

There was a metallic voice. The sound seemed to come from nowhere as though it was originating in your own mind. It had a weight to it like you stepped into frame in a movie narrated by Morgan Freeman. You could feel it swirling around you, filling you with the comfort of being under its spell. Something about the timbre of the voice cut deep into the back of your head, needling into your spine. After a moment the sound seemed to emanate from your throat as though you were speaking automatically without thinking. The cadence of the voice was unmistakably human and yet it felt otherworldly. It was speaking directly to the man sprinting full tilt across the mist filled lawn. *You have entered the realm of the Protector. Lay down your weapons. No harm shall be dealt to you.*

The man wasn't sure whether the voice was soothing him, scaring him or coming from him. He continued to run weaponless into the fog. Slowly a structure became visible. *Lay down your weapons. No harm shall be dealt to you. You have entered the realm of the Protector.* As he got closer the structure resolved into a massive fortress. The man was shocked and froze in the shadow of a door which extended up into the mist as far as he could see. Suddenly he was unsure of how he got there, why he was running, or where in the world he was. Time seemed to stand still for a moment and the cool air hung around him and hummed like large electrical equipment. He felt oddly calm.

You have entered the realm of the Protector. You are safe. He fell to the ground all at once feeling the bodily strain of having run for so long. "Where am I?" he asked himself under his breath. *You are in the realm of the Protector.* "What the fuck!?! Can you hear me? What the hell is going on here?" The man stood and spun around clearly distressed and distrustful of his surroundings but still too frightened and faint to sprint away again. A burst of light exploded from behind him in the direction of the giant door. The man spun around, knelled and covered his eyes from the growing light. *You have been chased here. You are lucky to have found us.* All at once he was surrounded by a group of people. They were all wearing in the same cloth. A burlap like color with a stitching pattern that resulted in a pattern of triangles and concentric circles unlike the true burlap squares. They had markings on their skin, running up their arms, all the way onto their smiling faces. The intensity of the light suddenly faded as the man collapsed into the awaiting arms of the group. Moments later he was sitting upright in a very average looking home. A cheery eyed blond women was extending a large glass of water towards him begging him to take a sip. It was all so fast and confusing for the man. His eyes darted around the room and he covered himself with the blanket he had been given. He realized he and been given medical attention. Bandages around his torso, a splint for his shin, and are these real stitches on my hand? The person with the glass of water spoke as she sat the glass on the floor next to him.

"You are no longer in danger friend. I know it can be hard to understand at first, but you are here now. Drink and you'll feel better. Trust me friend. I was scared at first too, but I promise you, you are safe." Their voice seemed calm. It was as though the nightmare of the past 50 years was but a figment of his imagination. The figure looked very health with a large almost comical grin. Markings that weren't quite tattoos or scar marks ran along their arms and face with a mark in the center of their forehead which seemed to fluctuate in color.

"I don't... I can't remember. Where... How did I get here?" the man timidly grabbed the glass of water and then drank it as though it might be his last.

"You were found running from a rouge group of militants with many wounds."

"The people chasing me, what happened to them?" his eyes filled with sadness as memories began rushing back to him as fast as the water he drank.

"You needn't worry about them friend. They will chose their fates."

"I don't understand what is this place?" he was begging to feel more at ease and relaxed his still aching muscles a bit as he racked his brain for any clue as to what the hell happened to him.

"You have entered the realm of the Protector. This is a safe place for all."

"The voice I heard. That was real? What is the Protector?" The woman laughed and took his cup to refill it from a near by faucet. The man realized the room was full of people eating and drinking.

There was no furniture but some 20 people, all with the same cloth robe and markings, sitting around a large pot of what smelled undeniably like chicken noodle soup.

“Not what, who.” They said handing the glass back to the man.

“Is that soup?” he said excitedly chugging his water.

“Indeed. Chicken Noodle. Shall I grab you some?” As though they had heard his question a woman sitting on the floor rose and retrieved a bowl into which she poured a ladle of the soup.

“How do you have this? There haven’t been chicken since before the Excision.” He said eyeing his bowl of soup with a bit of suspicion. One of the young people seated on the floor began to laugh and was hushed by another sitting next to them.

“It’s not nice to laugh at people Hough.” the other said in a jovial tone.

“Yes, well, things are a bit different here in the realm of the Protector. We’ve had chicken here since the 2nd Guard managed to open enough space to rear them. We have other animals too. We’ve been attempting to bring back as many organisms as we can. Admittedly knowledge of many animals has been lost to time. We do our best though, and are always looking for new records or cultures. This is a lot to take in I know. When you are feeling stronger we will take you to the Protector and they will answer all your questions. For now you must eat and drink and recover.”

“You see that fog sir?” Three heavily armed militants stood at the top of the hill which led down into the fog.

“All units switch to infrared and keep your heads on a swivel! You all know damn well what we just found!” he barked over the communication system at the small group of 5 militants now entering the fog in the valley.

“Sir, I don’t think that kid knew this was here. How did he manage to find this place?” The scout remarked without taking their trained eye off the last soldier entering the fog.

“Son I think he just got lucky, or should I say, he got us lucky. You two stay here and keep watch. Listen for any strange noises. We’ve gotten reports of an alien voice speaking to people around the encampment. Keep your recorders going at all times. The commander will be happy to hear that we’ve tracked one back to the filthy hoard.” The soldier spit on the ground towards the fog.

“Sir, again I don’t think he was one of them, they supposedly have body armor and strange clothing. This kid didn’t seem to have any of that crap. He looked like a normal civi. Plus he was bleeding and I’ve never heard of those bastards bleeding before.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if he was one or wasn’t! He sure as hell is one now. The bastard lead us right to them. You seen anything like that fog before? Huh? No we haven’t. Ain’t no fog like that but the damn cultists. We lost them once and we sure as hell ain’t going to lose them again. You understand? Keep your eyes and rifles trained to that valley and record every god damn minute. It’ll be your asses if we come back here and you’ve lost them. You got that?”

“You’re going to bring him here?” the two officers shuttered and refocused their sights on the fog.

“You’re god damn right I am. Commander ought to see this. Finding them twice is a sign. We’re going to kill these bastards right in front of his eyes. You got any idea how they would reward us for taking down those deranged cultists? Of course not. Pathetic lot you are. No imagination. You keep your posts and don’t you move or leave for any reason. Understood?”

“YES SIR!” they cowered and retrenched their position in the camouflaged command tent. In total 30 officers stood watch in various tents along the ridge. In the distance behind them smoke plumed giant dark clouds. The ground trembled as heavy machinery moved in all directions. The air was acrid and smelled of blood and iron. The muddied ground had a reddish tint from the ash which

fell like a thin mist. The sky felt claustrophobic with a dull purple tint like the inside of your eyelids. Aside from the militants and their various structures and vehicles there was almost nothing to see and there were absolutely no other living entities. Not even insects or worms could take the harshness of the environment anymore. Even the cockroaches were dead. If that wasn't eerie enough. There was no sun. No moon. No stars. Nothing but the emptiness of barren soil. No clouds beyond the black columns of smoke which signaled the location of a former bastion.