

I Looted Caiger Mall and All I got was this Lousy
T-Shirt
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Chapter 1

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An Urban Dead Short Story

This week I took a walk to the mall.

Most of the cars in Malton went up in smoke during the rioting. I've never been sure why, maybe people felt the flames would somehow keep the undead at bay. It must be said, I wasn't really paying attention at the time. There are rumours of working vehicles here and there and it's not like the supply drops don't keep us in fuel, but I didn't have access to one, so I had to get to the mall on foot.

Most people keep off the streets but I prefer to move at ground level. Zombies aren't really so dangerous as long as you keep out in the open and are reasonably quick on your feet. Most of the time they're not that alert and hardly notice you. At any rate, a good runner, and believe me, these days I'm a *good* runner, can keep ahead of even the fastest of them. The buildings, on the other hand, have been barricaded and broken into and ransacked so many times that they are veritable death traps. At least on the street I don't have to continually watch my footing for loose planks.

Even at ground level, though, walking to the mall took the better part of a day.

My instructions were simple. Go to the mall. Check its status. Report back.

From the outside it looked in pretty good shape. Caiger mall is one of those horrendous concrete structures they built in the late fifties and sixties. If it had been built recently it would have been wall to wall glass and steel and about as much use as a fortress as a chocolate fireguard. As it was, its only vulnerable place was the dozen or so glass doors across the four entrances. The glass was long gone, of course, but the doorways had been boarded up and the barricades

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were constantly manned. Lights blazed from the office windows high up in the mall's concrete sides. That meant it was currently held by humans.

The problem with the barricades, of course, is that they are pretty much an impossibility to get past. The easiest way into Caiger - if you are quick and nimble on your feet - is through the rooftop door.

The Hearne building is a big office block next to Caiger. Its doors hung loose on their hinges and it was dark inside. It was late afternoon when I got there. So there was some light to see by as I made my way up the stairs, enough to spot any zombies lurking in the empty rooms. I got out onto the roof with light to spare for the jump across to Caiger. I'm not keen on free running, but it's a skill that keeps you alive in Malton better than almost anything else. I checked the straps on my backpack to make sure it wouldn't bounce around too much as I ran, and then went for it. The gap between the two buildings is a metre or so wide, across a narrow alleyway. You wouldn't have had me even contemplating a jump like that four years ago. However, the worst that can happen is that you fall to the street below.

As usual the roof door was open. One day the zombies will learn to jump and then we'll be in trouble. I checked my knife before I went down. Caiger is pretty safe. It's too well known, a constant way point for survivors, for it to become too insular. You hear of malls down in the south of the city that have become completely closed communities, populated by petty dictators and cults of various descriptions. Even so, it never hurts to be careful. Most people carry guns but I gave up on them a few months ago. They're too bulky for the kind of work I do and carrying ammunition is a pain. At least a knife always works.

The ground and first floor plazas of the mall are where the action takes place at Caiger. There are hundreds of make-shift stalls, mostly selling stuff from the supply crates the authorities regularly drop on Malton. You can also find crazies who think there's a market for luxury items - jewellery made out of shot-gun shells, that kind of thing - and, of course, vendors of food.

The smell of freshly cooked meat wafted up the stairs as I came down and made my stomach rumble. The supply crates usually contain tinned food but the zombie virus never seemed to affect the animals of the city so there is hunting to be had, if you have the time. I've even heard that in some of the posh leafy suburbs there are small garden communities growing vegetables and keeping chickens, though I've no idea how you could defend them long-term against the zombies and the gangs. However it works, there is always fresh food in Caiger and after three months on tinned baked beans, heated if I was lucky, I was looking forward to blowing some scavenged supplies on the good stuff.

I'd got a lot of bandages and anti-virus in my backpack and, more importantly, several batches of the revivification serum Dixie squad had been cooking up for the past week in a lab down in Owsleybank. Caiger is built right next to its own Necrotech lab but that doesn't stop the stuff being valuable.

Half an hour later I was stuffed full of roast pigeon and chips.

Technically my job was now done. The place looked to be in good shape. There were plenty of people here and the barricades were well-manned. If the DHPD wanted to stop by for a few days to resupply and get some R&R, now would be as good a time as any. However, since it was late, my plan was to stay the night, sleeping in one of the abandoned offices on the upper floors and then head back the next day. That meant I had the evening free for some window shopping and any entertainment that was going.

That was when one of the little boutique shops caught my eye. Once upon a time it had been a Tie Rack or a Sock Shop, now a large supply crate had been pulled across the entrance and a pile of plain but functional clothing piled on top. They do drop clothes into Malton from time to time but it's not as common as the basic supplies: food, medicine, the chemicals needed for the serum, guns and ammunition. My own clothing was a mess and I knew it. Nearly every item was blood-stained and most of it had been worn for too long.

This was a good drop. Most of the stuff was new, end of factory line, I'd guess: warm winter coats, plain jeans and shirts, cheap trainers. I was considering bargaining for a swap: a complete new outfit for maybe some first aid supplies when I spotted a whole wealth of bizarreness in the middle of all the sensible work clothes.

"What's this?" I asked, picking up a flimsy spangly top. It was black with a starburst sewn into it in silver thread.

The guy with the crate shrugged. His name was Karl or Kramer or something. "Women's Institute," he said. "They sent letters too." He gestured to a pile of paper on the side of the crate.

I had a look through one of the letters. It was pretty sappy stuff. "We're all terribly concerned, blah, blah, blah, the scientists are working on a cure, blah, blah, blah, the quarantine should be lifted soon, blah, blah, blah, here's some little things to cheer you up."

"You want to try that top on?" asked the man.

He was a weaselly scrap of a guy who had that look of a peeping tom about him, so it was a bit of a toss-up. After all what did I need a spangly top for? Not exactly my first priority in a zombie apocalypse. On the other hand, every once in a while, I get tired of being just another one of the guys, you know?

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“There’s a back room,” says Karl or Kramer. “You can change in there.”

That more or less decided me. I grabbed the top, a T-shirt, pair of jeans and a decent looking jacket and took them into the back room. Once there I rammed one of my socks into the keyhole and jammed a chair under the door handle. I figured that would prevent weasel guy “accidentally” walking in on me while I changed.

I tried the normal clothing on first, eyeing up the ridiculous spangly top and thinking of all the good reasons not to swap hard-won supplies for it. Then I tried it on. It fitted like a dream. It was a bit worn in places, obviously the WI had done a charity collection, but I wasn’t complaining. It was stretchy and figure-hugging. There was no mirror but I’d slewed off a lot of excess weight in the last few years. My guess was that it was showing off my figure to its best advantage. So I was decided. I’d take the lot. I sorted through my old clothes, dumped anything salvageable into my back pack and left the rest on the floor of the back room. Then I went out to haggle with Karl, or Kramer, or whatever his name was.

“It suits you,” he said and ogled at me. I zipped up the jacket to hide the top. The point was to look good, not available.

“What do you want for the clothes?” I asked.

“Have them as a gift,” he said. “A pretty lady like you should have pretty clothes.”

God give me strength!

“Nope,” I said. “I’m happier to pay. I’ve got medical supplies.”

“Have dinner with me,” he persisted. “Everyone is so inhospitable these days and you shouldn’t be alone around here.”

Big warning signs were flashing by this point. “I’ll give you two rolls of bandages, 500 ibuprofen, two shots of morphine and a dose of anti-virus,” I offered, pulling the supplies out and dumping them on the crate.

It was then that the call “Cades” went up from the ground floor.

You don’t hesitate when you hear a call like that, especially somewhere like Caiger which always has more than its fair share of the undead outside. So I’d caught up my pack and was halfway out of the door when Karl or Kramer or whoever he was caught my arm.

“This way!” he said, pulling me back into the shop.

“You’ve got your fucking payment,” I shouted, gesturing at the medical supplies. “They need people on the barricades.”

He shook his head. “Safer back here,” and he continued to drag me backwards.

Outside the mall rats were swarming to the defences. We didn’t have time for this!

I'm stronger than I look. Three years in a quarantined Malton, and two or so working with what's left of its police force teaches you a thing or two. I twisted free from his grasp, elbowed him in the ribs for good measure, pulled my rucksack on and turned my back on him.

That was when something hit me from behind.

Never underestimate even small, cowardly, weaselly guys. Thank god Forky, who trained me, wasn't there to see it. Mind you Forky has been missing for most of a year and counting.

I woke up to the nausea and sickness that accompanies a head injury. It didn't take me long to work out I'd been tied up. It seemed like Karl, or Kramer, or whoever, had rigged up his own private little prison somewhere. He had knives and guns everywhere, mind you everyone has knives and guns everywhere in Malton, so that's hardly news. Most people clean them, though, and are less interested in the chains and meathooks. At least I only had rope around my wrists. I wasn't going to be getting them off in my current state but it gave me options.

"Come round, I see." Karl, or Kramer, was perched on a chair facing me, cradling a shotgun. "What a pretty little bird I've caught this time," and he stroked my face.

"Help!" I shouted. I'm not keen on being a damsel in distress but this was Caiger mall, for crying out loud. The place positively swarms with people. "Help!"

I earned a sound slap for my pains. "We're in the basements," he said. "No one can hear you."

I eyed my surroundings. It was a small enclosed space but the walls looked solid and made of concrete. There were no sounds of running feet.

I'd got too used to working with a squad. When you move in a group, you don't get attacked by lone weirdos. Or at least, if you do, they just want to kill you and be done with it. They don't tie you up in basements and call you a pretty little bird. It's easy to forget that, at five foot nothing, I look like something of an easy target.

"Get lost," I said. I tried to snarl, but frankly I was too sick and giddy.

He tutted at me. "Play nice, and I might give you a reward." His hand trailed down my face and neck to the top of the zip on my jacket. Slowly he pulled it open. "But if you're a bad little girl," and he hit me again, "then you'll have to be punished."

"I'm a member of the DHPD," I tried. "You just assaulted an officer. You let me go and I won't file charges."

He laughed outright at that. "You're going to have to do better than that, little girl. What would the DHPD want with a slip of a thing like you? Besides the

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DHPD are all washed up these days. The Dead whupped them good and proper, so I hear tell.”

I wouldn't have said the Dead whupped us exactly, but it's difficult to disguise the fact that these days the Dunell Hills Police Department can operate out of almost any Malton suburb *except* Dunell Hills itself.

He was standing very close now. One hand had slipped under the open jacket and was fumbling around in an amateurish fashion.

I decided to change tack. He hadn't tied my feet so I kneed him in the groin.

That bought me a good ten minutes to assess the situation while he lay on the ground and cursed me. Bottom line? In Malton there really are fates worse than death.

“So what's all this,” I asked when I judged he was capable of paying attention. “Can't get a date with a girl without tying her up first?”

The shotgun twitched in his hands. His breathing was still ragged and his eyes watering, but he'd hauled himself up into a sitting position and held the shotgun across his lap.

“Bitch!” he hissed.

“What's the matter?” I asked. “All the girls round here know you can't get it up, do they?”

His fingers were twitching around the trigger of the shot-gun. “Be quiet!” he shouted.

So I continued. I'll spare you the details but I had just reached the point where I was describing, with a certain amount of graphic detail, his mother's activities with various DHPD Officers of my acquaintance when he shot me... through the heart... the bloody idiot.

It ruined the spangly top, as well.

It's difficult to describe what being a zombie feels like. Mostly reason gets dialled right down and want gets dialled right up. It's worse if you don't have any brains to speak of. It takes the brain a while to regenerate. If you've been shot through the head, awareness returns only slowly and for a while you are just trapped in a sea of dull sensation: pale lights and muted sounds. That's why you should always shoot someone through the head in Malton. It was the first thing Forky drummed into me. Shooting them through the heart just means they'll be up again sooner and probably thinking about as clearly as they're going to be.

Not only had the idiot shot me through the heart but he was also still there when I came round and hadn't even had the sense to dump my body out of the nearest window.

I reckon I must have just broken the ropes he'd tied me up with. I don't recall. Ropes and restraints aren't the sort of thing you really notice much as a zombie. At any rate, I got up and went for him, at which point he shot me through the heart, again, the daft twat and then I beat him about the head with his shotgun until he stopped moving.

The thing about eating someone's brains is it's not about taste or not one that's on your tongue or in your throat. It's a taste that's in your mind somewhere. It's as if you steal a bit of their soul and a flash of them, their personality, their pleasures and their pains, runs through you. When you're functionally dead, your heart no longer pumping, your brain operating at the speed of a snail then that experience is something else entirely. It's like a splash of light in the darkness, the most intense set of feelings you ever had dropped into a nightmare of dulled perceptions. It's a sensation you never quite lose the taste for.

All that said. Psycho weasel brains? Yeurch!

Describing my thought processes at the time is hard but they went something like:

Nasty Man! Stop! Stop! Mmmm.... Brains! Bad! Bad Man! Bad Man Brains! Bad! Bad Man Brains Bad! Bad Brains!

Believe me that's high functioning cognition for a zombie. So, I resisted the temptation to eat psycho weasel brains and headed out for the mall concourse.

Nice Smell! Nice Brains! Mmmmm.... Yummy!

I grabbed my backpack on the way out. The urge to hang onto your stuff is pretty primal.

Of course, I got spotted straight away. Someone sensibly put a bullet through my head and the next thing I knew I was lying in the middle of the road outside. I'd been shot through the head so for a while I just lay on my back and stared at the pretty lights in the sky while my brain got what passed for its zombie act together. Once I got up my thought processes just cycled for a fair while.

Outside! No Brains! Not Fair! Outside! No Brains! Not Fair!

But eventually I got over the disappointment and headed for Salopia Row. Salopia's the street that runs in front of Caiger mall's Necrotech laboratory. If you hang around there long enough someone will step out and revive you. That fact is so universally known that even zombie thought processes can work out where to go. After that it's just a matter of resisting the smell of all the nice brains inside Caiger next door and trying not to eat anyone who's carrying a syringe.

I think I must have dozed off. Zombies tend to do that if they stand around doing nothing long enough.

I woke up face down on the tarmac once more. Sunlight was filtering over the

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horizon so I'd obviously dozed away the night. Someone must have filled me full of revivification serum while I was dozing for my cognitive functions were back up to speed. Technically, therefore, I was alive once more. Some days I think being alive in Malton is just another form of undeath. We're all infected. That's why they've quarantined us in and left us to fight it out amongst ourselves.

So, I was alive. Of course, I was lying face-down in the street in the middle of a crowd of zombies, which is one of the reasons why it's handy to be fleet of foot in this town.

Mostly, in fact, zombies will ignore anything that looks dead. Brains that have been dead for even a short space of time taste really, really bad, though I don't suppose you really want to know how I came to find that out. The zombies who lurk around Salopia are generally pretty harmless. They're mostly waiting for a revive. But occasionally you get rotters in their midst. Zombies who have no desire to ever live again but know Salopia's a good place to stand around and lure out the living. Even well-intentioned zombies occasionally crack and take a bite out of someone. So I lay on the ground, eyes just barely open, and took a good look around, trying to move as little as possible.

There were only a couple of zeds in the street and they had the look of dozing zombies if ever I saw them. Not that I hung around once I made my move. I got to my feet and sprinted off down the street, away from the mall and back towards Owsleybank.

Halfway there I stopped off in a ruined home and replaced the remains of my spangly top with the new T-Shirt. I made an attempt to clean up the new jacket too. Some of weasel guy's brains had ended up on it during all the excitement with the shotgun.

Dr Snow, my squad leader, looked up as I climbed in through the window of our Necrotech lab.

"How was Caiger?" he asked.

"Up and running," I reported, "with the lights on. Not too many zombies waiting at Salopia."

His eyes drifted over my new blood-stained jacket and trousers.

"Trouble?" he asked.

Technically Karl or Kramer or whatever his name was had assaulted an officer. That's grounds for swearing out a warrant. I could have sent Delta Squad after him to collect. It sounds laughable but the remnants of due process are pretty much all we have left. On the other hand I had already killed him once, even if I hadn't read him his rights first. Then there was the small matter of admitting that I'd let a civilian get the drop on me and ended up tied to a chair.

So I settled for shaking my head and saying, “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”