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The Hunt

 The automatic doors to the superstore are gone, and shattered glass is strewn around the entrance. It crunches beneath my boots and I glance around nervously. The store was right at the bottom of the hill leading up to the plat where my house is, and I was worried that I’d have to break in and cause a big ruckus to get inside, but the fact that someone has already been here is probably a sign that I might not find anything useful. And someone – or something – might still be in here.

 I resist the urge to call out as I cautiously enter the store. This time, my katana is at the ready. I remember the day I got this sword for my birthday just a couple years ago. I practiced with it on a weekly basis purely for enjoyment – little did I know that I’d so desperately need it to survive.

 The whole place is much darker than I expected. I don’t know why I constantly expect places to be lit up when the only available light is from the sun, and there aren’t any windows in the interior of the store. I reach into my coat pocket and find my hastily written list on the page of a book found a few days ago. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I’ve found a lot of random books to read and occupy my time, but this was not one of them. The only thing I have ever used this book for has been kindling for a fire one time, and now to write a scavenging list.

 In order to see it, I pull out the small flashlight I keep attached to my belt by the loop on the end. I have quite a few things attached to my belt…sometimes I imagine myself as Batman just because I can and there’s no one else around who makes a better Batman than I do. Except the real Batman, of course, but I’m sure Gotham was hit just as hard as the rest of the world.

 I begin roaming the aisles one by one, searching for anything on my list. I only have a finite amount of room in my backpack, and so I keep to largely the essentials: food, water, medicine. I have enough medicine by now, but I want a little extra just in case. I also am looking for more oil to clean my katana, and possibly some string and a needle of some kind to repair a large hole in the waist my coat. I remember that back in the summer, close to when this all started, I came upon a sewing store and spent a day and most of a night sewing my hoodie and my trench coat together to form a single garment so that I wouldn’t have to worry about one slipping out of the other. I must have used six spools of threat that day. I was pretty impressed with myself after that. But the hole in my coat now came from a brush with a sharp guardrail along the road one night when I was sprinting away to avoid a mutant patrol. Thankfully, it only tore the coat and not the soft hoodie underneath, but I could feel the temperature difference already, and it wasn’t even two weeks into fall yet.

 I also wanted to make special provision for any meat I might find. I’m dying to taste some meat, and with that in mind I added re-sealable bags and salt to the list. Only by the time I’m on the fifth aisle do I realize the irony of taking my shopping list to this abandoned superstore and scanning the aisles for things on it.

 I go through the aisles with a careful eye for things that even look remotely useful. My flashlight covers every inch of the shelves, especially where the shelves have collapsed. The dairy section smells terrible, nearly as bad as that rotting couple from the house yesterday, and the meat section is even worse. I’m surprised this place wasn’t emptied out back in the beginning, but maybe the mutants hit this place pretty hard, and they don’t come to the store to shop for the same food as the rest of us.

 Bingo. I find some bags – of a sort. They’re these big turkey brining bags, which is weird because Thanksgiving was still half a year away when this all happened. But they’re just lying in the middle of Aisle Ten, and they’re almost all still here. The box has been opened, but there are still nine out of the ten bags from the original pack. They’re meant to have a really strong seal, so that would be perfect to store meat from animals if I get any. I check the bags and the box to be sure that nothing is wrong with them, then I stuff the box into my backpack.

 I find some cans of beans stuck under a shelf in Aisle Twelve. Lovely. I’ve had a lot of those since I went on the run from the mutants, but a few more won’t hurt. At least it’s some flavor and a lot of nutrients to my diet for the next few days. But when I go to pick them up, I figure out why they’re still here. They’re wedged under a collapsed shelf. Was the shelf too heavy to move and no one could get them out? I go forward and I try to pick it up…it moves easily. There is no conceivable reason these beans should still be here, waiting for me to collect them…

 I hear a noise from a few aisles down and I freeze, turning off my flashlight so that I can only barely see the back of the store. I hear something moving back there, like whatever is back there poking though some crinkling plastic wrappers. Silently, I reach back behind my head and pull my katana back out of its smooth wooden scabbard, feeling the tip of the blade scrape against the inside as it emerges. I glance quickly at the beans, thinking to myself that I might have been simply the next person in line to abandon them, and that I might just risk putting my sword down and stuffing them into my backpack. Then, movement at the end of the aisle. I crouch down and realize that my position makes me pathetically easy to spot, so I pull out my flashlight and click it on.

 My heart relaxes when I see what was causing the noise. It’s a deer, a doe, specifically (oh, God, that stupid song comes into my head!), and she has a plastic wrapper for some long-gone snack stuck on her front left hoof. She’s shaking it, trying to get it off in between steps, but it’s stubborn and won’t dislodge. She finally shakes hard enough to get it off, and by the time she does that, I have the beans safely stowed in my backpack. Then, I stop and look back at her. It’s a deer. She’s stuck in the store, and I’m between her and the exit.

 Meat. If I can get my hands on her…

 I retreat slowly, walking calmly back down the aisle in the other direction, and I stalk her all the way to the corner of the store, past all the aisles and into an open space. Hiding behind counters that used to be filled with goods on sale, I move from one spot to the next as I edge closer to the deer, which is investigating the strange smell coming from a whole row of rotting lettuce heads. She takes a taste of one of them, just to be sure, and I hear her snort with disgust. She’s looking for food just like I am. Maybe this is what the cannibals feel like as they stalk their human prey…we scavenge for our meager sustenance and they watch and wait for the right moment to strike.

 That’s when it hits me – what if they’re watching me *right now?* What if they’re hunting me while I hunt the deer? I’m between the deer and the exit, but what if, in my distraction, they’ve made their way between the exit and me? I whirl around and scan my six o’clock, and in my haste to check my rear my sword bumps the counter in front of me. I lock eyes on the deer again. Her head is raised and she’s frozen in place; the only parts of her that are moving are her ears. She’s looking in my general direction, but I don’t think she sees me.

 I try to steady my breathing and I peer around the corner just enough to watch as her stamps her foot and sniffs the air. Then, after another tense moment, she goes back to searching the rotten lettuce, starting now to make her way back toward the back of the store.

 I have to get closer if I want to strike. I start moving slowly in a crouch. My legs burn from the effort it takes to move this low and still maintain as much silence as possible. I can feel the bottom of my coat sliding across the floor and I listen to it to see if it might be making noise, but I don’t hear anything. The deer doesn’t react to my approach.

 I’m within five feet of her, hiding behind a counter. My legs start to ache now as I place them under me for the right balance and angle to spring. I look at my target to see where the best place to strike might be. I want to go for the neck – I’ll cut the throat if I can, so at least if it runs away I can track it and wait until it dies from blood loss, but I won’t be disappointed if I can somehow just lob off its whole head. I’m not all that interested in its eyes and brain anyway.

 The moment strikes me as ironic. A year ago I would have been content to just sit and watch this adorable animal, with its big brown eyes, its cute snout, and its fluffy tail. But now the only thing on my mind is food, and I’m sick of eating beans, nuts, and canned fruit twice a day. I need REAL food! In the seconds before I leap up, I envision a big, thick piece of venison dripping over a crackling fire, then sitting before me on a plastic bag, salted, surrounded with crispy dandelion leaves and a few pieces of juicy oranges. My mouth starts to water and I force myself to focus as the doe takes another step. She’s facing almost entirely away from me now, and I focus on the spot where I want to aim my strike – I’ll only get one shot at this.

 As my muscles explode into action, I see her ears move, as if she can hear the release of tension through some sort of subsonic frequency. Or, maybe she knew I was there the whole time. Either way, her reactions are faster than I anticipated and she darts to the side. My sword swings down in a tight arc, speed gleaned from those years of practice combined with an adrenaline-fueled, carnivorous lust. My senses are struck by the sound of metal connecting with metal as the blade makes a deep notch into the edging of the counter where the lettuce is stored, and the sound of the deer hooves on the tile floor recede into the darkness of the superstore’s unlit anterior. Looking quickly in that direction, my eyes can just make out the white tail bobbing up and down frantically as she completes her escape.

 I let out the rest of my breath and lower my sword, leaning against the counter with my head tilted back in frustration. Beans, nuts, and oranges for dinner tonight.

 I put my sword away and take my flashlight and my shopping list back out…

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 The rest of the store yields very little in the way of useful material. I find some rope that seems solid (about three-quarters of an inch thick and over twenty feet long), and I test it by tying it to one of the support pillars and then pulling it as hard as I can. It’s decent rope, and it doesn’t break or snap. It also doesn’t appear frayed. I loop it up, tie it tight, and clip it to my backpack. I also find a medium-sized pair of bolt cutters. I have wire cutters, but I don’t think I have bolt cutters. I stuff them into my pack and decide to compare the two when I get back to the house to see if I want to keep one or the other (or both, but I don’t think I need more than one of them). No salt, but that’s fine for now since I ***don’t have any meat!*** Man! I can’t think of anything but that lost deer as I make my way back from the store up the hill to the house.

 As I empty my backpack out into the second-floor bedroom, I instinctively make sure to hide all the food and material under the bed mattress and in the drawers. The drawers are largely empty, with only a few articles of women’s clothing left – a couple skirts, some pink socks…even a bra. It’s rather large. And distracting. I toss it out the back window where I threw the two corpses out the day before and put the bolt cutters in the drawer. They’re larger and stronger than the wire cutters, so I’ll probably keep them. They’re not too big to fit into backpack, and I can’t think of any way to attach them to the outside of it.

 My pack is a durable backpack that I bought for my final year of college, so it’s relatively new. But the fact that it’s new doesn’t mean that it’s only a matter of time before it falls apart, because this is definitely not that kind of prissy, stylish bag. I remember back when one of my classmates (who I had in most of my classes at the time) had bought a new handbag for her final year of college, and I remember being jealous of it. It was black, leather, and big, and it looked like it could go through an apocalypse just fine. During the world’s descent into hell, and through a series of highly unfortunate events, I came into possession of that very bag. The joyous occasion ended very quickly when I discovered that it wasn’t ACTUAL leather, but that faux leather that tears more easily than wet paper towels. It fell apart within the first week.

 So I decided to be content with my own backpack, which has served me better than I could ever have hoped. It’s extremely well-made, and after several months of constant use in wind, rain, sun, and everything else, it has yet to show any sign of deterioration. It has three main zippered compartments, the smallest of which is still large enough to be broken down into several sub-pockets. As I’ve gone along, scavenging, I’ve kept my eyes out for carabiners, so now my backpack carries just about as much stuff on the outside as it does on the inside. I have at least fifteen carabiners on it, ten of which are currently in use to hold one thing or another. I don’t know how I would attach the bolt cutters in a definite way to it, but there might be something inside that I can take out to make room for them.

 Then, I get an idea. I take one of the denim skirts from one of the drawers and start to cut it into strips with my knife. I’ve needed to replenish the homemade first-aid kit I carry with me for a few days now. The last cut I got from jumping from a house roof and gashing my arm on the edge of a broken gutter healed up pretty nicely after I wrapped it and put antibiotic ointment all over it. But as I use my knife to cut the skirt up into more cloth strips, I cut a longer, thicker one to tie the bolt cutters to the outside of the backpack. It seems sturdy enough. I also think about using one as a sweatband, but I can take care of that later.

 I have several hours of daylight left, and I want to use them efficiently. I’ve eaten an afternoon snack, consuming half of the walnuts in their container, so I have a fair amount of energy to spend on whatever I choose to do.

 While the view from the office window across the hall gives me a view of the highway, the bedroom window looks out over the neighborhood below, including the superstore I raided earlier. I gaze out of it as I watch the sun reach an angle in the sky I’ve come to associate with two-thirds of the way through daylight hours. My eyes search instinctively for movement, and I see a few deer in the distance, grazing among some of the tall-grown grass in un-kept lawns. Briefly, I contemplate heading back out to try to catch and kill one, but they’re moving too fast and I’ll have lost them among the buildings by the time I get out the front door.

 As my face scrunches in frustration at the dream-mocking potential, I notice something alongside my view of the deer. A little farther off, my eyes catch the glint of a store sign rising above the rest. It’s a sporting goods store!

 “Ohhhhhhh…” I hear my voice make a soft, delighted sound, the first vocalization since the effort-filled yelp made while attacking the deer. I’ve always had a special place in my heart for sporting goods stores. Such mediocre clothes and gear sold for such overblown prices, but dang that stuff always looked cool! Full disclosure, I routinely also found great quality pieces in sporting goods stores that were so close to being worth the price it hardly mattered how expensive it really should have been.

 I probably can’t make it to the pharmacy and back while having enough time to give it a thorough search at the same time, so I decide to put off the pharmacy for the next day. I zip up all the mostly empty compartments on my backpack and swing it up, deftly pushing both arms through the straps, and then I grab my katana and slip it between my coat and the backpack, inserting it through the loop I sewed into it to hold the scabbard. I check to make sure all the really valuable stuff is safely hidden away, then head back downstairs and out the front door.