

## StoryLine-2

“Eat up,” Grandpa Louis says, lobbing a shiny something over his shoulder. The monster screeches at the action and lunges for him. “Oh, I don’t think so.”

As I catch the foil wrapped bar, he punches the head. There’s a flash of energy from the impact and the monster’s head whips away, pulling its body and leaving gouges in the ground where its claws are planted.

“Base!” he snaps. “Where did this thing come from? Tell me they haven’t somehow gained stealth capability.”

I don’t hear the answer. Base can’t speak outside his walls, other than by the speakers atop them and we’re too far for that, but Grandpa and him are connected, since he’s the Base Commander.

I quickly unwrap the bar so I’ll be healed. It’s one of Mister Roger’s revitalizing snacks. He’s a cook slash alchemist who Base has a contract with for combat related foods. The bulk of what he makes for Base is like this one, quick healing plus a regenerative buff.

“Come on,” Grandpa Louis says to the monster as he motions for it to attack. “Don’t turn shy on me now.” It doesn’t lunge. Whatever it is, it’s smart enough to learn from pain. It paces left and right, studying him.

As soon as I swallow the last bite, my health jumps up, and the regen buff appears in the top left of my sight.

Roger’s Revitalizing Bar 2:00:00
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Two hours? I didn’t think that lasted so long.

I’ve only had one of the bars Mister Rogers sells from his shop, and that one only lasted fifteen minutes. It was my twelfth birthday present from Grandpa. A way for me to mess around with the older boys without dad having to worry about me getting injured. Dad hates those bars. Says all they do is get people to think they’re invincible and get themselves killed.

The monster screeches and runs at Grandpa as I push myself to my feet. Maybe it isn’t that smart after all. It stops at the last moment and pivots. Grandpa swears and raises both arms to take the coming tail’s impact. There’s another flash of energy, and he’s launched straight into a building, cracking the wall.

“Okay.” He pushed himself away. “I guess you want to play hardball.” He takes a step and jumps. His boots glow as he goes up way higher than should be possible. Ten, maybe fifteen meters. Then, he doesn’t so much fall, as propels himself down at it.

The impact blinds me, and the shockwave pressed me against the wall. When my sight clears, the dust is settling, and Grandpa’s getting to his feet. The creature doesn’t move. The icon in the lower left for my combat log flashes blue. If I had a class, that’d tell me I gained experience.

In a few days. Only a few more days to go.

This means it’s dead.

I focus on it.

Drakoling, Level 5
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Perception check successful
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A precursor to the more dangerous Dragon, the Drakoling thrives in higher Aether regions, rarely traveling the border of their mating territory except under duress.
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Huh, it's not often my fifteen in perception's high enough to get the basics.

Cryptozoology check unsuccessful
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Or triggers a check for a more appropriate skills.

"You didn't answer my question," Grandpa states, tapping the side of his helmet, which causes the visor to split and retract to the left and right.

"I didn't want to distract you?" I try.

He motions for me to try again.

I sigh. "I want to help."

He lets out a sigh of his own, way longer, and filled with way more emotions. Mainly disappointment, I think.

When he puts a hand on my shoulder, there's none of the strength I saw him use. "Dennis, you're only fifteen."

"I'm going to be sixteen in a few days," I reply defiantly.

"And I think your father would like you to be alive to see your Choosing Day."

"His Choosing for me Day, you mean."

He doesn't have a response for that. Dad hasn't exactly been discreet about their conversations.

"Dennis, you can't gain experience. This isn't going to help you."

I slap his arm. The hope was to get him to remove his hand. The result is my hand stinging.

"Not everything has to be about me getting something out of it." My anger's undercut by the pain. "There are people in trouble and I can help."

"Your skills are only fifteen."

"Grandmother says that's just a number, and it doesn't mean everything. Someone clever can do more with fifteen and someone not as clever."

"Sometimes, I wish my mother would stop training you."

I grin triumphantly.

Motion from the alley catches both our attention. The townsfolk exiting its protection. My spirits sink as Grandpa's smile spread.

"It's safe," he tells them, then pats my shoulder. "And Dennis will escort you back to Base to make sure you aren't endangered on the way there." He looks at me. "This is how you help, Dennis."

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As expected, the walk to the gate is boring. Grandpa knew that was going to be the case. All the fighting's taking place at the edge of town. Maybe there's a few incursions, like the Drakoling, but nothing's going to make it this far.

"Dennis," Base says as the last of the dozen people step through, "I have strict instructions from the Commander that the instant you step within my walls, I am to prevent you from leaving again. He has authorized me to use all necessary methods."

I stop in my tracks and look at the line in the ground made by the doors as they close and open. I want to thank him for giving me the choice, but Grandpa can access his records. He's already not going to be happy Base told me before I stepped through.

"Dennis, you have to come in," he states. "Your father is worried about you."

I can help.

Some of the guards are sixteen, and all they get when they take the class is a handful of bonuses to their attributes and skills, and one ability. I doubt any of them raised their skills otherwise.

They're still just like me, basically.

I glance at the Regen buff.

Roger's Revitalizing Bar
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1:33:02
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That's a lot of time.

I turn and run. "I'm going to help!"

"Dennis, I order you to come back," Base calls after me, but I can tell he's only going through the motion.

Okay, where to go to both help, and not run into anyone who'll send me back? Grandpa was in the Greenway neighborhood, but with his suit, he can go anywhere in minutes, so I need a path with taller building and overhangs to block his sight, just in case.

That's White's Mill. It'll take me to Blue Basket, and then it's through Red River and I'm at the front line, where I can get lost among the guards.

I make it to Red River without trouble. A few blocks into it, I hear growls, grunts, and metal against metal. There's a yowl of pain, and I run in that direction. An injured and still living monster is a more dangerous monster. They're going to need help.

I skid to a stop and back behind a corner as I see the old woman in the middle of seven Ramthoms.

Or not.

Of all the bad luck. If she sees me, she'd not only sending me back to Base, she's escorting me there herself.

I look around the corner as Grandmother steps out of the way of one of the Ram's swing, then casually slashes at it, cutting through its thick wool and leaving a bleeding line. She's already out of the way from another attack, then under a club, casually steps over a low swing. Each time, Lullaby, that's her sword, cuts them, most of the times, parts of them fall off. It's magical, of course. The old timers who aren't afraid of the world have all

accumulated lots of magic and stuff. It's why, nearing a hundred, she only looks a few years older than Grandpa Louis.

I think. Maybe she just has 'good genes,' like she keeps saying, whatever that means. She's got that fight well in hand, so I don't have to stick around.

I go around that block and I'm back on track.

I run into the fight just before the end of Red River. More Ramthoms, a lot more, and fighting a bunch of guard. Some are in metal armor, most in leather, like me. A look and I spot someone in trouble.

I'm next to him, sword in hand, and block the Ramthom's rusty blade. I push it to the side and thrust. It backs up, snorting and leveling its small black eyes at me.

"Thanks," the guard says.

"No prob." I lunge, then parry and swing. Quick steps, light on my feet, aware of anything my opponents might do. Then the guard is at my side and we exchange a smile. By forcing it to split its attention, we have it down quickly.

Their wool's better armor than the leathers we're wearing, but that just means it takes more skill to cut and hit exposed flesh. I get a few cuts of my own, but the Regen buff takes care of that.

With it dead, we give each other a nod of acknowledgment, then separate to help others.

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Roger's Revitalizing Bar 51:42
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"Alright," a woman says when the last Ramthom falls. "Anyone too injured to continue, head back to Base. The rest form around me. There are more of these closer to the palisade."

I join them, and someone does a double take on noticing me. Granger's a few months older than I am. He was training with us until his Choosing Day, and he recognizes me. He gives a shrug, goes back to looking ahead, and I breathe a little easier.

Everyone knows how my dad feels about me and 'danger'.

Within five minutes, we're fighting again. This time, we're part of a larger battle, and further down, I see the destroyed palisade. Now I know how they got in. Although not how they made the hole. Those are made of Hardwood. Grandpa can punch one of them and not do visible damage.

In the chaos of the fight, I lost track of everyone, but I'm too busy to worry about it. If I hadn't capped my fighting skills, this would have given me one, maybe two, levels. Actual combat is way better at raising skill than anything else.

I find out I also lost track of the enemy when one of them rams me. It feels like I've been hit by a ton of bricks as I slide on the ground until a broken wall stops me. That's where they get their name from. They look like rams, and when those horns connect, it's like a tonne hits you.

Roger's Revitalizing Bar  
20:15

Twenty minutes? Where did the time go?

"You," a man orders, and I stare. He's a mass of muscle. Instead of leather armor, he wears a tan skinned jacket and pants. The boots are thick and reinforced. "These civilians need escorting back to the bunker."

That's Chuck.

"Are you daft, kid?" He points to a group that's huddled in a corner. "Get moving!" then there's a metal staff in his hand he uses to hit a Ramthom that got too close and the thing flies over the palisade, and Chuck's in the fray, making space for guard to form behind him.

I saw Chuck up close.

Holy mother of f—

Grandpa tells stories of him, and I know he comes to Court twice a year with the caravan he leads, but to be this close to him. To have him give me an order.

He gave me an order!

I'm on my feet, grabbing my sword and running for the townsfolk. They're a mix of older and younger. Grandparents who'd been taking care of children.

"Time to go, folks," I say as I reach them. "Sorry for this, but we need to hurry." I have less than twenty minutes until the buff is gone. I hurry them along, then I'm in the lead, slowing to keep pace with them. We encounter one Ramthom, which I only deal with until they've continued far enough and I've incapacitated it so it can't follow. Someone else can finish it.

I recognize the courtyard of the Pink Tulip marketplace and motion to slow. The air is calm here. We should be safe.

"Is everyone okay? Anyone need first aid?" The rules say we all must have that skill, but the older folks don't always care to follow them, and most of the kids look to be under ten, so they wouldn't have started on those yet.

"We are okay," an older man says, panting. "Thank you for leading us away."

"It's my pleasure. We should keep going, but we can take it at a more leisurely pace now." Five minutes on the buff.

The ground trembles.

"What's that?" a kid asks, and the grandparents gather them close.

"Move!" I order, pointing toward Base.

A few blocks away, the roof of a building disappears as the building falls.

"Now!" I equip my sword, for the little good that's going to do. I think I'm about to see whatever the Ramthoms used to break the palisade.

They run as another building falls. The shaking intensifies. There's no denying it anymore. That thing's coming here. I watch their back vanish and stand my ground. If I don't give whatever that is something to focus on, it might go after them.