

“Please sir,” the pregnant woman begged the guard in purple, “I’m very concerned about my child’s health. I shouldn’t be in the mines!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the guard replied in a mocking tone, “you want an exemption because you’re expecting? All I heard is you need to work for two people! Now grab your pick,” he continued, venom seeping into his tone, “and get to your post!”

“But sir, please! I-” the guard cut her off with the back of his hand, sending her down to the mud below. She began weeping, and the guard let out a grim laugh. Meredith couldn’t watch any longer. She ran over to the guard and shoved him back.

“You can’t talk to her like that!” she commanded, kneeling down to aid the pregnant woman. “She’s carrying the future of the world, and should be held in reverence!”

The guard, still slightly reeling, adjusted his scarf and cleared his throat. “My apologies. I don’t know what came over me there. I will say your face is unfamiliar to me. What’s your name?” He extended a hand, which Meredith, after assuring that the woman was okay, took and used to stand back up.

“My name is Mer-” She was struck hard in the stomach by a baton, which took the wind out of her. She collapsed into the mud and curled into a ball, clutching her gut. She looked up and saw the man was sneering at her.

“You seem to be new around here, girl, so let me do you a favor and explain your situation.” The guard aimed a kick directly into Meredith’s mouth, making clean contact with her teeth and knocking one out. He leaned down to see the damage, and grinned in pride. “*You are worthless. You matter less than the mud you’re laying in now. The sooner you learn that, the better!*” He pulled his leg up and tried to stomp on Meredith’s head, but her hand and forearm managed to absorb some of the blow before she felt the pressure of his boot on her temple.

The guard went to stomp again, but something stopped his assault. The guard let out a confused noise and placed his foot back in the mud with a squelch. Meredith, trying to prepare for the next attack, looked up. After realizing it wasn't coming, she relaxed slightly to read the scene.

A large figure had rested their left hand on the shoulder of the guard. They were cloaked in a large, muddied scarf that gave off faint signs of a lighter brown beneath. Or was that just dirt? At this juncture, it didn't matter. Something was unique about their hand, though: it had no fingernails and, in spite of the clouds in the sky, the fingers gave off a faded reflection. It had to be a prosthetic, and an old one, too, given the rust. That, or years of work had dulled the quality of the metal and they didn't have the money to replace it. In any event, they had to be a worker. The way the guard addressed them confirmed it.

"Oh, hey there *sir*. Is something the matter, *man*?" They spoke to the figure as if they were a puppy. "Last time I checked, you were being retrained to be a good little boy and listen to your superiors. So if you'd be so kind..." the guard shrugged the hand from his shoulder and turned back to Meredith with a sadistic smile, "... I have some business to *finis*-"

The figure wrapped their left arm around the throat of the guard, right over the scarf to ensure they could get a clean hold on the neck. The wrist of the hand released smoke and shot outwards a good few inches before curling over the head to cinch a one-handed rear naked choke. The guard writhed and squirmed, trying to escape the hold, but the strength of the arm and prosthetic were too much to overcome. Slowly, the light faded from the guard's eyes as he slipped into unconsciousness. Soon after, the figure let him fall limply to the ground, his body sinking ever so slightly into the mud. The figure shifted their gaze to Meredith, their hazel pupils cutting straight through her.

“You shouldn’t do that, y’know,” they said, shifting slightly in place. Meredith turned and spit out a mouthful of blood.

“What, defend someone who’s sacred and in danger? She’s pregnant! She should be treated with more dignity than that!” Meredith’s voice rose more as she spoke. The figure raised their right hand to try and calm her down. It didn’t work.

“Trust me, I know,” the figure replied sullenly. “I know they should be treated with respect. And they are in other districts. But here? In District 5? Not here, at least not for us.” They motioned to their scarf.

“Then why don’t you fight for them? Why did it take me getting my ass kicked for you to do something?” Meredith spit again. There was still blood, but it seemed to be slowing a bit.

“I am. *We* are. But we have to do it a different way. Doing it this way,” they waved their left hand over the unconscious guard, their fingers and wrist barely moving, “will cost me another week of rations.”

Meredith adjusted herself, propping herself up on her right arm. “Then what kinda plan do you have? Protests in the mines? That sure seems like it’d go well.”

The figure shook their head. “I can’t tell you here. If you want, I can bring you to meet some friends. Given you’re new here, you should probably make some. And my friends are good people.”

“Why the hell should I trust you?” Meredith skepticized.

“I just saved you from an ass kicking, didn’t I?” the figure smiled faintly beneath their shroud.

“And why should you trust me?”

“Because I saw why you got your ass kicked, and nothing in this short conversation has led me to believe it changed your ideals.” They extended their right hand. “So, you interested?”

Meredith looked away for a brief thought before turning back. “The hell do I have to lose?” She took the figure’s hand. They hoisted her up with such force she nearly fell forward into them. After regaining her footing, she looked up a good foot and a half to meet their eyes.

“Since we never did formalities, my name’s Meredith.”

The figure let out a slight chuckle and threw their head back to put down their hood. Their hair was matted and dirty, but long enough for them to shake out. “Name’s Arin.” They gave a small nod before checking Meredith’s face with their right hand. She recoiled.

“Got you pretty good, didn’t he?” They pulled their hand back before motioning to their left hand, which was still stuck. “Since I gotta visit a friend to get this sorted anyways, we’ll get you cleaned up. Dane can’t fix everything, but he’s the best technician I know. He’ll get us both sorted out.” Arin began to guide Meredith towards a nearby street, but she stopped them.

“Give me a moment.” She turned towards the body of the still unconscious guard and stomped on his face before spitting the last of the blood in her mouth at him. She turned back to Arin, who couldn’t help but smile.

“Now we can go.”