

Sample

She got up and made her way to Moler Town. Brannon hadn't specified where they would meet for her tour of the underground maze that was Moler Town, but she had assumed he meant The Green entrance. It was a large gap in the ground with a steep downward slope the army had made to ensure quick access if the need arose.

Brannon was waiting just inside the entrance, gun ready, pointed at the ground. He said nothing to her as she greeted him, just looked at the ground and waited in silence.

On The Green, some kids had found a wondering parasite. They were poking it with sticks, careful not to let any fluid get on them. Five minutes to twelve Calvin came jogging, his face ashen and his eyes darting erratically.

"Late again," Brannon said with a small smile. "Looks like you are on latrine duty tomorrow."

"He still had five minutes," Vin said coldly. There was nothing to latrine duty, but if you have to clean twenty toilets in the few precious hours you had to sleep daily, it meant the world.

Calvin didn't react, just took his rifle from his shoulder and pointed it at the ground.

Brannon ignored her completely and entered the tunnel leading to the depths of Jericho. Some people called Moler Town the intestines of the mountain, but the intestine only went one way. No, to her, Moler Town was like the central nervous system. It stretched the entire span of Jericho and even beyond where those above had dared to go.

"This is the first marketplace," Brannon said next to her, the first time he had addressed her directly since lunch. "As far as we can tell there are hundreds of these spread over hundreds of miles."

He took out a flashlight and pointed it at a wall. The light was black and it illuminated a green fluorescent stamp of two swords crossing. Underneath was an arrow pointing southwest.

"At any given time, there are eighteen teams of twos and threes patrolling each a section of three-square miles. This is the symbol of your section. Stay within your section. If you get lost, follow the arrows." He handed his flashlight to her, before continuing. "I expect you to do your rounds through your sector at least twice in a shift. Scan the barcode on the shaft of your gun at that station every time you pass it. You will find several stations spread out across your section."

The machine he was pointing at had one black eye looking straight at them. It stood out like a sore thumb against the raggedy stalls in the marketplace.

"There is one dangerous area I should make you aware of," he said, looking straight ahead. The way he said it, and the way he couldn't meet her eyes, told Vin that he had nefarious intentions, but she followed him anyway.

He led her and Calvin into a series of tunnels, all crowded, but the further they went, the narrower the corridors became until they grew quiet with fewer and fewer civilians in them and more and more thugs. He finally stopped in a small alcove, empty and just out of sight of everyone.

He shoved her against the wall, her head scraping against the low roof and his knife was against her throat. His movements were so slow that Vin could anticipate every move he made before he made it, but she let him pin her down. She wanted to see how far he would go to avenge his pride.

"I had one more evaluation to pass. One more!" he yelled, pushing the knife deeper into her skin.

Tiny trickles of blood were starting to run down her neck. The blade was scratching against the thin cartilage of her windpipe. She shifted slightly, moving his blade a fraction of an inch, so it rested between cartilages on the ligament that was a lot more flexible.

“A soldier should always be ready to face a pack of Gaders. Your limit is two Gaders at any given time.”

“I earned those consecutives. I deserved to level up.”

“No, you didn’t,” Vin said, allowing her eyes to search for Calvin. He was standing about a meter away, staring down at the ground. “You can’t handle the pressure. I did you a favor. You are not ready to go out there yet. The third, fourth trip, you would have been skewered.”

“What do you know?” Brannon screamed, spittle flying.

That was as long as Vin was willing to wait. He was losing control. She grabbed the wrist holding the knife, twisted it down, took the knife from his hand, spun him around completely, and pinned the back of his hand to the wall with the knife.

She had been too fast for him. The one moment he was contemplating slitting her throat, the next he was pinned against the wall, screaming in pain. He tried to pull the knife out of his palm, but it was impossible. She had driven it into the stone as far as it could go.

“Take my advice,” Vin said carefully. “Concentrate on your training. Learn to control your emotions and stop wasting your time trying to be the king of two.”

Calvin wasn’t staring at the ground anymore, he was wide-eyed, wondering if he should run away or help the creep that had been torturing him for months.

“Let’s go, Calvin,” Vin said sternly. “We have rounds to do.”

She waited until they were far enough away that Brannon couldn’t hear them before she spoke again. “You are a coward, Calvin. I felt sorry for you until I realized that.”

He didn’t even answer, just kept staring down at the ground, walking next to her mechanically.