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Dot-to-Dot

 When I reach the safe room, I skid to a stop and freeze, not with caution, but with desperation. I look around, hoping against hope that if I’m still enough, Ines’s head will pop up with a nervous look, pointing her gun at me with the utmost caution. But that doesn’t happen.

Everything is in shambles. There are bullet holes in the wall and shell casings on the floor near the bike, which is still running. Ines’s haversack is lying on its side, its contents spilling out across the footprint-covered grime next to her gun. I can see her tracks mingled with the toes and heels of the mutant prints, the streaks portraying the fight that took place before she was dragged out the door. At one point, her drag marks stop, which means she was picked up, which could only have happened if she was unconscious, or…

I can barely bring myself to imagine the concept. I run outside, looking for more prints to track, but the grime stops at the door, and all that’s left is a mess of mud and my own boot prints. They could have gone left, which leads to the front of the store and numerous exits, or they could have gone right, which leads back to the fountain and God-knows-where else.

“Ines!” I call, unable to stop myself. I wait for the echo of my yell to subside, but all I hear is the ever-constant drip-drip of water from the ceiling.

“INES!”

My louder summons renders the same non-response, and my panic builds in my gut and chest until all I can do is throw my head back and let out a scream fashioned out of simple, unbridled dread. I’ve lost her. How could I have lost her? It’s not right – it’s not possible. My mind searches for a weapon to use against reality and I clench my sword, desperately wanting something, anything, to present itself as a legitimate target for my wrath. This can’t be happening.

“No…no…no…no…!”

I stop my hyperventilating long enough to take in another breath to scream her name, but I hear something like pots and pans clattering to the ground behind me. As I whirl, there’s the familiar sound of skin pattering on the gunk-covered tiles, and a shape tumbles into view out of a hole in the wall. It rolls to a stop and I take in the sight of the thin, balding head of gray, the gaunt cheeks, the dirty, tattered loin cloth, and the blackened wound on the right side of his face. It’s old One-Eye.

He stares at me, drool dripping from his scraggly maw, his pastel eyes showing that familiar, rudimentary intelligence. My mind flashes back to that day in the police station, the sight of Scar-Face leaning over Ines, One-Eye there with him, and my worst fears are confirmed.

One-Eye stands slowly, staring me down, licking his chops like a canine. He gives a half-snarl, half-hiss and takes a few steps in my direction. My fingers flex, and I become aware of my sword again.

“Come and get some, you piece of—!”

Another noise behind me, identical to before, draws my attention. I turn just in time to see a second shape jumping up at me, arms outstretched, mouth open. I tumble backward, letting it bowl over me, rolling over my back and standing, swinging my sword as fast as I can. It scampers out of the way, like it knew I’d try that, and when it comes to a skidding halt, I’m looking into the face of Bloody Mary, remnants of the shared sustenance from last night still on her lips and chin. She looks at me, as if recognizing me now that my face is visible, and her head makes a questioning tilt, the same way she looked at me last night when I’d returned with food.

My body trembles with fury. As if she hasn’t taken enough from me already, now she wants more.

Well, I’ll give it to her.

When my jaw clenches, something changes in her. Her expression morphs from expectation to fear, and it fuels me. She takes a step back, and a bit of a terrified moan escapes her throat. She knows what’s about to happen.

When I explode into motion, so does she. She takes off down the hall, away from the fountain, toward the mall exit, and I run toward the safe room. The cannibals may be faster than I could ever be, but I’ve never seen any of them outrun a motor vehicle. I leap atop the bike and the tires screech on the floor as I rocket out of the door, nearly slamming into One-Eye as he tries to come in after me. I choose to leave him behind and pursue Bloody Mary instead. She gets to die first.

It’s mostly a straight shot to the sets of double-doors at the end of the hall, and I see her just before she vanishes through the broken frame. I pray that the tires don’t go flat if there’s broken glass on the ground, and that prayer is answered affirmatively. As the bike shoots me out of the exit like a ball fired from a cannon, I catch sight of her turning a corner behind another part of the strip, and I skid around the turn, my tires squealing as the asphalt slides by underneath. She looks back over her shoulder and turns again, this time taking me away from the strip and toward a row of houses across the road.

We fly over the street, the bike leaving the ground a little as I top the incline, and now I’m close enough to hear her panicked breathing. I’m nearly within reach when she jumps, her powerful legs carrying her up and onto the roof of the nearest one-story house. I ride around to the side, riding parallel with her as she leaps from rooftop to rooftop, and then choose my moment to strike before she can get away.

On the fourth leap, I stand up and hurl myself off the bike, reaching out and feeling my hand close around what ends up being her ankle. Her top half slams into the roof on the other side, and as she slides down toward me I see shingles flying in multiple directions. She scrambles, desperately trying to hold onto the surface of her salvation, but when my feet touch the ground, I yank with all my might on her leg. She screams when she plummets down, and with every muscle blasting at full power, I hurl her to the ground. Her back takes the full force of the impact and her head hits after, leaving her dazed and gasping for air. However, she’s just aware enough to know that I’m about to end her, and that is exactly what I want.

I hear One-Eye coming before I see him – he shrieks as he comes up behind me, trying his best to save his pack mate. When his feet leave the ground, I spin, my swing fast as thought, so quick and powerful of a motion that I barely feel the sensation of blade cutting through cannibal flesh and bone. His body separates in two at the chest as it tumbles past on either side of me, splashing my legs with his innards. Without blinking, I flick the blood from my weapon, step over the twitching remains, and approach the prone female as she inches away on her rear.

I waste no time, putting my foot on her neck, cutting off her supply of air and her means of calling for help. My pistol has already found its way into my hand, and I point it straight down, right at the sweet spot between her eyes. If she could speak, she’d be begging me to spare her, but she can’t. She’s a stupid animal, a monster, a blight on the face of this earth; life in the world would be better if she is gone. And now, because of my willful inaction, they have taken Ines, and I will not let her get away with that.

And yet, that very thing is what stops me from pulling the trigger. As Bloody Mary squirms beneath the heel of my boot, I remember that she wasn’t alone with One-Eye in this. Scar-Face was here. Even if I hadn’t heard his dreadful howl and seen the oversized footprints in the filth, there’s no way he would ever let anyone else take Ines. He came into my living space and claimed his prize in person, partly for the sake of his pride, and probably also just to spite me, to let me know that he will find me and get to me anywhere and at any time. He was proving that he is the alpha and is claiming the alpha’s rights.

And so, as I look at Bloody Mary’s terrified face, I realize something: it’s time I returned the favor.

And she is going to help me do it.

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 It takes an hour to get everything ready. I went back to the solar-powered freezer and the rest of the mall and took everything. I’ve loaded all my belongings into both bags and slung them on either side of the motorbike to balance the weight. I have my captive gagged and bound once again. There was a point during all the tazing, tying, and binding that I almost took the easy way out and shot her in the head. But without copious amounts of discipline, I wouldn’t be alive today, and so I resisted with the knowledge of what’s to come.

 I drag Bloody Mary and the bike outside. She is tied to the bike so that she can’t run away, but she is so terrified of me now that she has tried numerous times. The only thing that keeps her in line is my generous application of Ines’s Taser and a harsh tone of voice. As angry as I am, there are moments I begin to feel sorry for her, caught in between this interspecies war between two alphas. I’m treating her with roughness and cruelty, so much like the one she knew before, and she doesn’t fully understand why. She knows that I’m angry over the loss of Ines, but she doesn’t completely grasp what is happening, except that it’s simply a way of life for her. Since I can’t make her comprehend, I need her to be afraid of me. The last thing I have to do to put the plan into action will go a long way to making sure of that. I push my empathy down and replace it with determination.

 As I point her in the direction she ran before, she struggles against me, and I’m starting to wonder if I can actually fully control her. She may be weaker and thinner than most of the mutants, but she is still stronger than I am, the epitome of wiry. To head that off before it becomes a real problem, I deliver a strike to the nerve that runs up the side of her neck, and she crumples. Quickly, I hogtie her with the extension cord, and then I pull out my Bowie knife and crouch behind her, grabbing her ankle. I pause, waiting for her to relax a little, and then drag the blade right up the lateral side and ball of her foot. She shrieks in pain as blood spurts out, dripping onto the ground, and I immediately untie her, making sure she stays subdued with the Taser. Then, once I’m safely away, I stand up and back off. She cries a little, and for a second I wonder if I’m seeing actual tears in her eyes. She curls up on the ground, and I lunge at her, yelling loudly, to get her up and moving. With this final bit of terrifying prodding, she limps away on all-fours, her usual gallop stunted by the sting of her open wound. Even with her injury, her fear of me drives her on, which will take her to the only other place she knows.

As I watch her go, I keep my eyes trained on the red trail she leaves behind, a page from a dot-to-dot coloring book. When I reach the end, when I connect all the dots, Bloody Mary and I will have drawn a picture that will lead right to Scar-Face, and hopefully to Ines.

 If he’s killed or maimed her, then I’ll color in the rest of his picture with a fresh coat of crimson, and I won’t bother with staying inside the lines.

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 She travels quickly at first, initially making me doubt that I’ll find her again, but after two days, I catch sight of her taking shelter inside half of an abandoned gas station. She’s keeping to the roads, probably because that’s how she can find her way home. On the second night, I camp within sight of her shelter, careful to mask my own presence by not letting my fire get too large or visible.

 I haven’t eaten anything during this journey, so the fire is a necessary precaution against starvation since I have to boil water for the MREs. When I’m not eating, I spend my time going through my backpack and finishing those Molotov cocktails, cleaning my gun and checking my ammo, and making sure all my arrows are straight as can be. But most of all, I spend considerable time sharpening my swords. The katana was already battle-sharp, and now I’ve enhanced it even more. By the time I’m done with the short sword, it will cut through just about anything. For good measure, I apply the same treatment to all of my knives.

 At some point late in the night, only a few hours until sunrise, she gets up and starts moving again. I think she might have seen me, so I keep low to the ground and go back to track her. She’s still bleeding, but not nearly as badly. The fact that she had to travel on that foot means it will continue to bleed for some time and may even get infected soon, but I can’t risk losing the trail. I’ll need to keep her in sight as much as possible until she reaches wherever she’s going.

 This becomes a challenge after a while, especially since there doesn’t seem to be a single other cannibal along the route that she takes. Once, I hear one of their loud, shrill calls, and she takes off in that direction. I follow as best I can on foot, not wanting to draw attention with the sound of the bike (or their eerie ability to detect electrical discharge), and I think I’ve lost her at first. Eventually, though, I come upon her as she sits forlornly in front of one of their territory markers, not sure which way to go. The whole thing gives me a real sensation of being vulnerable and behind enemy lines, and it puts me on edge.

 In the midst of all this, not a minute goes by when I don’t think about Ines. I try to remember her smile, her laugh, the roll of her eyes as she tells me off in another language, but all I can think of is how she must be suffering. At the lowest point, with tears in my eyes, I pray that she’s already dead. I know that would be better for her, and a big part of me hopes that I’ll find her and learn she’s been dead since they took her. She was too much trouble for them, so rather than use and abuse her, they just killed and ate her later that night, or maybe the next day. The thought of losing her, especially like that, is almost too much for me to handle, but I remind myself that her fate is uncertain until I find a body, or what’s left of one. I know what she was wearing when she was taken – a black and red plaid wool jacket, brown cargo pants, and green t-shirt. As I travel for another day and a half, I keep my eyes open for any of these things scattered on the ground, careful not to overlook anything.

 Then, in the late afternoon of the fourth day since Ines was taken, Bloody Mary reaches her destination, and I’m right on her heels when she does.

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 There’s no mistaking it – this is the place. Lying underneath a rusty guardrail on a fifty-foot drop to the street below, I blend in against the moist, black asphalt. Through the light rain, I peer with my scope down into the mostly destroyed suburban scape. Unlike most of the places I’ve visited and camped in so far, the houses in this area are crumbling, falling in on themselves, or else completely demolished. One of them even has an old car where the living room used to be. However, some of the larger buildings are still standing, such as the one I’m looking at now.

 The target is an office complex, constructed with steel and brown brick. To my amazement, most of the windows are either still cracked but intact or only have a few holes in them. From the patterns of the breaks (and attempted breaks) it must be some kind of security glass. The bottom floor is wide open, and I can easily see the mutants moving around down there. There must be dozens of them.

 After about ten minutes of scoping the place out from this one angle, I start to scoot back to move to a new spot, but something moves down below, and there’s a scream. I freeze and look through my scope, seeing a gaggle of mutants coming into view, dragging a woman. My heart skips a beat, but then I realize that the blonde, middle-aged woman can’t be Ines. Still, I know Ines must be here because the one dragging the blonde forward by her hair is Scar-Face, and he’s surrounded by another one of his packs of fellow cannibals. She’s bruised and bloody, and it’s clear she’s been trying to fight back, but most of the fight is taken out of her already. Scar-Face throws her to the ground at the entrance, and more of the mutants gather around them, the woman moving slowly as she surveys the overwhelming odds arrayed against her. Scar-Face leans back and lets out a roar, and I flinch at the sound. It can probably be heard for miles.

 The blonde woman stands, and my heart goes out to her, even more so at the sight of her camo pants and a utility vest – she’s a survivor. I consider jumping down to help her, but that’s not why I’m here, and it probably wouldn’t work out very well for either of us anyway. After a moment of grandiose display, Scar-Face grabs the woman by the hair and drags her kicking and screaming into the building. Her cries steadily fade the further in she goes, but with the few broken windows there are and with what I can hear, I can tell he took her at least up to the fifth floor. My heart breaks for her as her bloodcurdling cries go unanswered, but I’m going to have to stick to a strategic plan and think tactically if I want to find Ines, let alone get in and out in one piece.

 There’s a more gradual approach toward the rear of the building. The whole place sits in a valley of sorts, with the road passing by from one side to the other beneath two bridges. I can sneak over probably one of the bridges before I’ve risked too much movement to go unnoticed. There appear to be some intact cars on the other side of the valley I can use as cover, or maybe even…

 I pause, considering my options, and how much time it would take to do what I’m thinking of doing. I glance back at the convenience store wall behind which I’ve hidden my bike, and I take mental inventory of everything inside. It could work, but it’d be risky.

 “Understatement of the year…” I think, shaking my head at my own foolhardy plan. Still, it’s the best thing I can think of right now, so I’d better get to work if I want to be ready before dark. I crawl back from the edge, then quickly but quietly return to my bike and prepare to sneak across the bridge.

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 I was right. The gradual slope of the hill behind the building is going to be perfect. The hill is unobstructed from top to bottom, which gives me a nice ramp as I roll the car up to the edge. It’s not my preferred make and model, but this Ford Explorer is in even better condition than I thought when I first spotted it. I’m just barely out of sight from the horde of adversaries below, and with this car’s engine running, they’ll be onto me in under a minute at best. It’s now or never. I wait as long as I dare, checking to make sure all of our equipment is underneath the back seat and in the trunk. It’ll be a risk leaving it in here while I’m inside, but no greater than the risk of dying altogether.

 Just when I think they’ve seen me, I throw the gear into neutral and hop out. The steering wheel is tied in place with a length of rope, and the lumbering piece of metal and glass slips over the side and begins to roll down, picking up speed as it goes. I’m on the bike, racing back across the bridge, and I glance back, seeing the larger vehicle roll over one of the cannibals as they try to attack it. I have to resist the urge to laugh out loud.

 Once I’m over the bridge, I look through my scope and watch as all the mutants begin to swarm to the rear of the building, and I hear the loud crash when the car goes through the glass and metal. I pray that it hit its intended target, which was the wide, rear entrance to the building, an outdoors deck of some sort with a high overhang that leads inside to some kind of back lobby area.

 Now, though, it’s time to make a grand entrance.

 I gun the engine on the bike and approach the drop, the front of the building looming just ahead. Once more, I check my precious cargo, and that’s when I realize the gravity of what I’m about to attempt. I’ve put myself in more peril than I have ever been in, because the motor bike is strapped with 200 sticks of military-grade dynamite, and I lit the five-and-a-half-foot fuse of detcord before I started. I have approximately fifteen minutes before it blows, assuming the drop doesn’t vaporize me first. I take a deep breath, nudge the first wheel over the edge of the steep embankment, and plunge fifty feet down to the parking lot below.