

StoryLine-4

Attack Wave Ended
Defenders successful
All attackers defeated, 8 support units captured
7 defenders lost, no sectors lost
Base settlement designated as Base gains 59,236 experience. 3,943,217 experience needed for next level

The message pops up when I see Base's gate. Sucks that we lost people, but we won, that's good. We even managed to hold all the town's neighborhoods this time. A couple of years ago, we lost one of them in a wave and it reverted to wild status. Took most of a year to tame it to the point we could resettle it.

The system isn't particularly nice in the wild. One of the reason Dad won't leave Base. Even the town's too close to that for him.

"Welcome back," Base greets me cautiously. "You look to be whole."

"A little sore and banged up, but I have most of my hit points."

"Dennis Michael Carpenter!" dad snaps the instant I step through the gate, which closes behind me. If there was anyone heading this way, they're going to have to wait for this to be done with before Base opens it again.

"Dad," I start, knowing I'm wasting my time, "I was able to—"

"Don't you say anything."

I sigh. "Yes, dad."

"I told you to stay in the bunker."

He didn't; he took for granted I'd stay, but pointing that out is only going to earn me a longer scolding. He only likes technicalities when they go in his favors.

"Will," one of the older man from the group I escorted says, "your son—"

"Don't step into something that doesn't involve you, Harry," dad growls.

The man gives a sad shrug. I appreciate the effort, but there's no reasoning with my dad when he's like that.

"How could you let him out?" he demands, addressing Base.

"I wasn't given instruc—"

"Bullshit! I ordered you to—"

"You aren't my commander, William," Base replies flatly.

"Oh, wait until my father gets back. I'm going to tell him about this and he's going to wipe you—"

"The Commander already knows," Base replies.

"You're lying. He'd never let Dennis stay out there. He knows how I feel about it."

"He ordered me to escort people back," I say, and because I pray that for once he'll see I can do good, I add. "There was a Drakoling who could have hurt them, so I protected them. Then Grandpa arrived and—"

"Are you okay?" dad asks, his anger replaced by pure terror. He's manhandling me in the process of looking me over. "Do you need to see Doc Brown?"

"I'm fine, Dad." Doc Brown's the town's healer. Only the older folks call him Doc. He's Junior Brown to the rest of us. His mom was a doctor, before the system, and he took her healer class.

"You are in so much trouble," he growls. "And so are you Dennis." His tone is stern now. He points deeper within Base. "Go to your room." I start moving, barely dragging my feet. "And if I find out you had anything to do with helping him, Base, you will pay for it."

* * * * *

My confinement lasts until morning. Which means I miss the festivities, and that sucks. I don't even get to access Base's entertainment beyond the book and music library, because dad's that angry at me.

"Don't leave Base," Dad says as I get up from the table after breakfast.

Like that's even going to be possible. I doubt Grandpa Louis did more than scold Base for telling me about the orders before I was inside, but Base is going to be on his best behavior. I won't be surprised if the

gates close if I so much as look at them.

I won't do that. It would annoy those who need to cross it.

Josie runs to join me. "Glad to see you're out of the doghouse."

"For all the good it's doing me. I'm grounded. I can't step outside of Base."

"Means you don't get stuck on cleanup duty."

"I want to do cleanup," I grumble. "I want to do something."

"Have you chosen a class?"

I glare at her. "What's the point? My dad probably picked it for me."

"You really think he'll do that?"

"Base?" I call.

"Your father hasn't narrowed it down to one," Base replies helpfully.

"See?" I sigh. "How do you get your folks to let you go out and have fun?"

She chuckles. "Probably by not going out and putting my life in danger when I'm told not to. Did you really fight a Drakoling?"

"Fighting's a strong word. It kicked my ass, then grandpa saved it." I look around and lowered my voice. "I also fought a Ramthom one on one."

"How are you not dead?" she looks me over as if I'm a ghost.

"I was—" I did promise I wouldn't mention Rich was in town. "I got rescued, again."

"Your dad knows?"

"I you kidding me? I'd be in my room until the system vanishes if he knew. He'd force me to take something like latrine cleaner as my class just to be sure I never went anywhere."

"That's not a thing," Base offers.

"Then whatever horrible other class that would force me to stay here."

"You can be a guard," Josie offers. "You'd get to fight in the waves, and when some monster gets too close. It's what I'm going for."

"No, I can't." I raise a hand toward the closest speaker.

"William has removed all combat classes from those Dennis can choose," Base says.

"He can do that?" she asks, stunned. "I mean, could my mom just come to you and tell you what I can choose?"

"No," Base replies. "Only the commander can give orders I can't disobey."

I chuckle. Base is very creative when it comes to finding ways not to disobey Grandpa's orders.

"So your dad told the Commander what to do?"

I shrug. "You do remember the Commander's my grandpa, right?"

"Shouldn't he take your side, then? My grandfather's always on my side when there's a dispute."

I shrug, then notice where our steps took us and consider turning around.

"I should head to the front," Josie says, noticing where I'm looking. "Unlike you, I might not want to do cleanup, but it's how I can help. See you later today?"

"Sure," I reply, looking at the command building.

"Do you want to come in?" Base asks. "You should at least look at the list of classes."

I don't have to go in for that. The class list is just a system query. I can even get the list of all the class that exist, if I want to make myself sick with envy. But because the choice can only be made at a settlement node, and Base is Court's node, the list of what I can choose from is filtered through him. Like everything, there are exceptions, but they aren't going to end up with me getting anything better.

My life sucks.

I step in, and the door closes behind me.

The command room is wider than long. In six steps, I'm at the bank of computers that line the wall. It takes three times that to cross the room on the width. A chair grows out of the floor before a screen.

Base doesn't need to grow the things he makes. Like everyone else, he has an inventory, and he can just 'equip' something, and it'll be where he wants it. But he adds little things like that; making them flow out of surfaces.

Because he's a military node, he had extra features. He can make things. He only does it in emergencies because he doesn't want to mess with the town's economy. He also had a defense system, which he only uses in dire situation because they aren't made for precision.

That time we lost a neighborhood to the wild, Base had to get involved in that fight. Keeping the

monster incursion from proceeding any further resulted in the destruction of every building there from mortar explosion. There were also guards still fighting in the wave.

The system doesn't say who's responsible for the deaths when it announces the victory. Few people know about it. I do because Grandpa needed to be with family after that, and we're all he's got left.

I sit, and a list appears on the screen

- Apothecary
- Baker
- Blacksmith
- Carpenter
- Leather worker
- Mason
- Painter
- Tanner
- Weaver

"Is there any way you can..." I can't even finish the question. I know the answer. My dad even removed farmer from the list, because that would take me outside of Base.

"I'm sorry. The Commander didn't leave me any maneuvering room."

"It's not fair."

"I know. But you have to remember, Dennis, your class doesn't define you. It's only an aspect of who you are."

"An aspect that's going to make my life boring."

"There is something to be said for boring," Grandpa Louis says behind me.

"Says the man who has a power armor and gets to kick monster ass," I grumbled.

"And who shuts down if he steps outside of Base's sensor field," he says, sitting in the chair that flows out of the floor next to me. "Thanks."

"But you get to do stuff." I wave at the list. "What am I going to do with that?"

"Whatever you want." He ignores my glare. "Base is right. Your class doesn't have to limit who you are. You remember stories of Old Man Milton?"

I have to think back for that one. "He was one of the original farmers, right?"

"More or less. Back then, Base's sensor field was barely a few hundred meters, and he didn't have any of the antenna that lets him get warnings of what's approaching. No one wanted to settle outside of that, but Old Man Milton, he went out there and set his farm in the middle of the forest. He was fighting the monsters, tending his land, his animals, taking trees down. Trust me when I say this, but without him, there would be no Court today. His farming class was so high the guy would get wheat to grow basically overnight."

"He was a farmer?"

"Well, yeah. What did you think he was?"

I shrug. "Some fighting class and he just retired into farming."

Grandpa shakes his head. "His fighting prowesses aren't because of his class. That's what I mean, Dennis. Don't think of your class as something that's going to limit you. Like Base said. It's just one aspect of who you'll become."

I nod, momentarily feeling better.

Then I remember the detail Grandpa is forgetting.

My dad.

He's not going to be content forcing me to pick a boring class. He's going to make sure I don't get to do anything else either. I look at the list again, and it still looks like a death sentence by boredom to me.

"Dennis," Grandpa calls after me as I leave the room, but I ignore him. I don't want empty attempts at comfort anymore. I just want...

Anything else.

I walk around Base. He's a circle a little over a kilometer in diameter now, so there are plenty of places to be without anyone. While he's the center of Court, he's not a place where a lot of people come to. The artisans who need special spaces, like the smiths, which reminds me I still have the copper in my inventory, the tanners, and others where the waste can be a problem have their workshops here because Base can absorb and process them. Some he makes into useful stuff, others he packages to be shipped out for someone else to use.

“Was that your girlfriend?”
I’m against the wall.

Debuff: Stunned, applied, 10 seconds

My heart is in my throat as I stare at the green-eyed guy dressed in black, trying to understand where he came from. I wasn’t so lost in thoughts I can’t have noticed him approaching.

He smirks. “You okay?”

“You startled me,” I snap, as the debuff vanishes.

“Yeah, that’ll happen. So, she your girlfriend?”

“What? Who?”

“Debuff still there?”

“No, it’s gone. You mean Josie?”

“That her name?”

“She’s not my girlfriend. She’s just my friend.” Of course, now that he’d asked, I wonder if we should be more than friends.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

And she’s right out of my thought with that look Rich gives me. “Wha...” I shake myself. “What are you doing here?” I look around the deserted plaza. “I thought you didn’t want anyone to know you’re here.”

“I didn’t want you to tell anyone,” he replies, stepping closer, and if I didn’t have a wall at my back, I’d back up because I... I have no idea how I feel about what that look is implying. I mean. “Nice save, by the way, not telling her I saved you.”

I nod dumbly. He’s close enough I can smell him, spices and sugar, and wildness.

“And no one knows I’m here,” he whispers.

“Base knows,” I croak, and he smiles.

“Base and I have an understanding, isn’t that right, Baby?”

Base doesn’t reply.

“He doesn’t get involved in what I do, and in return, I don’t do anything that’s going to cause him problem.” He looks me up and down. “And you looked like you could use some cheering up, which I know Base would want someone to do something about, isn’t that right?”

Again, Base remains silent.

“So, what’s got you feeling down? And what can I do... for you to make you feel... better?”

My mouth is dry, part of me is... Okay, let’s not think with that part right now. I scoot to the left to put some distance, and he watched me, a smile forming. But I can breathe again. Breathe something that isn’t so... him.

“Tomorrow’s my Choosing Day.”

“Then why so gloom? That’s supposed to be something worth celebrating, right?”

Again that look, and he’s definitely implying he wants to help me celebrate and it would—shut up. I’d glare down at that part, but I think that would let Rich know how he’s affecting me.

“My dad’s not going to let me pick the class I want.”

“Really? I didn’t think anyone got to dictate those.”

“My dad’s the commander’s son, and he—”

“You’re Base’s—”

“Don’t!” Base snaps, and I startle.

“Touchy,” Rich says with a smirk. When he looks at me, there’s understanding there, some sorrow. “I’m sorry you’re getting such a sucky deal.” When he comes to me, there’s none of the heat, of the implied things he could do. He’s just this guy a couple years older than I am. “How about we blow this joint? Go outside and see the world before your old man locks you in a tower and throws away the key?”

I slump. “I can’t. Base as orders not to let me through the gates.”

“Is that right?”

Silence.

“Come on, Base, I’m being civil here.” There’s an edge to Rich’s tone.

“Yes. The Commander had instructed me to keep track of Dennis and not let him leave.”

“I see. So if you lose track of him, there’s little you can do about it?”

"I can close all my gates."

"Would you really deny him his last day of freedom?"

"Richard," Base says, sounding tired, "we both know this isn't about him."

Rich—really, his name is Richard? No wonder no one my age knows that. That's an old man's name—is slow in replying and when he does, he sounds older. "Tell me, Base. When I have ever done anything to someone under your care that led to them being in trouble?"

"Never," Base replies reluctantly. "But Chuck has warned me about you."

"And Chuck has so many issues, I don't understand why you even allow him here. I give you my word, Base, that I will simply take Dennis outside so he can enjoy his last day. When he comes back, he will be in a much better state of mind."

"Fine," Base answers. "But that doesn't change the fact that if I see him close approaching a gate, I will have to close it."

"Let me deal with that part." Rich grabs my hand and pulls me to him and I get another nose full of those spicy and wild smells. He leans to my ear, a hand running down my back, and whispers, "And will you let me take you on a world of adventure, Dennis?"

We're pressed together. He's got to feel how I'm reacting.

When I reply, it's a croak I barely hear. "Yes."