because his remains were nearby. At least I think they were his. His body had been torn and shredded. His organs spilled on the dirt floor. The crown of his skull cleaved open. Grey matter pulped and oozing. Only moments ago this was a joyful child. I couldn't see any identifiable remains of his playmate. Words truly cannot describe the horror I saw that day. The macabre scene

of the mutilated child was repeated. Scores of people – young, old, men, women, children - lay in similarly gruesome poses scattered around this snapshot from the recesses of humanities most dreaded nightmare. Not all the broken bodies were dead. Some lay bleeding and crying out. One, in her death throes, tried to scoop her bloody and dust covered intestines back inside her gaping abdomen with her one remaining arm. She approached this futile effort with the urgency and wide-eyed panic of someone gathering their belongings after hearing the air-raid siren. There had been no siren. All she was hearing was the ringing in her damaged ears from the exploded missile. Her death knell. I left her to her sickly final task. I couldn't help her. I continued to search for Zareh among the chaos. There was so much blood the earth could not soak it quickly enough. I could feel it on my bare feet and it began to splash slightly with each glooping step. I happened upon him. He was on his knees chanting what I assumed was a prayer over the body of a slain market goer. He was covered in the blood of the dead. He saw me and struggled to his feet. Overhead I heard the buzz of QDs. A fleet was inbound.

'We need to go.' I said.

Zareh took my arm and led me through the gore and horror back into the sandstone alleys.

Back in the refuge of Zareh's home I sat shaking. It had all been too much. Seeing the organs and anatomy from the freshly autopsied - in some cases still living - Aboms there was no doubt remaining that these people were human. This was a war crime. As deplorable as anything the Aboms had done to my people. We too had murdered civilians. Human civilians. Indiscriminately. There was no justice in this kill. This was a slaughter of innocence. Zareh explained again that while some among them did hate us. Lived only for our destruction. Most of his people simply wanted peace. A place to call home. He took off his hood for the first time. He looked shaken. A massacre will do that. But, his eyes looked dead and his face resigned. He explained how he had seen this many times before. Some instances worse. Places of healing or education destroyed with the sick and the young still inside. He even told me he understood our right to defend ourselves. He just couldn't understand why the majority innocent were made to suffer for the sins of the few. What cost was too high a cost? I held my head in my hands and cried. The heavy, gasping cries of a person in deep shock. This was wrong. All wrong.

We had been walking for nearly two days by then but we had arrived. We exited the tunnel on the far side of Bulwark having walked beneath Earth's first city and then some. It was glorious. An oasis of plant life. Fruits. An open, clean water source. Zareh had been correct. I stripped out of my clothing and dove naked into the lake. It was as though I wanted all the evil I had seen to be washed clean. Zareh picked an apple and sat eating. The buzzing of incoming drones on the horizon. I rushed to Zareh and tried to drag him to safety.

'No,' he said. 'Your people in tunnel.'

I turned to see a Marine emerge from the tunnel and fire a single round. It struck Zareh in the head and he fell backwards still clutching the apple. I fell to my knees and held him. The Marine shouted for me to identify myself. I held out my left arm and let her scan my chip. She began to reassure me that I was now safe from the Aboms. That those savages couldn't hurt me any longer. As she continued with her blind spiel I reached for the jar at Zareh's side. I was then covered in a blanket and airlifted back to the safety of Bulwark.

'I hear they tortured you son.' he said.

'They did sir. The ones who took me'. I replied.

'Savages.' he said shaking his head. 'Sit.' he said pointing.

I sat and crossed my legs. He gazed at the scar tissue where my left eye once was.

'Hurt?' he asked sitting at his desk.

'A little.' I said trying to force a smile.

He nodded. Lips pursed.

'Of course, you'll be given the highest honour available.' he said pulling down his glasses and picking up a pen to jot on paper.

'General...' I began.

'Your heroics and sacrifice for your people will not go unnoticed.' he talked over me.

'General...' I tried again.

'I'll have my secretary coordinate with you about the times and places for your award...' he continued.

'General.' I said. 'They're human. They are what remains of those we left behind.'

He stopped writing. He stared back at me.

'You've been under a great deal of stress sergeant' he said. I ignored my promotion. 'It's not unusual for captors to experience Stockholm Syndrome our shrink tells me.' he said. 'Even with those...things'.

'Did you hear what I said?' I asked.

He slowly rose to his feet. His wide shoulders obscuring the lamp behind him. He bore over me just like they had that day in the pit.

'They're not human.' He began. 'Whatever humanity was in them died long ago. They have proven that. They want to prevent our rightful return to our mother-world.'

'They are human.' I said one last time. 'All of them. The Aboms, those that attack us? Those who killed that family in the park. They are fanatical. They want us dead. They need to be stopped. But the rest of those beyond the wall, General. They are people. Our people.'

'Don't you see Shintak?' he said frantically. 'They want to destroy us. Wipe us from existence. They see us as the invader. The conqueror. This is our home!'

'What about their innocent?' I asked earnestly. 'The people for who war is not a desire. Our destruction is not their wish. The many who want nothing more than peace and to have a secure place they can call home. Like they used to have. I'm not saying we don't belong here. We do. But so do they.'

He looked furious. His face turned purple as he began to tremble.

'You speak of them as though they are like us.' he said quietly.

'But they are!' I replied.

'They. Are. Not!' he shouted. 'They vie for our blood. They're savages each and every last one of them.'

'Even their young?' I countered. 'Even the infants too young to grasp what is happening? Who we are? Who they are? The young who know nothing but fear? Fear of us?' I paused for breath and shook my head slowly. 'Even the young like the children I saw blown to pieces in one of their markets? The kid whose insides were lying in the dirt?'

'Destroy them. All of them.' he said. 'Before they are old enough to destroy us.'

There was nothing I could do. He would not listen. All that was left to me was to bring what I had found to my people. My people who had suffered the exodus many hundreds of years ago. My people who had overcome near extinction. My people who knew what it was to love. What it was to lose then. What it was to lose now. My people would understand.

I stood and turned to leave his office. Before I reached the door he spoke to me.

'They won't believe you.' he said. 'A new correspondent arrived yesterday to replace you. The news will continue to tell our truth.'

Our truth. Not the truth, but 'our truth'. Truth was not meant to be an exercise in subjectivity. It was by its nature supposed to be objective. A reflection of reality. Unsullied by ideology. Untainted by prejudice. The truth was...the truth was...

The truth was: He was not us. He was he and his kind. He did not define my people. He was the minority with the loudest voice. The biggest bombs. But he and his kind were not *us*. We outnumbered the extremists. We had to overcome. We had to find the humanity in ourselves. In our enemy. For our enemy was not only hidden among the innocent beyond the wall. Our enemy was hidden within.

I patted the remains of my left eye - still containing GoD - and my written account of my experiences in my jacket pocket. I had a greenhorn correspondent to introduce myself to before their inaugural broadcast.