

## StoryLine-5

The dry air, and Rich no longer holding me, snaps me out of... wherever my mind went. I'm on the other side of Court's outer southern gate.

The walk through the town's a blur, with Rich's arm around my shoulders like I'm his.... His arm around my shoulders, his spicy smell masking that of people and buildings and refuse. Base has a reprocessing center, but people have to bring their waste to him, and it's impressive how many of them would rather endure the smells than do the work.

There are plans for a sewer system, but since Base can't change things outside his walls, getting the people with the right abilities to make it happen without uprooting entire neighborhoods at a time is proving difficult.

Every time the mayor's over to talk with Grandpa Louis, the 'how come it's not done yet' conversation happens. More than one of those took place at mine and dad's place because the mayor doesn't bother scheduling appointments.

Rich's a few meters ahead, and I hurry to join him.

"Welcome to the great outdoors," he said, arms wide like he's offering me the world.

"I've been outside the walls before," I reply curtly to mask how the idea he can take me anywhere in it is making me feel. I mean, it's not like I know him. So why I am reacting that way to this hot guy looking at me like—okay, no one's ever looked at me like that. I think I get why the older girls have been gathering guys who look at them that way; it feels... good.

"Really?" He smirks. "The way you were talking, I thought your old man never let you step outside of Base's walls, let alone the town."

"Of course he lets me go out." I point to our left. "Somewhere over there is Salmon River. Me and my friends go fishing there every so often." We take the east gate to get there, but from here, I'm not sure where it is. "Course, when my dad finds out about this, he'd going to ground me for the rest of my life."

"Who says anything about him finding out?" Rich says. "I'll have you back before anyone notices you're gone; don't worry about that."

"Base knows."

"And he knows better than to rat us out. He doesn't want you to get in trouble, right?"

"I guess so."

We walk in silence. We're the only ones on the packed dirt road. The south gate is only for the farmers with their fields on this side of the town. There are fields all around Court that grow more things than I can think of, as well as have animals. I don't think about the damage the Ramthoms will have caused to those on their way in. They're one of the reasons there are so many fields. The other is that it just takes that many of them to ensure a town like Court can sustain itself.

The West Road is the one that leads to something that isn't related to the town. Out west is where Toronto is.

In the fall, the road we're on is filled with carts bringing in grains, fruits and vegetables, but this is early summer. The only things that would come from the farms is meat. The spring harvest is done already. In that way, the timing of the attack was good for us. The farmers can probably rehabilitate the land in time to grow something before the weather gets too cold. That's going to depend mainly on the farming skills and abilities of the workers.

The closest farm is just over two kilometers away from town. Something about making sure there's room for the town to grow. Salmon River runs at the back on Mister Rooster's field, and that's another two and a half kilometers through the wheat or corn or barley. Those are his usual crops.

On the other side of the river is the forest.

On the other side of most of the farms is the forest.

If you include the farms into what is considered the town of Court, which most of us do, Court is this glade inside the giant forest that covers the south of Ontario. It's what this part used to be called, before the system. The older folks still refer to it like that.

According to them, we live in Court, which is in the province of Ontario, in the country of Canada.

The system doesn't recognize any of that, except for Court, because Base is our settlement node, and through him, the town was identified as Court within the system. Something about it being like the name of the city that used to be here, before the system.

The older folks are kind of obsessed with stuff that was before the system.

On the left is... I focus on the stalks.

Wheat, Grain, Ingredient
Agriculture check unsuccessful

So I can't tell how ripe it is. No surprise there. It goes to my chin.

On the right, that field is corn. I don't have to ask the system, it's distinctive, and already much taller than I am. I run my hand over the wheat as we walk. Further in the field is the observation tower that allows Base to monitor the area, as if it's part of the town. It also reduces the surrounding wildness, which means the farmers don't need as high skills to get stuff to grow.

Maybe I can convince my dad to let me be a farmer. They all have houses with the best durability, so I'll be safe in one when the system sends a monster wave against the town. If I could work outdoors, maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

"What's you want to do with your life?" Rich asks.

"You a mind reader?"

"Not something my class gets."

"And what's your class?"

"So, what are you going to pick?"

"Whatever my dad leaves me. After this, he'll probably force me to be a carpenter like him so he can keep me as his apprentice."

"If not for your old man, what would you pick?"

"I don't know. A guard, probably. I want something that's going to help the town. And they get patrols that take them outside the walls, so I'd be able to see all this every so often."

"That's it? Not a fire throwing sorcerer gallivanting around, burning down monsters, saving..." he looks at me, his lips quirking up, "someone in distress? Maybe some world traveling adventurer leaving behind swooning women in every settlement he comes across, as well as some of his seed?"

I swallow at the images that bring up. I've had a few fantasies that sounded like that. "Someone like me doesn't get to do stuff like that."

He stops and grabs my arm. "But what if you did?" the look he gives me doesn't have any of the heat from earlier, but the memory makes me blush. "What if you were someone like that? Would you prefer staying in this... small town, over traveling the whole damned world?"

With you? I can't help wondering what that would be like. "Well, yeah. I don't want to stay here. But I have responsibilities. To my dad, the town, my friends." I pull my arm out of his hand. "I'm not like you. I don't get to just go wherever I want and not care."

I'm surprised at the lack of bitterness in my voice. Sure, I've dreamt of seeing what's down the road, Toronto and whatever lies beyond that, but I'm just Dennis Carpenter. I live in Court, that isn't part of some old folks province and country, and I have to play my part to make sure my town survives the hardships the system throws at us.

It's who I am.

And I'm surprisingly okay with that.

He doesn't say anything. And I'm surprise by that too. What I've heard about him, and what I've experienced in the last few hours, doesn't paint him as someone who has high opinions of people who place responsibilities over what they want. I expected him to mock me. Instead, the look is serious. Then he smiles and is walking again.

"Come on. I think you're due a treat before we go back."

I want to ask what he means by that, because my imagination is all over the place with this. Instead, I catch up to him because if there's one thing everything I imagine has in common is that if it happens with Rich, it's going to be more fun than I've experienced before.

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This wasn't anything I imagined.

The road ended a good five hundred meters ago. I thought Rich wanted some place secluded for my treat, but this is...

He steps out of the trees. "What's the problem?"

"That's the forest." I don't elaborate. What's the point? Everyone knows about the forest.

“And?” maybe except him?

“There are monsters in it. Everyone knows that.”

“Is that what they tell you?”

“It’s what everyone knows. Where do you think the Ramthoms come from, or the other monsters that attack the town?”

“The Ramthom’s settlement is to the Northwest, the Gnolls to the East, and the Bearbarians more to the east from where we stand. This part is perfectly safe.” He pauses and grins. “Well, I’ll make sure you’re perfectly safe.”

“I think I should go back. It’s going to be noon in a couple of hours and dad’s going to ask around and —”

“He’s going to understand that you don’t want to be around him after what he pulled on you.” His smile softens, heat filled his eyes. “Don’t you want that treat I promised you? I swear it’s going to be worth it.” He backs within the trees and is quickly hidden from me.

I am so going to regret this. I run after him. But after he’s made sure I’m going to enjoy it.

He smiles at me with pride.

The first thing that registers is the sound. There’s a muffleness to it. I make a fist to knock on a trunk, but Rich stops me.

“You don’t want to risk angering them.” His voice is deeper somehow.

“How is tapping on a tree going to anger them?” my voice sounds different. I realize there are other sounds, birds. I look up.

“It probably won’t, but there’s no way to know with trees. I’m not taking on a Treant if I can avoid it.”

The foliage is much higher than I expected, and it sways and makes a rustling sound that’s... calming. Something moves in the high branches. I get little, only a rusty color that jumps from one to another.

“Not something you want to tangle with either,” Rich says, “but it’s not going to bother you first.”

“I thought you said there aren’t any monsters around here.”

“That’s not a monster. That’s an animal. They can be just as dangerous, but the difference between the two is that animals want nothing to do with you, while monsters want to do a lot of unpleasant things to you.”

He walks off and I follow him, looking around.

In the distance, there’s something. Four legged, taller than a cow, with a coat a little more green than the trunks. It has horns on its head that gouges the closest tree as it lowers its head to eat something on the ground.

Something looks at me from the closest tree, and I step back. It chitters, then scampers up the trunk. A few trees away, something larger peeks around a trunk. Large head, round ears on top. It opens its maw and teeth glimmer. So many teeth. One bit and half of me will be gone.

I turn, and there’s another one. No, a different one, the muzzle’s narrower, the ears triangular. There’s something about it that reminds me of the larger dogs in town, but when it looks in my direction, there’s nothing of their playfulness in that expression. It’s more like it’s evaluating me to see if I’m worth the trouble.

I open my mouth, but swallowed my call for Rich. I don’t want to draw anymore attentions to myself than I already am.

Where is he?

I look around. I don’t see him. I don’t see the way we came from. I swallow and look up. I can’t see the sun through the leave, not that it would help. I use streets and buildings to direct myself.

My throat constricts as I try to work out how to get out of here. We’re closer to the edge than anywhere else, so there should be more light, right? Only it’s all the same dimmed lighting with the occasional beam of dusty light. It looks great, but does nothing to tell me where the exit is.

I focus ahead of me. Maybe if I’m lucky, my perception skill will tell me how to get out.

No window appears, because that’s not how perception works. I have to focus on something. I look at the ground around me. My tracks, if I can see that, I can—

Perception check unsuccessful

I focus to the left. Come on, there has to be something.

Perception check unsuccessful

Fifteen isn't that low! Come on system, give me something!

## Perception check unsuccessful

I am so fu—

“Boo.”

I scream and jump away from whatever that is and hit my shoulder on a tree. I'm backing from that in case it wakes up as Rich's laughter registers.

He stands there, laughing at me, at how scared I am. At how scared he made me.

“You son of a bitch!”

He catches my fist in his hand and holds it. “Come on, lighten up. It was just a bit of fun.”

“A bit of fun?” I yell and pull. My fist doesn't move. “Do you have any idea how scared I was? I don't know anything about this place. For all I knew, you'd left me here to die!” I pull as hard as I can, and end up on my ass as he lets go of my hand.

I glare at him as he crouches way too close to me.

“Dennis, I'd never leave you here to die. You're way too cute.”

Nope, not falling for that this time.

He runs a finger along my cheek. “But if it makes you feel any better, if I did want you dead, I'd do it myself.”

“It doesn't.” I want nothing of what he's offering.

He leans to my ear, and when he breathes, I shiver. “Wouldn't that depend on *how* I make it happen?” he whispers. Then he takes my earlobe in his mouth and sucks on it.

I react.

Holy do I react.

I go to grab him so I can—only he's not there anymore.

“Come on,” he says, walking away. “We're almost there.”

Here is good enough! I want to scream. I'm on my feet to run after him, but first I have to rearrange myself. What is so special about wherever he's taking me?

“Don't ruin the moment,” he says as I open my mouth, “by asking questions.”

I'm not the one who ruined *that* moment by walking away.

“I—”

He stops and what's before us takes my breath away.

We're in at the edge of a large clearing. Metal sheets poke out to the ground in places, with vines attempting to smother them. Some are broken, leaving jagged edges and vines behind that give the impression they mounted an assault and tore it down.

I look down, and the clearing's floor drops away before us. It's about fifteen meters until the moss covered bottom. The light shows a metal wall on one side, with the moss half its height. In the shadows, on the other side, where the... is it a cave? Extends there are hints of angles under the greenery.

“What is this—” I feel the hand on my back, then I'm propelled over the edge and falling.