

Noxious Demesne

By

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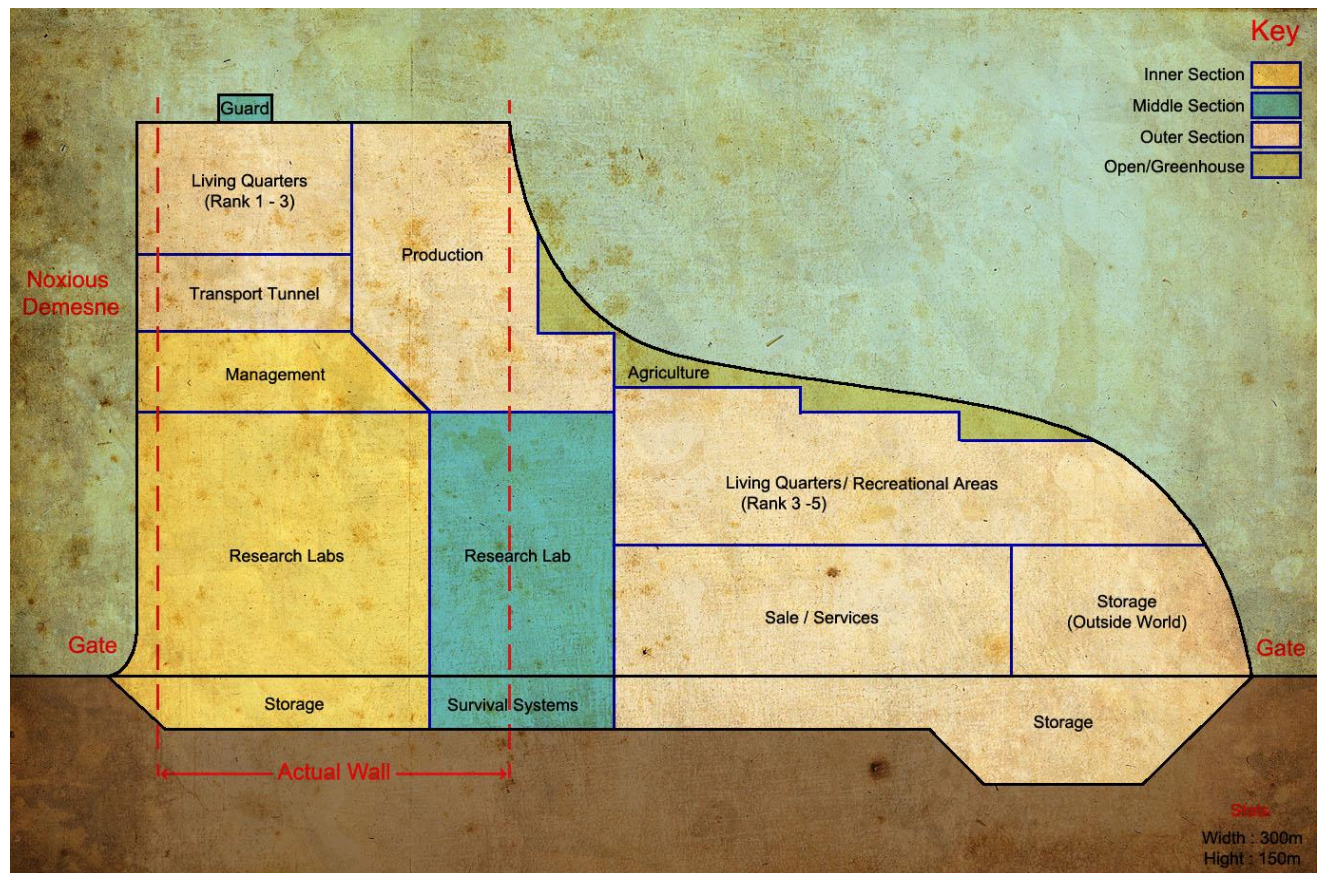


The Noxious Demesne





The Gate



Ranks

- 1 – Head authority and bureaucracy
- 2 – Soldiers dealing with the Demesne and leading scientists
- 3 – Soldiers and Scientist whose work is designated within the wall
- 4 – Workers in the fields of Agriculture/Production/Sales/Services
- 5 – Family members of employees, and those not employed in the wall



Chapter 1

There is a certain beauty to the evils of death, destruction, and decay. Some indescribable feeling that keeps your eyes locked, even though your stomach is in knots and your thoughts are screaming at you to look away, and forget. To shield your eyes from the horrors, because you know that they would linger at the edge of your memories for the rest of your waking moments, and come out to haunt you when you slept. But you can't look away. Because some part of you is fascinated with that which you see, even though you don't really know why.

That's what I was feeling; a deep, fascination with the darkness that stretched for miles in front of me. An undying threat that was anchored into the minds of everyone who was able and willing to think, one that right now was so real in front of me. It's hard to describe, hard to put into words what I was seeing; a sight I knew all too well, but at the same time entrapped me every time I looked at it. It looked wrong, no, it *was* wrong.

A forest, kind of, here right now it was a forest, but one so unlike those I knew, or anyone else for that matter. Trees that looked too alive, too tortured, to changed, to be real, or rather to be what it was supposed to be. Long ago it might have been a normal forest, but now, it was something completely different, something new, something wrong; something that didn't belong in this world, something that seemed to dissuade anything that was 'normal', and put a fear into the hearts of everyone who saw it. Or perhaps, just like me, it was more a fear of what they felt, than that which they saw.

It wasn't ugly, if that's what you think. It was just wrong. The trees, the rocks covered in moss, the grass and fallen leaves that lay like a blanket across the ground, even the sounds that echoed across the sullen bark. All these things were wrong, but you couldn't deny what they are, or at least, once were. Like I said, the trees looked more like frozen dead creatures, and at the same time so alive and caught in time; with colours that stayed in the darker and more nightmarish zone. Speckled with leaves too bright to even exist in this world, and colour combinations that would make any art lover puke. The leaves, too big, too small, too weird to be natural, sometimes like a thorn or a club, other times like a blanket, or thin strings, falling to the ground and just lying there. Not dying, or rotting, simply lying on the ground, creating an ugly colour pallet of bright hues. Then there were the lights. Strange lights that shouldn't exist in such a dead and dark world, and yet glowed like the eyes of a predator, sneaking through the whole forest like vines and snakes. And finally there were the sounds, or rather lack of. No, that's not quite right either. It's hard to explain. There wasn't a sound, but at the same time, you felt like there was something just outside your hearing, like you should be hearing a sound, and you'd believe it so strongly, till it became real.

Even from my vantage point, a thousand meters away from the forest edge, and fifty meters above the ground, I could hear it. Hard to comprehend, huh? Even harder to understand, but it's one of those snap decisions that humans make when faced with something new, something threatening. And it really came suddenly, if not wholly unexpected, but in my opinion it could have been prevented, and was completely our fault. To put it simply, it was the younger child trying to impress its siblings but instead creating a complete disaster. The children in this case being countries, and the disaster, well, that lay before me. In just a moment, a single moment, like all others but exclusively significant, a whole country turned into something wrong. I can't tell you exactly what happened, no one really can, but something



scientifically ran out of control, a catastrophe that contaminated a whole country and turned it into something, different. And what do we do with unstoppable devastation? We build a wall around it, and try to forget the horrors that lie behind it. So that's what the human race did. We built a wall, fifty meters high, three hundred meters thick, stretching around the whole country. Which might, in comparison to others be relatively small, but still, a huge feat. Money, which normally was held onto with such greed that you could only get to it with the help of a knife or a gun, given freely, willingly, literally thrown at those responsible, just so that they could make it go away, or rather to save their asses. Because the infection was spreading, and for some reason the wall did stop it, or rather the people who pulled the short straw and had to guard the wall did. Between the wall and the threat, which wasn't always a forest, like I said, it had once been its own country, was a thousand meters spread of ash and sand. Now it was its own country with a twist, so to say. It was the main duty of the wall keepers to maintain that kilometre stretch, to hold back the infection. To create a line of sight so that we could at least have a chance to stop anything that came thundering towards us. Unfortunately, that wasn't as uncommon as you would think, or we would like.

The job was simple really; protect the rest of the world from what was inside. The pressure was on stopping and destroying it, or for the more nature concerned groups, find a cure. Not a dime was spent on trying to understand what had happened. Which in my opinion should be the main focus here, after all, perhaps it didn't need to be cured.

"It's in a mood today." Someone remarked from beside me with a raucous voice, and I answered with a sharp click of the tongue.

"The seasons are about to change." I replied, taking a deep breath, feeling the forest flowing into my lungs. You couldn't just watch as an impartial party, it would pull you in, even if it was only a figment of your imagination, like a seventh sense you never knew about.

"If you say so." He replied sceptically, and I turned to look at him.

The man beside me was in his prime, but looked like his whole life had already been played, and played hard. He looked burly and untamed, with a wild nest of brown hair seated on his head like a wild animal, and with a trace of a beard which he didn't bother shaving properly. His skin was too scarred and dirty to be any specific colour. His uniform was barely recognisable. Then again no one who worked here really stuck to the rules. We each had one perfectly kept set that we kept safe in our closet in the unlikely case someone important came. Not that the uniform was particularly bad or ugly. It was even in a sense practical. But there was simply no way that it would stay whole, and it was a waste of money to buy new ones, when the patched up and customised versions worked just as well. And it wasn't just that. The uniform had been thrown out there to give the work here some credibility, to make anyone who saw us feel secure that the problem was handled by experts. Don't get me wrong, we were experts. Experts on a field that no one really could define and would never appear on a resume. Simply because if you weren't good enough, you would die, leaving all the survivors to become the experts that everyone relied on. Once you had this job, well, it stuck to you like the plague.

"Daniel, have I ever given you reason to doubt me?" I asked with an irked expression. Even though I understood him to a degree, the seasons here changed like the moods of a woman when it was her time of month. And yes being one myself I knew it was sexist, but hey, it's a truth and an excuse they use often enough, so why shouldn't I? But for those lucky ones who don't know what I am talking about, they simply changed on a whim, completely unpredictable, at least to all our high tech equipment. But I



didn't believe in everything that this project stood for. And I found my seventh sense in this field; it was a gut feeling, that once I stopped ignoring it, proved to be right most of the time.

"Not once." He said with a grin, and I couldn't help but sigh. Daniel was one of the good guys, he was one of the soldiers that actually stood on the front lines and had to bear the brute of the caged creature. Not like the scientists who were always moody and cooped up safely inside the wall itself. Unfortunately it was people like that who had the say, I mean, who else would rename the country Noxious Demesne. It was prejudice.

"Shouldn't you postpone the excursion then?" He asked and I snorted.

"It makes it even more vital, this is the perfect chance to find out more about how the seasons work."

"Still trying to understand it, even after all the time you have been working here?"

"Unlike you I don't just blindly charge at whoever my commander is pointing at." It was an old discussion. A debate that ran around blindly in circles and one that never ended in a joint conclusion. I wasn't one of the eco obsessed people, but neither was I a soldier who followed every command. I'd like to think that I was just me, trying to come to grips with this new threat on my own terms, if it even was a threat.

"It's the best thing we can do, defend ourselves. And the scientists who you're getting the samples for will only use them to destroy the Demesne."

"They can try." I replied with a smile, before turning and heading to one of the entries into the interior of the wall.

"Alexis!" He shouted after me, and I half way turned back. "Take care."

I gave him thumbs up to tell him I heard and then stepped into one on of the entry rooms. It was nothing more than a small terminal, one of many placed along the length of the wall; a place where the guards sat when not on patrol and monitored the wall through one of the many cameras. All the walls were glass, allowing a complete view of the wall, and several smaller screens that showed everything beyond eye sight. There were mostly five guards per shift, with enough guns to support an army, and of course outside were vehicles. It was, after all, a very long wall. Had to be to surround a whole country, I have no idea how long it truly is. But there was a terminal about once every five kilometres, and then seven larger ones at the gates. The wall had seven entrances, seven gates between the Noxious Demesne and the rest of the world. Why? I have no bloody idea. But these gate houses, if you like to call them that, housed all the laboratories, storages, living quarters, etc. The rest was wall, through and through, thick and impenetrable, except for small routes between the gates, imbedded deep inside the wall, nothing for those who are claustrophobic. That's where I was at home, one of these gates, it didn't have a name or a number; it was simply home.

I gave a short greeting to the guards on duty; I was a familiar face up here, one of the few besides the guards who dared to even stick their nose into the 'poisoned air', before stepping into the elevator which would take me into the heart of the gate. Of course, it was more than just 'an elevator' it was high tech, or in other words it was a contamination chamber. Every time you stepped into it, you were checked from head to toe and everywhere in between, with lasers or sensors. Who knows, not my area of expertise. If you didn't know its purpose, you wouldn't know the better, but I couldn't help but feeling robbed of my privacy.



Apparently I wasn't 'infected' because the doors slid open nicely, almost like an apology for ever thinking that I was not safe. And I stepped out, into one of the many halls in the gate, and it was as if I was in a completely different part of the world. People were bustling around like it was any other day. The whole thing looked like a living compound with plants and decorations, cafes for the people to rest and meet up with friends. It was in a sense, a whole world of its own. One that the people dedicated to the wall had built. It was no longer just scientists and soldiers, no there were people, crazy people, who of their own free will decided to live here. To support those who didn't have a choice. Families of the people who worked here had moved to support them, a dedication I had to admire. And truthfully, as long as you stayed inside, it was perfectly safe, the horrors outside left you alone. It was its own little city, with shops, and recreational areas, even a school, how unbelievable is that? Would you let your child near a place like this? But unlike the people who lived safely out there, and don't know squat about the Noxious Demesne, the people here had come to an understanding, just like I have. Don't get me wrong, the government, or governments, it was after all a joint effort on all fronts to cover up their mistakes and ignorance, didn't place us here and then forget about us. They paid for everything; clothes, food, equipment, and a salary of course. A salary which we used in here to buy whatever we needed or wanted. And after having the outside people look down on us, we were content to spend money amongst the people like us.

I hurried through the groups of people and children, for even though this was a joint community, I was still different. And the rest of the people thought so too. Not that they were malicious or anything, they just didn't understand me completely. There was respect, which sometimes bordered on the edge of fear. And other times there was sorrow. Sorrow in the sense that they feared I would die, and then of course there was the lack of understanding. They didn't know why, I, as only one, journey willingly into the Noxious Demesne, even though it's forbidden, or in my case strictly regulated. And why, I was still alive, even though I had gone inside more than once. To be honest I don't know myself.

I passed into the middle section of the wall, where all the laboratories and equipment was stored, as well as all the samples and other stuff to do with the science and destruction of the Demesne. In comparison, the outside section held all the living quarters, living areas, stores, and all the people who didn't have anything to do with the inner workings of the wall. The boundary between the outside and middle section wasn't so strictly regulated. Just simple doors, that only opened if you were authorised, as well as hidden safety measures that I, thankfully, never had the pleasure of meeting. Getting from the middle to the inner section of the wall was a little harder. The inner section after all was the quarantine area. And the home to everything that was from the Noxious Demesne, and all the more dangerous experiments. It meant strict security measures and required high level clearance, plus a strong determination to enter; most people just avoided it period. I would tell you about all the security measures I had to pass through, but there are too many, to intimate and top secret. That and I mostly didn't know what most of them wanted from me; I just stood there and waited for the door to open. Yes I know, I really should find out what exactly was being checked, but I am too lazy to read the manual. Its nine hundred fucking pages man, in the smallest font possible, who would read that willingly? And that's only issue one.

There were several containment rooms and smaller labs that I was familiar with, the rest I wasn't bothered to discover. The time I spent here was mostly spent preparing for an excursion, or with the bother that came with returning from one of those said excursions. Being the only one who regularly



dared the unknown, I had my own... rooms? You can't call them that, but I was like a race car driver, with my own team of mechanics to keep my equipment in shape. The mechanics in this case were either annoying scientists who depended on me to get them their vital information. Or actual mechanics that took care of my equipment. Although I believe you have to have a PhD in rocket science to work as an engineer here. Makes me wonder how the heck I got a job here? Don't worry; as soon as I find out I will tell you.

"Alexis!" Someone shouted and I cursed under my breath and tried to hurry forward.

Wasted effort on my part, Marian soon caught up with me. Not that I didn't like her, she was one of the more tolerable scientists here, I'd even venture to call her a friend. But she was that annoying friend that for some reason always irks you. She was a tall ginger, with a charismatic appearance and personality to match, and yet she looked much too fragile to work here. But she had the mind to make up for it, and thankfully was considerate enough to put any scientific babble into words that made sense to normally people. In other words me. But it was in times like this, when I was just about to head out, and in that perky tone of hers, that she wanted something. And I could never say no.

"Marian." I said with an annoyed smile as she caught up with me. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you could get me some more of the glowing moss, I am so close to recreating it in the lab, I just need a couple more samples to perfect it." She replied with excitement and a little out of breath.

Did I mention she wasn't a crazy scientist with a hatred and lust to destroy the whole world? Well, she was also one of the good guys. Trying to find some gain out of this disaster, instead of wasting time looking for a solution that doesn't exist. And she really could help with her glowing plant thingy. We were using it in the wall instead of electricity; we were practically living isolated from the rest of the world, by our own. We were surviving without their help. But the world outside was stubborn to the end; they simply wanted nothing to do with the Noxious Demesne. Even if it could solve all problems in the world, they would rather die than have to go anywhere near this 'poison'. And everyone is wondering why the world is heading for destruction. There you go. Problem solved.

"Define a couple more." I said.

"A container full, or so."

"You and I have very different opinions about 'a couple'." I huffed. "Ok, fine. You owe me though; I have enough crazy scientists bugging me to get samples for them."

"You should start charging them for your unique services." She said putting an arm around my shoulders. She was a tad taller than me, most people here were. I don't have the bulk of the soldiers, or the stocky build of most of the scientists, I was simply average. That, and I don't wear high heels, they are a death trap, in my opinion.

"I am." I said with a grunt, nudging her arm off and continued walking. I wasn't greedy or anything, but putting a price on my services kept most of the more stupid requests of my back. But, unfortunately, like I said, most.

"Good luck!" Marian shouted after me and I sighed.

I didn't believe in luck, nor did I believe that it would do anyone any good out there. But neither did I think that skill played a role when it came to survival in the Demesne. I had seen the best soldiers march into the forest and never come back. But at the same time some flimsy scientist came back with nothing but a scare, and vice versa of course. There was no method to the madness that happened in the



Demesne. Just like the seasons, who came back and who didn't seemed to be at its whim. Personally I just tried staying on the Demesne's good side, which was hard when the roles of good and bad had been thrown into the wind.

When I reached the departure area; a huge hall with observation decks around the walls and equipment neatly sorted underneath, the techs were already busy at work preparing my equipment. I would have done it myself. But the technology was so far beyond my understanding that it would be easier for me to travel to the moon. I had tried, I really had, but they lost me the moment the first scientific word came into play. Not that I was particularly stupid or anything, I was pretty skilled with computers, the normal ones that every adult had. And knew a thing or two about vehicles, but this was built so that no one, except the builders, understood it. But the scientists somehow thought that I was completely incompetent with technology, and made it infuriatingly simple. Something along the lines of press this button and the gadget will do the job for you. I tried to brush it off, knowing that if certain circumstances in my life had been different, I would have ended up like one of them. Now there's a scare.

I slipped into the changing rooms, making sure to avoid the techs and scientists buzzing about, they would only have something to explain or complain about. The changing room was more of equipment storage, with weapons, uniforms, hazard suits, gadgets, and a whole lot of things that to my knowledge had never been used. And I was pretty much the only who ever used this room, like I said, I was special. Even though I didn't feel like it. I would have been fine with a simple locker where I could store my stuff, and a small back door where I could slip out without all the preparations. But it was the laws of the wall, and the will of the scientists who ran this place.

I pulled out my outfit; it wasn't anything fancy, just a tight fitting long sleeved shirt with matching pants and gloves. It made sure that, other than my face, there was no bare skin. A precaution I didn't think much of, but it was better than the alternative, a hazmat suit. Now that would do no one any good. On top went a practical shirt and cargo pants with enough pockets to hold everything important, and a sturdy set of boots. A belt around my waist with attached sheaths that held a hunting knife either side. Not that I used them all too much in dangerous situations, I had the guns for that. One was strapped around my leg, and the other two sat snugly in a pair of shoulder holsters. You expected a bazooka, didn't you? Well sorry to disappoint neither would do much good, and if you needed them, you were already dead. To complete the set, I had a hooded jacket made out of a tougher material than the rest and which reached down below my waist. And a mask that could cover my mouth and nose in case of, well, I have no idea what, and I'm hoping never to find out.

I stepped in front of the mirror at the far end of the room to check that everything was in its place. The woman staring back at me looked like the soldier in an apocalyptic movie. A relative young pale face with piercing blue eyes staring back at me with the attitude of a rogue and loner. I was in all ways average looking. With nothing to boast shape wise, and whatever muscles I had were determined to stay hidden. The only thing outstanding were my hair, cut short so that they would never get in the way, and completely white. Not naturally, no, for some reason I had decided to bleach my hair, because I felt like it. Call it a belated rebellion from my teenage years. It was the only thing noticeable of my appearance, and I was glad to keep all the other 'special' things about me hidden beneath the surface.

Completely prepared and determined to go, I returned to the departure hall, where my bike was waiting and ready to go. It was a motorcycle, built specifically for my ventures into the Demesne, it was



fast, robust, sleek, and thankfully not an eyesore. I couldn't tell you anything more about it, not even how much horse power it has. It is built and fuelled by what we found in the Demesne and I'm not one to care for the specific numbers, all I know is that it goes as fast as I need it to.

I quickly swung onto the seat and flipped the switch. The motor awoke like a cat, a yawn and a stretch and then it simply sat quietly with a soft purr running through it. I had never been one for motorcycles, but this one had caught my heart. It did everything I needed it to, and was as silent as a bird in the sky. A quality that the outside vehicles desperately needed.

I slowly rolled towards the door. I didn't feel like having another lecture from a scientist who needed their samples to be taken in a specific way, or a tech explaining another piece of equipment that I really didn't need. And if anything, they could still reach me through my earpiece. A small little thing that was greatly annoying and everyone who worked here was required to wear it at all times. So that we could be reached whenever, where ever. It allowed a secure line of communication between those who worked in the wall. Creepy thing was that even when we left the wall, say to visit relatives, they could still apparently reach us, even if we were in the middle of nowhere. Unbelievable, but I wouldn't know, since I had come here I had never left except to go inside the wall.

I think they had gotten the point that I want to leave since the doors opened. I let the bike roll into the slightly smaller room, completely plain and sealed, and waited as the doors closed behind me. I heard a voice over the com, someone trying to remind me of something, but I promptly ignored them. I didn't have the patience to listen to the string of instructions and protocols that followed; I just wanted to get out. Finally the doors in front of me opened, and I was greeted by a familiar sight; desert and ash, and at the horizon, the forest looming like an omen. A smile slipped across my face as I pulled up the face mask and put on a set of shaded specs. After being trapped in the wall for so long, these excursions were always an escape from reality. An adventure; one that I found hard to return from, even though I knew in my mind that it was dangerous and would eventually kill me. I couldn't help but feel a thrill every time I ventured out into the unknown.

Without a glance back, I forced my heel down on the gas and was off like lightning, leaving everything and anything behind me.