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Gift

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Jenn's latest summer vacation to Gramma's house involved many more chores than last year, and a lot more weapons, too. Stranger than having to eat their breakfast of fresh berries and oatmeal inside the armored blind, which used to be the cottage's front porch, was the heavy buck knife Gramma required Jenn to carry everywhere. Or, as Jenn called it, her buck sword, based on the way the weapon's sheath hung from her hip.

"Hard to believe you're gonna be a birthday girl tomorrow." Gramma peeked outside a slit in the side of the blind, the thirtieth time she'd done so since they began eating breakfast. "You'll be how old?"

"Six!" Jenn held up two hands, three fingers raised on each. She wanted to laugh at Gramma's placement in front of one of the jury rigged panels, which used to be part of the mural-covered sides of the duck coop, so a cartoon duckling appeared to sit on her head. "Will Mommy and Daddy be here?"

"Maybe." Gramma's face twitched and she brought her binoculars up from the lanyard around her neck to double-check something in the distance. She stifled a cough before lowering the binoculars. "They have a long trip over here from town."

"They should speed, like you did, Gramma." Jenn popped a spoonful of strawberries and oatmeal into her grin. "You drove so fast."

"Only time in my life I've ever gotten from town to here in less than two hours." Gramma cleared her throat as she rolled her wheelchair back to the overturned crate which acted as the blind's dinner table and planning desk. "But you know what you need? Something special."

"A cake!" Jenn giggled at her grandmother's nod. "Will it have blue frosting?"

"Yes. I've got plenty of food coloring." Gramma chugged down a cup of cold brew coffee. She sputtered and dribbled some coffee out the corner of her mouth as she entered into a long fit

of coughs. She regained her composure by tapping a crimson handkerchief to her lips. "What I don't have is eggs. And I can't get out to the duck pond until my leg heals." She glanced between Jenn's face and the buck knife on her hip. "I wish you weren't too small to use a shotgun. But it should still be safe. Will you be a good girl and stay safe if I send you out to the duck pond to collect eggs?"

Jenn hopped in her seat. "Yes Gramma! I promise to be safe." She shook and grinned from ear to ear, her eyes larger and brighter than any prior time in her vacation.

Gramma rolled back to the slit and watched for activity. "And what are Gramma's rules for going outside?" She cleared her throat and breathed heavily, stifling a new fit.

Jenn stood and nodded as she recited, "Hide so they don't see you. If they see you, run if it's a person." Her excitement faded a little when she went on, "If they're an other, growl and look big." Her right hand went down to her hip, but she gulped rather than speak another line.

"And Gramma's final rules for going outside?" She made a point of tapping the trio of shotguns slung to the back of her wheelchair.

"If they grab me," Jenn drew her buck sword and raised it with rehearsed efficiency, "stab them in the chest or gouge out their eyes." She snarled and sliced through the air at an imaginary foe.

"Very good." Gramma let out one loud cough and pounded her chest for a second. She regained composure with her crimson handkerchief then shifted a glance over to the rifle hidden next to the slit, also the thirtieth time since breakfast began. "Have you made our bed?"

"Yes, Gramma." The little girl sheathed her weapon.

"Have you checked the blackout blankets on all the unboarded windows?"

Jenn bowed into a nod, still standing before her matron.

"Did you carry all the boxes I asked you to?"

"Yes, Gramma." Jenn took a deep breath before reciting her chores. "I took your filled jars to the pantry. I carried two boxes of empty jars up from the basement. I went back down and carried a box of bullets up from the basement. And I checked the radio batteries."

"That's my marvelous little Pumpkin." Gramma rolled over, coughed only twice, and pinched Jenn's cheeks. "Don't worry about hanging the laundry in the living room. I'll take care of that. And all your morning yard chores can wait until this afternoon. Do you know why, my darling?"

Jenn's face beamed with excitement. Goosebumps covered her arms. "Why, Gramma?"

"Because today, I'm allowing you to go beyond the yard. It's an early birthday gift." Her face flickered between jolly and angry. "But be very, very careful. You can play, but don't wander beyond the hilltop with the lone pine tree. I can see you from here." She leaned back to the slit in the wall.

"Thank you, Gramma!" Jenn hugged her matron with all her strength, then picked up their dishes.

"Safe, remember?" Gramma waited for the over-energetic bow-nod from her granddaughter. "I love you, Pumpkin." She shook in her seat as she contained a powerful cough yet smiled through it all.

"I love you too, Gramma." Jenn rushed away with the dishes and scampered through the house in the manner her Gramma instructed her. Dirty dishes went into the bucket near the sink, but be careful not to dislodge the rifle hidden between the bucket and sink. Count the number of steps through the living room under the dangling laundry lines. At five paces, make sure the trap door was secure. At ten paces, she should be at the beginning of the hallway, and check the trap door there. Check all the blackout curtains for sunlight peeking in. The entire way, make sure the

fifteen plush rabbits on miniature country benches around the house hadn't shifted and revealed the revolver grips hidden underneath.

"Remember your outside clothes," Gramma said from the kitchen, already washing the bowls.

Jenn sprinted into the bedroom she shared with her Gramma, the one room with the thickest blackout blankets and the most guns. She switched out of her colorful home clothes to the dirty jeans, dirty boots, old wide-brimmed felt hat, and altered Portola Recreation Department Summer Academy shirt. What used to be a green t-shirt with a colorful cartoon bear waving hello, had been transformed into a drab shirt with most of the bear scratched off and dozens of intentional stomps through the mud. She hopped in place and smiled at getting to wear the outfit.

Sixteen paces to the open cabinet with the radios. Grab a wocky-tocky and check its battery before turning it on. Set it to channel six. Finally, leave out the former washroom's doggie door and grab her basket.

Jenn moved swiftly and recounted the outside list of routines. Pass by the bad spot where Gramma fell and hurt herself trying to board up the master bedroom window. Say a prayer for Gramma's health. Thirty paces around to the garage, where a dirt patch marked a buried ration canister, and where she checked the camouflage tarp over Gramma's van. Twenty more paces out toward the garden and the next buried canister. Glance at the garden for vegetables to pick later. There were at least three good heirloom squash, a pair of cucumbers, a dozen bright red cherry tomatoes, and at least one basket full of different berries. Fifteen more paces to the southwest to the next buried canister, and where she watched the old coop to see if any ducks had volunteered to return. Another twenty paces to the next canister and the spot where she checked the array of solar panels were clear of leaves and branches.

The next move, to turn her back on the house, was something she hadn't done in the week since she came to visit Gramma. She eyeballed the dark ropes and wires that formed trip lines beyond the yard, strung between trees like a dark spider web, visible only from the ground, and only during the day. She performed her last yard chore of checking those lines for damage.

Chills ran down Jenn's spine. She had only known the lands beyond the yard from last year's summer vacation, when Gramma didn't care so much about safety. Back when Gramma listened to her kitchen radio all evening rather than in secret, late at night when she pretended to be sleeping.

"It's okay, Pumpkin." Gramma's voice squawked in over the heavy wocky-tocky. "I'm watching you right now. I've got my rifle aimed at the trees. Over."

Jenn pulled her radio from the basket and pressed the big PTT button on the side. "Thank you, Gramma. Over." She took a slow step toward the trees. The towering redwoods, along with their buddy pines and oaks, never looked so inviting. She crouched under a trip line that spanned at the level of her nose, at the same time stepping over a thick rope at ankle level. She scanned above her head, where another line made of razor wire ran out at a slightly different angle and from the height of an adult's neck.

A bush shook at the foot of a redwood with five lines leading out of it as Jenn came within a few yards.

Jenn crouched and put her hand on her buck sword's hilt. She stalked around the bush, taking a wider path over and under an extra dozen trip lines.

The bush rustled and an old black tomcat popped out with a shrew in his mouth. He bounded back toward the house.

Jenn secured the leather strap around her weapon and sighed in relief.

Gramma came in over the radio. "Just old Jack-Jack. The cats are probably all that are out here. Everything else knows to stay away from your Gramma and her guns. Over."

Jenn smiled. "I know I'm safe with you, Gramma. Over."

She moved onward through the next twenty trip lines, the only sign the old forest was any different than prior visits. The hiking trail next to the dry creek that led south was surrounded with ferns and little wildflowers. All that was missing were the shrieks of magpies and jays. The breeze was soft, carrying viceroy butterflies and fallen leaves from the lush, green canopy above.

A perfectly round stone laid in the middle of the old trail. It was a light pink, apparently made from crystal, and warm to the touch. Jenn considered the kong marble-sized object an interesting enough decoration to put it in her basket. She was a good distance out from the cottage, no longer able to turn around and see the comfort of the armored blind with her ferocious grandmother hidden inside.

A lone Steller's jay shrieked in the distance. The summer before, the forest was full of the noisy things. Jenn paused and pulled up her radio. "Gramma, I don't hear the highway. Why don't I hear cars past the hills?" She gulped. "Over."

"Gramma's cottage is a special kingdom, Pumpkin."

Jenn's hand tingled and her breaths sped back up at the sound of her matron's voice.

"Everywhere outside Gramma's kingdom doesn't belong to us, anymore. It belongs to the others. The new animals I told you about. So now roads are where people go to get hurt. But you're going to the duck pond. Remember my rules. Over."

"I'm staying far away from the roads. Over." Jenn paced forth, looking to the branches for noisy birds, but seeing only leaves and butterflies.

"That's my Pumpkin. Over."

The pond was only a half mile more through the woods. The hiking trail widened and connected with well-worn park system trails. The wooden signs with friendly, yellow letters were a reminder of the way things were last year. A dirt road just wide enough for ranger trucks led directly to the north bank of the pond.

A family of Canadian geese waddled away from little Jenn as she approached the water. She scanned the weeds surrounding the pond for nests, looking for the white ducks, the ones that escaped from Gramma's yard. Eating their eggs would be okay until they met some boy ducks in the wild. She tripped on a brilliant jade-like orb the size of a tennis ball. It was warm to the touch like her pink stone, but where her fingers touched, the surface turned pure white, only to turn back green when she set the strange crystal in her basket.

"Gramma, I don't see any duck nests in the grass. Will you allow me to climb trees to look? Over." Jenn heard nothing but the soft static of the open channel. "Gramma? Over." The static was broken by pieces of words in her grandmother's voice. She set the wocky-tocky back in the basket. Goosebumps formed on her arms at the memory of Gramma saying the pond might be too far for wocky-tocky range.

Footsteps of a small creature sounded out from the tall grass. Jenn crouched, knowing the timing and weight of the strides were unlike any of the water fowl. She couldn't control herself from whispering, "other" at the sight of the creature.

The thing was spider-like, with ten long legs holding aloft a softball-sized body made of exoskeletal plates. It had two claw-like front arms that moved grass aside and pulled up a green crystalline orb to its face, a predatory visage made of serrated plates and a half-dozen compound eyes. As soon as the orb touched the creature's head, the stone dematerialized and a mechanical

spike grew above the creature's eyes. It twitched for a second, then doubled in size and was made of white robotic armor. It surveyed the surroundings with its new green visor single eye.

Jenn crouched lower and looked in her basket. The jade orb was just like that of the creature. She pulled both stones up with one hand and inspected them. Her other hand gripped the hilt of her buck sword. She wanted to run. But Gramma's rules said you only run from people. Animals and new animals give chase when you run. She raised the orbs closer to distract from the mechanical spider stomping through the grasses just yards away from her. When she peered into the crystal structure of the orbs by looking too close, both vanished in her palm with a burst of light.

A mechanical headset formed over Jenn's ears and around the back of her head. She clawed at it but it wouldn't move, stuck on her permanently as a pair of robotic antennae grew out the back of the headset. A tiny white spike grew out of her forehead. She was terrified by the new growths and stumbled backward out of the grass, into the pond. Abject terror filled her mind. But something else flowed in from the outside.

Hunger. Loathing. Failure. Relief. The idea fragments came in from multiple sources. Multiple minds.

"You aren't supposed to have that." The statement came not as words but as an idea anchored onto disdain from the mechanical spider. The creature on the bank stared at Jenn for a moment. "You're lucky I'm here. Doubly lucky that I refuse to shoot baby humans."

"Why?" Jenn leapt onto dry land and sputtered her next question, distracted by the disjointed ideas flooding her mind. "Can I hear your thoughts? Can you hear mine?"

The creature answered without making a sound. "If it helps to process it that way, sure." It turned away and raised itself high on plated legs. "Stand down. I command you to stand down."

A massive predator emerged from a stealthy trot through the trees and roared at both Jenn and the creature. It was like a bear with the fur shaved off, exposing red and pink and gray patterns on its flesh that gave its ferocious, muscular body the appearance of ground meat. Its head was the most unearthly of all, with tiny ears set behind a pair of large eyes, those set behind a pair of smaller eyes, which all rested high on a skull dominated by a jaw many times larger and stronger than a bear's, as if to obliterate whole bones rather than simply eat meat. Overwhelming concepts came from it in the form of, "Hunger! Eat! There food!" Unlike the spider, none of its thoughts showed any sign of mercy for the young.

Dozens of waterfowl took flight in a feathery panic.

"Stand down. I'm not food." The white robot spider raised its claws at the bear. "Obey."

The red bear closed its mouth and huffed.

"Kneel."

The bear crouched and allowed the spider to climb on its back.

"Stand. March." An image flashed forth from both the spider's and the bear's minds. South, to the small towns and the cities of the coast. Where people with guns fought against hordes of new animals of every possible design. "We rejoin the fight." The spider and the bear turned their heads as one and looked to Jenn. "Don't interfere."

Jenn nodded and gasped. Terrifying images of the others rampaging the countryside filled her head. There were dozens of the bear-like things without masters wandering through the nearby woods, and she could sense all of them. There were hundreds of soldiers moving south, hiding among the trees around her. The only comfort was their collected memories of an inland city to the east where people prevailed. The others forced to retreat took out their anger on signs, buildings, and even cars.

Suddenly, Gramma's obsession with safety made sense. Jenn felt terrified to be alone out in the woods. She wanted more protection than her stupid buck sword. That would barely be useful against a real bear, but against a charging red bear, she'd be smashed to pieces before she thought about stabbing its eyes. Safety. Protection. At her thoughts, the spike on her forehead tingled and robotic plates materialized all over her body.

She more than doubled in size, instantly as tall as an adult. The white plates weren't wrapped around her body, but were her body. She was aware of her organic heartbeat inside a metal chest, and her segmented boot-like feet sent her sensations as real as if she were barefoot in the soft soil. She rubbed her plated hands around herself, feeling her face was angular and robotic with a single green visor eye, a horn on her forehead, and a twin set of antenna fins out the back of her head.

"I'm safe." Jenn was back to her normal size and shape, the armor plates vanishing the instant she formed a contented thought. She was in her dirty clothes with only a few robotic things growing out of her head.

"How did you do that?" A little boy in a bright red jacket emerged from behind a tree. He was clean, with no dirt rubbed into his clothing, and looked like Gramma would yell at him for having poor camouflage if she saw his version of outside clothes. He burst out and giggled with a half-empty cloth shopping bag in his hands. He didn't have a single weapon anywhere on him, but his right cheek had a long scab.

Jenn lifted her basket. "I just found some rocks. But they disappeared."

The boy came up to Jenn, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open. "You found some of the alien weapons? Wow! My dad tried to get one, but some mean people stole it." He dropped his shopping bag and rubbed the spike on Jenn's forehead. "That's so cool! What can you do?"

Jen shrugged. "I don't know. It just happened."

The boy folded his arms and faked a scolding. "You can't hide your powers from me. You're the coolest person I know. Come on, tell me."

"I can hear their thoughts." Jenn rubbed her headset and wished there was a volume knob to shut down the intensity of the transmissions. "And I can turn into a robot suit."

"Could you fly!? Did you have a big cannon arm!?" The boy shook Jenn by the shoulders. "Come on, spill it."

"Normal arms. And I don't think I can fly." Jenn remembered the quick examination of her robotic body. "My buck sword was trapped inside my leg when I was a robot."

"Too bad." The boy was down for a moment, then his eyes opened wide again. "Imagine how cool it would be if it turned into a huge sword!"

Jenn's face lit up. "I know!"

"I can't wait to tell my parents I met a kid with alien weapons."

"I can't wait to tell Gramma." Jenn shivered at the sudden shift of events. "But I have to find duck eggs first. I need them for my birthday cake. I turn six tomorrow."

The boy smirked. "You're only gonna be six? I'm seven." He puffed up after retrieving his shopping bag. "I'm Caden." He reached out his hand.

"Jenn." She shook the boy's hand. She smiled at the first new person she'd seen in a week.

Caden revealed an empty water bottle from his bag and crouched by the pond. "My parents need me to collect water. Wanna trade? I'll let you have one of my bottles if you let me have an egg."

"I don't have any eggs yet." Jenn saw no signs of nesting waterfowl. Only a goose and a pair of ducks remained across the pond. "I'll let you have one if I find any. But we don't need to trade. My Gramma's cottage has a well."

Caden burst up with wide eyes. He shook his head. "You live in a cottage!?"

"Yes." She scrunched her face. "Where do you live?"

"My family lives in our car. It's better than the cities." His eyes glazed and his face sagged. "We're happy. We're safe. We won't get bombed like Aptos. Or Davenport."

Jenn's face scrunch intensified. "You were talking about aliens. And now bombs. Like a war?" Images of the conflict trickled over from the other soldiers traveling through the forest. The images couldn't be real, because they were too much like movies. Death and blood was only for bad movies she wasn't allowed to watch.

A few tears fell from Caden's eyes and his lips quivered. "You don't know about it?"

"About what?" She rubbed her forehead spike. "My Gramma said she turned her cottage into a happy kingdom. And everywhere else belongs to new animals. Some of them are scary and they watch too many bad movies. But they seem okay." She thought about her antennae, and they wobbled downward, taking a new position straight out the back of her head and picking up visual representations of troop movements, similar to the mapping screens in her parents' cars.

"They're allowing me to change the channel. They're nice."

"They're evil." Caden dropped his bottle to form a fist. "They attacked our car. My daddy's repairing it right now. We'd be all the way to the craters of San Francisco by now if they hadn't done that!" He collapsed and sobbed.

Jenn crouched by his side and hugged him. Her grandmother's warnings about roads came to mind, and how Caden's family proved they were true. "I haven't been able to play all week. Just chores all the time. Wanna race?"

Caden sniffed and stopped his crying. "I haven't played for a week, either. A race would be fun."

"This trail leads up to a hill where a forest fire killed everything a few years ago." Jenn pointed down one of the paths. "The only thing on it is a pine tree at the top. We'll be safe there. My Gramma can see us and protect us. Let's race."

Caden leapt to his feet and wiped away his tears. "Only if we come right back to finish getting water and eggs. I don't wanna get in trouble."

"Deal." Jenn watched her friend re-tie his bright orange shoelaces on yellow sneakers. Her own boots were secured with triple-ties. "Ready?"

"Three-two-one-go!" Caden shot down the trail with the split second advantage of calling the start.

"No fair!" Jenn sprinted after. She thought about armor, and her body shifted into a robot between steps. Her stride wasn't interrupted, but her longer legs allowed her to catch up to Caden in an instant.

"Hey, cheater!" Caden stuck out his tongue.

"It's okay." Jenn focused on comfort, and she was her normal self again. "See? I just wanted to get even."

The trees thinned then cleared as the two progressed down the trail. They went up the steep sides of the grass-covered hill with a single pine tree at the top.

"Tag!" Caden slapped his friend on the shoulder.

"Oh yeah? Tag!" Jenn smacked his arm.

They exchanged rapid tags halfway up the hill, then Jenn skidded to a stop.

Caden stopped a few moments later and turned around to find Jenn in her robot form, alternating between looking at the highway at the base of the next set of hills, and toward the cottage a short distance away. "What's wrong?"

Hunger. Anger. Food! Images of prey.

Jenn wiggled her antennae until she was in clear communication with the loud voices in her head. "Two red bears. I think they're called chargers."

"I don't have armor like you! What do I do?" Caden crouched at Jenn's plated feet.

"I'll protect us. Wait. They aren't coming for us." Two different images floated into Jenn's mind. One was the highway where two adults worked on a broken down car, in similar jackets to Caden. One was the cottage's back yard, where Gramma was picking berries. "Do you live in a silver car?"

"Yes." Caden's hands shook.

"Stand down. Obey me. Stand down, bears." Jenn restated her commands, but switched to mental rather than spoken. "They aren't listening." The chargers projected insubordination. Behind those thoughts were images of them only listening to commanders who faced them.

"They're coming for your family and my Gramma. I can stop them."

Caden jumped out from under Jenn and sprinted down the hill toward the highway. "Daddy! Mommy! We're coming!"

Jenn followed. The thoughts of the charger on the highway became clearer, but the one near the cottage weakened. The idea fragments were broken like sounds through static. Just like the

wocky-tocky when it reached the edge of its range. The more steps she took, the less she could sense the one at the cottage. She stopped and looked back to her Gramma's kingdom.

Hunger. Food. Weak prey.

"Why are you stopping?" Caden spun in place and waved for his friend. "You said you can stop the aliens." He hopped backward and tears welled up from his eyes as he failed to move the white robot that was once a little girl. "Help me!"

Jenn leaned toward the cottage, and Caden screamed in terror. She leaned toward Caden, and she was haunted by the last vision from a charger stalking the cottage.

Hunger.

"Help!"

Prey.

"Please!"

She made her choice.

Jenn couldn't fly, but she could run faster than she knew possible for a person. Nothing bad would happen if she could move fast enough. She leaped with the grace of a deer, off to face a single charger. She wanted to stop both. She was already haunted by the direction she didn't run. She wanted to cry, but the robotic visor eye was incapable of tears. She needed to stay resolute. She raced through thickets, stomping ferns and smashing through saplings, in order to make it in time.

A shotgun blasted in the distance. A painful distance. A terrifying, impossible distance.

Only one. She could only stop one.

Another shotgun blast sealed the horror of how far away it was.

Jenn heaved inside her mechanical suit. She needed to breathe, just like the massive thing in front of her needed to eat. She raised her armored hands in the face of the terrible beast. Her armored, but small, arms against a head meant to destroy.

"Stand down! Obey!"

The charger slashed a muscular arm into Jenn with the force of an avalanche, sending her crashing into the panels of the porch. A cartoon duckling slammed down on her as the entire construct collapsed.

Jenn hopped to her feet, uninjured from the attack but scared for her Gramma. She spotted the old woman behind her, rolling up a wooden ramp to the washroom door, a pair of shotguns in her lap.

The charger dashed around Jenn and tore through the remains of the porch.

"No!" Jenn grabbed the beast's neck. "Obey!"

The charger stopped. "Your orders?"

"Go away. Never return." Jenn doubled over as the red bear obeyed and sprinted off to the forest. She turned around to face her matron, and took a shotgun blast to the chest.

Gramma dropped her weapon. She shook from overwhelming coughs and clutched her chest.

"It's me, Gramma." Jenn shifted back to her girl self, smiling and without injuries.

"Gramma?" She ran to her trembling grandmother. "It's okay, Gramma. We stopped the charger."

The old woman thrashed in her seat. The remaining shotgun in her lap slid to the floor with a frightening thud.

Jenn hugged her Gramma and pressed her face into her grandmother's shoulder. She squeezed harder to help keep her from falling out of the wheelchair. "Gramma! You'll protect me. You need to protect me."

Gramma's coughing and shaking stopped.

Tears poured from Jenn's human eyes. "Who will protect me?"

There was no answer.

No cars on the highway. No birds in the yard. No radio. No more coughs.

The world was silent, save for the thoughts of the traveling others.