

## StoryLine-1

“Attack,” Grandmother instructs, and I raise the wooden sword to deflect Josie’s attack, slash as she jumps back, press and lift my leg so her sweeping kick passes under it. Then I backup, gasping from the pommel hit in my stomach. She grins, and her face lights up.

Never noticed until now how pretty she is. I wonder if that’s because I’m about to get a class soon. About to be an adult.

“Stop gawking, Dennis,” Grandmother instructs. “Why aren’t you taking advantage of his distracted state, Josie? Remember everyone, in a real fight, you can’t afford to be distracted, or not take advantage of your opponent’s distractions.”

“Yes, Grandmother,” the twenty or so of us on the training field reply in unison. Me, Josie and three others are the oldest. My sixteenth birthday is in a few days, Josie a week later, and the others spread over the next two months.

She isn’t our grandmother, she’s actually my great-grandmother. Grandpa Louis’s mom.

“I don’t get why we have to do this anymore,” Josie grumbles as she thrusts and I deflect. “It’s not like we can go up in levels.”

I reply with a thrust of my own, which she barely parries.

“An attitude like that is how you end up needing to be rescued, Josie,” Grandmother says without slowing her pacing in front of the field. “You grow too dependent on the system to maintain your skills, and even if the number’s the same, you are too slow to win against your opponent.”

“And in a few days,” I say, “we’re going to gain level as quickly as we can train.” I punctuate my comment with a series of jabs. “So I want to be as close to going up as I can be for when I pick my class.”

“You made up your mind yet?” She parries and counters, then goes for an overhead swing I have to block by bracing the flat of my sword against my forearm. The force still drops me to a knee.

“Still going over my options.” Which is code for ‘still trying to get my dad to let me pick my class.’

“If you don’t—”

The alarm klaxon sounds and we all stop. It only ever sounds for two reasons. Preparedness, and—

### Monster Wave Incoming

“This is not a Drill,” the deep voice coming from around us say. Grandmother looks at the speakers on top of the pole. “I repeat, this is not a drill. Monster wave incoming. All civilians, make your way to the bunkers. Combatants, take your positions, first responders to the checkpoints. I repeat, this is not a drill.” The klaxon sounds again three times and goes silent.

The klaxon and voice messages are there for the older folks. The rest of us know to

leave the system alerts up. You don't want to miss when a wave is incoming, especially if you're outside Base's influence. And it's also good to know when you're crossing onto another territory, you know, if your dad will ever let you travel at all.

"They're ahead of schedule," Grandmother muses, shifting her gaze to the closest gate in Base's wall. People from the town outside are already moving toward it. "Alright," she says in her drill sergeant voice, facing us. "You heard Base. Find your families and head to your bunker."

"I can help," I say.

"Me too," Josie adds.

Which earns us looks. Admiration from the youngest trainees and disbelief from those our age. Me and Josie are the only ones here because we want to be. The other three are here because it's one of the town rules that everyone needs to have basic fighting training as well as first aid. That class is tomorrow.

"I appreciate it," Grandmother said, and her voice softens ever so slightly. "But you are still children. Your parents wouldn't forgive me if I allowed you to get hurt. So move along; you have your orders."

Josie heads for the gate after dropping her training sword in the bin. I send mine to Base's inventory before heading deeper within him. Her family lives outside Base, while I, because I'm related to the Base Commander, live within it. Dad barely leaves the grounds.

I find him at our assigned bunker by his carpenter's workshop—yes, my dad, whose surname is Carpenter, is a carpenter—ushering people inside the five by five meters concrete building. More people are arriving. This bunker is assigned to the families living near the wall. A few hundred of them, I think. There are bunkers all along the wall for those living further away.

The wall is within the limit of Base's influence, so each bunker will accommodate all the families assigned to them.

"You're late," my dad says.

"I offered to help." I take position on the opposite side of the door and glance inside as I help a pregnant woman step in.

The space stretches further than I can see, with bunk beds on one side, separated by curtains. Further down, there's an eating area with basic food available. If needed, we can stay in there for a month. It's never been needed. A few days is as long as it takes to deal with these attack waves.

"Are you listening?" dad asks.

"Yes." What else am I going to say?

He sighs. "This is helping."

"This is standing around moving people through a door."

"It's making sure it happens in an orderly manner."

The flow of people slows.

"They don't need us standing here for that. Everyone has gone through the drills. They know how important it is to keep calm. It's Base, dad. They know this is the safest place they can be."

"Dennis Michael Carpenter," he growls. "Do not take that tone with me. Every role is important. Ours is to make sure they feel reassured that everything will be okay."

Ours is to stand around and wait while the fun stuff happens. “Yes, Dad.”

“Dennis,” he says in his ‘I’m trying to comfort you,’ voice. “It’s not all about running out there and having adventure. You’ll see. Once you have your class, there’s pleasure in simpler things too.”

He means once he’s narrowed the selection to only the classes he thinks are safe; which means boring. We had an argument last week when I told him I was not becoming a carpenter.

He’s not supposed to have a say in what my class will be. It’s supposed to be my choice and mine alone. But, the catalog of classes is held within a settlement’s node, and Base is that node. Since Louis, the base commander, is my dad’s father, that means my dad can talk him into limiting access to that list.

You’d think my grandfather would take my side on this, but dad has had something of a rough life because of the system, and Grandpa bends to rules to make him feel safe.

Which includes going along with what he wants for me.

“All families assigned to this bunker are accounted for,” Base says. The speaker grill above the door isn’t really a speaker. Base doesn’t need a speaker to speak within his area of influence, but a voice coming from nowhere freaks out the older folks, so every building has that grill, and Base projects his voice from it.

“Then in we go,” Dad says and motions for me to enter. When I don’t immediately obey, his eyes narrow and I go in, shoulders slumped.

He follows. “Base, we are in. You can close and seal the door.”

The door closes by itself slowly. Another thing Base does because it makes the old folks comfortable. He could just make the opening not there anymore, just like he can make the inside of a five by five meter box able to house a hundred families comfortably.

I’d prefer he just made the doorway vanish. That way I wouldn’t have to watch my future close in at the same time. If the fighting goes on long enough, I’ll be in here when my Choice Day arrives; and dad will be there to choose for me.

The moment that door closes, it’s all over for me. I’m going to be stuck with some boring class in this boring town until I die.

I take off and barely squeeze between the closing door and frame, not bothering to reach out and grab one of the backpacks hanging by it since that might get caught.

I am so not dying in this town.

It closes as the sun warms my face. I turn and watch as the outline of the door melts away.

“Don’t open it,” I plead. I know dad’s screaming at Base to do just that. “Please, I can help with the fighting.”

“I won’t open it,” Base’s voice replies, as if he’s standing next to me. “I know what it feels like to be held back. You go help. But be careful. The commander is going to be pissed at both of us if you get hurt.”

“Thanks!” I’m off again.

My first stop is the armory.

It’s unoccupied; everyone one’s already equipped. Not that anyone would stop me since it’s always good to have more swords against monsters. Even a classless kid like me; and yes, they can tell I don’t have a level yet. About the only thing that can be told without a

special ability, but we all have the same training. So I'm not defenseless.

Standing by the weapon's racks, I open its inventory and my equipment panel automatically does the same. I need armor, a shield, and a sword. Good thing I can add that directly to my equipped stuff, because with a strength of ten, and fifteen in strength training I only have four inventory slots. I have to settle for hardened leather since the metal ones are locked to their specific owner, but all swords and shields are basically the same.

Once armored and armed, I head for the closest gate. Those will remain open unless the defenders are forced to retreat within Base. That's never happened while I was alive.

I make it halfway to the front line when a shadow passes over me and I skid to a stop. The shape's way-wrong for a bird. No bird around here has a tail that lashes like that as it flies, or an elongated neck.

It circles overhead, and the light shimmers over it. I shake myself from the sight and run again. The front line is where I'm going to be—

It lets out a bone chilling call and dives for the buildings to my left. I change direction to match it. There's only one reason a monster will attack.

People screaming confirm it's seen prey.

Everyone should be in their bunkers by now, but the town proper is outside Base's influence, so he can't do anything about it. He can't even watch unless one of the cameras on the wall has a line of sight, and no one's bother keeping that in mind as they built up the town.

I burst into the courtyard and stop at the sight.

It's not a bird, but a lizard of some sort. Its scales shimmer in a rainbow of colors the way oil on water does. It's about four meters, not counting the tail, its muzzle is long and narrow filled with sharp teeth as it pulls its head back, then slams forward, its shoulders hitting the buildings on each side of the alley it's trying to force itself in. The screams come from in there, and that stops me from focusing and getting its name and level. We can get that from from monsters, unlike anyone with a class.

The buildings shake, one cracks, but they don't give.

Monsters waves are a three or four times a year thing for us. So we build everything monster tough.

I hit my sword against my shield. I do it again when it rears back, and its head snaps in my direction. Its eyes are larger than I expect, slitted and of a surprisingly vibrant amber. I hit my shield again.

"Come on. Easy target here. Ignore the armor, the shield, and the weapon. You aren't one of the smart monsters, right? You don't understand what I'm saying." That would suck.

He lunges at me, and I throw myself to the side. It slams into the building and I slash at it. The tip of the blade slides off its scales. That's going to be a problem. It roars as it rears back. Its head barrels at me and I raise my shield.

It takes the impact and sends me flying back. My health bar flashes as I lose some. What was that, a tenth? Grandmother keeps telling us to learn to read it, to know how much each blow takes out so we know when we need to run.

I run out of the way of the claws coming down at me.

Grandmother says that running to fight another day is the smart thing to do. Even before the system's time, she's seen too many battles to believe in fighting a losing one.

The noise makes me look over my shoulder as the claws gouge the wall. I look ahead in time to see the tail coming at me. My health bar flashes from the impact, and again when I hit the wall. Down close to half. Not good. At least I've avoided any debuffs, so I roll out of the way from the incoming tail.

I'm on my feet and drive the sword into it. Half the blade sinks in, then it's yanked out of my hand, making me backpedal, as it roars in pain and turns. Those amber eyes are damned expressive. And it is angry.

I back as best as I can as it snaps at me. Those teeth are vicious looking. I hit a wall with a curse, then raise my shield at the incoming teeth.

When they don't bite half my body off, I realize I closed my eyes.

Stupid.

I open them. The teeth are stopped by the top and bottom of the shield. Yep, monster tough, I still—

I scream as it shakes its head and my arm slips out of the straps. There goes more of my health. I'm under half for sure now. I sit up with a groan. It's looking at me, then spits the shield out before walking in my direction.

No sword, no shield, not much in the way of armor against that thing. Why am I not shitting my pants right now?

Shock?

Maybe it's time to run.

A face appears out of the alley. Older man, terrified.

I guess not. I get to my feet and equip the knife I keep in my inventory. I wish I was allowed to keep a sword in there, but that's another of the town's rules. No one can carry weapons bigger than a knife.

"Okay," I tell it. "That cinches it. I'm not as smart as I like to think."

I am so dead—

The form that drops between me and the monsters is covered in white armor, thick and solid looking.

Yep, I am so dead.

"Care to explain," Grandpa Louis says, "why you aren't in the bunker with your father?"