

Chuck-13

The toy section was disturbing.

I didn't have much of a childhood, with having to use most of my energy dealing with my father's mind games. The little I did have is courtesy of my mother and her ability to stand up to him, or more precisely, I'd come to realize later, not let me see how what he did to her affected her.

So having toy figures come to life and attempt to bury us felt to me like a literal case of ruining my childhood.

John came away from the incident with Nerf gun that shoots explosive darts. We have three more vitamin bottles.

The one good thing about this fighting is how my willpower is maxed out again.

Ah, violence, my father says, the solution to all the world's problems.

I don't know where that thought is from. Certainly not him. My father wasn't a physically violent man. He went for psychological violence. Less evidence that way, he liked to say.

My immediate goal is in sight, the sports section at the end of this too-long lane, but we have to cross the hardware section first. I dread to think what will come out of it.

We move carefully. Me at the front, Terry and John a few steps back and to the side. I'm physically tougher than both of them. A tank, Terry calls me. I eye each of the lanes on my right as we pass them, holding the barbell tightly. Unlike the seasonal and toy section, there is no bleeding out into the aisle. It's the same on the left, although, except for the aisle dividing the cosmetic and bedroom section, it's a wall of shelving with pillows and bedding that are attached to them.

Terry thinks the entrance to that section is on the other side. Each section is a room in the dungeon, according to him, and only triggers if we step into them. He can't explain why the seasonal section reached out and pulled me in, or the toys that leaped out of their section to attack us.

His knowledge of games doesn't entirely apply to how the world now works, despite the similarities.

I let out a breath once we are on the other side of the hardware section. There was no movement within it. It was the most normal thing in this store, or dungeon, I've seen yet.

"That's..." John trails off. He's looking where I should be, ahead. "Could be a problem."

What I wasn't able to see, because distances work strangely in this place, was that the three sections in this back corner, outdoors, sports, and automotive, have bled together into one, and that greasy grass spreads out of it on the floor and side of the visible shelving outlining the entrance.

"You two don't have to come." I try to make out details inside, but there's a fog obscuring it.

"We already split the party enough," John says.

“And you don’t have the damage capability we do,” Terry adds.

“I’m stronger and tougher.”

“But we can hit at a distance,” John says. “You keep them occupied. We kill them. That’s how it works.”

“We just need a healer and we’ll be well balanced.”

I tried.

My father snorts.

I step into the section, this dungeon room, and I’m... outside? Over my shoulder the aisle is visible in the opening, the light as dim as it was before, but still carrying that artificialness every Walmart I’ve been in has. The walls on each side are clearly shelves with greasy moss-covered items, a basketball in its packaging. A complete set of Olympic-rated barbell weights. But the barbell is a transmission shaft.

The air is damp and carries a mix of rotten wood and used motor oil.

“The grass just looks greasy,” Terry says, running a hand on it. “It’s astroturf.”

“It’s Walmart,” John says. “I think everything’s fake in those.”

“Terry, what do you think we’re going to encounter?”

“The way the items look like they’re merged together, it could be anything. Maybe a car crossed with a bear?”

“No cars in this section,” John says, “unless this stretches all the way into the oil change bay.”

“Also no bears,” I say. “No animals at all. If Walmart sold pets, they’d be in the pet section.”

“Didn’t see one of those,” John replies. “You think it got eaten up?”

“They’re usually on this side, so it must have.” I raise a hand at the sound of grunting ahead. I step carefully; the astroturf’s oily sheen insists my footing isn’t as steady as it feels. The end of the aisle opens up into a clearing with netting across it made of badminton nets, soccer goals, volleyball, and others.

At the foot of it, a zombie in the blue Walmart vest struggles to untangle itself.

“A spider of some sort,” Terry whispers nervously, searching around us. It’s the first time he’s sounded less than confident since we’ve entered.

“Any idea where it is?”

I join Terry in looking around. The shelves outlining the clearing go much higher than the ceiling should be, and the fog is denser up there and on top of the oily sheen that seems to be over everything, it seems to be glowing a little, as if hinting there was a moon, or sickly sun trying to punch through it.

“There.” I point to the glint high on the shelves. As I do so, it moves closer, clicking, and a shape is hinted at. Spindly legs and a lot of them. A bulbous torso-like mass. I could imagine it was a spider, but not without someone telling me first.

John takes out the Nerf pistol and even after having seen it used against the toys, I can’t keep from shaking my head in amusement.

I step forward.

“Kid,” John hissed, and I look to find Terry at my side.

“Didn’t you say I’m the guy who goes in while you and John attack at a distance?”

“Please?” his expression is pleading, and I swallow the scoff at the cost of some of my willpower. I don’t mind it this time. I’m going to be hitting something soon enough.

“You’re going to be safer with John, away from that.”

“What if there are others hiding in the shelves?” He shudders. “Small ones, crawling all over the place.”

“Not a fan of spiders?”

He shakes his head.

I sigh and he winces. More of my willpower vanishes. “How about this? You remember what I did when Bernard went to strike you?”

He nods.

“Tag, you’re it.” I tag him as my charge. “Now, if something attacks you, I’ll know and I’ll take your place so I can kill it.”

Leaving him dealing with the bigger monster, my father says, smooth.

Terry relaxes, but looks ashamed.

I turn toward the netting and still struggling zombie. A second later, Terry moves away and I step forward. One swing and the zombie is dead, dropping a vitamin bottle. It goes to my inventory without me looking away from the monster. It stands there on the netting, maybe looking in my direction. Maybe it’s blind and only knows what touches its nets? I step to the side, if I can get—

It turns with me.

Not blind.

It seemed to take a breath, the ball of its torso inflating. I now have a better view of that and I curse, jumping to the side as it spits at one of the nets that makes up its torso at me. I come to a sudden stop and slam to the ground, my foot and lower leg wrapped in it and glued to the astroturf. I pull on it, but it isn’t moving.

There’s an explosion that casts more light, and what I see in the shelving near me doesn’t inspire confidence. I don’t know why they aren’t moving, but that can’t last. We need to get out of here.

“Chuck!” John calls.

“Take Terry out!” I wedge the end of the barbell between the netting and ground and push up.

“Not happening!” another explosion on the net spider.

I grunt and put as much of my strength as I can muster in this position. The stuff is a lot tougher than it has any right to be. With a scream and a push, it finally tears and my leg is free.

I push myself to my feet. “Okay,” I tell it. “Now, it’s my time.” I run at it with a yell and it turns and takes a ‘breath’. I’m already in the air, rolling as I land and back to running at it. The netting covers where I’d been.

I jump, have enough time to notice I’m going higher than I think I should, then swing at it. The bar impacts a leg with the sound of two metal bars hitting each other. I’m sailing back down and I’m not sure I did any damage.

I land next to one of John's Nerf darts and pick it up. He only has a dozen of them. I'm not sure what I can do against it.

Run.

Not happening. The torso is the vulnerable part. I can see some of the nettings that it's made of burning and there is an ice spike through it. So Terry was right. Attacks at distance work. Which means my job is keeping its attention on me.

I let out a whistle as I throw a ten-kilo plate in the netting. As I expected, it sticks there, but it causes it to turn away from the attacks.

"How about you and me have another go at this?"

I jump as it takes another breath, but at it this time. The netting sails under me. I time my swing for when I'm higher than its legs, but one is up and blocks with another resounding 'thung'. As I start to fall, it hits me in the stomach and I crash on the ground weaker by half my hit-points. I fight through the yellow of a head with starts around it.

Oh, like I need to be told my head's woozy.

I need to get it down from there. It has all the advantages, and if I jump wrong, I end up tangled in the netting.

"John! In all that scavenging you did, you found anything highly flammable?"

"I have a case of lighter fluid. I figured they'd come in handy with all the fires we're going to have to build."

"Throw me one." I jump out of the way of another netting. As far as I can tell, it isn't actually throwing any that is part of its body. It might mean it doesn't have a limit to how many it can throw. So no chances of outlasting it.

"Chuck!" John calls as he lobs a canister at me. I catch it, open the end, and empty it on netting. Then I pull out the old zippo and pray I didn't let it go dry again. I don't have enough of a need for it, so I have a bad habit of not refilling it.

It takes three flicks before the flame appears, then I press it against the soaked netting and fire blooms. I step back as it spreads quickly, then stops as it reaches the end of the fuel-soaked nets.

I'm worried as the fire diminishes. The fuel's burning up. I'm about to call to John for another when I notice the fire is climbing beyond where I soaked it. The netting's burning.

I smile and step back again.

If good luck is on my side, it will stay in its net as it burns around and then it. But my father disabused me of the existence of good luck. Good luck's only you not looking closely enough at what's going on.

It jumps off the netting and lands between me and the others.

"Welcome to my playground, the man told the spider." I run at it, barbell at my side, solid two-handed hold on it. When it brings a leg up to block, I have the footing to change the angle and the end passes it by, tearing at the torso. No guts fly out, which is good.

I step back to avoid its swing. It tenses.

"Oh, no you don't." Before it can jump, I'm on it again, and I hit it, forcing it to skitter back. I stay with it, and now when a strike connects, it screeches. "That's it, you son

of a bitch,” I snarl. “Scream for me.”

The screeching intensifies and I’m just happy at it. That thing is going to die. I hit it over and over. When it finally falls apart, I’m panting again. For all the endurance I have, I can’t seem to end one of these without being out of breath.

The screeching goes on, and I enjoy it until I remember it’s dead, so...

“Chuck!” John calls, and I realize it isn’t the first time. I spin and his waiving a burning shirt at the end of a baseball bat, keeping the horde of smaller spiders I’d seen in the shelves at bay. I can’t see Terry until I look behind John. He’s curled up in a ball.

“Get down!”

Tag.

I swing and take out a slew of them. The others jump on me and my increased health starts going down as they claw and bite at me. I swing with a hand, rip them off me with the other. Then John’s pulling them off me and I can focus on hitting the rest. There are still enough making it through that by the time they’re done a few seconds later, thanks to the increased strength and endurance I get with the switch.

Only it doesn’t last.

I drop to my knees, as both my endurance and health are just about to disappear. I must have some health available, since I’m not dead, but I can’t see it with the angry flashing of my health bar. I pull a vitamin bottle out of my inventory.

I might need more than one to fix this.

I might need...

Darkness is good.

It’s peaceful.