

StoryLine-14

No one pays us any attention as we make our way to Fifth Circle Road.

It's not really a circle, although it goes around Base. Grandpa Louis told me that the plan was for the town to be built in rings around Base, expanding as it grew, but that didn't last beyond the first expansion, when people built where ever they felt like it, and they had to redo the roads around that.

With each expansion, they tried to make the next ring stick to the plan, but didn't succeed. Fifth Circle Road is the newest ring. It handled the expansion of ten years ago. It when Court became large enough to trigger the monster waves, and the wall had to be upgraded to stone. Before that, they were logs that were easy to take down and move as people settled here.

I have no idea what we're going to do when we need to expand again. It's not like if Base decides to expand. He can simply absorb everything within his area of influence, which includes his wall and the buildings on the other side, and remake that where he needs it.

He hasn't done it. The last time he expanded was before I was born. Not long after Court had enough people, they couldn't all live inside his walls anymore. I don't know exactly how far Base can reach past his walls, but I know he went up in level twice since setting them there.

"What's wrong?" Josie asks and I look at her.

"Nothing."

She smiles. "You've been looking around like... I don't know, you never thought you'd see this place again?"

"Was I?" was I? I was looking, but I not like I was surprised I was back here. Right? I mean, here were a few times when I didn't think I'd make it back, make it out, but they are behind me, so this wasn't it, right?

She puts her arm in mine and...

What was I thinking about? The town, right?

"I'm just a bit surprise at how not special my return is." I motion around even as I feel like I'm making some excuse so I won't have to really explain myself. Not that I'm trying to.. What, hide something.

She chuckles. "Trust me, your father will make it special enough."

We turn once we Fifth Circle Road to head for the West Gate. Base has many of them, but West Gate is sort of me and dad's gate since that's the one we take when we go fishing.

"I guess he sent you to soften the punishment?"

"Base sent me. He let me know you were within the fields as soon as he sensed you. Your father probably isn't happy I knew you were back before he did."

Base sent Josie to welcome me home.

That makes me feel... surprisingly good.

"But yeah, no one's reacting to my return," I said, and yeah, I know. "I mean, I know it makes no sense to expect everyone to jump with joy that Dennis Carpenter's back with all parts intact, but... I guess the childish part of me hoped more people had worried."

“I worried,” she says. “Those who matter worried. Your father was beyond worried. He showed up at my house demanding to know if we were together.”

“My dad stepped beyond Base’s walls?” Oh, I am in so much trouble if he was that worried.

“He headed right back in as soon as my parents confirmed you were there.” She shrugs. “Not sure why he thought you’d be at my house, but yeah, he was back inside the walls minutes after.”

Her statement hurts a little, as I have no problem imagining the two of us alone in her bedroom. Me taking off her—

Whoa there, Dennis. Calm the horses.

Am I thinking about those because of Rich? Him asking if me and Josie were together? All the ways he hinted at what me and him could do, before shoving me into a hole and leaving me there to die?

“System to Dennis,” she says with a chuckle. “System to Dennis. You in there?”

“Sorry.” I clear my head with a shake, then scramble for some reason I zoned out. “Just readying myself for my dad.”

“It won’t be that bad.”

I stare at her.

“Okay, it probably will, but it’ll pass.”

“I’ll probably be level twenty before he lets me leave my room.”

“You can’t get levels being stuck in your room,” she replies with a light chuckle. “All your quests are going to be farm related.”

“Right...” I should tell her about my class. “About—”

“Josie!” someone calls, and a man hurries out of a fabric store carrying a bundle. “I’m glad I saw you. You’re saving me a trip. Your mother ordered these fabrics. Can you take them to her?”

“Of Course Mister Mainse.” We’re on our way again. “You were saying?”

I shake my head. It’s best I wait when we’re in private and after I told my dad.

We make it to West Gate and head inward in silence. A few people wave at us, at Josie, and it isn’t until we cross Second Circle Road someone reacts to my presence.

“Hey, look who’s back?” Kyle Price says, swaggering in our direction. He smiles at Josie. “You know he went off with this *guy*, right?”

I swallow. He saw Rich and me? I don’t remember seeing Kyle. Okay, I don’t remember much of the walk out of town other than Rich’s smell, and his arm around me and how my body reacted—

Stop that. Rich is an asshole. I am not going to react to the memory of him.

Josie glances at me, and I shrug. “We were just heading in the same direction.” I fix my gaze on Kyle and dare him to make something of that.

I’m being stupid. Kyle’s only one year older than I am, but that’s one year without any caps on his skills, as well as gaining levels. He’s only level four, and that’s because his dad’s in charge of the expeditions to the dungeon up north and he put Kyle on everyone of them, even if who goes is supposed to be rotated so everyone benefits.

But as a guard, that’s four levels where he gained a point in strength and endurance each time. Now he also had eight to put anywhere he wants, so those two and health is where

they'll have gone in. Then there's eight points for his skills, and all the training he put in over the year. Kyle is serious about protecting Court.

All that work's given him a nice body, good tan and hard muscles, but that swagger and the attitude really aren't helping him.

"Right." Kyle's smirk tells me he noticed how Rich was holding me. "Anyway, what are you now? A bandit? A cutthroat? Or are you..." he lowers his voice and smirks again. "Classless?"

"That's not a thing," Josie replied with a roll of the eyes.

"How do you know?" Kyle asks.

"The same way everyone knows. If you don't pick a class in the thirteen hours the system gives you, it gives you the one of the next person within range. Dennis' a farmer."

Whatever reply Kyle was about to give dies as he looks at me and pity replaces the attitude. "For real?"

"Yes, for real," She says before I can say otherwise. That's for the best. If I thought telling Josie before my dad was a bad idea, having Kyle Price screaming it through town while I'm still walking toward Base would be a disaster.

"Fuck man, that sucks. At least bandits get combat abilities."

"Skill still means more," I reply, repeating one of Grandmother's saying. "Without the right skill, the strongest ability's not worth the time spent going up in level."

"You mean it?" Kyle asks in surprise. "You're still going to guard duty?"

Is that respect in his voice?

"If my dad will let me."

He winces. "Look sorry for the..."

"It's okay," I tell him. I mean, it is. Kyle's kind of full of himself, but he's not a bad guy. "We should keep going. Waiting isn't going to make my dad any happier."

"When he finally lets you out," Kyle calls after us, "let me know. I'll tell my dad to put you on a dungeon team."

Like my dad will ever allow that.

"Don't let his taunting get to you. You don't need the dungeon to train your combat skills. Grandmother will do that. Considering how high her teaching skill has to be, she can probably have you higher than any trip to the dungeon, anyway." She squeezes me and my heart does somersaults.

We're greeted, and some of our friends welcome me back and I feel...

It's stupid, but seeing the relief on their face makes me feel like I matter. I know I do, but...

I did say it was stupid.

They don't stick with us, though. With a pat on the shoulder and a variation of 'good luck with your father,' they remain behind as I head to my...

It's just my dad. As angry as he's going to be, it shouldn't feel like an execution.

The gate comes into view, and the group fills it. I Recognize Dad, Grandpa Louis, and Grandmother, of course. Mister Tanner, Miss Molson and Kaiden are there too. Not sure if it's to support dad in his berating, or to hold him back. Dad's friends try to get him to temper his overprotectiveness, but in the end, they are his friends, so what he wants as a lot more sway.

I'm maybe twenty meters from the gate when dad's running, and before I get over the surprise, his arms are around me and he holds me tightly enough I'm surprised I don't see a system message about how my soak is the reason I'm not getting damage.

"I was so scared," he whispered. "You just disappeared. Even Base didn't know where you'd gone to. I was terrified the system had stolen you away."

That's not a thing, but I just hold on to my dad. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"What happened?" he demands, his voice hardening as he holds me by the shoulders. Grandpa Louis and Grandmother approach, while the others remain behind. "Where did you go? And how come Base didn't know you'd left?"

He knew, so in his fear, dad didn't ask the right question. Base is pretty good at skirting truths when he wants to. He's incapable of lying to the Commander, so he's learned how to not lie in a way that lets him say things how he wasn't to say them.

"Calm down, William," Grandpa Louis says. "I'm sure that whatever happened, Dennis didn't mean to simply wander off like that."

"To the forest?" Dad demands of his father. "How does he 'wander off' all the way to the forest? That's where Base said he sensed him step out of when he was back in range." He turns his anger on Josie. "And you, young lady. I'm going to have a talk with your father about you just running off to meet my son and not tell me about it."

"Leave her out of this," I snap. "She did nothing wrong. And I didn't mean to be gone so long. Rich just said we'd be out the day and..."

Oh, fuck.

"Rich?" Dad demands, stretching the name. "Richard was here? You talked to him?" never thought the expression 'being livid' was a real thing. Dad's face is turning red. "You went off with that..." he sputters, then his expression shifts to fear. "Did he touch you?"

"No, Dad, he didn't do anything like *that* to me." I can't quite silence the voice that wishes he had touched me the way dad's expression implies.

"Why did you talk with him?" he demands, sounding hurt. "Haven't I warned you away from him enough?"

"He's not someone you want me to be around isn't much of a warning, Dad," I reply, by temper rising. "Not one of you ever says anything more than 'he's a bad influence,' when we ask about him. You think that if I'd known he was going to try to kill me, I'd have gone with him?"

"He what?" Grandpa Louis demands, while dad pales.

"He shoved me in a hole and left, but I got out of it, obviously."

"Base," Grandpa Louis snaps.

Base doesn't reply.

"Base, don't make me walk to the center, so I am going to delete you."

I stare. Can he do that?

Base sighs. "I don't think this is a conversation you want us to have in public, Commander."

"You think I give one fuck who overhears what I have to tell you about allowing that man within your walls?"

"Then I'll remind you that neither of us had ever been able to keep Richard O'keefe out. Do you want the rest of the town aware there is someone like him able to come and go

as he pleases?”

“Go to your room,” Dad orders out of nowhere, tone angry, eyes wide.

“Dad, I’m fine, I swear. Other than him pushing me and me getting out, nothing—”

His arm snaps in the gate’s direction. “Your room!”

I glance at Josie with a sigh, and her expression’s a mix of fear and surprise. Not that I expect it when we’re against adults, but I wish she’d look more defiant.

Feeling pretty alone, I head toward Base and my prison for what I expect will be the rest of time.