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The Door and the Dread

 When I was young, I had a friend named Cody who had been in the Boy Scouts for a good number of years. Whenever we would go camping, he would teach me all the different ways to tie knots and get frustrated that I didn’t catch on very quickly. After a year or two, he showed me an app for my phone that had all sorts of knots and knot-tying techniques for virtually every situation. Every time we went camping was a chance for some quality practice.

 All of that time was apparently a waste because I can’t remember a single knot from that app or from Cody as I stare out the fifth-floor window. The cracked, spider-web-like pattern around the edges of the hole in the window makes it difficult to see all the details, but it’s facing the rear of the building, which is exactly where we have to go. We’re four stories above the back entrance where the Ford Explorer is waiting to rescue us.

 The extension cord and rope get tied together in one of the strongest knots my instinct can muster – Cody would be ashamed of me, but if he wanted to make sure this got done properly, he should have survived the apocalypse and done it himself. The end of the cord gets tied to a sturdy piece of rebar visible through one of the many holes in the wall across the room near the door. There’s a sound from the next room, at least two mutants scampering around. They spot Ines lying on the floor near the constructed seat that formerly held her captive, and they immediately enter to replace her. In her drowsy but panicked state, she’s at the peak of her vulnerability and fear, which adds rage to my vigilance as I swiftly put two rounds into the first one’s head. The other screeches and makes as if to leap, but the barrel of the pistol is jammed into its mouth and the round exits the back of its skull.

 Then, the bellow shakes the room from somewhere on the floor below and my heart skips a beat. I put gentle hands on Ines, hefting her up so that she’s barely standing, but when I try to tie her hands together, she whimpers and tries to pull away, her shocked, betrayed eyes stabbing into my memory. I whisper into her ear as I pull her close.

 “Shhhhhh…it’s going to be okay,” I tell her. “But we have to go. Just hang on a little longer.”

 She nods, turning her fear into courage as I tie her hands together and then slip inside her arms, one over my shoulder, the other under my opposite arm. The cord and rope go around my waist in a loose series of loops, and I back out toward the window.

 The massive beast, the Harvester, lumbers into view, its former target nowhere to be seen. The gunshots must have drawn it over and I curse myself for letting my anger get the better of me. It isn’t until its head jerks up at the sound of my voice that I realize I spoke out loud. The two nostrils on either side of the vertical maw swell, and the mouth rumbles wetly.

 At the sound, Ines cries out, and this beast springs into movement. I raise a gun and empty the magazine, seven rounds, and it doesn’t even slow down. I can’t back out fast enough, and the two humongous arms rise up, the foot-long spikes of bone ready to skewer us (or maybe just me).

 “Ines,” I hear myself say as if underwater. “I want you to know that I—”

 Suddenly, I’m on the floor. My ears don’t work, and my vision is swimming. There’s a pounding coming from inside my head. A light flickers from somewhere in the foreground. As my senses adjust, the thick, moving feet of the Harvester come into focus. It, too, is lying on its back, struggling to regain composure along with us. In the distance, just over in the other birthing chamber, the flickering that I perceive turns out to be fire, and there’s a black stain from the smoke.

 The bomb went off downstairs.

Just as I realize this, the ground beneath us shifts; the second floor has collapsed. I flinch instinctively as a pair of hands grabs one of mine. Ines is pulling at me. For her to be dragging me toward the window in my armor and weapons is an astonishing feat considering how amazing it is that she’s able to stand at all. I don’t know how long it takes me, but eventually I will myself to my feet and back into the rope loop. Through the smoke, a thick shape flails about, bellowing angrily. An arm comes through the haze and stabs into the floor right in front of me, nearly severing the rope.

 We can’t waste any more time. With Ines clutching me with her arms and legs, I step out of the window. The rope goes taught in my hands and tight around my waist. If I didn’t have an outer shell, I’m almost convinced that I’d be severed in half just from the pressure, but fortunately, we’re able to slowly make our way down. Any moment, I expect our slow descent to rapidly become a blinding plummet as the Harvester cuts our umbilical, something it’s likely done many times before. Smoke hovers up from the back entrance below us. Ines begins to cough, and I have to close my eyes, feeling the rope in my gloved hands slip by a few inches at a time. My arms are on fire, and my legs are barely holding up under the weight of two bodies pressing against the glass.

 My thoughts drift to my feet moments before the first hole in the glass is discovered. We buckle, flopping sideways against the building. At least four hands clamp down on my ankle and foot, and it’s by sheer will alone that I’m able to hold onto the rope with one hand and draw one of the pistols with the other. At first, I think I’ve shot myself in the leg by firing blindly, but then I realize that I’m feeling teeth chewing on my calf. I empty this sidearm also, and eventually I’m able to use the collapse of the building to thrash myself free. The fire is spreading, and things are getting hot. The heat of it seeps through the broken windows, and I feel like I’m being cooked in my own armor, like pumpkin stew in October. I can’t imagine how Ines must feel.

 After either five minutes or five years, we reach the literal end of the rope. I pause, both of us suspended in the air, enveloped in the dirty black, the hunger above, the fire below. It’s impossible to see clearly, but it appears we’ve made it down at least three stories, maybe three and a half.

 “Ines!” I call. “We have to drop!”

 Her voice carries into my ears only enough to know that she spoke, but not to know what she said. Her tone conveys some confidence, but not completely. It doesn’t matter though – there’s nowhere else to go. Either we drop here or we bake. The building lists away from us, turning the vertical angle into a steep slope. Even if it’s only psychological, it makes it easier, and I release the rope. I turn as we drop so that Ines is on top, and my muscles tighten for the inevitable impact.

 It comes much sooner than I thought it would. The overhang at the top of the rear entrance hasn’t yet collapsed, so we impact after only a few feet. The fire has weakened the metal supports, though, so our fall pulls it down with us, and we make landfall with a terrific crash. Ines rolls away from me, and in my effort to keep her in sight, I also spy the Ford Explorer about ten yards away. She’s closer to it than I am. Our eyes lock for a brief moment – she’s struggling to stay conscious.

 “***GO!***” I yell as loudly as I can.

 It must have some force, because it jerks her out of her stupor and she moves toward it. I’m about to fall in behind her, but something grabs me and pulls me down. It’s a mutant, and he’s on fire.

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 Later – much later – Ines will tell me about the escape from her perspective. She staggered to the car, opened the rear driver’s side door, and crawled in. With no strength left to continue, the door stayed open and everything passed by in slow motion. Orange and yellow fingers reached from the ground to the ceiling, caressing the inside of the lobby with an all-consuming passion.

She felt like she stayed there, waiting for me, for hours, but I didn’t come right away. Among the passersby, both real and imagined, a random mutant on fire spotted her and turned to attack. Out of the flames behind it, a dark shape flew forward and took off its head with an afterthought swing. He rolled, coming up, pursued by more of the fiery demons, hurling a bottle that glinted too brightly against the rest of the light and hurt her eyes before it smashed against one of them, fanning the blaze.

She’d forgotten what it was like to ride in a car. The revving motor sounded to her more like a new kind of terrible creature than a machine. I recall pushing down on the pedal exceptionally hard since I’d forgotten how to drive at first. It was bumpier than either of us remembered, but that was probably the bodies.

I’d been so quick to get moving that I hadn’t closed the door, and another one of them grabbed from beneath and nearly pulled me out. If we hadn’t been driving backwards, he (or she, neither of us could tell what gender the disfigured, melting face had been once), would have succeeded. As it was, I was able to boot him (her?) out. Once the driver’s door slammed shut and I shifted to *D*, we may as well have been driving a tank.

We reminisced about this after a long while. But in the moment and the days following, there were no words for the relief and the terror. Or the pain.

I suppose there never will be.

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 We drive for hours. I’m not sure how long, exactly, but it’s long enough for the sun to go down and come up again. The vehicle passes through at least one old suburb and its whole periphery, and we can see the remnants of skyscrapers in the distance. It’s my cue to turn around and drive in another direction, not only to throw off any of the mutants that might be following, but also to avoid the downtown deathtrap. Fortunately, we’re able to make it several more hours along the congested highway without running into anything else, human or cannibal. It’s sheer happenstance that we have enough fuel to go that far.

 On the afternoon of the next day, the fuel runs out, and there are no cars or anything else in sight. We have to abandon the vehicle, and while I’m not thrilled about it, I’m almost relieved by the familiar sensation of my feet on the pavement. Ines, her bag slung over her shoulder, exits the vehicle opposite me and I give her a long look, one of many I’ve given her since we got out. I’m trying to make eye contact with her, but like all the other times in the past two days, she won’t acknowledge me.

 I want to talk to her. I want to tell her it will be okay, that no matter what happened to her, I’ll never abandon her. I want to reassure her that the horrors she experienced (and the ones maybe yet to come) won’t cause me to leave her behind. But I don’t know if it’s right to say those things. If she’s trying to forget, I don’t want to bring it up and force her to remember. I want to be there for her, but I’m just not sure how. So I say nothing.

 At the end, I’ll wish I’d said something. Anything.

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 Eventually, we find shelter underneath an old, cement bridge. The thick, immutable ceiling, walls, and floor of concrete give us a sentiment of invulnerability, and after unpacking and starting the fire, I lay down my bedroll. We’ve wedged ourselves into the crease on the underside of the bridge where it meets the ground, and briefly I worry about being startled and hitting my head if I jerk awake.

 Ines is lying next to me on top of her blankets, facing away, curled up, hugging her knees. She’s been like that since we arrived here, and at once I have a flashback to when I first found her. A gust of cold wind blows through and she shudders silently.

 We use to huddle together for warmth on cold nights like the one that’s coming now, but I can’t help but wonder if those days are over for good. Shifting my weight, I pull a blanket out from under me and reach over, gently draping it over her and tucking her in, using a ball of rolled-up clothes as a pillow. When my hand touches her head, she flinches and whimpers.

 “I’m sorry,” I say reflexively.

 Her hands come up to her face, and her shoulders start to shake. Her quiet cries echo under the bridge. I’m not sure what to do, what comfort I can offer.

 She turns suddenly toward me and curls up in my arms, unable to stop the tears or the shaking. As we hold one another tightly, painfully, I stare off into the sky, watching the moon rise from beneath the earth, and I vow that the next time I see Scar-Face, I’m going to kill him, even if it kills me also. Maybe that will help Ines, or maybe it won’t. But it will help me.

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 The next morning brings a kind of renewed strength after the excruciating night of catharsis. We head out, stopping only once to fill our water bottles at a spring off the side of the road. The water, chilled by the night’s cold, refreshes our bodies and our minds, and we make our way toward a residential area I spotted with my scope from the top of the bridge early that morning.

 When we packed up, I noticed that the .22 sidearm was missing, along with about one hundred rounds, and now I see the holster clipped onto Ines’s belt at her hip. Every so often, her hand rests on it and there’s a look in her eyes I don’t recognize. But then she looks over at me and her hand leaves the gun, her eyes returning to whatever state of normal she exists in now.

 After a few hours and several repeats of this trend, I venture to try talking to her.

 “You okay?” I ask.

 Immediately, I hate myself. *“Stupid question, King,”* my inner voice chastises. *“Of course she’s not okay. You’re a moron.”*

 To my surprise, though, she nods slowly.

 “I think I will be,” she says. For some reason, the strength in her voice breaks my heart. There’s so much I want – need – to say, but I can’t. Not yet. I imagine the same is true for her, so we just keep walking.

 It’s a little after midday when we reach the town. There’s what’s left of a gas station on either side of the road when we first enter, with more various shops and stores scattered about. It’s perfect for scavenging.

 I hand Ines the walkie-talkie, and I’m about to tell her that it’s just in case, but I close my mouth. She knows why we need them, and I’m not going to say it aloud. Wordlessly, she clips it to her belt next to the gun and we enter the first building we’ve chosen, an old, run-down thrift store. Ironically, it looks like most thrift stores I’ve been to in my life, which gives me hope. There was always some gold nugget hidden among all the junk in places like this, and I’m hoping that remains the case. Any little bit that helps us get closer to Ashborne is welcome, especially since we have no idea how much longer it will take us to get there.

After ten minutes or so of scanning the aisles and shelves, I look around and my heart skips a beat when I don’t see Ines. I press the button on the radio and take in a breath to whisper, but Ines’s radio clicks from the next aisle over. When I turn the corner and see her, she’s standing very still, her attention fully captured by something on the shelf in front of her. It’s a picture frame, and contained within is an old photograph, a placeholder for whoever might want to buy the frame. The image of the happy, contented father, mother, daughter, and son in a suburban backyard has somehow avoided the forces of time and space and looks unusually pristine.

She doesn’t acknowledge my presence when I approach, and we stand there for a minute or two, me staring at her, her staring at the picture.

“You wanna take it with us?” I ask after a bit.

She thinks about it for a long moment, then reaches up and turns it flat, facing downward.

“*Non*,” she mutters bitterly.

I stand back and look around.

“Well, I haven’t found anything in here. How ‘bout you?”

“No,” she replies. “Let’s move on.”

That’s more than I’ve been able to get out of her for the past few days. It must show on my face because she stops and gives me a weird look.

“Something on your mind?” she asks. It has a hint of her old, sarcastic flair, but there’s acid in it.

“Nah,” I say dismissively. “Let’s go.”

We abandon the thrift store and make our way over to the next building, an old, wide structure with a faded sign above the doors that once proudly proclaimed *Craig’s Furniture and Appliances* to passersby. The front of the building has siding that’s peeling off, and the doors are big, old, wooden ones that hang open just a little. There’s an unusual smell coming from the dark interior.

We stop at the front, and I cast a glance toward Ines. She hesitates just for a second, not returning my look, and then she clicks her flashlight on and nudges the door open with her foot. It makes a loud creaking sound that stops us both for a moment, but then I follow her in with my flashlight. She has her gun in her hand, and I reach up to stop her in mid-raise.

“Don’t sound the dinner bell,” I warn. There’s a brief flicker of defiant panic on her face, but then she holsters the gun and reaches up, unclipping my one-handed survival axe from my backpack as I draw my short sword.

When I was little (and, admittedly, even up until just a few years ago), it was a dream of mine to spend the night in a furniture store, playing hide-and-seek with friends. Obviously, it would have been illegal, and we would have been in a world of trouble with the police and our families, but there’s no point now that it’s hanging wide open, begging me to check that box on my bucket list.

Most of the furniture in here is completely trashed, but that’s not what we’re looking for anyway. Our eyes are peeled for anything we can use, any meager form of sustenance. I’m keeping the time we spend in here toward the front of my conscious memory, but we don’t find anything useful for at least ten minutes. Not willing to give up that easily in a place this large, we press on. Briefly, it occurs to me that we might be able to take shelter here if we can’t find any other places. It won’t be easy to secure such a big space, but the mall was technically less safe than this, and we still managed to find a secure room. Still, that won’t do us any good if we can’t find something to eat. The memory of the thick venison comes back to me, making my stomach growl. Ines looks over at me, and I pat my belly.

“That’s *my* dinner bell…” I tell her with a grin.

She smiles, the first one since we got each other back, and my heart soars.

My foot comes down into a puddle of something. My flashlight illuminates it, and my nose picks up the odor just as I see what it is. A pool of blood stains the bottom of my boots, and I follow the long, winding, red river to its source. After all we’ve been through, I thought I was prepared for anything. I wasn’t.

The blood is coming from a pile of corpses in various stages of decay and disfigurement. My recently encouraged heart lodges in my throat, realizing that we’ve scavenged our way right into a feeding ground, but even as my adrenaline starts to surge, my eyes focus on the clothes worn by the bodies. Grass skirts, bone necklaces, white face-paint…these aren’t humans that have been caught, tortured, maimed, and dumped here; these are cannibals.

“What the…?” Ines and I turn to one another, realizing that we both asked the unfinished question in unison.

“Who did this?” she asks.

My analytical nature overcomes my revulsion and also the tenderness Ines has brought into my life, and I begin to inspect the nearest body. It’s been almost completely bisected, with only the spine fully intact, the torso and most of the internal organs having been eviscerated. The skin where it ends is cleanly cut, not torn or ripped. The bruising on the rest of the upper body is minimal, even around the face where the eyes have been removed. There are holes in the back of the skull consistent with long, sharp objects. Three slash marks have opened the neck, which I’m assuming are the killing wounds. By the amount of blood, it appears these were the first injuries. The torso evisceration was after the fact.

*“Not mutant kills…not a sword or a knife, either…more like claws or talons…like some kind of creature did this…”*

With further examination of the bodies and parts piled up here, it becomes clear that not all of these cannibals were massacred for the purpose of being consumed. Some of them are perfectly intact, the only wounds being the parts that had been torn from them to kill them.

Ines grabs my shoulder, and I straighten up from the body I’m examining at the edge of my flashlight’s reach.

“Matt…” she whispers. “There’s something in here with us.”

My ears pick up a rustle just then, like whatever Ines is referring to knows that we’re aware of its presence. I swing my light around, trying to catch any sort of movement, but when my light comes back around, the body I’d just been looking at is gone. At that same moment, another body vanishes, jerked by something out of sight into the darkness. I shine my light at it, but it’s too fast and disappears behind the corpse pile with the body in tow before I can get a look at it. The noise from it might have been the body being dragged along the floor, or it might have been a hiss or an extremely wicked and cruel snicker.

“Matt…!” Ines gasps. She is shining her light upward, and so I look up and do the same. There are shapes moving above us; gaunt, black, skeletal shapes with huge hands, wide, toothy mouths, and reflective, round, crimson eyes, like a dozen malnourished Spider-Men.

The black, bony shapes scurry about in the rafters of the store far above, and when one of them drops down into the darkness ahead of us, I turn and bolt for the doors. Ines is right beside me, keeping pace easily, and when I look over my shoulder, the black things are descending like a curtain, their red eyes flickering in the light of the exit. Their claws screech along the tile floor.

In spite of myself, I scream. I’ve never felt a dread like this in my life, not even facing down the Harvester three days before. Ines doesn’t make a sound, but the fear on her face seems to shake me even more.

The door is only two or three bounds away, and I swear I can feel them coming up behind me, like one of them is breathing down my neck. Somewhere next to my ear (right or left, I cannot tell), something is laughing at me. I swing madly with my sword, still forging ahead, and I hit the half-open door with my whole body, sunlight flooding the entrance. The things hiss and scramble away from the light, and I look inside briefly as Ines and I slam the doors. In the split-second glimpse before they are closed, the round red eyes stare at us, into us, and mock us with their hissing laughter as we seal them in.

We sink down, panting, our adrenaline-fueled limbs trembling. More grateful to be clasp one another’s hands and rise together. We can hear their claws on the tiles inside, so we hurry away from the door and the dread. We should find a place to set up, a secure place. Those things hate the light, but the sun is going down soon.

We have about four hours left until nightfall.