

DESCRIBE A PLACE AS YOU EXPLORE IT FOR THE FIRST TIME

The wheels of the wagon creaked to a halt, the sound low and long, as though even the wood sensed the dread of our destination and mourned its arrival. I was shoved from the cramped interior before I could brace myself, landing hard in the cold, sticky mud. Rain lashed down from above, each drop like a needle of ice, slicing through the fabric of my torn tunic and sinking into my bones.

Blinking through the storm, I caught my first glimpse of it. A vast stone labyrinth stretched before me, towering and silent, every corner swallowed by shadow. I had imagined ruins or overgrown paths, not this living, breathing monument of despair. Its gray walls rose like the backs of ancient beasts, slick with rain and time, completely untouched by mercy.

There was no pause to marvel, no time to wonder. The wardens, faceless behind their angular steel helms, barked commands that echoed like thunder against the stone. Their armor clanked with every movement, heavy and deliberate, each step a reminder that this place belonged to them. I followed the line of new arrivals through an iron gate that gaped like a jaw, ready to devour us whole.

The courtyard we entered was no sanctuary. Figures moved through the mud, skeletal and silent, stripped of humanity. They dug pointlessly, carried stones in endless loops, their eyes glassy and unseeing. Their movements were not labor but punishment wearing the mask of purpose. The rain carved paths through the dirt, pooling around their ankles like nature itself sought to bury them.

I had read of ancient temples, forgotten cities, and sacred palaces. Places explorers dream of uncovering. This was none of those. This was a monument to suffering, a relic not of forgotten times, but of pain sustained. Even the air carried the history. Rust, sweat, filth, and something else, deeper and older. It curled into my lungs like smoke and clung to my skin.

We were herded through a narrow corridor. The torchlight flickered against the damp stone, casting warped shadows that danced like phantoms. One by one, the others were taken, cell doors slamming behind them like thunderclaps. Until only I remained.

A guard stepped forward, keys jangling like a bell of doom. The door opened.

No explanation. No ceremony.

Just a shove into the unknown.

I stumbled into blackness. The door closed with a scream of metal.

Then silence.

And I knew. I had not discovered this place.

It had discovered me.

Vinsler

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GRADE 10