

Short Stories

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BD Well of Souls.

Gabby Stockholm Syndrome.

Luka I Looted Caiger Mall and All I got was this Lousy T-shirt; Well of Souls;
Not a Good Day to Die.

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Chapter 1

I Looted Caiger Mall and All I Got was this Lousy T-Shirt

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.”

Chapter 2

Well of Souls

An Urban Dead Short Story

2.1 Part One

I cursed as the lights flickered and went out. That was another generator gone. I finished soldering the wire back in place on the one in front of me. The soldering iron cast enough light to see the work by and, luckily, it was gas powered.

The late afternoon sun filtered through the grubby windows of the workshop. I grabbed a can of gasoline, fuelled the repaired generator to check it worked and then carried it to the door. I met Ian in the hallway, carrying a second shattered generator. I sighed. “What happened to it?”

Ian shrugged tiredly. “A Death Cultist emptied a pistol clip into the rotor”

Ian Carlyle is the youngest of the Dunell Hills Police Department command staff. Once, I think, he must have been skinny, but Malton has made him lean, giving him a look that suggests his body has concentrated on building fibre and muscle. He’s tall too. If I stood on tiptoe, I reckon the top of my head would just about reach his shoulders. He has short brown hair and very blue eyes. I’d say kind eyes but I think it’s more that Ian often looks thoughtful and that is unusual in an environment where we are almost always fighting. He’s also American, East Coast, I think. There used to be a US Army Base on the outskirts of Malton. A lot of their service personnel got trapped in with us, trying to help out in the first days of the crisis.

I handed him the generator I’d just repaired and took a look at the broken one. I had a nasty feeling it was beyond my ability to solder and weld back together.

I've learned generator repair on the hoof. I've a good working knowledge but I never trained as a mechanic.

"I'll get on to it," I said.

Ian shook his head. "No."

"No?"

"It's almost dark and I'm prepared to bet we're facing a big attack as soon as the sun's down. That's why they're expending so much effort taking out the generators. We're going to need medical support soon and you've been in the workshop all day. I want you to grab a couple of hours sleep before the attack starts."

"And if they take out that generator as well? We don't have any spares left."

"I'll see if CMS have some guys they can get on it. Caiger's supposed to be their mall after all. But right now I'm more worried about the need for medics. Get some sleep. It's going to be a long night."

I shrugged. I had learned the hard way not to argue with Ian about strategy. He's one of the best tacticians the DHPD have and if he thought medical support was the priority, he was probably right.

I took the devastated generator back to the workshop and left it on the bench. Then I headed for the bunk room the DHPD had commandeered. Once upon a time it had been a medium-sized branch of Boots. We'd pushed the shattered remains of the display units to the front, to form an additional barricade across the entrance and then bedrolls and blankets had been spread out on the floor. No luxury spared. There were about a dozen sleeping forms there already as I clambered in. That meant command had reduced the watch considerably. They were expecting something big tonight.

I grabbed a blanket and rolled myself up on one of the pads. I had been working for nearly 12 hours, losing the fight against the death cultists' determination to deprive us of power. So I fell asleep almost straight away.

I was woken by a hand on my shoulder. "Purple Cat! Wake up!" It was Ian's voice.

Purple Cat is not the nickname I'd have chosen to get saddled with. I've always been called Cat. It's a diminutive of my real name, but Purple? I still carried one of Claire's old stuffed cats as a kind of mascot. It has purple stripes and somehow the name has become attached to me.

“Time to start stitching people back together?” I asked, sleepily.
“No, something’s come up. We need to talk to you.”

The Dunell Hills Police Department command staff had taken over a suite of offices on one of Caiger Mall’s upper floors. Commissioner Bob and Goldstar, our Director of Field Operations, were there. Bob, Ian and Goldstar form the entire upper echelon of the DHPD. Ian came in behind me and shut the door. Bob and Goldy are both much older than Ian, more what you’d expect from senior officers in a police force, not that anything in Malton is quite how you would expect it to be. Bob and Ian had led us for a long time. They’d somehow managed to unite the rag-tag remains of a police force, miscellaneous soldiers and a bunch of civilians into something that had some shred of a claim to represent law and order in this city.

The Director of Field Operations was rotated around regularly. The force had learned the hard way that it was simply too stressful a job for one person to run with for long. Staying one step ahead of the undead and the death cultists required constant attention. Before Goldstar, Braunwyn Cleanslate had held the job. I shied away from that thought. I didn’t want to think about Bryn. She’d led Dixie Squad before she took on DFO-C and had hauled my arse out of the fire more times than I cared to think.

Dixie is the DHPD’s support squad. We’re the medics, the scientists and the engineers of the department - usually all three at once. Bryn was a warrior, first and foremost, but she knew our value and she knew where to tell us to go and when to tell us to leave and she fought to protect us with all her heart and her soul. The department felt empty without her. Mostly I tried to pretend she’d never existed in the first place.

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“Ghost Squad have missed their last three check-ins,” said Bob.

This is what happens when I think about Bryn. BD just inevitably has to pop up to haunt me.

Ian pulled up a chair and sat down next to me, across the desk from Goldy and Bob. “We got a request to help out at Bale Mall and sent them over,” he said.

“But we need them back here now, and fast,” said Goldstar. “Caiger’s not going to hold for much longer and the evacuation has hardly started.”

“I’ve seen no signs of an evacuation,” I said.

The command staff exchanged glances. “We’re talking to the Caiger Mall Survivors,” said Bob. “We’ll have something organised soon.”

I looked at Ian instinctively. “How many zombies outside?”

“Forty at the last count,” he said. “But there are more arriving every minute and the place is crawling with death cultists. We’re having several murders a day and we can’t keep a generator running for more than an hour.”

“We’ll agree on an evacuation plan soon,” said Bob firmly. “In the meantime we need the entire department here. We have to hold this place until the civilians are out.”

“Where do I fit in?”

“We need you to go and extract Ghost Squad.”

“What?”

“Cat, they’ve not checked in for three days,” said Ian. “The only explanation is that they’re all dead. We need someone to go up to Yagoton, revive them all and bring them back.”

“There’s the Revivification Clinic up there. The place is crawling with revivers. No way do they need another.”

The command staff exchanged another look. “There’s been no news from Yagoton or any of the surrounding suburbs for over a week,” said Goldstar.

“What?” I realised I was looking at Ian again for confirmation.

“Nothing,” he said. “That’s one of the reasons we sent Ghost to answer the distress call. We wanted to know what was going on.”

“Why will I make any difference?”

“Your job isn’t to find anything out,” said Bob. “Get in there. Get our boys back on their feet. Bug out as fast as you can. We’ll deal with Yagoton once we’ve got this place under control.”

“Why me?” I asked.

“Ian recommended you,” said Bob. “You have a problem with the assignment?”

I shook my head. “No problem.”

I was going to have to have a chat with Ian before I left.

I returned to the bunk room and filled my pack full of vials of the revivification serum and first aid supplise. I kept my toolbox. It was only a six-man team I was after and I had space to spare, even after packing twice the revivification serum

needed to get them on their feet. I was halfway through when Ian turned up with a shotgun, a pistol and an armful of ammunition.

“What’s that for?”

“You don’t know what you’re walking into. I’d be happier if you were armed.” He sighed. “I wish we could send a team but we simply don’t have the manpower.”

I eyed my backpack with irritation and then unloaded the toolbox to make room for the ammunition.

“Why me?” I asked as I repacked. “Bulldog and I haven’t spoken in months.”

Not since Bryn vanished in fact, though the argument itself had been about something else entirely. Would Malton be a safer place if they didn’t keep dropping guns and ammunition down in the supply crates? Something like that. But in the middle of it all I’d shouted that Bryn would have stayed if he didn’t repeatedly behave like such a jerk and he’d responded that at least he knew what it was like to love someone rather than viewing the opposite sex as some kind of meal ticket. And that had been the end of that.

“He’s still your brother, Cat. You may fight like the proverbial cat and dog but you’re both quick enough to leap to the other’s defence if anyone else tries to get involved. If anyone’s going to get him out of there you will.”

“God speed,” said Ian as I left. “I’m relying on you.”

I approached Yagoton from the South West. It was a hot summer’s day with that heavy oppressive feeling in the air that promises a thunder storm to come. I’d have said it was blisteringly hot, but that’s the kind of statement that always makes the Yanks laugh. It was hot for Malton, though. My shirt was sticking to my body underneath the bulky flak jacket Ian had insisted I wore.

Yagoton is about a half-day’s walk from Caiger Mall. I became increasingly disturbed by the silence as I approached the suburb. Malton’s pretty quiet at the best of times but this was eerie. Even on the quietest of days you can hear the groans of the undead, but here there was nothing except birdsong, and that frightened me almost more than anything else. I’d have been reassured to stumble across a zombie.

What I was passing were the unsouled. They lay in the streets where they had been dragged out of buildings or stood staring blankly into space, stopped in their zombie tracks. Unsouling isn't picky, it'll take the walking dead as often as someone freshly killed. At first I assumed they were sleeping zombies and gave them a wide berth, but gradually the silence got to me and I had to find out. I had come across the unsouled before, but never in great numbers. They appear to be the end point of the disease that infects us. Sooner or later the cycle of life and death just... stops. I approached a small child, standing in the street, her mouth smeared with dried blood and the remains of a cotton dress hanging in tatters on her small frame. I held my shotgun at the ready. I nudged her cautiously with the gun and watched her crumble away. I ran my hands through the forlorn pile of dust. This was coming for all of us, sooner or later.

Street after street, building after building was filled with the unsouled. A creeping dread came upon me that I would discover BD and his squad in that state, staring blankly into nowhere in unearthly silence. I headed for St. Swithun's Church, the revive point operated by the Yagoton Revivification Clinic. It's where I would have gone if I had found myself dead in the suburb. As I approached I began to hear the sound of zombie groans and, twisted as it sounds, my heart lifted. There was still life, of a kind, in the suburb. I turned a corner to see a large horde of the undead, clearly awake and moving. There must have been a hundred of them milling around the church and its next door Necrotech building.

I beat a hasty retreat, back round the corner and out of sight. There was no way I was going to be able to get into the church. If Ghost Squad were all zombies, would they have the sense to realise that? I tried to think what I'd do in such a situation. If I managed to work out I wasn't going to get revived in the church I'd try to stand nearby. I had my back pressed against the side of a warehouse. This bit of Malton was old, a small mill village that had been swallowed up when they built the new town. The warehouse was tall and built from red brick. Its windows gaped open, high up in the sides. I should check it out while it was still light.

Inside, the warehouse was a big open space with a gently sloping corrugated iron roof. The remains of shelving were toppled and strewn all over the place. Shafts of light fell from the empty windows across the floor. One of them illuminated a familiar silhouette. It was Andy, my baby brother, who these days carried around a shotgun called Black Betty and styled himself Bulldog, or BD for short. Words endlessly fail me in describing the ridiculous machismo of the whole thing. What worried me even more was that Black Betty was actually his. I hoped that meant he'd owned a firearms license before Malton went to hell in a hand-basket. I didn't like to think that the jet-black 12 gauge had been an illegal weapon.

He was standing rigidly to attention with his back to me. But I could see his hands flexing convulsively so he was probably alert. I sat down quietly behind one of the tumbled shelves and began to mix serum. We cook up batches of the key ingredients whenever we can but, once you mix the final results together, they only remain active for an hour. Worse yet, you need heat to mix them. I had a small calor gas stove in my pack which I took out and lit. Then I mixed the liquid together into a syringe and heated it over the flame, shaking it to watch the chemicals combine. Eventually the L.E.D.s along the side of the syringe began to light up, showing the mixture was done. I shook the syringe one last time for good measure, watching the glittering sparkles swirl in the green liquid. I packed away the stove. Then I peered cautiously around the shelf unit to see what BD was doing. He was standing just where I'd last seen him. Which was good, I told myself. If he didn't see me approach it would make administering the serum easier. BD's never gone in for attacking as a zombie. I wasn't sure he'd ever eaten anyone. But it was better to be safe than sorry.

You'd never know we were siblings to look at us. I inherited my mother's small frame and my father's blonde hair. BD got the brown hair and the rugby player's physique. Add to that an interest in body-building and he must weigh twice as much as I do and none of it is flab. So I was pretty much relying on the fact that he would be a good, docile zombie. I was disconcerted when he turned around, apparently alerted to my approach, and fixed a baleful glare upon me.

"It's all right, BD." I said in as soothing a tone as I could manage. "I've got a nice syringe full of medicine here. We'll have you back to normal in no time."

BD opened his mouth and let out a long, loud groan. It echoed around the shadowy interior of the warehouse and, no doubt, out into the street beyond and to the vast horde crowded outside St. Swithun's and the Whatmore building.

"Shit, BD! What did you do that for? You want a horde of zombies on top of us, soon as you're on your feet?"

I was wary of his behaviour though, so I started trying to circle around. I needed to get behind him to administer the serum. Slowly BD shuffled to follow my movements. Shit.

"Come on, BD," I carried on talking, hoping something in my tone would break into his awareness. "Stand still like a good little zombie."

He lurched towards me, arms outstretched. Not good. I wasn't going to be able to circle behind him. I tried to assess my surroundings. A couple of the shelving units were still standing. It was a long shot, but gripping the syringe with my teeth, I clambered up one until I was crouched on a wooden shelf just out of BD's reach. I got there just in time as he reached the foot of the unit, hands

reaching up to grab me. Then he grasped the supports and began to pull the unit over.

I jumped. It was a seven-foot drop to the ground, but I've done a lot of running and jumping and I rolled as I hit the warehouse floor. I staggered to my feet turned and sprang again onto BD's back. It's a good thing zombie thought processes are on the slow side. BD was still gripping onto the shelving unit, though he had stopped pulling at it, obviously aware I had gone somewhere. I wrapped my left arm around his neck and my legs around his waist. You have to insert the syringe into the spinal cord at the base of the skull so I struggled awkwardly to get my right hand into position.

BD roared, turned and staggered backwards. We crashed into the shelving unit, driving the breath from my body. I was going to have some bruises from this little encounter. I managed to hang on though, still struggling with the syringe. I found the right spot and inserted the needle into BD's neck. At that moment he bit my arm, pretty much through to the bone. I had just about enough willpower to slam the plunger on the needle home before I passed out from the pain.

2.2 Part Two

"Come on, Cat. Swallow!"

I came round in a haze of pain. BD had a hand clamped over my mouth which was full of water or something. I swallowed convulsively without thought and felt pills slipping down my throat. They would be an anti-virus. Zombie bites are infected and the disease spreads through the system quickly.

BD lifted his hand from my mouth.

"Morphine!" I gasped, loudly.

"Shh! You'll attract the zombies."

"Give me some fucking morphine then. I can't believe you bit me, you tosser."

BD sighed. "When did you last have a shot?"

Morphine addiction is an occupational hazard of life in Malton.

"It's been long enough! Morphine! Now!"

"Very well. You'd better roll over."

BD had already bandaged up my arm while I was unconscious and bound it in a sling. Rolling over was agony since it trapped the arm under my body. I wasn't quiet about it.

"Will you keep it down!" hissed BD.

He was breaking out one of the pre-packaged morphine shots. The first-aid supplies they drop on Malton are intended for use with minimal training. Morphine comes in pre-packaged syringes designed to be injected into muscle, all wrapped up in a handy little information leaflet, complete with diagrams. Basically the recommendation is to stab the syringe into a nice large muscle, as far as possible from any major veins or arteries. That translates into your arse-cheek, in layman's terms. Fortunately, put me in enough pain and I'll stop worrying about my dignity.

When he'd finished, BD hauled me to my feet and began to bundle me towards the door of the warehouse. "We need to get out of here," he said urgently. "You've made enough noise to attract a small army."

"I've made enough noise! What about that bloody great feeding groan you let out?"

BD swore. On cue a human figure shuffled through the open door of the warehouse. BD unslung Black Betty and fired a round into it. It collapsed backwards on the floor, its face a mess of shot.

"Shelving unit." I said. "Against the wall, over there."

I pointed to where a loose roofing panel provided a way up onto the roof.

"We don't have time," protested BD.

I unholstered the pistol Ian had given me. "I've got six shots. You'd better be quick."

I headed for the door. Behind me I could hear BD cursing, but also the sounds of furniture being moved. A second zombie came inside and I shot at it, missing the head the first time but hitting the second. That's the trouble with pistols, they require rather more accuracy than shotguns. Then I kicked the door closed in the face of a third. There was a bolt which I rammied shut. Moments later, of course, an arm came through the door. To my amazement the hand scrabbled at the bolt, drawing it back. The arm withdrew. I leaned against the door and peered through the hole. A large male zombie stood right next to me. I put a shot through its head and pushed the bolt back into place.

Behind it stood two more zombies who charged at the door at a surprising pace. I stepped back. The hinges failed under the assault and the door burst open. It took my last three shots to put the two zombies down and then I was running back towards the shelving unit and BD. I pulled my arm free of the sling as I ran. I was going to need both hands free to climb. Luckily the morphine was already beginning to dull the pain. BD was climbing up one side of the unit and I ran to the other in order to balance the weight, somewhat at any rate. Below us the zombies surged into the room. BD reached the top of the unit first and waited for

me. He then jumped for the hole in the roof, catching hold of a side panel and hauled himself through. Down below me the zombies had reached the foot of the unit. I had seconds before they tipped it over. I jumped, arms outstretched. BD caught them and I screamed. There wasn't yet enough morphine in my system to override the pain of someone actually grabbing my injured arm. Below my feet the shelving unit tumbled to the ground with a crash. BD hauled me through the hole and I lay whimpering and cursing next to him until the morphine took hold properly.

Then the storm, that had been brewing all day, finally broke with a crash of thunder and rain began sheeting down onto us.

"We're going to have to move," said BD. "Get a few buildings along and then barricade ourselves in. We can't stay up here."

I stared at him in disbelief. "I can't free run in this state." I lay back and closed my eyes, cushioned by the familiar wooziness that came with a good dose of morphine.

"Well, you'll have to. If you stay up here you'll get exposure."

I was dimly aware of BD moving around on top of the roof. But I was getting distracted by the sounds of whispering voices in my ears. It was the souls of the dead. Every time a zombie eats a brain it ingests a fragment of someone's personality, a shard of their soul becomes lodged inside you somewhere. Even when you're brought back to life you can still hear those shards, occasionally, whispering to you. It's particularly obvious if you actually meet the victim again. It's one of the reasons I tend to avoid Conndraka, a former DHPD Commissioner. It's extremely disconcerting to have a voice in your head whispering someone's words to you moments before they utter them. Mostly the voices are pretty quiet but tonight they were singing a full choral symphony, helped along, no doubt, by the morphine.

"OK." BD's voice broke through and I opened my eyes to look at him. He was standing in front of me, rain pouring down his face. "Time to get going."

I blinked at him. I had no intention of going anywhere. It was midsummer. I wasn't that cold.

BD grabbed my good arm and hauled me to my feet. That's when I saw what he'd been doing. A makeshift bridge, constructed from a roof panel, led from the top of the warehouse to what appeared to be the remains of an apartment block that backed up close to it.

"You have to be kidding me!"

"You've got to get indoors Cat. I'll barricade you in and then go and find the rest of Ghost." BD nodded at the roof panels. "That should hold your weight. I'll

hold it steady at the other end.”

He leaped across the gap and then sat on the end of the large roof panel. “Just walk slowly and carefully,” he said. “You’ll be fine.” He smiled his cocky, lopsided grin that I always wanted to smack from his face.

I stepped out onto the bridge, holding my arms out to balance. But to tell the truth I wasn’t really concentrating. I was listening to the voices in my head and they were calling down to the street level, singing in tune with the low sonorous minds of their undead brethren. They sang of unity, of the loss of self, of shrugging off the fighting and the striving and simply following the call. I remembered Bryn walking out, leaving her badge behind and saying she was tired of trying to hold all the diverse personalities in the DHPD together. Had she been following a call the rest of us couldn’t hear? I paused halfway across BD’s bridge and turned to face the drop to the street below, arms still outstretched.

“Oh fuck!” I heard BD say. “Cat, you’ve got to listen to me. There’s something here that makes people behave strangely. Makes them want to be zombies and stay zombies. We bumped into a guy who said it had been going on for a while. People would get up in the night and sleep walk out of the barricades. Shit! I knew I shouldn’t have given you that morphine.”

Seriously, what difference would it make to BD if I did jump? The wind whipped around me, tugging at my clothing, calling me to leap into it.

“Cat! Don’t you dare quit on me. Do you hear me? Don’t you dare quit!”

Who’s quitting? This was moving on. I raised up on my tiptoes experimentally, thinking about the jump. Somewhere more thunder rumbled.

“Shit, Cat! Can’t you stick to anything? I mean seriously, did you ever hold down a job for more than six months? I thought you said things had changed.”

Actually I once worked in Waterstone’s, the bookshop, for a whole year before I chucked it in. I couldn’t off-hand remember why, something to do with a plan to move to London. But who cared? Not BD, he always wheeled out the quitter line when he wanted me to piss off and leave him alone. Easy enough to leave him alone when you think about it. Why hadn’t I thought about it before?

“You walked out on us 20 years ago and you’ve been walking out on people ever since.”

It was a long time since he’d brought that up. I turned to look at him. In a flash of lightning I saw him, kneeling on the edge of the roof panel, fighting to keep it steady as my weight tipped it over. He had one arm stretched out trying to grab me, but I was out of reach. I blinked, puzzled by the reference to our youth and the thunder rolled again.

“I was 16, BD, and pregnant, and couldn’t sit in the same room with Dad

without arguing.” I shrugged. “What did you expect me to do?”

I’d gone to Barry’s as I recalled, which was stupid, it was obvious even at that point that the relationship wasn’t going to last until the birth. I moved back for a couple of months, and then I’d moved in with Steve. I frowned, trying to recall what had happened next. But it wasn’t like I’d really walked out on them. I’d ended up back in the family home often enough. It was a long time ago.

“I was six, and I’d just lost my mother,” BD shouted above the wind. “I expected you to be there.”

Something in his tone pulled me back and across the bridge. The roof panel clattered down into the street behind me while BD held me tight.

“Thank God!” he whispered.

Malton’s Zombie Apocalypse - bringing families closer together since 2005.

It was an apartment block. I was shivering with cold by the time BD got me inside. He picked an apartment on the top floor that was still relatively intact, found some discarded clothes in a wardrobe and left me to get changed while he dropped down to the ground floor and secured the entrances. I was half-asleep on the bed by the time he got back.

“I have to go and find the others,” he said. “The place is pretty secure. It should hold until I get back.”

“I’ll be fine,” I whispered. I just wanted to sleep.

He draped a blanket over me and I felt his lips brush my forehead. “Useless Hippy,” he murmured fondly.

Before sleep overwhelmed me, I managed to say, “Fascist.” Just so he knew I loved him too.

As I sank deep into slumber, the ghostly choir continued to sing.

“She’s support, not strike. She’ll slow us down.”

That was Anton Weissenberg. I’ve never liked him much and he’s never failed to make it clear that the feeling is entirely reciprocated. He thinks I’m a bad influence on BD. I think much the same about him. BD worships the ground beneath his size 10 SAS boots. I don’t know much about Anton. He’s a middle

height, wiry American with brown hair and brown eyes. Like most of Ghost Squad he's heavily into the tattoos, including a professional one depicting black flames that extend across his chest and over his right shoulder. Thanks to some complex military politics, no one has ever cared to elaborate for me, he got parachuted into Malton in the first days of the outbreak as part of an SAS team who all promptly got themselves eaten. He's in his early 20s now but has been in active military service, mostly in sniper units, for over a decade. Either he's lying or there's some very scary maths there. For some reason the squad always call him Whats. This is apparently short for Whatshisname. No, the joke is lost on me as well.

I cracked my eyes open. The bedroom door stood ajar, looking into the living room area. Ghost Squad were seated around a table, BD at their head. Whats had his back to me. Hawthorne, Famz, and Tarabon were all there as well. BD had been busy overnight. He'd obviously managed to find and revive almost his whole squad. Victor Hawthorne was a former fireman, the oldest and calmest squad member. Famz was a former US Navy SEAL and Tarabon was the squad rookie.

"We can't leave her here," BD said. "She'll be fine with us."

The looks on the faces of his squad were not exactly full of confidence. I sat up slowly, hoping no one would notice. I flexed the fingers of my left hand. My arm was sore and aching but it felt a lot better. It seems pretty clear that this is the effect Necrotech were aiming for. Soldiers that healed overnight. The whole shambling brain-eating stuff was just an unfortunate side effect.

Question was: how to get past the squad?

I walked briskly into the living room. "Hi guys!" I said brightly and waved at the squad. "With you in a minute." I carried on, through to the apartment's front door.

"Cat! Where are you going?" asked BD.

"Give me five. I'll be right back," I shouted as I headed down the stairs to the ground floor.

They'd done a pretty good job of barricading us in. Wooden boards had been nailed across the doorway and then loose furniture from the surrounding flats piled up against it. Outside, the zombies hammered and groaned. I pulled aside a bed frame to reveal a table. I climbed up on it, and then the book shelves it wedged in place and this gave me access to the top of the wooden board. I grabbed a loose piece of timber and started using it as a lever to pull the board loose.

"Outside," whispered the voices in my head and the horde roared in response.

"Shit! She's taking down the barricades." It was Whats, but the rest of Ghost was right behind him. I pulled desperately at the board finally prizing it away. At

the very least it meant the hands outside could gain purchase on the next board down. Then I reached for my pistol.

This is not a sensible thing to do in the company of an SAS Officer and a Navy SEAL. Whats was within a foot of me when I got the gun level and he didn't stop. I couldn't see Famz, but he couldn't be far away. I pulled the trigger.

2.3 Part Three

I'm lucky, really, that I hadn't had the chance to reload the pistol since my encounter with the zombies in the warehouse. If I'd shot Whats I doubt I would have lived.

Everything became quite confused. Whats had the pistol. Famz had pinned my arms behind me and was forcing me down from the barricade, while Hawthorne and Tarabon rushed to shore up the gaps. Then BD and Whats were kneeling on the table shooting into the throng outside. Famz flung me against the wall and I was very efficiently searched for weapons. He held me still, a gun against my head, and one eye still on the fight at the barricades.

It didn't take long. Hawthorne and Tarabon got the boards back in place and the squad piled more furniture up against them.

BD looked at me coldly. "Take her upstairs."

Famz pushed me up the stairs, my arms still pinned behind me. We reached the flat once more.

"Keep her in the bedroom, Famz," said BD. "We need to discuss this."

Famz dumped me unceremoniously on the bed. He placed a chair by the door and sat on it, eyeing me with apparent disinterest. I sat on the bed and considered my options. I could hear the sound of discussion from the next room, but not what was being said.

Famz and Whats both have a similar wiry build, a complete contrast to BD's chunkiness. Anton's mostly quite quiet while Famz is the joker of the pack, if you're into practical jokes and sexual innuendo anyway. But that gave me an idea. It was something of a long shot, but you work with the tools you have to hand.

"Famz," I said, standing up, aware of a wheedling tone in my voice which I tried to suppress.

"Cat?"

I crossed the room to him and sat astride his lap. "Did I ever tell you I liked you best of all the Ghosts?"

“Can’t say that you did.” His tone wasn’t entirely discouraging and his arms had sneaked around my waist so I persevered and dropped my head down for a kiss and, since he reciprocated, I placed my hands on his chest and then ran them down over the abdominal muscles and towards the thigh holster and the pistol it contained. His hands moved up my back and out, cycling down my arms and reaching my wrists about the same time I reached the gun. At which point he grabbed hold and twisted my arms behind me, pulling me away at the same time.

“You know,” he said conversationally, “if I had the slightest reason to suppose that you were of sound mind, this would be quite fun. You should put out more in the normal run of things, Cat. This kind of behaviour would be more convincing if you did.”

I couldn’t help hissing at him in anger.

“And,” he added, as if he’d just thought of it. “There’s the small matter of BD threatening to rip the balls off anyone who lays a finger on you.”

Actually BD had had a similar conversation with me, warning of dire consequences if I so much as thought about considering sleeping with any of his squad. I struggled in Famz’s grasp.

“BD!” he called. “You guys made a decision yet? Only your sister is getting quite lively in here.”

The door opened and BD looked in, taking in the sight of me struggling on Famz’s lap.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asked.

“Only an attempt to steal my gun,” returned Famz. “You need to do something about her, mate. We can’t risk leaving her in this state.”

“Wait there,” said BD and he went out slamming the door behind him.

When BD returned he had a needle full of the glittering revivification serum in his hands.

“Shit!” said Famz. “What’s that for?”

BD shrugged. “We were all fine after we got revived and she was fine until the morphine. I’m gambling a dose of this will clear her system.”

“You ever given that to someone living before?” asked Famz.

“Nope,” returned BD.

I began to struggle harder in Famz’s arms.

“Hold her steady,” said BD.

“Fuck off, BD!” I said. “You’re completely mad. You are not putting that stuff in me.”

“It’s this or shoot you between the eyes and dump you out of the window,” he returned in a tight voice.

His hand came down on the back of my head, pushing my chin into my chest. I struggled desperately until I heard BD's voice in my ear. "Cat," he said. "I'm trying to inject a bloody great needle full of serum into your spinal cord. So help me, if you keep struggling, this really is going to kill you."

I closed my eyes and concentrated on his voice, which cut through the singing and the whispers. "Keep talking," I managed, "and do it quick."

"It'll be OK, Cat," he said. "All you have to do is hold still."

And I held still, feeling the prick of the needle at the back of my neck. Then there was white fire screaming into my brain and flaring behind my eyes. As if from far away I could hear people shouting.

"She's fitting!"

"Shit, BD! I hope you know what you are doing."

"Don't pin her down! Just make sure she can't hurt herself!"

Then the adrenaline payload hit and I sat up with a gasp. I had been lying on the floor and Ghost Squad were crowded round me. Inside my head all was blessed silence. I hate it when BD has no sensible argument on his side, whatsoever, but somehow manages to be right anyway.

"So is she sane again?" asked Whats.

"You all right?" asked BD as he knelt down to my level.

"Yes, I'm fine," I said. "Though Mandy Rice-Davies applies."

BD grinned that stupid lopsided number again. "She's back to normal. Well, normal for her, at any rate."

"The effect is spreading," said BD. "You said Shuttlebank was deserted too when you came through."

We were all seated around the table, except for Tarabon who had been sent downstairs to watch the 'cades. At the moment the barricades were holding but we didn't really expect the situation to last. We were packed and ready to go. I was studiously avoiding catching Famz's eye.

"The orders were to head straight back to Caiger. We're needed to defend the mall." BD had made it clear that this was all of Ghost Squad. Syvwxh Lloyd, always referred to as Sblmnl, presumably because it, too, lacked any sensible vowels, would not be coming back.

BD shook his head. "No, we need to sort this out and quickly. Caiger's going to fall whatever we do. Ian's just playing a numbers game to minimise the

resources wasted reviving people.”

“You have absolutely no idea what is going on here,” I argued. “Not a single clue.”

BD ticked off the points on his fingers. “We know something here is making the zombies smarter and more able. We know it makes pretty much any zombie inimical to the alive which makes reviving difficult to impossible. We know that it can influence living people too, particularly after they have slept or if they’ve had a dose of morphine. So we can’t afford to sleep until this is sorted out.”

“What’s it like?” asked Whats suddenly. He was looking at me.

“What’s what like?”

“Whatever it is?” he persisted. “What were you trying to do?”

“OK,” I tried to pull my thoughts in order. “You know how it is when you’ve eaten someone’s brains. It’s like you can hear their voices in your head?”

“Hang on just a minute!” said Hawthorne. “When you’ve eaten someone’s brains? Their voices? Just how many people’s brains have you eaten?”

I shrugged. Zombie brains aren’t really up to counting. I looked to BD for support but his face was set in a carefully neutral expression. As far as he was concerned this was another mess I needed to sort out for myself.

“When the disaster first struck,” I hesitated. “When the disaster first struck I ran with a horde for a while.”

“How long is a while?” asked Whats, his voice unfriendly.

“Until the first siege of Caiger, or thereabouts.”

“Fucking Hell!” said Whats. “That’s more than six months. BD, she’s virtually a death cultist.”

“It was three years ago,” said BD.

Whats simmered visibly but kept quiet.

“Go on, Cat,” said BD.

“OK, so take it from me that when you eat someone you get an echo of them in your head. There’s some Necrotech theory...”

BD waved his hand. “Theory later.”

“OK so this thing, whatever it is, it makes the voices sing out and then talk about returning to the horde.”

They sing of the joy of being a small part of something, rather than the whole. They sing of the lust for violence, the simplicity of the search for warmth and life and the splendour of the kill. No choices, no decisions, no complications, just blood on your tongue, flesh and bone beneath your hands and someone else’s thoughts in your brain. They sing of acceptance and belonging without judgement or conditions.

“Hey! Cat!” Famz was clicking his fingers in front of my face. “You zoned out there a minute.”

I caught his eye and I think I blushed. My cheeks felt warm at any rate. Why had I tried to seduce Famz of all people? It was like one of his less funny jokes.

“So basically the more brains you’ve eaten. The more susceptible you are to whatever it is,” said BD.

“Why are we going to take her with us again?” asked Whats.

“No one gets left behind,” said BD firmly.

“Well at least tell me we’re not giving her any guns,” said Whats.

BD looked at me and then shook his head. “No guns, for the time being.”

“So where do we start the search?” asked Famz.

“The Whatmore Building,” I said.

“Why?”

I shrugged. “The voices were calling to head in that direction and there’s a massive horde of zombies outside. If that isn’t a big red sign saying ‘Here be dragons’, I don’t know what is.”

We headed back towards the Whatmore building across the rooftops. None of us wanted to risk street level with that many zombies around. The apartment block and the Warehouse both had flatish roofs, although the warehouse roof was barely held together. From the warehouse though we had to cross a street corner to the top of St. Swithun’s pitched roof.

Hawthorne slung a rope with a grappling hook over to the church and most of Ghost stood at one end, anchoring it, while Tarabon swung across, a second rope tied to his waist, and secured both at the far end. Then we all followed, leaving the ropes in place as an escape route.

Zombies milled around below us, visible through the missing tiles on the roof. We worked our way around the crenellations and gargoyles until we were opposite the Whatmore building. Like all the Necrotech buildings, it was a prestigious, architect-designed structure. In this case it was a complex, blocky thing with over-hanging cubes jutting out from wooden planking.

St. Swithun’s is an old church, another remnant of the mill village. It was built right up to the boundaries of its land. When Necrotech, who basically bank-rolled the construction of our shiny new town, picked the plot next door for one of their

facilities, they built up to the boundary as well. So from the top of the church there was basically a two-foot gap onto the top of one of the pods.

BD went across first, followed by Hawthorne. They roped themselves together and BD anchored himself to the wall as best he could. The plan was that Hawthorne would climb up onto the roof of the Necrotech building, secure a line, and then the rest of us would follow. BD, as the heaviest person present, was responsible for holding if Hawthorne fell.

Hawthorne had just started the climb when all the lights came on across the building, blazing out of every window in a sudden flash. It felt like there was a vicious tug and I stumbled forwards, but Tarabon caught my arm. Then there was a rushing in my ears, like a wind passing by. I gripped Tarabon as I realised what it was. The souls of the dead were being pulled into the building, lamenting their fate to the grey summer sky as they rushed past. The souls within me cried out too, but were anchored by the flesh. Just as suddenly the lights went out and the sensation ceased.

“What was that?” whispered Tarabon. There’s a reason they call him the rook and it’s not just his recent transfer into the squad. He has a round face and a kind of innocence about him that gives him the appearance of youth.

“Something trying to steal your soul,” I said.

“You’re not serious,” said Famz.

I looked at him managing, I think, not to blush this time. “Did you feel anything?”

For a moment I thought he was going to deny it and, knowing him, make a joke about fingers, but after a second he gave a sharp nod. I thought of the ranks of the unsouled. I don’t know who first coined the term but the sense that, when you ate a brain, you stole a piece of someone’s essence was profound. What could essence be but the soul? And if you lost enough of it to the ravening hordes what became of you? The blank staring faces and the bodies that turned to dust provided an answer of sorts.

“OK folks,” said BD. “So now we know why there are so many unsouled around. Let’s get on with this before it happens again.”

BD opened the roof hatch and peered cautiously into the darkness inside. “This place is probably crawling with zombies,” he observed. “How are we for torches?”

Famz and Hawthorne both produced torches. BD took one and hung through the hatchway, shining it around.

“OK, I’ve got one. Looks like it’s snoozing. Take it out, Whats.” BD sat up, holding the torch on something in the interior.

Whats un-holstered his mean-looking revolver and sighted through the hatch. There was a bang.

“Unsouled. It’s crumbled,” he said.

BD made a disgusted noise at the waste of ammunition and looked around his team. “OK, we treat this as a standard clear and ’cade, but be aware that the zombies may be more lively than usual.” He looked at me in exasperation. “Cat, just try not to get in the way.”

One by one, Ghost Squad dropped through the hatchway. I followed more cautiously. A clear and ’cade is an operation to clear a building of zombies and then barricade it to make it safe. Dixie nearly always arrived after the job was done. We were in a small stairwell, empty rooms with broken down doors standing on either side of us.

“Three in here,” said Hawthorne quietly, raising his shotgun.

“Just a moment,” said BD. We crowded in the doorway as BD crossed the room, gun upraised until he reached the first zombie. Then he kicked it. It crumbled into dust.

“Shit!” whispered Whats. “Unsouled too.”

BD walked up to the next two, with the same results.

“It’ll save ammunition,” said Famz.

“They’re too close to the power source,” I said, almost without thinking it through.

“What do you mean?”

“When the power goes on it sucks souls. There’s not much to hold a soul in a zombie body, no heart-beat, no circulation of the blood. They just get... pulled out.”

It was then we heard a groan from the doorway.

It was the remains of a large man in a suit and tie. It looked to me like he’d been dead a long time. Hawthorne was closest and he hardly blinked. His gun came up and the zombie’s head exploded in a shower of bone and brain. He and Tarabon picked up the body without comment, carried it to the open window and threw it outside.

“OK, so some of them are still alive,” said BD.

I was thinking through a mental map of the building. None of the Necrotech buildings are the same, but they all conform to one of four or five basic layouts.

The tall upright ones, like the Whatmore, generally had a strange parabolic chamber that was called 'the well'. No one knew what it was for.

"We're standing directly above the well, if Whatmore has one." I observed.

Everyone glanced downwards at the peeling carpet tiles beneath our feet. "And that is relevant why?" asked BD.

"I want to go down."

"You're not going strange again are you?" asked Famz.

"Not so much. But you insisted on bringing me along. You might as well use me as your miner's canary if I'm here." I gestured downwards with my rapidly healing arm. "I'm telling you, whatever it is, is beneath our feet and in these buildings, that's the well."

They all looked to BD for a decision.

"We head for the well," he said.

"Mind you," I added, "that's where it wants us to go, so it's probably a trap."

BD just shrugged.

We met two more zombies on the stairs before we got to the edge of the well chamber. I didn't even see them, Tarabon and BD at point took them out and tipped them over the banisters to the ground floor below. Famz and Hawthorne moved behind them using the torches to light their way. Whats stood behind me, carefully not pointing the barrel of Rough Justice, his Ruger .357, in my direction.

The well chamber was round. Like all the wells, you enter onto a high gantry that surrounds the top edge of the parabolic pit. No one knew what they were for nor why Necrotech had built them, not even the few Necrotech scientists left inside the city.

Around the gantry of this well, however, were ranged the silent figures of the unsouled, facing inwards, still as death. BD marched around silently, collapsing each one in turn, checking that none were zombies. The rest of us gazed into the well. Instead of a deep, dark pit, this well glowed with faint blue light. It glittered and sparkled like glowing dust motes in the air. It sang to the voices in my head.

"Dear Lord!" I whispered.

"What is it, Cat?" asked Famz.

"This is where the souls have gone." I reached down to them over the gantry rail, only to be pulled back by Whats.

"Careful there," he said.

"None of this makes sense," said BD.

I struggled to put it together in my mind. "I think it does."

"How so?"

“Right, we know that one of the effects of the Necrotech virus is to keep a person’s personality and memories coherent, even when the brain itself, the wetware, is destroyed.”

“We do?” asked BD.

“Don’t you guys ever talk to Doc Sy?”

“Shit, Cat, why would we do that? If he hadn’t got himself bitten and ended up trapped here, he’d have us all strapped to a laboratory bench before you could say ‘Experimental test subject’ ”

OK, a fair comment, but information is information right?

I sighed. “OK. Your memories and personality are stored as, basically, electrical signals in your brain, in a kind of personality matrix. In theory if you destroy the brain, you lose the signal. It doesn’t matter if Necrotech zombie nanites, or whatever they are, reconstruct the brain itself. The wetware alone isn’t the person, it’s the electrical signals and once they’re gone, they’re gone. You should be a blank slate. With me so far?”

“Possibly.”

“One of the things the zombie virus does is allow the electrical signals to continue processing, at least long enough for the wetware to regenerate and provide a basis for them. When a zombie goes for brains, it’s the electrical field it’s after. When you become unsouled, it’s because the electrical field has lost its coherency. That can happen for a variety of reasons including losing too much to zombie brain feeders or, on the other side of the divide, becoming overwhelmed by the competing signals of all the people you’ve eaten.”

Tarabon was looking pale, in the strange half light that came from below us. “So this thing is pulling this electrical personality matrix out of people and putting it here?”

We all looked down into the lights.

“They were trying to build a fucking super-computer out of people’s souls,” said Famz.

Note to self: the joker of the pack is brighter than he likes to make out.

“Wait a minute, so these aren’t actually souls. I mean this personality matrix isn’t actually a soul,” said BD.

I shrugged.

“Souls don’t exist,” he persisted.

I opened my mouth to argue the toss and then I thought of the missing Bryn. When someone vanished in Malton the assumption generally was that they had become unsouled. Bryn had walked out saying she needed a few days to herself and had never come back. I pictured her, standing in some darkened back street,

staring blankly into space, those porcelain perfect features ready to crumble to dust at the slightest touch. Her soul devoured by the horde. The image had haunted my dreams for months. Maybe it was easier to pretend it wasn't the soul that got destroyed.

"No, they are not souls," I agreed.

"So let's blow this shit up and go home," said Famz, ever practical.

"We have explosives?" I asked, surprised.

Famz grinned dangerously. "We can always improvise."

"There's something down there," said Tarabon who had been peering into the well for some time.

We all leaned over to look. The pale dusting of blue light made it hard to see, but there did seem to be something at the bottom of the well.

"Someone should go down and see what it is," said Famz.

BD nodded. "We all go. No splitting up."

I lingered behind as the others started down the stairway. Inevitably, Whats prodded me with Rough Justice. "Get a move on, Cat."

"Whats, I can hear whispering again," I said quietly.

"You becoming a liability?" he asked.

"Not yet, but soon, maybe," I returned.

"Why are you telling me?" He looked bored.

"Right now, if any of us gets killed, and there's another of those power surges, there's a chance they'll become unsouled. I don't see BD taking that risk where I'm concerned, do you?"

I think Whats actually looked at me properly then, for the first time ever. He has these warm brown eyes, but you shouldn't let that fool you.

"Don't worry, I have a bullet saved," he said.

I reflected, as I began the descent, that it's a pretty screwed up situation when you find a statement like that reassuring.

As we got lower, the sight at the bottom of the well unfolded itself before us.

"Well, fuck!" said Famz once we were down.

Bodies were strewn over the floor, crumbling to dust with the vibration of our footfalls.

"What is this?" asked Whats.

"Death cultists," said BD in disgust.

"Some of them anyway," I said. Several of the bodies were in robes. Where the hell did you get robes in Malton?

"Cause of death?" asked BD.

I looked around me. “Nothing obvious on this one,” I said, peering at a robed figure carefully and trying not to crumble it as I touched.

“This one was stabbed. All of these were and all unsouled” said Tarabon. There was a neat row of bound figures lined up on the floor. He caught BD’s eye. “Sorry Boss, all unpersonality matrixed.”

“OK, Cat. Tell us what happened here,” said BD.

I blinked. “How should I know?”

“Because you talk to Doc Sy, though goodness knows why. Why hasn’t one of these super-computers activated before?”

I looked around the chamber. “Well, I guess, if you normally switch one of these on, it doesn’t have enough power to actually pull in any souls.”

“Personality matrixes,” said BD.

“Matrices,” I said vaguely.

“Whatever. So why did the death cultists make a difference?” BD pushed.

I looked at the scene. “They were sacrificing people.”

“Making them into zombies,” Hawthorne spat.

“And they had the power on.” I walked over to the makeshift altar at the centre of the well. “They were right here.” I looked up at as the parabola spread out around me, up into the souls that whispered ever more strongly to mine. “At the focal point. They basically stood right at the focal point and killed a whole bunch of people, weakening the anchoring of the souls and then turned the power on.”

“But the power’s not on now,” said Tarabon. “Why are the souls still up there?”

“Same as when you head-shot a zombie. It’s self-sustaining for a while. At least for long enough to let the wetware regenerate.”

“But there’s no wetware here, Cat,” said BD.

“No, so it needs regular injections of power. That’s why the lights went on. It’s controlling a zombie to operate the generator.”

The voices in my head were singing with the voices in the air: community, conformity, regimentation, peace. I felt like I was sailing or flying. Nevertheless I kept slotting the pieces into place. “It calls to all the matrices, all the corrupted ones anyway. The computer isn’t just the souls in the well. It’s every zombie it can reach out to and every soul fragment in one of us. That lets it control the bodies. It uses the power not just to keep running, but to draw more souls unto itself in order to expand its field of influence. Everything gets pulled to this spot.” I thumped the altar. “To the focal point. The more souls it pulls in the wider its influence extends.”

“So, like I said, we blow this shit up and go home,” said Famz.

I was struggling to speak. Half my mind seemed to be shutting down. I could hardly hear as Ghost Squad debated. But I could hear the well of souls whispering to the zombie that stood crouched over the generator.

“Get out!” I shouted.

“What?” someone said.

I looked up. Ghost Squad were spread out around the bottom of the well.

“The power is about to come on again. We’re inside the well, at the focal point. You have to get out now!”

2.4 Part Four

BD glanced around. “Everyone, nearest exit!” he shouted.

Ghost Squad split. There were doors on either side. I could see Hawthorne, Tarabon and Famz heading for one. Whats and BD went for the other. My hands wouldn’t let go of the altar. The well screamed its rage in my head and urged the dozing zombie by the generator to move.

“Cat!” BD was struggling back from the doorway towards me. His feet crunching through the bodies of the dead.

“No!” I wailed. I looked beyond him to where Whats stood. “Whats!”

Whats raised Rough Justice, sighting down it towards me, but BD obscured the shot. Whats couldn’t get a clear line. I tore my hands free from the altar and staggered towards BD.

“Get out!” I called.

“Not without you.” He grabbed hold of my arms, pulling me back towards the doorway. I felt the zombie awaken and I began to run, dragging BD along in my wake. My feet slipped in the dust on the sloped sides of the well. BD caught my waist as I fell and then Whats grabbed my outstretched hands, pulling me forwards into the doorway. I turned and we both grabbed BD’s arms and pulled him through just as the lights came on.

My soul streamed outwards and I took a half step forwards but BD rugby-tackled me to the ground. “Oh no you don’t!” he shouted.

I closed my eyes. Right then I wanted to join the voices. I was tired of being judged and trying and failing and being someone’s awkward big sister who was kind of flaky and unreliable. I wanted to belong with the voices, to dance away with all those shards of soul in my head.

“Stay with me Cat.” It was BD’s voice. I opened my eyes. He was leaning over me. He held my head between his hands, staring down intently at me. Our

eyes are the same brown. I'd never noticed that before. "You belong here, Cat." he said. Shit! Could he hear the voices too? The power went off. I realised my face was wet with tears.

"Why did the power go off?" asked Whats.

"It gets souls in the initial pull, then after a minute or two no more come in," I said without thinking. "It's going to wait a while and then try again."

"Right," said BD. "We need to destroy that generator."

"Then blow it up," said Whats.

"I think, without power, it will just dissipate naturally," I mused.

"Yeah, but we'd all be happier if it were blown up," said BD.

"Zombies!" shouted Whats.

We were in a narrow corridor that led away from the well and past a number of lab spaces. Whats was shining a torch down to where a shuffling group were visible at the far end. BD was on his feet immediately, feeding rounds into Black Betty.

"Here." He paused and hauled a second shotgun from Whats's pack. Rapidly he loaded shells into it.

"Hey!" said Whats. "Who said we were rearming her?"

"You want two guns or three against those zeds?" asked BD.

We moved down the corridor together, getting as close as we could to the oncoming group. Shoulder to shoulder we spanned the corridor so at least they couldn't out-flank us.

"Steady," murmured BD, "fire on my mark. Let's not waste shot."

The gun I'd been handed was a Remington pump-action 12 gauge. The magazine held 2 rounds and there was a third in the chamber. I had spare shot from the supply Ian had given me. Problem was: it was in my backpack. BD had a cartridge holder strapped to the butt of Black Betty and more in the gun's bandolier-style strap. He was going to be reloading a lot quicker than I was.

"Fire!" said BD. The front rank of zombies went down.

I pumped the magazine. "Fire!" he said again. The second rank went down.

"Back! Fire!"

Whats and I each took a pace back and fired. BD was reloading.

It was a drill we all practised, retreating slowly and in step in the face of a horde.

"Empty!" I reported.

"Fall back! Reload!" he barked.

I hauled the box of shells from my backpack, loaded the gun and stuffed the box in a pocket, in easy reach. BD and Whats retreated towards me. We were

going to be forced back into the well.

There were no doors leading off the corridor, but I knew that there were labs behind the walls. I had a feeling said walls were temporary partitions, built into the spaces beneath the well. I glanced up and down the corridor and spotted the obligatory fire axe attached to one wall. I slung the shotgun over my shoulder, broke the glass and freed the axe. Then I swung it at the wall. There was a satisfying splintering sound as it smashed through the plasterboard and wooden studs. I swung it a second time, and then pulled and kicked to make a hole.

“Through here!” I shouted, squeezing through into the lab beyond. I didn’t have a torch and the place was in darkness. I had a dim impression of smashed benches and overturned furniture. The floorboards creaked and wobbled under my feet.

Whats slipped through behind me with a torch. “You’re going to have to widen that gap for BD,” he said.

There came the sound of another shotgun blast from beyond the wall. “In your own time,” came BD’s voice.

I judged where he was and swung the axe again on the far side of the hole I’d already made. Whats began pulling at pieces of plasterboard. I saw the back of BD’s flak jacket and began to haul him through the gap. Black Betty roared again. Whats grabbed BD’s arm and together we pulled him into the lab. Then BD tripped over the threshold, falling back onto us. The floor gave a protesting groan as we landed and gave way beneath us in a shower of twisted metal and plasterboard. BD slid away from me, his flak jacket torn free from my grasp. Instinctively I flung up my arms and felt a hand grab mine. My fall was arrested with a painful jolt. I looked up to see Whats above me and over his shoulder was a zombie. I scrambled at the knife at my belt with my free hand. The zombie fell forwards, biting into Whats’s shoulder as I hauled myself up, stabbing with the knife into it’s head. At that moment the lights came on.

“Cat?” came Whats’s voice through the now familiar tugging sensation.

“You might as well let go,” I said. “I’m going.” Not much point staying around anymore after all.

“I did,” he said. “You’re hanging onto me.”

I opened my eyes. It seemed I had dropped the knife and my right hand now clutched the neck of his flak jacket. His shoulder was ripped open and bleeding nastily. I’m frankly amazed he was still conscious. The zombie was nowhere to be seen apart from the light dust that fell around the two of us. I let go, eager to be on my way.

But it seemed Whats wasn’t giving up on me that easily. His good hand had

already caught hold of my belt. Didn't matter. The link to the flesh is not that strong. I closed my eyes again.

"Think about BD." There was a note of desperation in Whats's voice.

"BD's dead," I said, and my voice sounded far away.

"It'll take more than falling through a floor to kill BD," said Whats. "Have a little faith, Cat."

When had I last had faith? Not since I was a child really. "I put away childish things."

"What?" Whats sounded confused. "You're not making sense, Cat."

That's what he thought.

"Jesus!" I heard him mutter. "Thank God no one's relying on her."

A chain of association sparked off in my mind. "Ian is relying on me."

"What?"

"Ian. Ian's relying on me," I said.

"Yes, OK, good!" said Whats. "Ian's relying on you. You can't let him down, can you?"

Could I? I thought about that.

The lights went off. I couldn't see in the dark.

"Not bad for someone who hates my guts," I said.

"I only did it for BD," replied Whats from somewhere above me.

I waved my arms upwards and managed to get a grip on his shoulders once more. He screamed as I grasped the open wound.

"Fucking hell, Cat!"

"Sorry!"

I scabbled around at the edge of the floor and somehow managed to haul me back into the lab. The torch had rolled across the floor and I retrieved it. Shining it down I could see that BD appeared to have crashed through the floor below but nothing further. I turned back and examined Whats's wound.

"BD," he said.

"You won't do him any good if you die of an infection." I was as anxious as Whats, but I was going to need his help.

I bound up his shoulder and fed him some of the anti-virus pills.

"There's climbing gear in my backpack," he said.

I fished out a climbing harness and struggled into it, tightening the straps.

"I should go," he said.

I poked the wound at his shoulder, causing him to grunt with pain. "Not a chance," I said.

"You could give me morphine."

“After what happened to me?” I asked.

“Point taken.”

We set up a rope, pinned to one of the lab benches and looped around Whats’s waist. I put my rucksack back on, but I also kept the Remington and helped myself to one of Whats’s pistols. I looked up, as I was about to drop down the hole, to find myself staring down the barrel of Rough Justice.

“Flake out, Purple Cat, and I swear I will find you, chain you to a wall and put bullets into your brain until there is no soul left,” he said.

It’s nice to know he cared I suppose. In fact, I was less bothered by the voices than I had been in the well. I was going to get BD and Ghost back to Caiger Mall. I blew Whats a kiss and dropped cautiously over the edge.

I had the torch in my free hand and controlled my descent with the other. As I dropped through the floor below, the torch picked out BD and, standing over him, a zombie. Throwing caution to the wind, I gave up on the idea of a controlled descent and came down as fast as possible, landing on the zombie with my feet. I rolled free, drawing the pistol as I did so and leaving the torch on the floor.

The zombie stood up and groaned, turning around towards me. I put one shot through the head and waited to see if it would stop. Never waste ammunition. It rocked and then took a step forward. I stepped back and shot again. It rocked once more and then dropped to the floor, disintegrating into dust as it did so.

BD was a mess. There was a raking claw mark down the side of his head. The zombie had been trying to get at the brains. Sometimes, as a zombie, you forget that you really need to apply a good, sharp blow to break the cranium open and then you can scoop out the brains. Luckily for BD, this one had tried to peel him like an orange. It was messy, but it would heal. Airways: clear. Breathing: thank god. Circulation: there wasn’t too much blood on the floor but there seemed to be something behind his head. Cautiously I felt behind the neck and towards the back of the skull. My training didn’t really cover broken necks and backs. Dr. Snow, Bryn’s replacement as Dixie Squad lead, reckoned breathing and bleeding were the priority. We didn’t have the resources for broken necks. It was better to risk killing the patient. If they died, we could always throw them out the window and pick them up the following day at a revive point. But I wasn’t going to risk killing BD just here, not with the well of souls sucking the life from any newly-dead body. The back of his skull felt damp and sticky, my finger tips came away red with blood but his skull felt as though it was still in one piece. One shoulder was dislocated and checking his legs I reckoned his right was broken. I wanted to fix the shoulder but that was going to involve twisting the body and exacerbating any spinal injuries. I cleaned up the cuts on his face and splinted the leg.

The lights snapped on again. I grasped BD's hand. From somewhere, a long way up above me, Whats was shouting. But the pull was a lot weaker than it had been before. I was beneath the well now. BD's eyes flickered open.

"Hey!" I whispered, mildly embarrassed that he should wake up to find me holding his hand.

His eyes seemed unfocussed and I suddenly noticed a pale blue aura lifting up from his body.

"Hey!" I said more firmly, "don't go anywhere, BD."

"Not planning to, Sis," he croaked and then he suddenly rolled onto his side and threw up, simultaneously groaning with pain. So much for worrying about spinal injuries. The lights cut out again.

"Time to see to that shoulder," I said.

I lay him back on the floor and began to manipulate the shoulder back, rotating his arm. His eyes closed and his breathing came in short gasps but I didn't dare give him morphine. He gave a grunt as it finally slipped into place.

"I'm going to throw up again," he murmured. I hauled him upright and held him as he retched. Then I kept him sitting while I cleaned the wound on the back of his head. I was right; his thick skull was still intact. Hopefully our super healing powers would sort out any internal bleeding, if there was any, before it became a problem.

"I'm feeling a bit woozy," he muttered.

"Concussion," I said.

"That's probably as bad as morphine, isn't it?"

"You should be all right, since you're so clean living and keep off the brains."

"I might have eaten a few." He shuddered in my arms. "Sometimes it seems quicker than heading for a revive when you can see the death cultists in the fight."

Shock was probably setting in. I shone the torch up above our heads.

"Whats!" I called.

Whats's face came into view, but he motioned with his hand for quiet. I shone the torch on BD's seated form and gave a thumbs up sign. Whats echoed it back then his face vanished. I wrapped my arms around BD, trying to keep him warm in the absence of blankets.

The lights came on again and BD jerked in my arms. "You still here, Sis?"

"Yes, I'm still here. We're in the basement of Whatmore. Whats is two storeys up. We're going to have to get you up there somehow."

"I can't climb a rope like this and even the two of you together won't be able to lift me." The blue aura swirled in and around him.

“We’re not leaving you, you daft lump,” I said, seeing what was coming next. “Ian will have my guts for garters, if nothing else, if I leave you behind.”

“Oh! So this is all about Ian is it? And for a moment I thought you’d come for me.” He laughed and then started coughing which turned into more vomiting.

The lights switched off.

“That generator should be down here somewhere,” I mused. “That way a zombie can manage it without losing its soul.”

“Personality matrix,” mumbled BD.

“Whatever.”

BD sagged back leaning against me. “Famz is pretty smart. He’ll figure it has to be down here. Obvious place really, even without all the soul sucking shit. He’ll be here soon.”

Speaking of zombies, I shone the torch on the body that lay next to us, busy regrowing its brain. It was motionless. Brain regrowth takes a while but a zombie always gets up eventually. I gave it a kick to move it further away and my foot sank into crumbling dust. We may have been in a weak spot, as far as the well was concerned, but it was clearly not a good place to be growing a brain. One less thing to worry about however.

I switched off the torch to conserve the batteries and to avoid unwanted attention and we sat for a while in the dark as the lights came on and off. BD didn’t throw up again but his mind rambled off to the edge of consciousness and then struggled back. The whispering in my own mind grew louder and more insistent but it seemed easy to ignore, somehow, with BD in my arms.

“Sis?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you join the DHPD? Doesn’t seem like your style somehow.”

“Honest answer?”

“Sure.”

“You know you said I was a quitter?”

“I didn’t really mean it.”

“No. It was a fair comment. Well, I quit on being in a horde.”

I could feel BD beginning to laugh. “You quit being a zombie.”

I shrugged. “I got bored.” Which was pretty much at the heart of why I’d quit most jobs in my life. “First siege of Caiger. I got bored. Someone revived me. I wandered inside, a DHPD recruiter came round and I thought why not?”

“Just like that?”

“Pretty much.”

He was shaking with barely suppressed laughter. "I can't believe you joined the DHPD on a whim."

"Well, I'm still here, aren't I?"

"Three years later. I'm impressed. Been in it longer than I have. It was a shock finding you here when I signed up."

I ruffled his hair. "At least I finally did something you approve of."

It was then we heard the sound of gunfire.

"My guys!" said BD. "We need to get to them."

He began struggling to his feet and then cried out in pain as he put weight on his broken leg.

"Just hang on!" I said. I checked my guns and picked up the torch. Then I grabbed BD's arm and dragged it around my shoulder. "OK, let's go." I said.

We staggered forwards, lighting our way with the torch. BD was bloody heavy, which shouldn't really have surprised me but it made my walking erratic. We were in a small room at the end of a long corridor. Halfway down the corridor were the other three members of Ghost Squad. The corridor was wide and they were being forced back at a rapid pace to avoid being out-flanked.

Somehow BD unslung Black Betty. "Keep me upright!" he said and then he bellowed: "To me! Form up!"

The three men looked back at us, standing in the torch-light, and then they broke ranks and sprinted down the corridor to form up alongside BD. The zombies shambled on, only about a dozen, I reckoned. Tarabon fumbled with his shotgun, reloading it.

"Steady," said BD. "Fire!" The spread of shot took out half the zombies.

"Once more! Fire!"

One zombie was left. "Take it, Famz!" said BD. There was a shot and the creature went down.

"What's our situation?" asked BD.

"We can't find the fucking generator," said Famz. "Must be down here somewhere, but we keep getting chased by groups of zeds."

The room we'd stepped out of was at the end of the corridor. "This is a dead end," said BD.

"Where's Whats?" asked Hawthorne.

"Two floors up nursing an injured shoulder. He was fine last time we checked." I said.

"Generator must be on the next floor up," said BD.

"We don't have the ammunition to search the whole fucking building," said Famz.

The lights flashed on. “That’s getting worse as well,” said Tarabon. I looked at the drawn faces around me and realised they could all feel it now. In spite of myself, I hoped Whats was OK. He was stuck much closer to the full force of the thing.

“Join us!” whispered the voices in my head, even as the lights dimmed once more.

“You’re just going to have to try,” said BD. “I can hardly move with this leg. I’ll stay here. Take Cat with you. Sweep each floor in turn as you move up the building. Connect up with Whats when you get there.”

I looked at the doubtful faces around me. This wasn’t going to work.

“JOIN US!”

“I have a better idea,” I said.

“What?” asked BD.

“Just keep a good hold of my hand, OK”

“Cat what are you about to do?” BD said sternly.

I grasped BD’s hand, leaned back against the wall of the corridor and let go.

“What’s that blue stuff?” I heard Hawthorne say. “The lights aren’t on.”

“Cat! Cat! Come back now! Do you hear me?” That was BD’s voice. I smiled and gripped his hand harder.

It was like diving upwards into a cat’s cradle. Not so easy when I was trying to keep at least some of my attention on the sensation of BD’s hand in mine. Within the web, fragments of people swam and dived around me, binding me into the matrix. I tried to focus on the idea of the generator. Somewhere, within this hive mind, I had to find the information.

“You won’t find it,” said a voice. “It’s far too well hidden.” The voice was feminine, deep and throaty and very familiar.

2.5 Part Five

Bryn.

The ghost of an image formed amid the lights of the matrix, all curves and guns. No wonder she had captivated BD as soon as he had clapped eyes on her.

She laughed her oh, so familiar laugh. “I like to think he saw a little more in me than that,” she said.

My heart was sinking. I’d hoped that she was still out there somewhere, having that time to herself.

“I’m sorry, Cat. I was pretty fed up with you all, it’s true, but I wouldn’t have stayed away this long.”

And now she would never be coming back, not to the DHPD, not to Dixie Squad, not to BD, not to me. I thought about that a bit and then about the eerie peacefulness of the well.

“You’d get bored, Cat. This place is the pits and I don’t want to hear any self-pitying bullshit about not belonging anywhere. You belong with the DHPD. Every time the power has gone on for the past day, I’ve had to listen to you whining about how nobody loves you and it’s getting tiresome.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry and, seeing as how I was incorporeal, couldn’t do either. It was Bryn who had kept me in the DHPD even after BD had showed up and my first instinct had been to move on. Though she’d been quite subtle about it at the time.

“A lot good it did me. I should’ve banged your heads together when I had the chance.”

So that was that really. I was going back to the DHPD.

“Get on with that job of Ian’s. You know, the one that involved not trying to find anything out and bugging out as soon as possible.”

Hey! I was trying. I couldn’t help it if Ghost Squad would follow BD into the depths of Hell without a second thought.

“You want to know where the generator is, then?” said Bryn’s voice.

But she’d said that was impossible.

“I’ve had nothing to do for the past few days except poke around in here. It wasn’t easy, but I’ve found it.” A schematic of the Whatmore building opened up in my mind. No idea how Bryn did it - tweaked a few electrical connections, I suppose.

“Something like that.”

So, my plan had worked.

“Not that it had any right too. Another piece of inspired stupidity from the Clark family.”

She knew us too well.

“You have to go now, if you still can. If you stay here too long you’ll be trapped.”

I realised I’d forgotten to pay attention to BD’s hand. I struggled to refocus.

“He’s just here.”

I’d have said that Bryn wrapped her arms around me and guided my hands, except that I’d long lost track of anything that constituted a body, but I became

aware once more of BD's hand in mine and I struggled back towards him through a tangled web that seemed to try to hold me back.

"Tell BD I love him."

Yeah, right! Like I was going to tell him Bryn was stuck in here.

"Better coming from you than anyone else."

Besides, she got eaten a lot. Just because there was enough of her in here to form a coherent personality didn't mean she wasn't still in Malton carrying on her life, just fine. She was going to be just fine.

"Oh! Cat. You can do better than that." Her voice was full of sadness.

I looked back, figuratively speaking, unsure what I wanted to say but feeling that a chance was being lost.

"I know, Cat, and take care. Look after BD for me and that's an order, Officer."

All that was there was the sparking of blue electrical connections and an angry fizzing as I tore through the tangling web that sought to constrict me

The image of someone blowing a kiss followed me out and down and back into the corridor.

She'd better not have hitchhiked out with me. Our family is screwed up enough as it is.

"What kind of a fucking stupid stunt was that, Cat?" demanded BD angrily.

I flung my arms around him and held him tight because Bryn wouldn't be coming back and would never hold him again.

"*Farewell BD*" The words echoed in my mind. "*Love you always.*"

"Cat?" BD said cautiously.

"I know where the generator is," I said, proud of the steadiness of my voice.

"You what?"

"I know where the generator is. I reckoned the well must know. It was just a matter of getting in there and poking around a bit."

"I don't believe this. You had no idea it would work. It was fucking mad." Bd said angrily.

"Ah! But it did work though." I'm afraid I may have smirked a bit. I hate it when BD says that.

"So where's the generator?" asked Hawthorne.

I pointed back up the corridor they'd walked down. "Up there a little way, in a side room. You must have missed it."

"Shit!" sighed BD. "OK squad. Form up." His arm went around my shoulder again. "You're going to have to support me a bit further," he added.

We limped slowly up the corridor and I played out the schematic in my mind's eye.

“About here.” I stopped, confused, in the empty corridor.

Famz rolled his eyes in the torch light. I took a deep breath. I wasn’t going to whine ‘I’m sure I’m right,’ in front of these men.

Hawthorne nodded at some shelves. “Those aren’t bolted to the wall,” he said. “It’s some kind of unit.”

“Shift it,” said BD.

Hawthorne, Famz and Tarabon grabbed the shelf unit and began to move it aside.

“What was it like? Up there in the well?” asked BD.

I shrugged. “Sort of whispery.”

He gave me a hard look. “And that made you come over all family hug?”

Luckily for me, at that moment, the others got the unit aside, revealing a door. Yeah, I’m a coward. So sue me.

“I’m amazed zombies could move that unit,” muttered Hawthorne.

“Not so difficult,” said Famz. “They move them about easily enough when they’re breaking down barricades.”

He nodded at Hawthorne and Tarabon who placed themselves either side of the door. Famz lifted his shotgun to his shoulder and kicked it open. He stepped inside and I heard his gun sound twice.

“One zombie and one generator totalled,” he reported, “and plenty of spare fuel. Just what we need to get rid of this place.”

“Right!” said BD. “We head back to Whats. Famz, Hawthorne, Tarabon bring as much fuel as you can carry. We’ll empty it out below the hole in the ceiling and then light it as we leave.”

We staggered back down the corridor.

“Wine cellar!” said Famz suddenly, darting into a side room.

“It’ll all be looted by now,” I shouted.

He came out with three empty bottles piled precariously on top of the two fuel cans he was holding. “I only need the empties.”

We stopped below the hole in the floor and fixed BD into the climbing harness.

“It’ll take three of us to lift him,” muttered Famz, gazing up.

BD nodded. “Famz, Hawthorne, get up there and check with Whats.”

The two men climbed up the ropes. “Will you be OK, climbing up?” asked BD.

I rolled my eyes at him. “How long has this apocalypse been going on now?”

He stuck his tongue out back at me. “Watch it, you. My squad’s a feminism-free zone.”

“We’re good!” came Famz’s call.

BD tugged on the rope and he began to ascend. Tarabon and I set about emptying out the fuel cans onto the floor at our feet.

I flashed the torch out of the door of the room. It illuminated a new pack of zombies coming down the corridor. I reloaded the Remington.

“Incoming,” I murmured, backing up.

“How many?” asked Tarabon.

“Enough! We just need to hold them off until the rope comes back down.”

Tarabon glanced nervously upwards.

“Just hold steady and don’t waste ammunition,” I said.

We let off the first volley as the zombies came through the doorway. That felled the front rank. The rope dropped back down.

“Up! Tarabon!”

Somewhat to my surprise, he did as ordered.

I fired again into the oncoming throng. Then a third time. I then slung the Remington over my shoulder and switched to the pistol. The horde were spilling through the doorway. They’d have me surrounded in moments.

“Clear!” shouted Tarabon.

I wrapped the end of the rope around my left arm several times.

“I could do with a lift, guys!” I shouted.

Almost at once the rope jerked, hauling on my arm. I kept firing at the advancing zombies as my feet left the ground. One clawed at my legs and I kicked out and fired the last pistol round into its face. Then I was clear.

Several hands reached down, hauling me up into the small lab where I’d left Whats.

“You all right?” I asked, seeing him as I was lifted through.

“The well moved the zombies along as if they were in shifts,” he said. “I’ve watched whole batches move down the corridor. The lights come on and they all crumble away. Then the next batch shambles along. Whenever one spotted me and came in here, it didn’t last long enough to cause trouble.”

“No more lights now,” commented Hawthorne.

“Right, time get out,” said BD. “We head up the stairs. Famz, time to do your thing.”

Famz gave a wolfish grin. He had filled one of the empty wine bottles with petrol and stuffed a rag in the top. He fished a lighter from his pocket and lit the end. Then he dropped the bomb down the hole in the floor. There was a whump and a blast of heat.

Hawthorne was supporting BD as we exited the room. Famz and Tarabon were in front with Whats and me at the rear. We were in a side passage, but the hallway

it opened out into was full of zombies.

“Famz!” said BD. “We need another.”

Famz lit a second petrol bomb. He darted down the corridor and hurled it into the throng. It was incredibly effective. The zombies crumbled to dust as the flames hit them, their souls pulled into the well. It created a clear space for us.

BD shouted. “The stairs, at the double”

Famz and Tarabon charged across the corridor. Hawthorne and BD followed at a surprising lick, given BD’s broken leg. Whats and I came last.

Then we were backing up the stairway to the roof. Famz and Tarabon cleared the way ahead while Whats and I kept the horde, that had closed up behind us, at bay.

Rough Justice stuttered into silence. “Damn,” Whats murmured. “Out of ammo.”

“I thought you were saving a bullet for me,” I said.

“I got distracted,” he replied.

I changed in my last clip.

“I’m out of ammo!” shouted Whats.

“Here!” BD passed down his H&K USP .40.

We had reached the top floor.

“Keep them at the top of the stairs,” shouted BD.

The stairwell was beginning to fill with smoke.

“Last one pays for all,” said Famz, he was holding the final wine bottle. “Cat, get up onto the roof. Help BD through.”

I scrambled up onto the roof as Famz threw his final petrol bomb down the stairs. Hawthorne was already up there and together we helped BD through. Tarabon followed.

“Whats! Famz!” I shouted. All I could see through the hatchway was smoke and flames. Suddenly Whats appeared, scrabbling for purchase with his good arm. Tarabon and I hauled him through. Famz followed, coughing with the smoke.

We dropped back down the ropes we had hung over the side of the Whatmore building and onto the roof of St. Swithun’s. Flames were already visible through Whatmore’s ground floor windows.

It was then the souls began to escape, just one or two at first, then there was a whole stream of them rushing past us. I felt a familiar pressure in my mind and the merest hint of a tut.

BD and the rest of Ghost Squad had stopped still, also aware of the throng around us. I stepped forward to grasp BD’s hand.

“Bryn said farewell,” I said quietly. I watched the understanding dawn in his eyes. “And that she loved you.”

“Well, I do have some good points,” he said gruffly. His head dipped a moment, avoiding my gaze. “I loved her too,” he whispered. “Kept her badge.”

He pulled it out of a pocket. We don’t have proper police badges, just whatever we can knock up in the workshops. Bryn’s was a flying eagle, welded onto a Mercedes badge. The word Dixie had been roughly etched into it, below the letters DHPD. It was battered and bent, but still proud and defiant. Gently, BD placed the badge in my hands and I ran my fingers over the eagle, flying fierce and free.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I was sorry about everything.

Somewhat to my surprise I realised BD had put his arm around me and pulled me close. “I’m sorry too,” he whispered, and kissed the top of my head.

We stood together on the roof of the church, holding Bryn’s badge and listening as a heavenly chorus sung of freedom and joy. At our backs, the Whatmore building burned and around us the souls danced, taking flight upwards to wherever they were going.

Chapter 3

Ghost in the Library

An Urban Dead Short Story

“It’s DCC,” I muttered looking through my binoculars.

“I told you so.”

I shrugged. “We head over to Broadbelt and tell them. Good hunch of yours.”

“You won’t get there and back in time. You’ll also lose any chance of following her and finding where the Dead are gathering.”

I couldn’t help scowling. “You engineered this situation.”

“If you’d done as I asked in the first place and gotten Delta squad up here, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“No one, least of all Delta squad, is going to follow a random hunch of mine.”

Bryn tutted. “Could have told them it came from me.”

“We’ve been through that already.”

She shrugged. “Well Purple Cat, time to pick up a gun and show what you can do.”

I don’t free run quietly. I wasn’t, therefore, all that surprised when DCC looked up as I followed her. She ducked into the building below me.

“That’s torn it,” I said.

“Not at all,” returned Bryn. “You can shoot straight. All you have to do is hold your nerve.”

“We’ll lose the location of the Dead.”

“True, but DCC won’t be talking to them.”

“Bryn, I’m not a Delta.”

“You can do this. Put down the pack. It’ll slow you up. Check that gun I made you bring.”

I was standing on the roof of Garland library. It was a small building on two floors. Once inside, I ducked behind a fallen shelf. I closed my eyes and listened. I couldn’t hear anything.

“She’ll still be downstairs,” said Bryn. “Wait here, I’ll take a look.”

I stared at the pistol in my hands and reminded myself that DCC would be up again as soon as she found a revive. Murder is a game in Malton. There was a check out desk at the head of the stairs. It would provide better cover so I stood up and headed over to it.

Naturally I trod on a pile of colouring pencils which scattered and rolled. One tipped over the top step and clattered and bounced down the stairs.

I cursed silently and ducked behind the desk. Bryn reappeared next to me.

“Well she’s on her way up the stairs now,” she drawled sarcastically.

I listened but still couldn’t hear a sound. Damn! DCC was good, but then she would be.

“I’m watching,” said Bryn. “When I give the word all you need to do is stand up and shoot. She’ll be on the third step down. You have a clear shot from where I am. All you have to do is hit her.”

Dust motes danced through the pale light of Bryn’s body as she watched the stairs.

“On my mark,” said Bryn. “Remember look before you shoot. One well-aimed shot is worth six wild ones. Now!”

I stood up, pointing my gun. I saw DCC. She stood on the third step down and she held some kind of rifle. I took the moment to aim and then pulled the trigger.

The first shot hit her in the leg. I adjusted my aim and shot again. The rifle was pointing at me. The check out desk splintered. She staggered back. I’d hit her in the chest. I aimed again, the shot went wild, aimed once more and pulled the trigger. Something hit me, slamming me against the wall. I slid down to the floor.

“You killed her with that last shot,” said Bryn.

“Good!” I felt at my chest. It hurt like hell. My hand came away covered in blood. “I thought this thing was supposed to be bullet-proof.”

“Not against rifle ammo, hon.”

I thought of my pack on the roof. I wasn’t going to be making it up there.

“I’ll be back,” whispered Bryn.

I managed to tear a wad of cloth from my shirt to press over the wound but the pain prevented me being effective. After a while I passed out.

I struggled back to consciousness through a haze of morphine. BD was sitting next to me.

“You made it then,” he said.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

“You’d never believe me if I told you.”

Behind his shoulder I could see Bryn’s ghostly form. She grinned at me and made as if to ruffle his hair. Her hand passed through his solid form and it didn’t look like he could see her. However she’d obviously communicated with him somehow which was progress. I smiled at them both, closed my eyes and fell back into sleep.

Chapter 4

Urban Dead Drabbles

Written for the Weekly DHPD Drabble Challenge.

Challenge 1: Welcome to Malton

Brigadier Hargreaves arrived at his new posting late at night. Bright search lights cast the camp into stark relief of black and white. Beyond the city wall and the camp, the empty fields of the town's former green belt vanished into darkness.

Hargreaves took a walk down the dual carriageway towards the wall which crossed it; enormous, heavy and brutal. Hargreaves could just make out the sentries patrolling the top.

“Welcome to Malton,” said a roadside sign.

“Largest prison in the world.” Someone had spray painted underneath.

At least Hargreaves knew what his first order in the morning would be.

Challenge 2: Shotgun

The shotgun was originally purchased by St. John Masters who wasted his Oxbridge education writing copy for the Malton Advertiser.

Two weeks after quarantine, it belonged to “Garfield”. In 2003, he had spray-painted “Not in my name” on the railway bridge.

A month later, it's owner was the self-proclaimed Lord of Fryerbank. A year later it was in the hands of Officer Jim Extreme, DHPD.

Rotting fingers closed around the stock and brought it level with a single eye. Somewhere in the depths of what was left of a brain, the thought formed that it might make a good club.

Challenge 3: Death be not Proud

Death walks the streets of Malton.
 We know it as we hide and run.
 We know that zombie has his fun.
 Death walks the streets of Malton.
 His time has come.

But see his cloak is tattered and torn.
 His scythe is blunt, in light of dawn.
 Amid the dead, amid the groans
 No longer does he walk alone.
 A new age is born.

Death hides himself amid the crowd
 That presses hard on barricade.
 No man in Malton needs a shroud
 Death is fleeting. The call is loud.
 Death walks the streets of Malton tonight
 He is not proud.

Challenge 4: Joy

Cat sang and Gabby played guitar. Once in a while they persuaded her to sing a folk song that wasn't depressing, although even the depressing ones seemed quite jolly if everyone sang "*Whack foll the daddio*" loud enough.

"And if I had more bricks and stones, I'd build my chimney higher"

Cat's father had sung this song. Gabby thought he had made bits up.

"It would stop the neighbours cat from pissing in my fire."

They all joined in:

"Come landlord fill the flowing bowl until it doth run over jbrç For tonight we'll merry, merry be. Tomorrow we'll be sober."

Challenge 5: Tonight the Witches Ride

Cat double-checked the barricades on the school room door.

“It doesn’t make a difference,” said BD. “If they’re coming for you. They’ll get you.”

“Just don’t open the door.”

The sound of tapping, “Let me in, BD!” cried a voice.

“No!” said Cat, clutching his arm.

“It named me.” BD began to demolish the barricade.

Cat’s eyes fell on a discarded box of chalk. The last plank was gone from the door and the handle was turning. She frantically drew a circle on the floor around them.

In a torrent of darkness and terror the hunt poured through the room.

Challenge 6: The Blackmore Building

It stands at the heart of the empire. It isn’t the heart, that would give it a significance it doesn’t deserve, but it stands there anyhow.

We flow through it and around it. The quick come and go. They light it up for a few brief hours. They celebrate their triumph and then they are gone. It stands at the heart of our empire.

The curse was born here and the cure can be found here. The quick think it is hope. The dead know it is not.

It stands at the heart of the empire and it is ours.

Challenge 7: Street Fight

Twycrosse Alley is one of the oldest streets in Malton. A narrow lane squeezed between St Luke’s Hospital and Withyman Road Firestation. During WWII, nurses evacuated patients across the gap while the wards burned. Now the DHPD are escaping.

In 1645, during the brief royalist defense of Malton, Thomas Mallows made an abortive stand in the alleyway. His son stood behind him, frantically reloading the muskets as he fired.

Gabriel Mallows doesn’t know this but he curses anyway. Cat is standing behind him, reloading one shotgun while he fires the other. They won’t keep the

RRF at bay for long.

Challenge 8: Silver

I'm in Stanbury Village, just south of Ridleybank, and running on empty. I lost my squad somewhere in the RRF rout. I've no clips left for the pistol and one shell in the shotgun.

Kersley Mansion is undefendable, as a result I have a small hope it won't have been looted as thoroughly as elsewhere. I stop to look for pickings. A display cabinet lies over-turned on the floor. I heave it up and realise I've got lucky. For whatever reason no one had ever checked it before.

I leave the silver, but take the ancient hunting rifle and ammunition.

Challenge 9: Family

"Where's Cat?" asked Gabby.

Anton shrugged laconically. "Off sulking somewhere."

"Bulldog?"

"Off sulking somewhere else."

Gabby groaned. "Not again. What was it about this time?"

"Fucked if I know. I sent Officer S in to find out. They sounded deep in the usual 'lack of responsibility' 'you're a control freak' schtick."

Gabby grinned. "Poor Rook. He OK?"

"He'll live. He said he thought Cat *had* let the team down on the last op. BD punched him, then Cat chewed him out for getting BD stressed."

Gabby shook his head. "I guess he knows not to mess with that family now."

Challenge 10: The North Wind doth Blow

"Frozen solid! They're frozen solid!"

Sam rapped one of the zombies with his hand. It stood stock still. It's mouth was frozen in a grimace. It's hands reached upwards, bent like claws.

"Too much to hope they'll stay this way when the thaw sets in I suppose," said Anton.

"Almost certainly," agreed Tarabon.

“Make you feel like home Anton?” asked Sam. “Let’s all decamp to Alaska, we’ll be safe from zombies there.”

“You can fuck right off.”

“Still, might as well enjoy a few days off,” said Tarabon.

“So,” Sam looked around uncertainly, “what are we going to do now?”

Challenge 11: Something Old

Something stalks through the streets of Malton. It dances in the debris of the dying city. It has been called the Morrigan, Crom Cruach, King of the Redcaps, Spring-heeled Jack.

It is ancient. It dwelt in Malton when it was just a part of the wild wood, thick and endless. It is wild and savage. It has been called Herne the Hunter, Cernunos, the Green Man. It leads the wild hunt. It isn’t a tame thing.

Something old moves through Malton. The living fight and squabble and kill each other. Something old and ancient doesn’t laugh but it knows joy.

Challenge 12: The Holly and the Ivy

Ivy covered the Neate Monument, an aging statue of a forgotten general in a war long lost. It had been unkempt even before the zombies took over. A holly bush grew, threatening and prickly, among the iron railings that surrounded it.

Cat had climbed the railings and cut both holly and ivy. They now trailed over the broken desks and shattered fittings of Cotty Street Police Station, covering the wreckage the war that had been lost and the new generals who were already forgotten.

“Happy Christmas, DHPD,” she whispered and drank to dead friends and comrades.

Outside the zombies groaned.

Challenge 13: Starlight

“Cat! There is no fucking point!” complained Gabby. He stamped his feet in the snow to keep them warm. “We’re out in the open here!”

“Don’t be such a misery! Pass me up that last bit!”

Gabby groaned and passed up the string of lights. Cat hung them over the doorway of Club Meade.

“There!” she said climbing down the ladder. “Now all we have to do is turn them on.”

Gabby grunted. “All we have to do is fit a generator, repair the building and *then* turn them on.”

“Whatever,” Cat grinned. “We’ll still have star lights for Christmas.”

Challenge 14: Something New

Cat spent the night on the roof of the library, clutching Black Betty. Gabby climbed up to see if she would come down but retreated in the face of her silence. He found blankets, though, and coffee and ventured back to make sure she was, at least, warm.

She didn’t know it was the Tattooed Man who had taken BD, but something had, something new.

She watched the sun rise. The red light flooding over the rooftops of Malton, bathing the place in a gentle glow.

It was a new day. Time to give the gun to its new owner.

Challenge 15: Molebank

“This suburbs a mess!” complained Gabby.

Steve shrugged. “That’s why we’re here to repair it. You want peace and quiet, go to one of the green ’burbs.”

The sound of groaning floated on the wind.

“That’ll be the local zombies. About time we had a look at them.”

Steve leaned out of a window and looked around. “Well, I’ll be...”

“What? What!”

“Take a look at these zombies for me and tell me if I’m imagining things.”

Gabby leaned out of the window and then gaped in amazement. Down the street came a line of zombies, all doing the conga.

Challenge 16: Running on Empty

BD got killed in West Beckettown, part of the fighting retreat from Caiger.

By the time we reached Havercroft and Ackland mall we were out of syringes, and low on everything else. Ackland was burning and empty. That was the last time I saw a member of Bravo. Gabby lies dead somewhere in the ruins.

We detoured round Ridleybank.

In Stanbury Village I threw away the shotguns, they were slowing me down. It was three days since I'd seen another officer.

I've not eaten since Edgecombe. Ahead of me is the wall. I'm empty and I've nowhere left to run.

Challenge 17: Light

Living in Malton makes you appreciate the light. You spend so much time behind boarded windows.

A small chink of sunlight is creeping through a gap. The planks aren't flush. Prying fingers could gain purchase. Just now, though, it's only the sun.

We could plug in a generator, flood the empty dance floor with harsh electric light. But there are soft, silent footsteps in the ruins; the faint click of a safety catch. Light makes you easy to find, easy to see, an easy target.

Living in Malton makes you appreciate the light, but it makes you love the dark.

Challenge 18: A Factory

Here on the production line
Stamp! Whirr! Clack!
Turning out the pretty dolls
Pack! Pack! Pack!

Turn the handle! Move the Boxes! Keep the stacking neat.
All for happy baby people out there in the street.

Now there's no production line.
Tiptoe! Run! Hide!
But we need the fuel and gennies
To be found inside.

Watch behind you! Watch behind you! Quick! Shoot! Quick!
BD nooo...

Here on the production line
Thwack! Arrgh! Scrunch!
Eating brains of pretty people
Yum! Yum! Munch!

In they wander! Always Creeping! In a lovely line.
All for happy babbah zambahs wanting for to dine.

Challenge 19: So Foul and Fair a Day

The government, or whoever was in charge these days, was leafletting again. White paper drifted down, half invisible amid the snow.

“I’m amazed they can fly in this weather,” muttered Ian.

Cat staggered out into the biting wind.

“It’s pointless,” BD shouted after her. “Just more propaganda!”

But Cat wanted to *see*.

The design was clumsy and amateurish.

WE’RE FIGHTING FOR YOU.

A picture of the “Free Malton League”; their leader sat in the centre, scowling and determined.

Cat touched it with frozen fingers.

“It’s Claire.” Her voice echoed faintly. “She’s alive!”

“Who’s Claire?” asked Gabby.

“My niece,” whispered BD.

Challenge 20: Tiger

Once the tiger had been caged in Malton Zoo. The enclosure had been generous but, to a creature used to ranging over twenty kilometres, it had felt small and confining.

Zombies broke through the walls in the early days of the outbreak. Uninterested in the tiger, they had let her leap and run past them.

Now the tiger glides among the shadows and over the rooftops. It isn't the jungle she's used to, but it's jungle enough. The high forbidding walls do not trouble her. She hunts her prey. She knows that now it is the humans who are caged.

Challenge 21: The Wasteland

The DHPD pulled out of the Hills weeks ago. I'm in the wasteland.

*Between the idea
and the reality*

I stumble across Brains Monroe.

*Between the motion
And the act*

He's put down his shotgun, but I'm holding mine.

*Between the emotion
And the response*

He's killed many, many of us.

*Between the desire
and the spasm*

I've only killed zombies.

Falls the Shadow.

The question is, can I pull the trigger?

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper

Challenge 22: Aren't you a little short for a Stormtrooper?

I never worked out what Gabby had done to get on the wrong side of the Veterans of Fort Creedy. Let's face it, the possibilities are legion.

The rescue plan we eventually came up with involved a looted army surplus store, some gas masks, and a rather unconvincing cover story about an old World War I stash of mustard gas.

For some reason it worked though.

I think Gabby must have been expecting us. Leastways, when I finally broken into his cell, he merely raised his head from the bunk and said, “Aren’t you a little short for a stormtrooper?”

Challenge 23: Law and Order

“Sic Temper Tyrannis!” The cry echoes through the building.

I carry on binding up BD’s leg as Delta come back, their excited voices chattering about the pursuit and the kill.

Gabby appears in the doorway. “We got Brains Monroe!” he says excitedly. “My twentieh kill!”

“Well done!”

They look up to BD. He started Delta, initiated the hunts for killers. Gabby’s eyes flame with pride and then he’s gone.

“Don’t act so disapproving Sis,” says BD. “It’s a tough city out there. We’re all the law and order there is.”

Some law and order where we turn teenagers into executioners.

Challenge 24: Biohazard

“Officer Scalia, get the civilians out the back!”

“Aye Ma’am!”

“Wha? Why?” asked Gabby.

“Not now Gabs.” It would be obvious before I finished talking that the ’cades weren’t going to hold.

“There are zombies out the back, too. What kind of a dumb plan is this?” That was Arthur.

“These zombies *are* the ones from the back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I could explain why but it would take ten minutes we don’t have.

Luckily Biohazard has already gone, taking the civilians with him. Some days you need an officer who won’t slow you up with too many questions.

Challenge 25: Citizen Mallows

“Well we’ve done away with money, haven’t we? You have to admit we’re not a capitalist society any more.”

“The bartering is a nightmare,” pointed out Cat. “You often complain about it.”

“Well that’s because the dealers in Caiger are fuckers. They’re trying to reimpose Capitalism by other means.”

Cat rolled her eyes. “I’m not doing it Gabby.”

“But you’re perfectly placed. Just announce we’re a commune. We share everything anyway.”

“We do? You want to redistribute some of your stash of chocolate then?”

“Hey! I’m saving it for Vicky!”

Cat laughed and shook her head. “No chocolate! No commune!”

Challenge 26: With it or on it

They’d come in through windows and skylights, guns blazing, and if you survived or even if you didn’t you maybe did or didn’t pass their test and eventually they’d leave.

Since they were killing ‘civilians’ and we were all that counted as ‘police’ we took them on. We hunted them down and crashed through windows and skylights (or at least Jim did).

We shot them and they shot us. Meanwhile the zombies tore down the barricades.

Then they went away, leaving the suburb in ruins. Wellington once said, “The only thing worse than a battle lost is a battle won.”

Drabble Meme: Revolution for Gabby

“This is the Revolution! Hand over executive power!” stated Gabby as he swept in, his forces at his heels.

Cat laid down her pen. She looked tired. “Someone needs to run things.”

“Dunell Hills is a police state, and you know it. That’s without discussing the way civilians are expected to support officers.”

“Take away the DHPD and everyone gets eaten.”

Gabby pointed Slasher at her. “The time to talk me out of this has passed.”

“I’m not going to hand over.”

Gabby placed the muzzle against her forehead.

Cat raised her eyebrows. “Go on. Make my day,” she said.

Drabble Meme: “I’m back from the Dead” for Bio-hazard

A tattered police jacket hung from the zombie’s shoulders. Rotting flesh was falling away from an empty skull, but there was some semblance of a man I had known.

Biohazard had been missing for months, swallowed up into the interior of Malton, defeated by the simple effort of remaining alive in this town. I’d not expected to see him again.

Yet here he was, constituting a biohazard as usual.

Muscles rebuilt themselves over bone, and flesh over muscles. Bio twitched and writhed as Necrotech’s poison did its work.

Finally his eyes opened and he groaned. “Ah! Bittersweet taste of life.”

Drabble Meme: “Basically... Run” for Gabby

I sat down next to the little man. He stared down at the swarming hordes of zombies in the street below. Some were already collapsing and crumbling to dust, victims of the accelerated virus.

“You planned this all along, didn’t you?” I couldn’t help the tone of accusation in my voice.

“Broadly speaking.”

“People died.”

He looked at me, expression neutral. “You should have done as I told you.”

A crash below us. Some zombie must have broken through our barricades. “Is that part of the plan?”

The little man stood up. “Not exactly.”

“So what do we do now?”

Drabble Meme: Life in Uniform for Goldstar (Double Drabble)

“There’s really no escape, love. You might as well come back here.” Alasdair Crowley leaned out of the window.

The plank hung out over empty space. Cotty Street Police Station beckoned invitingly on the other side of the road. The DHPD were so close and yet so far.

“You’ll fall to your death. Come back to your Uncle Alasdair.”

Zombies thronged the street. One of them, a policeman’s cap strangely askew on its head, let out a long low groan.

“Come back. There’s a good little girl.”

I jumped and crashed into the throng of semi-rotted bodies. I closed my eyes, waiting for the inevitable; the teeth, the claws, the death that is not the end.

There was a lot of noise. When I opened my eyes, I saw the zombie in the police cap, in fact an entire uniform, between me and the horde. He groaned once more and his arms flailed, knocking back a lurching monstrosity.

A door banged open. “In here!” shouted a voice.

I got to my feet and ran.

“What happened there?” I asked, once I was safe inside the PD.

“That’s Goldstar,” said a grim-faced blonde woman. “A life spent in uniform dies hard.”

Mean Streets

I dropped through a skylight into a nightmare torture chamber that stank of blood, fear and urine. A lone man was chained up to the wall, his mind broken, cursing and swearing at the burns and lacerations that swarmed across his body in intricate patterns. The place was littered with home-made blades and spikes whose use was only too clear.

I shot the man once, through the head and hoped the resulting zombie would break free before his tormentors returned. Then I fled.

The streets of Malton are mean, but sometimes they are preferable to the horrors behind the barricades.

The Dead

We are The Dead.

We have woken, clawing our way out of clammy earth, pushing aside rotten timber, opening our eyes to the baleful sun. Sinew and bone knits together.

We rise and answer the call.

We are many. We are one.

The sole purpose is to sweep away everything in our path, slowly but inexorably. We will cleanse the pathetic detritus of the living, who scrape together meagre, small-minded lives in the wasteland that is our birthright.

In the end each one is alone and lost and friendless.

Only we will remain, united, together and it will be good.

Medical Attention

I stared in disbelief at the man on the stretcher. His head rocked back and forth as his mind raced through some delirious fever dream. When I touched his wounded leg he screamed with the pain.

“He fell and broke his leg, then it festered. We heard the DHPD had medical supplies.”

I looked at the stretcher bearers. They were obviously new to Malton.

I sighed, pulled out my gun, and placed a bullet in the patient’s brain.

“This is what counts for medical attention in Malton, sweetie.” I said to their disbelieving faces. “He’ll be fine once he’s revived.”

Chapter 5

Not a Good Day to Die

“Are we going to check out Roywood?” I asked.

“Is there any point? It’s not in our jurisdiction and it’s supposed to be crawling with zombies, isn’t it? Or am I thinking of somewhere else?”

I grimaced at Gabriel Mallows’ back. We were scouting, or more accurately wandering around aimlessly. For once things were quiet in Dunell Hills which just made Squad Leader Mallows restless. Half an hour ago he’d burst into the squad room at Swinnerton PD and announced, “I’m going scouting. Who’s coming with me?” When no one answered he’d pointed at me. “You don’t look like you’re doing anything, Cat. You’re scouting with me.”

I hadn’t been doing anything, but frankly I valued my not doing anything time.

I didn’t have a clue what was in Roywood. At least not right now, although it had certainly had more than its fair share of zombies back in the early days. “You’re the squad leader Gabs, you tell me if there are zombies there.”

“Bloody indecisive wimmenz,” he muttered. “Where are we now?”

“Tupton Lane, it’s still in Peddleston Village. Cross the road and we’re in Roywood.” I pointed at a road sign and then decided to wait patiently for his decision.

I’d switched in to Bravo squad a few months back, thinking I should maybe get some experience in the front line, as it were. Support was all very well, but in this town there are days when you have to pick up a shotgun and defend yourself. Gabriel Mallows had been promoted to squad leader not long after I’d joined up. He was half my age, with the organisational skills of a hyperactive hamster. If the department hadn’t been desperate... but then the department was desperate. This was a zombie apocalypse and we had no time to worry about whether 16-year-olds could handle responsibility. I coped with Gabby by skilled deployment

of passive-aggression. Waiting patiently for answers was, I had discovered, a particularly successful tactic.

“Fuck it!” he muttered. “Well we’re here now. Might as well check out some of the buildings. We’ve nothing better to do.”

“Protect Swinnerton PD? Man the ‘cades?”

“Rest of the squad have that covered. We’re scouting. Come on!” He headed across the road.

We turned into Owers Way. St. Dismas Hospital was on our left and Hem-burrow Library and Carslake Museum were on our right. They were both related to the hospital somehow; ancient, ornate and imposing buildings constructed to glorify their donors.

“Let’s give the library and museum a quick sweep, then we’ll check the hospital for medical supplies,” said Gabby.

I shrugged. Whatever.

We scrambled over the remains of a barricade. Heavy wooden doors had been dragged across the entrance and now lay splintered and rotting on the floor. Bookshelves lay in heaps nearby. Someone must have got them ready to plug the gaps. Piles of books lay in mounds against the far wall. The place smelled of damp paper, but not badly. The windows were set up high and hadn’t been smashed. The hall was large and the windows were small, not much rain had got in. The small high windows plunged the whole place into shadow, though.

Gabby looked around. “Doesn’t seem to have been much of a fight here. I wonder where the defenders went?”

I shrugged again. What was I? Fount of all knowledge?

Gabby scowled and skittered off into the depths of the hall, swinging his gun around imaginary corners. It was a silver-plated Smith & Wesson Model 500. Gabby described it as ‘big and manly’. It was certainly big. I had had no idea revolvers came in super-size. It did convey a certain Dirty Harry vibe on Gabby and its stopping power was impressive. It was a good quality handgun for Malton where we typically relied on what BD termed ‘pea-shooters’, dropped on us in supply crates. Gabby had called the gun Slasher. All the younger recruits seemed to worship BD and since his favourite gun had a name, so did theirs.

I picked up one of the books. It was a medical text, not surprising given this was a medical library. I frowned at the small writing and technical illustrations but I had no idea whether it was of any use to me or to us and no way of finding out. I tossed it to one side. It was probably useless. In this town, if you can’t fix the problem quickly, you wait for it to run its course and let our cheapened version of death do the fixing for you.

“Do you think there was an economics section?” Gabby’s voice echoed back. “There’s some books I’ve not been able to track down.”

It was easy to forget that Gabby read. He argued. He argued endlessly, mostly about the equitable distribution of resources and sometimes liberating the sources of production. Not that he could identify any sources of production in Malton. Some days he argued that, in the absence of an economy, communism and libertarianism were identical. That one always went down really well. Once or twice I’d joined in since I sometimes got weary of the DHPD’s right-wing rhetoric, but I never got much further than calling various officers fascist wankers, which doesn’t really rate highly as a debating tactic.

Gabby, on the other hand, knows his stuff. He read voraciously, mostly biography, politics and economics, when he could get his hands on the books. I’ve no idea where he picked up the habit. He can only have been 11 when the dead started walking the streets. He never talked about his family and no one ever asked. He’d staggered into Cotty Street Police Station when he was 14, half-starved and dragging a guitar that somehow looked bigger than he was. It was certainly more solid. We fed him and then taught him to shoot. Sometimes I’m not so sure we did him a favour.

There were several doorways leading off the large room, small offices maybe, or reading rooms or something. I checked my shotgun was loaded. It was. This was a routine drummed into us in the academy again and again; always keep your guns loaded and always double-check. I started looking through the side rooms one by one; office, cleaning cupboard, another office, a small hallway with a second door at the far end. There was a large biohazard sign stuck on it and then a long series of instructions for entry and exit procedures. I frowned.

“Gabby! Gabby!”

“What is it?”

“There’s something odd here.”

“Define odd.” His voice echoed, distorted by the large empty chamber at my back.

“Some kind of quarantine thing.”

I felt him arrive at my shoulder. “Wow! Well, don’t suppose it does anything now. Zombies will have been all over it.” He kicked the door. It fell from its hinges to the floor with a crash.

“Gabby!”

“What?”

“All those biohazard signs might have been there for a reason.”

“Zombies ransacked this place long ago. Someone just propped that door up. Whatever was in there has got out already.”

“You don’t know that.”

Gabby shrugged nonchalantly and walked into the room, sweeping his pistol about. Unlike the rest of library, this had smooth walls made from metal and a large hatch in the middle of the floor. Gabby stood in front of the hatch and stared at it thoughtfully.

“Best leave it shut.” I said hopefully.

Gabby shook his head. “Might be defensible down there. This room doesn’t look too badly mangled. We should check it out.”

I looked at the bare room and the metal walls. “There’s nothing here to mangle.”

Gabby just grinned and then pulled the hatch open. A metal tube led downwards. There were fixings in the sides where a ladder had once been. It looked like someone had torn it away.

“They must have taken the ladder away to prevent the zombies getting in,” suggested Gabby.

“Wouldn’t stop them for long. They’d just throw themselves down the hole and then stand up when they reached the bottom.”

Gabby looked thoughtful. “It worries me when you come up with shit like that. You’re right, though. Mind you, whoever was down there might not have thought of that. Fuck. Would zombies notice this hatch, if it was closed?”

I looked at the hatch thoughtfully. When shut it lay flush with the floor, a small handle set into it. “Maybe, maybe not.”

Gabby rolled his eyes. “Still worth checking down there. I’ve got climbing gear in my pack.”

I was still doubtful as Gabby began his descent. “There could be anything down there.”

“Only one way to find out.” Gabby fished a pair of sunglasses out of a breast pocket and put them on. “How do I look?”

“You can’t go down a big dark hole wearing sunglasses!”

“Who’s in charge here, bitch?”

I froze and glared at him. “Oi!”

“It’s a term of affection!” He grinned, waved, and began the descent. I stamped my foot.

“Halloo?” called a voice. “You coming down?”

I lay on my front to call down the hole. “Don’t you want me to keep guard up here?”

“Nah! Shut the door. Who’s going to come past?”

“Zombies? Death Cultists? Random maniacs? Take your pick. Anyway, you knocked the door off its hinges.”

“So I did. Fuck. Well, prop it back up. It’ll be fine.”

I growled in frustration, then heaved the door back into place.

It was dim down the bottom of the hole, with a faint musty smell in the air alongside the normal smell of rotting bodies that pervades Malton. Low power lighting cast a dull yellow glow over everything. That meant there was a generator down here somewhere which was probably worth salvaging.

I sniffed. “Zombies around. Must be.”

“It’s bloody dark. I can’t see a thing.”

I looked at Gabby. “Take the sunglasses off, maybe?”

“Point.” He took them off, grinned in an entirely unembarrassed fashion and then bounced on the balls of his feet. “Which way?”

I shrugged and then pointed right. Seemed like as good a direction as any. Our feet clattered on metal. We were in a long tunnel. I struggled to orient myself. We were probably heading out under the road towards the hospital. That figured, I supposed, what with the biohazard signs and everything.

“Something ahead,” said Gabby quietly.

“What kind of a something?”

“How should I know?”

I peered around him. There was a sort of lump in the middle of the floor. A dark mound in the yellowish light.

“Someone dropped something?” I hazarded.

“Pure genius.”

“I didn’t even want to be here.”

“So you keep saying. Fuck it! I’m checking it out.”

He walked forward. I saw him stiffen and then prod at the shape with his foot. It rolled over. The movement helped resolve the form. An arm flopped. It was the hunched shape of a human body. I hurried up, gun at the ready.

“Shit!” muttered Gabby. “Is there somewhere we can dump it?”

I looked around. “All the windows are at ground level. I suppose there might be a room we can lock it into.”

I knelt down for a closer look. It smelled terrible, but then zombies did. Although it was decomposing I could see the deep gashes in its torso. “Looks like a zombie kill to me. That means there are more of them down here.”

“That body’s been dead for a while, though,” pointed out Gabby. “Must have been zombified when it was put down. Why would zombies be tearing each other up?”

I shrugged again. “Maybe this one was looking for a revive or something.” Zombies weren’t terribly bright, but they did all work out eventually whether they wanted to be living or dead. Those that wanted to live stood around at revive points, muttering ‘Mrh?’ at passing humans, if they were alert enough. It was a strange sound, a kind of strangled groan, but everyone in the city knew it, and what it meant. Those who wished to remain dead often fought with the ‘mrh-cows’. They can be quite evangelical, in an odd sort of way, zombies.

Gabby pulled out a torch and switched it on, sweeping along the floor. “Lots of dust. No footprints.”

“So?”

“So there wasn’t a fight recently. I think that’s just a dead body.”

I snorted. “No such thing around here.”

We stood over the body bickering about whether to explore further or return to the surface and whether there was anything useful we could do about the body. In the end Gabby shot it through the head for good measure and announced we’d be back before it re-grew enough brains to cause trouble.

Then he put his sunglasses back on and headed deeper into the tunnels. After about a minute he tripped, cursed and took the sunglasses off.

“There’s only me here anyway.” I pointed out. “And I’m already unimpressed.”

“You never know. There might be a young and innocent wimmenz down here somewhere. I can rescue her.”

“And she’ll then fall at your feet?”

“Actually I’m more likely to fall at hers and beg in an entirely unmanly fashion, but I live in hope.” Gabby could be surprisingly self-effacing and self-aware at times, in amongst the brash confidence. I guess it’s called being 16.

The narrow tunnel opened out into a large cavernous space. There was a railing in front of us and we leaned over it to look down onto an empty floor.

“Cool place for a party,” remarked Gabby.

I laughed. “Maybe we should suggest it to Brass. When did we last celebrate anything?”

“Dunno, when did we last retake Caiger?”

“Must be someone’s birthday soon. When’s your 17th?”

There was a sharp silence. “Tomorrow.”

I blinked in surprise. “You never said.”

He shrugged. “Nothing much worth celebrating, not really.”

“Gabby, your 17th! That has to be worth marking.”

“Maybe, dunno, fuck it! I’d just rather not. This place is so fucked up I just can’t face it.”

“What was that?” I asked. I could hear something behind us, a dull metallic clatter.

“Sounds like someone running,” muttered Gabby.

We turned. The tunnel we had walked out of stretched away into the distance but it was possible to see the form of a man, silhouetted against the emergency lighting.

“Oi, mate!” called Gabby. “What’s happening.”

There was no answer. Some instinct made me start backing away but I bumped straight up against the railing. Seconds later I realised the run was slightly lopsided, like the man had a limp. Gabby fumbled about and produced his torch again. A powerful beam of light flooded the tunnel.

“Fucking hell!” he said.

I raised my shotgun and fired. The man’s skin was a palish green colour and blood was caked around his mouth and hands. I couldn’t account for the speed but I was pretty sure this was a zombie.

It staggered backwards and then came on. “How big is that thing?” muttered Gabby.

It was big, I realised. Gabby’s tall, well over six foot, but this creature was going to tower over him by several inches and it wasn’t skinny like he was. I fired

again. It was almost on top of us.

Gabby raised Slasher, all the time keeping the torch steadily fixed on the creature. He fired one shot, placing the bullet directly between the man's eyes. It fell over backwards. He glanced at me sideways and grinned. "Always go for the brains."

Then something dropped down from the ceiling. Gabby's gun clattered on the walkway, skidded and then dropped over the edge, clanging on the floor below. It was a second zombie, this one lean, wiry and elongated. Its limbs seemed uncannily long and jointed like a large spider had dropped down from the ceiling to pin Gabby to the floor. I raised my shotgun, hoping to get a clear shot at the thing's head but a stray arm lashed out, knocking the shotgun over the edge to join Slasher.

I fished in my pocket. I'd cooked up a syringe full of revivification serum earlier in the day and then Gabby had decided we didn't need it. So it had been slowly going to waste. The creature was busy biting and pounding on Gabby, so it was easy enough to slam the thing into the back of its neck.

On the whole, combat revivification is frowned upon. Those who have chosen the zombie lifestyle have a habit of standing right up, knocking you out, stealing your guns, shooting you and then committing suicide. It's very messy. Live humans do more damage than dead ones, who'd have thought? so we prefer to keep them dead. However, reviving him would buy us a few minutes, let Gabby find one of his spare guns and then we could just kill the zombie again and tip him over the edge of the gantry. With luck it would take the thing a while to get back up to our level.

I slid home the plunger. The zombie jerked upwards, its back ram-rod straight, and then turned a baleful glare upon me. To my surprise, it then stood up and sprang, spidery limbs outstretched. I found myself toppling backwards against the gantry rail and I scrabbled frantically at the zombie's front, realising I was grabbing the tattered remains of a lab coat. The gantry creaked and bent and I was leaning out over the drop. The zombie pressed forwards and my feet began to slide. I twisted frantically, grabbing at the railing behind me, hearing the sound of tearing metal. Then I was hanging over empty space. My hands were gripping thin metal struts that had twisted away from the gantry. The thin strip of metal hung down over the floor far below like a piece of orange peel and I dangled from the end.

"Cat!" It was Gabby shouting. There was a sudden flare of light and the zombie fell past me, burning like a comet.

"What?" I asked.

“Flare gun! I knew those things had to be useful for something.” Gabby lay down on his front, hands reaching down. “Can you get hold of me?”

I hauled myself upwards and then lunged with one hand. He grabbed hold and pulled. A foot found purchase on a metal strut somewhere and I risked transferring my second hand to his arm. Moments later I was back up on the walkway.

“Thanks,” I said, sitting up.

Gabby stood, his face looking surprisingly adult for a fleeting moment. “No problem.” Then he fidgeted and looked both ways. “What now? Go back and tip the other bodies over the edge as well?”

“Anti-virals first. That thing bit you. I don’t want you dying on me.”

Luckily Gabby wasn’t badly mauled. He’d sustained some scratches and a bite on his upper arm which appeared to have done more harm to his leather jacket than it had to him. I swabbed it clean and applied a dressing anyway, while Gabby whined that it was stinging and he was fine.

“You’ve got blood on your shirt too,” I muttered, examining the tear around the bite.

“It was blood-stained already from that break-in last week, a little more won’t hurt.”

“Really Gabby! Don’t you wash it?”

“Occasionally, often enough. Who made you my mother anyway?”

I tossed my head but didn’t say anything, because really it was none of my business and hot water was pretty hard to come by.

We tipped the big zombie Gabby had shot through the head, after its fellow and looked down at the burning remains below us, neither seemed to be moving. Even after spider zombie had burned out, it just lay there on the floor.

“I reckon it’s dead,” said Gabby.

“No such thing in this town.”

“So you keep saying but those zombies aren’t moving, nor is the fucker we found earlier.”

“Maybe one of those is the fucker we found earlier.”

Gabby shook his head. “He was black, so unless his skin magically changed colour when he stood up...” He shrugged.

“Point taken. I tried to revive that gangly one as well and it didn’t work. Mind you, the serum could have gone off.”

“Well, whatever the fuck’s going on, we need to find a way down. Slasher’s down there.”

“So is the big fuck-off zombie and the creepy ceiling spider zombie. Slasher’s not worth it. It only holds five shots in the cylinder anyway and the ammo isn’t

easy to find. Why not get a hand-gun with a magazine and ten shots?"

"You just don't understand guns. Speaking of which..."

Gabby had a large shotgun strapped across his back. He unbuckled it and handed it over. I'm generally given shotguns. Precision aiming isn't really my thing.

"What about you?"

"Spare pistol." He pulled back his leather jacket to reveal a holster under one arm, counterbalancing the one at his hip where Slasher normally lived.

"Why did you shoot it with the flare then?"

"Flare was cooler."

"What?"

"Fuck! Flare was to hand. I didn't have time to think."

I shook my head.

The gantry continued round the edge of the large room. Doorways opened off it at regular intervals. The first batch led into spaces that had clearly once been laboratories. The doors were all smashed and we wandered, largely uncomprehendingly, amid broken glass and twisted bits of equipment.

"What do you suppose they were doing here?" asked Gabby.

"Zombie stuff."

"How do you figure that?"

I pointed at the nearest whiteboard. Notes were scrawled across it in marker pen. 'Group meeting: Monday 10am', 'Remember to bug NT again about notes', 'Could infection become airborne?' All the lab whiteboards had had similar scrawl. Enough to be sure these guys were studying the Necrotech virus.

"Do you think they developed the disease?"

"Doubt it." I pointed at the note about bugging 'NT'. "Looks like they were separate, trying to get the information from Necrotech."

"Yeah but if they were separate *and* working on the virus... I mean how? No one knew about the virus until after the quarantine."

"Maybe they came afterwards. I bet no end of people have been smuggled in here for one reason or another since the wall went up."

"But the biohazard signs in the library?"

"These labs have probably been here a long time, connecting the hospital and the library, and maybe the museum. Maybe we'd have ended up at the museum if we'd turned left instead of right down the tunnel. Someone must have known about these labs and thought they could make them secure."

"More fool them."

We found the living quarters; five bedrooms and a small kitchen. Then we stumbled across the remains of what had probably been some kind of isolation room. The door had been smashed out from the inside. A large, reinforced, metal door, smashed out from the inside.

“That’s not good,” muttered Gabby, looking at it. “Zombies shouldn’t be that strong.”

“Shouldn’t have been as fast as that one we met earlier either.”

“What the fuck were these jokers doing?”

I looked at the twisted and buckled door again. “Are you serious about finding a way down to collect Slasher?”

I heard him sigh. “Not really. It would be kind of stupid, knowing that thing is down there somewhere. Not to mention the creepy spider one.”

I nodded and patted him on the arm. “There’ll be other guns.”

“It was just a gun. It was cool but, you know...” he shrugged and scratched his arm. “What do you say we quickly check the rest of the rooms on this level, see if there’s anything useful and then we bug out? Leave the big dangerous creepy spider zombies safely boxed up down here.”

“We *will be* in trouble if we both get zombified down here. No one knows where we are and zombies can’t climb up ropes.” I pointed out.

“Right and once we get back up top, we can let the right people know about the mega-zombs and they can bring the buildings down on top of them. That should stop ’em getting out.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said relieved. “Mind you I think there must be a big generator down here that we should look for. Something’s kept the lights going, and for quite some time, I’d guess.”

“Won’t be portable then, will it? Nah, let’s just give the stuff here the once over quickly and then scarper.”

I smiled at him. “They could be stuck down below. Maybe it’s all safe now.”

He grinned back. “Five bedrooms and this isolation room; That’s six people. There must be three more somethings down here somewhere. I don’t much fancy meeting them. No, we’ll do this your way.” He made a mock serious expression. “I’m wearing my sensible hat today.”

“You’re not wearing a hat.”

“Well I don’t have a sensible hat. But, if I did, I’d be wearing it. Use your imagination, woman!”

I thumped him gently. “Sexist!”

“Always! Come on wimmenz! Let’s check this place out!”

Then we found the morgue. It looked like the basics of an infirmary but a large chest freezer had been dragged into the room and someone had taped the word “morgue” onto it. Inside were two bodies. A small blonde woman in pyjamas was laid out, looking like she was asleep. There wasn’t any obvious sign of injury but since she was frozen solid it was difficult to tell. There might have been a bandage on her arm, under the pyjamas. The other was obviously a zombie, although someone had put a bullet through its brain.

“Freezing doesn’t stop zombies, does it?” asked Gabby as I squinted at the bodies.

“Slows them up a little, but no. Never heard of freezing stopping them.”

“Then why aren’t these two up and about causing chaos?”

“Or that body in the tunnel for that matter, or even the zed you fried. This woman might not have been infected, but the other four sure are.” I closed down the lid of the freezer. “I wonder if they’ve got medical notes anywhere?”

“It’ll all be on the computers won’t it? Behind passwords and shit.”

“Bet there was a paper trail too. This room was some kind of hospital. I’m guessing that woman died of something or other and they had nowhere to store the body.”

“Why not just ship her out?”

“They had no easy way out of the quarantine? They had to jury rig up this ‘morgue’?”

“OK, makeshift morgue, find the paper trail.” Gabby glanced around the ransacked room and then wandered over to a filing cabinet. It was lying on the floor, the drawers trapped beneath it. Gabby heaved it over. Papers spilled out and ran across the floor.

The story we pieced together was pretty simple. The medical notes were full of phrases like ‘massive organ failure’ and ‘infection carried by saliva’ but the basics seemed to be that the woman, Dr Kent, had been bitten. They’d administered a ‘cure’ and she had died.

“Stupid fuckers,” muttered Gabby.

“They were working on a cure. They were trying to help.”

“Like fuck they were. What do you think the stronger, faster zombies are all about? If they were working on a cure it wasn’t the only fucking thing they were doing.”

At that moment we both heard the noise. A faint groan and the sound of running feet.

“It’s another one,” whispered Gabby.

“They don’t seem any brighter than the regular zeds, just faster, and stronger or creepy-crawler.”

“Just.” His tone was dead-pan.

“It’ll also stay down once shot. I’ll go and stand in the corridor. It’ll head for me and then you can shoot it from behind.”

“You trust me?”

I hadn’t thought of it that way. The question made me pause and look at him closely. Yes, he was 16 and hyperactive and irritating in all sorts of ways but I actually had no doubt that he would stay calm in a crisis and he was a good shot. He wouldn’t run or abandon me or panic. It wasn’t everyone who could face down a mega-zombie and remember to shoot it between the eyes. Most people wouldn’t think to turn a flare on one either and certainly few people would actually hit it. There was a reason Brass had put him in charge, after all. I’d just never really thought about it. “Yes, I trust you.”

“K. Let’s do this thing.”

Once I was standing out on the encircling walkway, it did occur to me that I had maybe been a little blithe in my confidence. The plan was sound, but that didn’t make acting as bait any easier... and why was I the one acting as bait anyway?

I clutched Gabby’s spare shotgun tight against my chest and banged a metal ladle from the kitchen against the railing, listening all the while for the sounds of running feet. Gabby had concealed himself behind the closed door of one of the offices.

It wasn’t long before the thing appeared some way off to my right, a moving shape in the dim lighting of the facility. I banged the ladle against the railing a couple more times, just to make sure I had its attention and then dropped the lump

of metal on the floor so I had both hands free for the gun. Gabby's hidey hole was between me and the zombie, which was good.

I held my ground until it was past Gabby's concealed room. I could see it now, a woman's form with grotesquely elongated arms and legs and a mouth that seemed unnaturally wide and gaping. I opened fire, emptying shot after shot into her and pumping the chamber maniacally. I walked backwards a step at a time as I did so, more through habit than anything else. The fighting retreat was ingrained into us all.

She pounded on. I'd been aiming for her chest because shotguns are useless as precision weapons but great for sheer stopping power. My intention was to slow her down, expecting Gabby to take the head shot, but Gabby hadn't appeared. I backed up further, fumbling new shells into the gun. I dropped the first onto the floor but the second slipped home. I didn't bother scrabbling for more but raised the gun and fired in the general direction of the thing's head, watching the shot pepper its way across her features, ripping flesh from bone to reveal the skull beneath. She was less than a stride away. I held the gun out in front of me like a bar as the flailing limbs reached forward. I fell backwards, staring into that wide gaping mouth, my shotgun rammed hard against her throat, keeping the teeth away from me.

I didn't think getting eaten would kill me, but it's never a pleasant experience. "Gabby!" I shouted, desperately.

I heard shots. The thing turned its head but I was pinned down by the weight on my chest and couldn't do much with the distraction. I closed my eyes and hoped Gabby's aim was good. More shots followed and then I felt the body slump. I pushed it to one side, no help from Gabby, and then struggled to my feet a sarcastic comment on my lips. Gabby stood in the centre of the corridor, a pistol held in one hand. He gazed at me a moment, mouth working silently and then swayed and crashed to the floor.

It didn't take long to work out what was wrong with him. His skin was hot to the touch and his arm, where the zombie had bitten him, was a livid red. With difficulty and a lot of cursing I managed to drag him to the infirmary and get him onto one of the beds. I found paracetamol among the pills littering the floor and gave them to him on the grounds that it might help bring the fever down. It had some effect. I'd have done efficient medical things with fluid drips if I'd had the

skills and been able to find any supplies. As it stood, I was reduced to dabbing at his forehead with a damp flannel.

After about ten minutes his eyes flickered open.

“Did I get the zombie?”

“Yeah, you got the zombie.” I reached down to squeeze his hand.

“That’s good. I feel like shit, though.”

“Infection.”

“That’s not good, is it.”

“I don’t think so, no. It means our normal anti-virals don’t work.”

“We’re going to have to use their cure, then.”

“Well for starters we don’t know if there is any and for seconds it killed the only person they tried it on.”

“I had actually remembered that much, but what alternative is there? I’m not getting all zombieish and killing you too.” He looked completely serious.

I wondered briefly if he really understood what he was saying but then realised he did. He wasn’t stupid by a long shot and he clearly knew he was proposing his own death in order to save me. “There are revives,” I hazarded.

“Not for this type of zombie-ism.”

He was right there. Nothing we had seen suggested that this infection carried the same immunity to permanent death. “We could wait and see. I can always try to revive you, and shoot you if it doesn’t work.” I stumbled a bit over the end of that sentence. I didn’t like the idea of shooting someone dead, properly dead that is, even if they were a zombie, least of all if they were someone I knew.

He shook his head. “I’m not prepared to take the risk. You could get infected too. Go find the cure.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Well I’m in charge of this squad and I am. Go find a cure, wimmenz.” He raised his head and then sank back with a groan. “I’ll rest here a bit.”

I sighed and started checking the litter of jars and vials on the floor. We had the medical name for the cure in Dr Kent’s notes. It was just a matter of matching the labels.

Gabby grimaced when I returned with the a small vial and a syringe. “Maybe that woman had some dodgy condition. The cure just reacted badly as a one-off.”

“Maybe. You still sure about this? I could go get Snow or Sy or someone. They might have some idea that we don’t.”

“If you thought you had time for that, you’d have gone already. Look on the bright side, either I survive, or you get rid of a lousy squad leader.”

“You’ve done all right.” I suddenly felt defensive on his behalf.

"I irritate you. You think I don't know what I'm doing."

"Only sometimes. You do OK in a tight spot." There was finding him a bit irritating and there was wanting him gone. I didn't like to think of him actually hurt.

"You didn't want to come down here. I should have listened."

"I get too cautious. If someone else had stumbled on this place the infection might have got out. It was a good call, checking down here."

"Now I know it's bad, with you complimenting me."

"Gabby... I..."

"Wimmenz! Just... fuck... get on with it please."

I sighed and sucked a dose into the syringe. The notes hadn't been that clear about amounts but the bottle was small, looked like a single dose to me. Like I knew anything about it. I didn't like the colour. It was just off clear with a sickly yellowish tinge.

"These probably weren't meant to be left around that long," I said doubtfully.

"They probably wouldn't have done me any good when they were fresh. Get on with it, Cat."

I tapped up a vein. Dr Snow had shown me how to do this. It was useful for some of the medical supplies they dropped on us. Then I injected the so-called cure.

"What now?" asked Gabby.

"I don't know. I guess you die or get better."

"Burn." He closed his eyes.

The symptoms more or less followed those laid out in the medical notes. Gabby's fever went down as the cure wiped out the virus. We chatted a bit about nothing much; music and politics and our friends back at the PD. He was a nice enough lad, really. I held his hand and he let me, but we never talked about what was actually happening. I didn't know what to say. I don't suppose he did either. Gradually his breathing became laboured.

"Do you think I'll make it to 17?" he whispered.

I glanced at my watch. "You've got half an hour."

"I'll make it to 17 then. I'd hate to die at 16. It's a shitty age." He coughed and there was blood on his fingers as he took his hand from his mouth.

"You'll make it to 17. You're going to pull through and we can have a big party. Anton quit smoking last week but he's been hoarding the ciggies. We can trade them for pigeon at Caiger, and Christmas lights and some big fuck-off boom box you can play Guns 'n Roses on. It'll be great, you'll see."

"You almost make it sound worth celebrating."

“It is. Oh Gabby, it is. We might give you a hard time but we all like you really.”

He coughed again. “Thanks Cat! I’ll look forward to it.”

Another fit of coughing took him, his body shaking. He was taking big gasping breaths. Dr. Kent’s medical notes said her lungs had failed first. I found a bag valve mask and started ventilating. He lay silent under the mask for a bit, his eyes flickering open occasionally. He continued to cough and I had to stop the ventilation and hold him up as his body was wracked and shaken and he brought up blood and goodness knows what onto the sheets. He clung to me after one such effort.

“Sorry about the mess.”

“No problem. You’ll be fine,” I whispered. “You just have to get through this and then you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah! Keep telling me that. Oh God, Cat! I feel fucking awful.”

I hugged him. Then he sank back onto the bed and I reached for the ventilator once more.

The scientists in this underground lab had kept their colleague alive for almost four weeks as her organs had failed one by one. It sounded unpleasant. I tried to tell myself that Gabby was lucky that I had neither the skills nor the equipment to do the same. I wasn’t convinced.

“Hang on in there,” I whispered.

He smiled wanly and then closed his eyes.

He drifted in and out of consciousness, surfacing a little occasionally to complain in a ragged whisper about music I hadn’t heard, or rant about the evils of The Man or money or Necrotech or all three at once. Occasionally he mumbled about a family I didn’t know and had never inquired after.

Then his eyes opened and fixed me with a penetrating gaze. “Mum!”

I grasped his hand instinctively, but he blinked and disappointment flashed across his face.

“Sorry Cat,” he whispered.

“Gabby! It’s OK.” I realised tears were starting to run down my cheeks.

“Don’t cry, Cat. It was a pretty shitty life anyway. Not got... much... to look forward to.”

“No, Gabby. There’s always hope. We’ll get out of Malton one day. Don’t give up!”

“I don’t think I’m going to make it. Sorry to let you down. I’m glad you were here.” His head fell back and his eyes closed. The fingers grasping my hand slowly fell away.

“No, Gabs! You’re doing fine, just a little longer.” I pressed fingers to his wrist, searching for a pulse. There was nothing to be found. “Please, just a little longer,” I begged, but he didn’t respond.

I tried a desperate improvised CPR, probably doing more harm than good. Slowly, his body became cold and stiff beneath my palms.

“Gabby, please, don’t die.” But there was nothing. He had already gone.

I lifted my hands away from his chest and looked at the still body. Only my sobs disturbed the silence.

It was 1.05am on the 17th May. Gabriel Mallows was just 17.

I smoothed the untidy brown hair away from his face and wondered whether to leave him where he was, put him in the freezer, or somehow try to drag the body back to the DHPD. It was such a stupid, stupid waste of life. But then all of Malton was a stupid, stupid waste.

Then his eyes flicked open and fixed me with a cold, dead stare. My hand stilled on the cool skin of his forehead. A low groan issued through his lips.

“Mrh?”

So I cooked up a needle and stuck it in him. Twenty minutes later he was revived, right as rain and I was incandescent with fury.

It wasn’t hard to work out what had happened. The ‘cure’ had cured only the mutated form of the zombie virus. The underlying original infection, which responded to the revivification serum, had continued chugging around his system. So when the cure finally killed him, the original infection simply kicked in and raised him as a zombie.

“This is all your fault,” I shouted over the balcony rail as he abseiled down a rope to the floor below in order to collect Slasher. “Coming down here was a stupid idea. Anything could have happened! We could both have died, or become super-zombies. What if one of us had gone back up the hole and carried the infection with us?”

“I just had a near-death experience. I could use a little fucking sympathy here,” he retorted. There was a clatter and a curse. I deduced he had reached the floor.

“You don’t deserve any sympathy. You are disorganised, reckless, puerile, adolescent and sexist.” I shouted down.

“And you’re obstructive, hyper-critical and scared of responsibility. Ah ha! Found it! If you don’t like the way I run the squad then you should have stepped up.”

“Bastard! Stupid, fucking, bastard!”

“I’m tying your shotgun onto the rope. Haul it up.”

I did so with bad grace, still seething quietly.

“Did you check the zombies?” I asked as he emerged back over the railing.

“Yes, I checked the zombies. Dead as fucking door nails. I told you.”

“You just made a lucky guess. I can’t believe how close we came to dying, really dying.”

“Oh shut up, Cat! I get it. I’m a joke. My life is a farce. Fuck, I died today and even that was a farcical stupid fucking mess. I’m stuck in this shitty town, with a bunch of people who tolerate me at best. I have no life, no future, I don’t even have a sodding girlfriend because, let me tell you, picking up women in a zombie fucking apocalypse isn’t easy. To top it all, it’s my sodding birthday so just, for once in your life, quit complaining about how much you hate working for me.”

He looked terribly vulnerable all of a sudden, like he had on the bed while he lay dying. I suddenly burst into tears.

“Oh God! Cat. Don’t cry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shout at you.” He took a step towards me and then stopped waving his hands vaguely, almost, but not quite, daring to touch.

“I thought you were going to die!” I sobbed.

“Shit! Cat! It’s all right. I didn’t die. I thought I was going to die too.” He hugged me rather awkwardly as if I might explode any moment which, given how unreasonably I was behaving, was probably a fair assessment.

“I’m sorry,” I sniffed a bit. “I didn’t mean all those horrible things I said. You’re not a joke.”

“Well they were mostly right.” I felt him shrug. “I am puerile, adolescent, disorganised and.. what else did you say? I’ve forgotten.”

“Sexist.”

“Yeah, that too, silly wimmez. Have you stopped crying yet? You’re getting my shirt wet. I wouldn’t want to take it off. You probably couldn’t control yourself.”

I laughed and thumped his chest. “In your dreams, sunshine. I’m old enough to be your mother.”

“But you’re not and anyway, maybe I like the sexy mum thing.”

“Waaay too much information Gabby.”

He grinned. “We good?” he asked.

“Yes, we’re good.”

“Cool! Because I don’t know about you but I want to get out of this shit hole and get you to organise me a birthday party.”

Chapter 6

Stockholm Syndrome

An Urban Dead Short Story

Part 1

The Escape.

Such a truly stupid idea and yet the rumour caught on like wild-fire; there was going to be an evacuation, the trains would leave from Ellicott Place Railway Station in Owsleybank, they would leave on June 1st, if you weren't there you would be left behind. It didn't help that we pointed out, time and again, that no one would organise an evacuation like this, that no one would let the news be spread by word of mouth alone, and why one particular railway station? and one particular date? The number of people camping out, in and around Ellicott Place swelled. Simply shipping in the water they consumed was a logistical nightmare. The Dunell Hills Police Department was internally divided. These people couldn't die, so we could just leave them to it, on the other hand there were *families* there, people from the 'Green' suburbs where zombie activity was limited to the odd horde sweeping through. Even if they couldn't really die permanently, they could die of thirst and the children did cry with hunger and it was hard to simply turn your back.

And then of course the hordes came and the death cultists and the random murderers, because the rumours were not confined to the survivor population. First it was the odd death, opportunistic murders, then the Philosophe Knights arrived in their blank white face masks, proclaiming their purge of the uneducated and simple-minded. They were followed by Lord Curton's Gentleman's Hunting

Club, killing in the name of the aristocratic right to hunt. On their heels came the hordes; the Militant Order of Barhah and the Ridleybank Resistance Front with feral zombies trailing in their wake. It was carnage. I had never seen anything like it and that is saying a lot for Malton. Ellicott Railway Station was littered with bodies, they piled up high before the victims had a chance to stand and move away. Zombies continually clawed their way out of the piles of bodies and onto the station platforms, swelling the ranks of the undead. We simply could not brew revivification serum fast enough and our labs and safehouses were broken into ever more frequently. The ammunition ran out and, in the end, Brass sounded the retreat. Since the rest of Malton was, presumably, currently empty of zombies, we would move out, restock, lick our wounds and then return.

I broke my leg in the scramble to retreat as the final barricades came down and the Ridleybank Resistance Front roared their triumph to the summer skies, I fell through the damaged floor in a second story room and my leg fractured beneath me. So I was left behind. The harsh reality is that around here the dead can walk. They can certainly walk a lot faster than a member of the living with a broken leg. Either I'd make it out alive or I'd make it out dead. If the DHPD had waited, I'd have slowed them up and more would have died, more precious syringes full of serum would have been wasted.

Thus it was I found myself alone, in the ruins of Dunell Hills, as dawn approached, hobbling along on a makeshift crutch with my leg in a splint.

I ended up in Club Meade, the social hub of the suburb in those rare quiet moments when the hordes were elsewhere. It was ruined. The bar was broken. The many bottles that had once held an impressive range of vodka and tequila cracked and ground under foot. Broken chairs and tables littered the dance floor. I groped through the dark. Club Meade's windows had been boarded up long ago, before the zombies even, long before the rise of the RRF, the Ridleybank Resistance Front, who had invaded the suburb lured by the promise of easy meat at Ellicott Place. I could hardly see a thing but I could hear shuffles and groans. There were zombies in here, but if I found somewhere out of the way, wedged between an upturned table and the wall, perhaps. I might get lucky and remain unobserved until it was comparatively safe to walk the streets again.

That was the plan anyway.

I woke up from an uncomfortable sleep to find a man sitting next to me. A hurricane lamp had been placed on a righted chair and that allowed me to see him. He had greying hair which had maybe once been brown and a lined and weathered face. He wasn't young, but he wasn't old either. Like everyone in Malton he was lean and fit and he inhabited his body with the ease and confidence of a man who

had grown easy with his own physicality. He sat calmly watching me, a pistol resting lightly across his knees.

I raised my head. In the half-light I could see the club doors standing open but no zombies were flooding in. This couldn't be good.

"Hello," he said. His accent was a gentle lilt, the faintest hint of Scottish in his tones.

"Hello," I responded cautiously and sat up, reaching for my crutch. It wasn't much of a weapon to use against a pistol, but it was better than nothing and had the benefit that he might let me pick it up.

No such luck. He cocked the pistol and pointed it at me. "Leave it where it is," he said.

I shrugged. "What do you want?"

"A chat."

"What about?"

"Do you always respond with questions?"

I shrugged again. "Not many other options available to me at the moment. I've got a bust leg and you're going to have your pals come and eat me soon."

"Pals?"

I looked at the open door and the glowing hurricane lamp. "A light in a building, with the doors open, and the RRF on the prowl?"

He smiled. "The intelligence said you were bright."

I think I may have rolled my eyes. There's something about the use of the word intelligence, and its implications of spies and conspiracies which I find inherently funny. As if we weren't all simply struggling to survive. That said, news in Malton travels slowly and unreliably, I'm not unaware that facts that would be common knowledge elsewhere have a value in Malton. It's just I wouldn't dignify them with the name intelligence.

"I'm Mark Wright." He said it like it should mean something but I've never been good at keeping up with the politics of Malton, even now when it could mean life or death. Or maybe even less now when there is no death - why waste the brain cycles keeping track of every two-bit would-be dictator round here?

He sighed. "Lord Moloch? I'm the leader of Gore Corps, I assume you've heard of them."

I had. They're the human wing of the RRF. They were as dedicated as the zombies to the elimination of the living and the Gore Corps could climb up drain pipes and squeeze in through windows, which the zombies could not. They also had guns where the zombies only had teeth and claws. If anything they were more feared than the zombies were, which made it even more surprising that I was still

alive. I'd also heard of Lord Moloch and the rumours weren't pretty. Mind you no one had mentioned how good-looking he was.

"Are you going to kill me then?" I asked.

"Not just now."

I considered that. In fact I mostly considered provoking him into killing me anyway. It had worked for me before and I didn't suppose he really had my best interests at heart. It was really a question of whether I was interested in hearing what he had to say and whether he was likely to get to the point any time soon.

"We're going to talk then," I said in the end.

"But not here." He tucked his pistol into a holster at his hip. He had a thigh strap.

I gestured at my splinted leg. "I'm not going anywhere."

He looked down at it dispassionately. "You'll manage with help."

He flashed me a smile and then blew a sharp whistle through his fingers. Two men hurried in and he walked over to them. I took the time to make a quick inventory of my assets. This revealed that someone had been through my pockets as I slept and removed pretty much everything. Someone was very good. I'm not a heavy sleeper at the best of times, and sleeping under a table in a ruined, zombie-infested pub with a broken leg, doesn't constitute the best of times. Mark Wright handed over his pistol to one of the men and then walked back towards me, holding out a hand.

"You'll have to lean on me," he said.

I stared stubbornly at the hand, but refused to take it.

"It's that or I'll have one of the zombies carry you in a fireman's lift. With your leg, I don't suppose that will be comfortable."

He had a point. Reluctantly I took his hand. His grasp was firm and dry. He pulled me to my feet and steadied me, one arm about my waist.

"You could let me use my crutch," I pointed out.

"I couldn't let you get hold of a lethal weapon."

"Why not? Even assuming I could brain you to death with it, I'm not going anywhere fast and you'll be up again in minutes, no doubt."

"Syringes are difficult to come by."

That gave something to think about, although it made sense. Making syringes required power and the kind of lab machinery you only got in Necrotech buildings. From everything I'd heard, Gore Corps was small, probably too small to hold such a building and prevent anyone else around making use of the facilities as well. The RRF probably didn't much like other people getting hold of syringes, so that no doubt meant that the Gore Corp had to watch their supplies.

“There, that’s not so bad is it?” he asked as we hobbled towards the door.

I grunted. The leg was pretty painful.

“The leg hurting?” he asked.

“What do you think?” I snapped.

“I’d offer you morphine if I thought you’d accept it.”

I shook my head. “I’ll manage.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say. I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

“So where are we going?” I asked moved out into the street.

I was leaning on him more than I’d have liked, but the leg really wasn’t taking any weight. He smelled clean, which is unusual in Malton.

“East,” he said.

East we went, an eerie procession. Zombies crowded in on either side of us. I didn’t flinch. I had become used to the horror of the walking dead long ago. I even had a certain sympathy with those who wished to remain in that state. But the alliance with the living had a certain freakish quality to it. Those parts of me that relished death, revolted at that thought of letting the living walk among you unmolested.

If I’d been in that horde I’d have ripped the throats out of the pair of us.

Part 2

Mark was as good as his word and the pace we kept was slow. He didn’t talk much. The only sounds accompanying us were the faint groans of the undead. Even so I tired rapidly, clearly sooner than he had planned for, and we struggled for the last hour or two with Mark murmuring encouragement to me as we went.

Eventually we stopped at Somerville Cinema in Lukinswood. I was tired and my leg was painful. Zombies don’t get tired. They could have continued travelling into the night but Mark decided I didn’t have to be carried and would be allowed to rest. I sat down amid the remains of the seating. Piles of hard cushions surrounded me, their stuffing ripped out and spread around the empty auditorium.

I didn’t think Mark was going to do anything much to me. As far as I could make out I was a hostage, which did mean the most sensible thing I could probably do was throw myself out of the nearest window, but the walk had tired me out. I would have to get past the men and zombies in the room and up some stairs if I could find them and, in my condition, I had the the sense to see that wasn’t going to happen.

“I had better check those dressings on your leg,” he said as he lowered me to the cushions. “I don’t like the smell of them.”

He was right, there was a faint but distinct smell which probably meant an infection of some sort.

I winced as Mark removed the bandages. It was a nasty jagged cut. I had fallen on glass and was probably lucky not to have bled to death in short order. Or possibly I was unlucky. If I’d been dead, I wouldn’t be in this mess.

“You sure you don’t want some morphine?” he asked. “You need to get some rest and I can see you’re in pain.”

“No thank you.” Least I could do was keep a clear head, if I had the option.

“Thought you might say that. Don’t worry the worst will be over soon but brace yourself, this is going to hurt.”

I gasped as what was clearly disinfectant was splashed on my leg. Then Mark produced clean dressings and began to bind it up again.

“Don’t you have some kind of lackey who can do this?”

His gaze was level and thoughtful. “Maybe, but I’d rather do it myself.”

Oh.

His hands were firm but gentle. I’d had worse people bandage me up; less competent ones anyway. The leg felt firmer once he’d finished. I tried standing, holding onto his arm, and putting my weight on it. It was still pretty painful but in the right circumstances it might get me to a window. I craned my neck, looking around the cinema, counting the men and the zombies. As I was doing this Mark suddenly hit me, open-handed, across the face.

“What was that for!” I protested.

He hit me again. “That one was for talking back. The first was for thinking about running away. Don’t try it. I admire the spirit but I’m afraid I have a job to do and that takes precedence.”

I stared at him, shaken. While I had understood that I was a hostage, I hadn’t factored in this kind of treatment.

He regarded me a moment and then smiled gently and squeezed my shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll look after you. Just don’t make my life difficult, OK?”

I nodded and he helped me sit down again.

“You wouldn’t make it in your state anyway,” he pointed out.

“Can’t blame a girl for trying,” I pointed out.

He laughed quietly and shook his head. “Maybe not, can’t blame me for stopping you either though.”

The laughter was infectious and I found myself smiling. The slaps already seemed to be fading into insignificance. I shook my head. “Well that’s me done

for tonight. I won't be trying to escape again until the morning."

"I'll tell the guards to take it easy in that case." He raised a hand to wave and then he left.

A few minutes later another man walked over with a bowl. Steam rose from it, warm and richly flavoured. The man placed the bowl a short way from me and then retreated to sit on an upturned box. He pulled out a pistol. As I watched he began to methodically strip it down and clean it.

I eyed the soup doubtfully.

"It's not poisoned," the man said after a minute or two. "We've got quicker ways of killing you."

"Could be drugged."

"Could be," he agreed and turned his attention back to the gun.

I ate the soup. I didn't think I had a lot of choice.

"So you're doing as Mark wants?" he asked suddenly, while I was eating.

I glanced up at him and shrugged. I couldn't see much reason to respond either way. He stared back at me thoughtfully.

"Have you heard of Stockholm Syndrome?"

"Yes," I'd heard of it. The limit of my knowledge was the name Patty Hearst and something about people falling in love with their kidnapers.

"You know how it works?"

"What's your name?" I countered. That gave me time to consider whether I wanted to answer his question.

"Jayden Nichols."

Jayden Nichols was tall and lean. His skin was black and his head was bald. He wore a clean shirt and grey trousers, they almost looked as though they might be a part of a suit. I felt grubby, and unwashed and unsophisticated.

"Do you know how Stockholm Syndrome works?" he repeated.

"What is this? Good cop and bad cop?"

"Possibly. Are you going to answer the question?"

"No, I don't know how it works."

"Well I only know what Mark has told me. He's the man with the degree in Psychology. The kidnapper makes small acts of kindness. He gives the hostage hope that the situation can be negotiated as long as the kidnapper is kept happy. He alternates that with, sometimes almost arbitrary, threats and acts of violence. The victim must invest more and more mental effort into predicting what will please and what will anger the kidnapper. To do so successfully, they need to identify with the kidnapper. Once they identify with him strongly enough, they

stop trying to please him simply as a means to an end, a way to survive and escape their situation, but as an end in itself.”

I thought briefly about the soup I was eating and then decided to play dumb. “What’s this got to do with me?”

“Mark wants a mole in the DHPD.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I have my reasons.”

“What if I tell on you?”

“I guess, in that case, there will be some random acts of violence from me as well.”

I finished my soup in silence. At least I now knew they were playing mind games, though precisely who was playing games with whom was a little obscure. However if Mark Wright really was a psychologist then he definitely had the upper hand here.

I slept fitfully, aware of the groans of the dead around me.

Part 3

Buttery Row school stood in the heart of Ridleybank. Wrought iron railings surrounded a tarmaced playground. Heavy panelled wooden doors hung off their hinges. We reached it in the late afternoon. The RRF and the Gore Corp had set a fast pace and my breath was coming in ragged gasps once we arrived. My leg hurt terribly and I felt hot. I had a nasty feeling the infection in the wound was spreading.

“Come on, Purple Cat!” said Mark. “Not far now.”

“Where are we going?”

“Caretaker’s flat on the top floor.”

“Oh joy!”

“You’ll make it! Brave heart!”

Somehow we got up the three flights of stairs, although I had to cling onto Mark’s waist and he almost carried me for the final stretch. By now I was familiar with the shape of his body and the strength of his arms. I resisted the temptation to rest against him. The flat itself was dim and smelled of dust and wood smoke. Heavy planks had been nailed over the windows, most of the doors were missing, but in the faint glow of Mark’s hurricane lamp I could see that there was furniture there. Furniture that was still intact.

Mark set the lamp down on the table. "Lie on the bed!" I must have stiffened in his arms because he said. "I want to look at that wound on your leg again."

Cautiously I lay down on the bed. There was a scratchy blanket covering it, but underneath I could feel a real mattress. Involuntarily I closed my eyes, but once they were closed the temptation was to stay like that.

"Tell me about the DHPD." The question came out of nowhere just as he finished securing the dressing.

"Tell me about the RRF," I countered.

I was suddenly hauled upright and off the bed, my face held inches from his own.

"This is not a game," he snarled. "I've told you once already. Do not talk back."

I stared at him speechless for a moment.

"Well?" he demanded.

"What makes you think I'm going to tell you anything?"

He laughed harshly at that and pushed me backwards so I stumbled and fell back on the bed again.

"Either you tell me or I kill you. Then, when you wake up as a zombie, I'll have you put in a cage and used for target practice and we'll go on shooting you again and again until your soul leaves your body. In between times we might revive you occasionally and ask a few questions. Then we'll kill you once more. Make no mistake, you are ours now."

Then he turned on his heel and left the room. The door slammed shut behind him.

I almost asked myself 'what happened there?' but Jayden's little pep talk made it pretty clear what happened there. Mark was demonstrated that talking back wasn't encouraged. However his elaborate threat did reveal a flaw in the plan. He couldn't exactly threaten to kill me. I'd been killed enough times in the past few years that it wasn't a particularly scary prospect. I hoped that would help me resist whatever it was he was doing. On the other hand I had jumped when he shouted at me and was left feeling shocked and a little scared and glad that he hadn't hit me again. Some things you just react to anyway, no matter what the situation.

"How are you doing?"

I opened my eyes. It was Jayden again. It disturbed me that I hadn't heard him come in.

"As well as can be expected. How are you doing?"

He grinned at that. "Pretty much the same. Mark says you're to take these. He wants to keep your temperature down."

He handed me some pills and a cup of water.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Paracetamol, we're out of anti-biotics. This is just temperature control."

I stared at them suspiciously.

Jayden sighed. "If you don't take them, Mark says he'll come back in here and make you."

I wasn't up to that tonight, so I took the pills and washed them down with the water.

"You wouldn't have told me what Mark was up to if you didn't want it to fail, right?" I observed.

"You're making a lot of assumptions there."

"I've got nothing else to go on." Broadly speaking, though, either he was working against the Gore Corp or he and Mark were working together to some obscure end out of a psychology text book. I was simply hoping it was the former because if the latter was true I was pretty much doomed.

He shrugged.

"Rather than warning me, why not help me escape?"

"On the assumption I want Mark to fail."

"On that assumption yes. Doesn't have to be obvious. Let me find a gun somewhere or even just an open window. I can handle the rest."

"No."

"I could tell Mark that you warned me. Might even convince him I was coming round to his way of thinking which would work in my favour."

He regarded me levelly. "I would rather you didn't do that."

"I would rather escape than sit around here hoping whatever psychological tricks Mark is playing won't work."

He turned his back on me and walked out.

"Right, let's try talking again."

This time everything had been set up formally. I'd woken with a raging temperature, feeling sick as a dog, but they'd dosed me up with more Paracetamol. I still felt miserable, but I no longer simply wanted to curl up and die. A rough

wooden table had been placed in the centre of the room. Mark Wright sat on one side and I sat on the other.

“My name is Kate Clark. DHPD Officer. Badge number 2702.”

“Name and number? Cute!” He didn’t look amused.

Truth to tell I didn’t have a clue what I was doing. Getting captured and being questioned wasn’t really something we’d ever considered. If Jayden was right and the questioning wasn’t actually the point, I thought it probably didn’t really matter what I said anyway. The point was just to avoid getting into the habit of doing what was asked.

“Who is the leader of the DHPD?” Mark asked.

I could have said it wasn’t a secret. I could have handed out Bob’s name. But the principle of the thing was more important than any intrinsic value in the information.

“My name is Kate Clark. DHPD Officer. Badge number 2702.” I repeated.

He sighed in an exaggerated fashion. “It looks like I am going to have to ask more forcefully.”

He nodded and the goons standing either side of me grabbed my arms, placing my hands flat on the table. I struggled, but there were two of them and a both were bigger and stronger than I was.

Mark Wright lifted a heavy iron bar. I don’t know why I didn’t speak then and there, except that I was caught in a mixture of horrified fascination and disbelief.

My hand were pressed flat on the top of the table, fingers outstretched. He slammed the iron bar down right across the backs of my knuckles. Pain exploded through both hands even as the blood flowed onto the table.

Part 4

It’s true what they say about forgetting pain. I recall vividly that it hurt, but the memory of the pain itself, is long gone.

Mark pressed the end of the iron bar under my chin, tilting my head back even as I strained to curl up into a small ball around my damaged hands.

“Who is the leader of the DHPD?”

I answered his questions. There weren’t that many. The point, of course, was that I answered them, not that Mark Wright learned any useful information.

“That wasn’t so hard was it?” he asked afterwards as he splinted and bound my fingers with those gentle hands of his.

“I hate you,” I said through the tears. There had been a lot of tears and a lot of screaming. Even after I started talking, they hadn’t been gentle.

He just tutted quietly and finished what he was doing.

“Now,” he said. “because you’ve been a good girl we’ve got something for you to eat.”

Stew was brought in. It smelled good. There was meat in there somewhere. There was obviously something to be said for the luxury of cooking uninterrupted by zombie incursions. A bowl and spoon were placed in front of me. I tried to pick up the spoon but, with my hands splinted the way they were, it was impossible. Mark sat opposite me patiently. I sniffled a bit but I was fighting to regain some self control so in the end I just placed both my hands in my lap and sat staring right back at him.

“Would you like me to help?” he asked.

I really didn’t want to be fed by him, on the other hand, the hungrier I got the less likely I was to be of any use to anyone. I nodded slowly.

“Good girl,” he said approvingly.

Then I sat there and let him spoon feed me like a baby.

The stew was good. Real food, actually cooked, something that required space and time.

“What did you do before the zombie outbreak?” he asked as he fed me.

“Is this more interrogation?”

“No, I’m just asking.” He smiled at me. I would have said it was a kind smile except somehow I doubt it.

“Does it matter what I did before the outbreak?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to know more about you.”

“I thought you had intelligence.”

He laughed. “It’s not much. Kate Clark, sister of Andrew ‘Bulldog’ Clark. Member of the DHPD for at least four years. Rumoured to be bright but difficult.”

“I’m not that difficult,” I said defensively.

“I’m not saying difficult is a bad thing. I like bright but difficult, so long as you respect boundaries.” He smiled again. It was definitely a nice smile.

“What did you do before the outbreak?” I asked, since we were making conversation.

“Criminal psychiatrist, I worked in police profiling.”

“So why are you working with Gore Corps now?”

“Look about you. Have you got this kind of stability in Dunell Hills? We’re perfectly safe in here. The zombies aren’t going to break in.”

“It’s all right for you, but not for all the regular people you kill.”

“They can always join up. We’re not that picky. You just have to accept that it is the zombies who are in charge, not the humans.”

I closed my eyes. There was something wrong with the argument, but I was too tired to work it out and there was that invitingly comfy bed to collapse into.

“Your hair needs a brush,” Mark remarked. He tucked some behind my ears. It had only ever been held up in a scraggy pony tail anyway. At some point the band had come loose.

“It’ll be OK. I’ll put it back up in a pony tail,” I mumbled and cast about for the band.

“Not with those hands you won’t.”

Mark fished a comb out of a breast pocket and walked round behind me. Very gently he combed out my hair, teasing out several days worth of tangles. The soft strokes were relaxing and my head began to nod. I also felt hot, the Paracaetamol was probably wearing off.

“Nichols!” Mark summoned his lieutenant. “Take her to the bathroom and then let her sleep.”

Jayden took my arm and dragged me to my feet. I let him lead me down the narrow corridor to the toilet at the end.

“There’s a gun on top of the cistern,” he whispered in my ear as he pushed me through the door.

Normally they left the door open, presumably to make sure I didn’t try to strangle myself with the toilet paper or something. This time Jayden gave it a slight push so it swung to, obscuring me from his sight. All very well but I had both hands trussed up like a pair of mittens. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes, trying to will up the energy to act and to convince myself that the risk was worth the potential consequences.

I was sick, dog-tired, and my hands and legs were bust. All I wanted to do was sleep quietly, but I couldn’t be sure the gun would still be there next time I was here. I forced myself to open my eyes. With my teeth I managed to remove the splint from my right hand and even managed to wiggle my fingers a little without screaming. They were bruised and swollen but they appeared to be semi-functional. I groped about on top of the cistern until I found the gun, a small handgun with a single clip. With difficulty I managed to get one of my fingers between the trigger and guard and just about hold the grip. I walked round the door, raised the gun and shot Jayden through the head. I thought it would probably help his story later. The recoil made me gasp in pain.

Then I headed for the stairs.

There was a guard on the front door. I used my second shot putting him down.

One shot to the back around chest height. I didn't trust myself to make another head shot, especially not in a hurry and from a distance. He was still cursing and bleeding as I stepped over him and into the crowd of zombies. I felt them turn and stare at me.

I told myself that most of them were probably dormant. It was just one or two who were moving, most weren't. I just had to move fast. Which isn't so easy with a broken leg. I limped through the crowd and I felt them wake and their interest grow like a ripple on a pond. There was absolutely no way I was getting very far and nothing I could do about it with only 8 shots left in the gun. I looked around for somewhere a little concealed. I spotted the burned out remains of a smart car. I shoved my way into the front seat, clambering awkwardly through the half open door. Once inside, I lay flat, rammed the gun up underneath my chin and pulled the trigger.

It takes longest to recover from a bullet in the brain than any other part of the body, but anywhere else and it could have taken me hours to bleed to death. As it was cognition returned slowly and the voices of the horde called to me. I lay where I was for a while, listening to their gentle song. Then I sat up and stumbled out into the crowd, happy to be swept up among the shuffling feet. I was dimly aware of shouting and I vaguely searched around for the harmanz and the brainz. Someone was up in front of me, shotgun in hand, shouting something incomprehensible and the idea formed itself that I should maybe be heading in the other direction and away from the comfort of the horde. Then there was a prick at the back of my neck and a searing white light of pain in my mind.

Part 5

When I woke up I was upright, leaning against a wall with my arms stretched outwards. I tried to move them in the first few moments of consciousness and couldn't. I was restrained at the wrists. I kept my eyes closed and did a stock take. My leg and hands were healed, though how long that was going to last was anyone's guess. The infection was presumably cleared up too, I certainly didn't have the slightly muzzy, detached sensation of a low temperature. The gun, presumably, was long gone. It had not been the most successful escape attempt in the world, but I had judged speed to be of the essence and the situation had been against me. However, if I could avoid getting any more limbs broken I was up on points... probably.

Then someone threw a bucket of cold water over me, forcing me to splutter

and open my eyes. Mark Wright was standing in front of me, two thugs either side of him. Jayden was nowhere to be seen. Mark followed up the water with a slap across the face, open-handed. I suppose I should be grateful for small mercies.

“You have made me extremely angry,” he said. He didn’t shout but there was undisguised menace in the words.

Then he hit me again. This time his hand was curled into a fist and I felt blood in my mouth and realised I had split a lip.

The beating went on for a while. He didn’t break any bones, but I added a black eye to the split lip and I can’t say I was optimistic about my internal organs. Then he walked out, leaving me wet, cold, bloody and chained to the wall to contemplate my crimes.

So, it would fair to say at this point that I felt pretty sorry for myself. I couldn’t even wipe the tears away nor, when my nose inevitably began to run as well, could I wipe that. It wasn’t the worst of my situation but it’s the detail I particularly recall at this distance, standing alone in the cold with the snot running down my face.

Eventually, I don’t know how long I’d been left there, but some time later, Mark came back in. He had a small bowl of water and he proceeded to clean my face wiping away the mixture of blood and snot and tears, as well as the grime of Malton.

“You really were a very bad girl,” he said reprovingly as he cleaned me up.

“I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted.” He smiled and placed a finger under my chin, lifting my face up towards him.

I think I must have stiffened because he paused and then leaned in close. His face touched mine and his lips whispered in my ear.

“You’re worried about what happens next, aren’t you?”

I closed my eyes. How to find my way out of this one? or whether even to bother. It might be easier at this point just to submit, at least it wouldn’t involve any more pain.

“A little,” I said.

He stepped forwards, so now his whole body was pressed against mine. I was sandwiched between him and the wall. There was a dull ache everywhere from the beating but at the same time I felt my body reacting to his presence because, heaven help me, it had been a long time. I think I whimpered though I’m not sure if it was from fear or desire or a mixture of both.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to rape you. If we fuck, it’ll be because you asked for it.”

He kissed me gently on the lips and I felt his breath ghosting across my skin. He lingered like that for a moment, maybe waiting for me to give some sign of reciprocation and believe me I was close to it. Confused thoughts about how sleeping with him might be a situation I could turn to my advantage, or at least be used as a let out from any beatings or further violence, but I hadn't quite reached breaking point.

Then he stepped back. My hands were released from the chains and I staggered. Cramping pains shot through my arms, followed by intense pins and needles in my wrists and fingers. Mark picked me up bodily and carried me to the bed. He removed my shoes, tucked me in, and stroked my hair away from my face.

"Sweet dreams," he said. He turned out the light, and left the room.

I think I was asleep before he got down the stairs. The bed was blissfully comfortable and I was too tired to keep myself awake even with worrying.

When I woke up Mark was sitting at the foot of the bed reading a book. "Hello sleepy head," he said as I stirred.

"What time is it?"

"Early evening, you've been asleep almost a whole day."

I sat up and looked around. Everything was much the same.

"Do you want some breakfast?" asked Mark.

"Yes, please."

He stood up and left the room, locking the door behind him.

Seconds later the door was unlocked. A woman came in. She was tiny, possibly smaller than I am, and dressed in a tail coat with a scarlet waistcoat. Her hair was swept back in long dreadlocks with a top hat somehow perched on top. Her face was painted black with a white skull laid over the top. She moved with the confident grace of authority as she crossed the room and sat down in a chair by the table. Either side of her walked two zombies and they stationed themselves behind her.

I heard the sound of feet running up the stairs and Mark appeared in the doorway. "What is going on?" he demanded.

"Out!" she said. Her accent was cut-glass. Centuries of giving orders and having them obeyed were personified in that word.

"Marinette," he began.

"Out!" she repeated more forcefully and her eyes blazed. Mark scowled and retreated. I was suddenly scared. I wanted his presence there.

"Sit," she said, gesturing to the chair opposite her.

I sat.

“We felt your thoughts yesterday,” she started.

“You felt my zombie thoughts. They’re hardly coherent.”

She leaned forward. “They understand.”

“All zombies think like that.”

“Eventually, but most of you meat-bags, it’s just fear and horror and a desire to return to life.”

“Most people would say that’s natural.”

She smiled slowly. “I don’t know about most. There are a lot of zombies in this town. I like to think that some people are just slower to catch on than others. But you do understand so I’m asking, why don’t you join us? Why do you persist in being alive?”

“When you’re dead there is nothing, only brains. What will you do when everyone is a zombie? There will be nothing.”

“When you’re alive you feel pain, you have to eat to survive. You get sick. Puke and bile and shit are endlessly coming out of your body. It’s horrible and degrading and disgusting and entirely unnecessary. Join us.”

“Isn’t that the point of this whole little game? I must say this is the first time I’ve seen the good cop dress as a skeleton.”

“I’m Marinette Bwa Chech, Voodoo Loa, I free my people from bondage. I am fierce and unforgiving and my enemies tremble at my approach. But I can free you, if you will let me.”

I glanced at her hands which were as pinky white as my own and wondered where she had picked up all the Voodoo business.

“Who are you really?”

“Does it matter? I’m now Marinette, the RRF Papa.”

“Mama surely?”

“I prefer Papa. Join us.” She drew out the syllables of the words, like a call.

I shook my head.

“It would take you out of the hands of the Gore Corps,” she said.

Now that was both attractive and frightening. It would save me from the violence, the fear that any moment I might be beaten or my limbs might be broken. More than that it would take me to a state where it wouldn’t actually matter if they did. The zombies of the RRF were more powerful than the Gore Corps. I’d seen that in the powerplay a moment before. They could protect me from Mark Wright where others couldn’t.

On the other hand, I knew where I was with the Gore Corps and Mark Wright and Mark would certainly not be happy at all if I went with the RRF. He had other plans. He wanted to fuck me as soon as I asked for it and my mind was already

wandering down byways. What, exactly, might he consider to be 'asking for it' and did I actually want to ask for it or not. I wanted to find out and I wouldn't if I was dead.

Something must have shown on my face. "I see," she said. "Well, if you change your mind, there's a place for you in the RRF."

Then she nodded at the zombies either side of her. One of them groaned loudly stretching its mouth to its teeth and then it lunged towards her throat which was exposed as she tilted back her head. The second simply grabbed hold of her arm and pulled. She made no sound and I sat in shocked silence as the blood and gore splattered across me.

Moments later Mark burst into the room. I felt his arms around me as I was pulled to my feet and dragged away from the scene. In the corridor he held me against the wall, arms still around me.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I nodded.

"They'll be gone in a minute," he said. "Then I'll get the place cleaned up for you. Don't worry. I'll protect you."

I sat in the corridor with Mark. He offered me cigarettes and I hesitated before turning them down. My lungs definitely weren't worth the cost of another beating but cigarettes make me cough and I didn't want to look stupid.

"You're allowed to say 'no'," he said, noticing my hesitation and I shook my head.

"What did Marinette want?" he asked.

"She asked me to join the RRF, as a zombie."

"Something must have impressed her. Normally we let people come to us."

"She felt my thoughts, so she said."

"Well, you are full of surprises. What are you doing in the DHPD if you think enough like a zombie to attract Marinette's attention?"

I laughed. "I'm just a drifter. I washed up in the DHPD."

"Why the loyalty then? Is it your brother?"

I laughed at that. "Have you met my brother?"

"No, I'm told he's even more difficult than you are."

"He's more useful though. He's much surer of his purpose."

"That is a matter of opinion. I think people underestimate you. Not many people would have thought to escape like that yesterday."

"It was a crappy escape attempt."

"A little shambolic maybe, but very few people would have even tried. I admire that. Don't sell yourself short."

I watched him as he sat smoking on the stairs. He looked relaxed and thoughtful.

“Anyway,” I said. “I didn’t escape and I didn’t agree to join the RRF either.”

“No, there’s a lot more to you than meets the eye, Purple Cat. Keep on the right side of me and I think we’ll get along famously.”

It was dark when I got back in the room. They hadn’t left me any lighting, but a pale moon shone outside. Through the bars of the window I could make out the crowd of zombies in the street outside.

Then the drums started. A deep thumping sound that echoed through my body. A slightly off-beat rhythm like the ba-dum of a heart-beat. In fact it was the ba-dum of a heart beat, the faint but distinctive sound of the warm-blooded hiding behind some barricade. Just so much food penned in, waiting to be devoured. I closed my eyes and let the sensation carry me. Down below the zombies groaned.

When I opened my eyes the zombies were all awake, swaying together, driven by the beat of the drums, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum. I wanted to be down there with them and away from the pain and the dirt and the fear.

The heart-beat drumming speeded up and the zombies began to sway and shake more fiercely. The groans were almost coordinated now, an eerie ululation echoing out into Malton’s dark night.

I jumped when the key turned in the lock. Jayden came in. He was carrying a plate of sandwiches. “Mark has sent food,” he said. “He says not to worry about the drums.”

“What are they doing?” I turned back to the window.

“Fucked if I know. One of the early RRF Papa’s made it up. He’d seen too much James Bond, if you ask me and then he found some book on Voodoo in Boniface Library.”

I looked back at the swaying zombies. It made sense of a sorts. Clearly the RRF had bound itself together with a made-up religion and I could see the attraction of borrowing bits from Voodoo to do so.

“Is it a real Voodoo ceremony?” I asked.

“Like I said, fucked if I know. What do you think?”

James Bond and a book from the library, in Malton, North Riding, Yorkshire.
“OK, no.”

The drums beat on.

I heard a falter in the rhythm. Actually I didn’t so much hear the drums falter as hear the disturbance in the crowd. A ripple of silence, a change in the groans. Somewhere the rhythm was being interrupted. I strained to see through the bars. Then I heard the familiar sound of a shotgun and over it all a cry went up.

“Take that you capitalist brain-eating parasites!!”

That could only be one person. I heard more gun shots. There weren't a lot of people out there, but there was definitely more than one. It could have been coincidence, but I suspected that the rescue party had just arrived.

“I need to get out of here.”

“You already tried that remember.”

“It'll work this time. Give me your gun.”

Jayden backed up. “No way! I'm already in the shit house for letting you get the drop on me once.”

“And this time I can run. It'll work I promise.”

“No. You are going to eat that food.”

I grabbed a sandwich and stuffed it into my mouth. No point letting useful calories go to waste. Meanwhile I gestured at him impatiently to give me his gun.

“No. Good night Cat.”

He turned and headed to the door. I didn't give myself time to think, because that would mean thinking about how angry Mark would be. I simply grabbed hold of the nearest chair and brought it down, as hard as I could, on the back of Jayden's head. He collapsed to the floor in a very satisfactory fashion.

I liberated his gun and headed out through the open door. There were guards at the foot of the stair, but they were distracted by the shouts from outside. I came down the staircase firing and both fell to the floor. I tucked the, now empty, handgun into the waistband of my trousers and then grabbed one of the guard's shotguns. Then I was out on the streets, surrounded by the beat of the drums and the crowds of the RRF.

I could feel more than see where the disturbance was in the crowd by the way the zombies were moving. I charged forwards, dodging the bodies of the dead, feeling their attention begin to focus upon me.

I could hear voices. “The horde's moving!”, “Who's that coming towards us?” and then the report of a shotgun blast and the crowd began to thin ahead of me, even as hands grasped my shoulders from behind.

“BD!” I shouted.

“I got you covered. Drop your head!”

I tucked my head down as best I could and heard the roar of BD's shotgun, Black Betty, once more. I pulled free of the grasping hands and struggled forwards towards the two living men that I could see. They were standing behind a wire fence, firing through it into the crowd. I leaped at the fence and adrenaline drove me up the wire and over the top. I'd say BD and Gabby caught me, but it would be more accurate to admit I just sort of fell on them. We were in the yard

of a warehouse. Already zombies were approaching. They had probably got in through an open gate somewhere.

“Is this a rescue?” I asked once I got my breath back. There were three of us, we were surrounded by the RRF. They were all awake.

BD fired a shot into the advancing crowd. “It’s all you’ve got doll.”

“No one else took it seriously when BD said you were captured.” Gabby was frantically reloading Slasher, his big handgun.

There was a route to our right, along the edge of the warehouse and towards a smashed doorway. Out of options, we headed in that direction.

“How did you know I’d been captured?” I asked as I ran.

“I have contacts,” said BD, shortly. He always says that.

We ducked through the door and plunged into darkness.

There was a bang behind me and then a crash. Gabby had tried shutting the door and it had fallen off its hinges.

“Fuck!” he said.

A light flashed out and I realised BD had fixed a torch to the end of his gun. The beam swept over smashed tables and chairs and along a large, solid looking oak bar.

“We get behind that,” said BD. “We can hold there for a bit and there should be a way through to the back.”

We scrambled behind the bar. There was, indeed, a door there. I pushed against it, but it wouldn’t budge. “It’s locked, or barricaded.”

“The fuck?” asked Gabby.

“Gabby concentrate will’ya? Slasher has a better range than Betty. Pick them off as they come in.” BD shouted.

“I am concentrating!” Gabby let off two shots. “See?”

“And the third.”

“There’s another? Oops! sorry! didn’t spot him.”

“BD, can I have some light,” I asked.

The light flashed round on the door.

“Well now I can’t see the fuckers!” Gabby complained.

I could see planks nailed across the doorway. “It’s been barred on this side. Do you have a crowbar?” I asked.

“I need light!” shouted Gabby. Groans floated into the room.

“There’s a toolbox in my backpack Sis. You get it out while we hold off the horde.” BD shrugged his backpack to the floor and turned back to shooting.

I groped in the backpack for the toolbox, unearthing a small armoury in the process. I dumped a pile of pistols and clips on the bar. I had a feeling we were

going to need them. As I piled them up I could see the horde pushing through the door of the bar, illuminated in brief flashes by the beam of BD's torch.

Then there was the loud bang of a shotgun and one of the boarded windows gave way. A click and a hum and the beam of a large spotlight flooded through the the space revealing the inside of the club in all its ruined glory. Smashed wood, bare floor and the walking dead, shambling around the walls as BD and Gabby picked them off.

Instinctively all three of us dropped behind the bar. There was another loud shotgun blast and chips of wood rained down on us. Apparently the Gore Corps had arrived, to back up their zombie partners with light and ammunition.

BD popped up his head, let off a wild shot from Black Betty and then ducked down again, feeding shells rapidly into the chamber.

"Looks like a dozen breathers. Not good odds but not the worst if we move quickly. Cat, carry on working the door!"

I looked down at the bag. Now we had light I could see the toolbox plainly and hauled it out.

"Gabby, I'll cover, you aim!" said BD.

I could hear handgun fire and more chips of wood rained down on us.

"They're shooting!" whispered Gabby.

"Wait until they reload," BD hissed back.

I heard several clicks in quick succession. BD instantly stood up and fired Black Betty. Gabby popped up next to him, sighted down Slasher and started shooting. I seized the opportunity to stand and wedge a crowbar under the edge of the top plank on the door.

"Kate Clark! Freeze where you are!"

Part 6

I recognised the voice of Mark Wright and did indeed freeze. Everything seemed to still around me. I turned to see him standing there, shotgun resting against one shoulder. I was vaguely aware that Gabby and BD had both ducked back down behind the bar.

"Stand absolutely still and I won't shoot." Mark took a step closer. The gun still level. I could see his finger curled about the trigger. "Let go of the crowbar. Put up your hands. Tell your friends it will be better for all of you, if you give up now."

“Yeah, right! So you can feed us to your zombie friends!” shouted Gabby. “Fucking moron,” he muttered quietly.

“Cat, get down,” hissed BD.

“Cat, if you don’t do as you’re told, right now, you will regret it,” said Mark.

A weight suddenly landed on my chest and I found myself lying behind the bar with Gabby sitting on me. There was a loud bang and the wooden plank splintered, exactly where my head had been moments before. The crowbar fell to the floor as the plank fell apart.

“Shit Cat! Snap out of it!” Gabby said.

“They’re going to get round the end of the bar,” muttered BD.

The bar was thick and solid, made of oak. It formed a long L-shape, one end meeting the wall, off to the left of the barricaded door. To the right it was open though. BD scrambled on his belly to the open corner. He edged round at floor level and let off three shots in quick succession. Then he dropped back.

I pushed Gabby off me and grabbed the crowbar again. Two more planks to go. Gabby was pushing bullets into Slasher’s cylinder.

I saw him look up and raise the gun. Following his gaze I realised someone had leaped up onto the end of the bar where it joined the wall, a woman in goth-chick clothing, hair in bunches and a pistol in either hand. Gabby shot her three times and she toppled backwards.

“They’re creeping up on the left,” he shouted, “using the bar as cover.”

Gabby suddenly surged forward. He charged at the end of the bar, rolled over the top close to where it joined the wall and dropped out of sight on the far side. I heard shooting.

The second plank came free as I forced my weight against the crowbar.

“Gabby! Are you all right!” I shouted.

“Yeah! Got them! Now I just need to get the fuck back to you.”

A shotgun shell hit the top of the bar between us. I could see zombies approaching near to where Gabby was hidden.

“Fucking bullets!” complained Gabby. “Go into the fucking cylinder!”

“Where’s he gone?” asked BD, glancing back at us.

“Over the bar. We were being crept up on,” I replied and wedged the end of the crowbar under the last plank.

I pulled at it and then glanced back towards where I’d last seen Gabby. The zombies looked awfully close. I abandoned the crowbar and grabbed two pistols off the top of the oak counter. I emptied both clips in the direction of the zombies and watched them stagger back.

“Who was that?” asked Gabby.

“Me!” I grabbed another pistol. “On five, come back over the bar. One, two...”

Gabby’s head popped up. Unprepared I staggered to my feet and fired the pistol indiscriminately into the crowds of zombies that pressed into the pub’s interior. I could see the odd gun and tried to focus on the living Gore Corps members who carried them.

I heard loud shots above me. I glanced up and saw Gabby walking briskly down the top of the bar. He was firing as he went, using the height and the clear view to pick off the Gore Corps one by one.

A young wiry man jumped up onto the bar behind Gabby, his steel toe-caps ringing out as they contacted with the hardwood surface. Gabby turned and shot him through the eyes, before he even raised his gun. A zombie groped for Gabby’s legs and he kicked it away. Some distance across the room a woman was raising what looked like an automatic. I emptied the remainder of my clip in her direction and watched her fall.

Above me Gabby continued to shoot: five clear shots, one for each bullet in his cylinder then he jumped down off the bar. I ducked and the shooting resumed.

“What happened to counting to five?” I hissed.

“Thought I’d surprise them. They can hear what we’re saying you know!”

“You could have been killed?”

“So? BD has syringes.”

“Cat! Door!” shouted BD. “Gabby, get your butt over here and help out!”

Gabby crawled over to where BD had been keeping up a steady fire from his shotgun. I wasn’t sure how many of the Gore Corps were left in the crowd, but hopefully they were being cautious. Meanwhile zombies shuffled constantly into sight. I pulled at the final plank and it popped free. When I grabbed the door handle, it was still locked.

I picked the last of BD’s handguns off the bar and aimed it at the lock, pulling the trigger. The wood splintered and the lock fell away. I pulled at the handle again and watched in satisfaction as the door heaved open.

“Purple Cat, if you go through that door, I will be very, very angry.” Mark’s voice echoed through the room.

“Like she cares,” shouted BD. I found myself being hustled through the door.

I was facing backwards, still straining behind me to see Mark as Gabby came through the door. I saw Gabby’s silhouette against the light that shone in through the pub’s broken window and behind him, shotgun level at his shoulder, I could see Mark.

Without thinking, I shoved Gabby to one side. But I was too slow. There was a bang and I heard Gabby cry and saw him fall.

I briefly glimpsed Mark once more, his face dark and angry. Then the door banged shut.

“Ah fuck!” cried Gabby.

I groped for him in the dark. “Where are you hit?”

“Arm! I can walk, I think.”

“Then let’s move,” said BD. “Cat help him!”

I grabbed hold of Gabby. I felt the wet blood over my fingers. “He’s bleeding pretty badly.”

“No time! We’ll fix him up in a minute. Now we move.”

Gabby staggered and I dragged his good arm around my shoulders. Then we followed the bobbing light of BD’s torch down a narrow corridor.

We came out into an alleyway at the side of the railway arches that carried the now disused tracks north-south from Cribb Row station to Hubbard Boulevard. There weren’t too many zombies in evidence as we took a sharp right, but the groans of the horde were loud to the south of us. Gabby began to lean heavily on me. I could see the blood now and it was flowing freely.

“I need to see to Gabby,” I hissed.

“Almost there,” said BD.

“Almost where?”

BD looked around. Three zombies were shuffling towards us down the road. He raised his gun and shot each one in turn, until they dropped.

“That was a waste of ammo wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Didn’t want them seeing where we go.”

He headed into an old factory building ahead of us. Once inside BD threaded his way between rows of smashed machinery and into a small back room. I think it had once been an office. BD marched up to a safe set into one wall and started spinning the dial.

“What are you doing?”

The safe swung open. “Quick! Inside! You may need to help Gabby.”

I could see a tunnel behind the safe door. I scrambled in, squirming round in the concealed space. BD had to more or less hoist Gabby in behind me while I pulled at his shoulders.

“I’m feeling a little faint,” muttered Gabby.

“I’m not surprised, the amount of blood you’ve just lost!”

BD scrambled in after us and pulled the safe door shut behind him. I heard the dial spin in the pitch black.

“Bandages!” I said, “and light.”

BD's torch switched on. We were packed into a small tunnel, but I could see that it continued for some distance. If I squeezed, I could just about sit. Gabby was lying flat on his back, his eyes closed. BD was lying on his front, his backpack in front of him. He rummaged through it, and tossed me a couple of bandages.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"Fuck knows. One of the MPD guys knew about it, I think he worked security here before the outbreak. He passed the information on to me, because he owed me a favour. The tunnel takes us up to a rooftop apartment, if we can get Gabby up there."

I was already binding up Gabby's arm. He groaned a bit and his eyes flickered.

"I think he's fainted," I said.

"I don't faint," whispered Gabby. "I'm very manly."

"Right then! Oh manly one!" said BD. "Let's see you get off your backside and up a ladder."

"Cat!" whined Gabby. "Tell him I need to conserve my strength. You might need rescuing again."

BD and I exchanged glances. Then we both hit him.

"Ow! Is that what you guys call gratitude?"

"Come on! Get up the ladder and you can lie down again and I'll soothe your troubled brow in an adoring fashion," I said.

"Will you feed me grapes?"

"No but there are tins in BD's pack. I can feed you cold whatever's in them."

Gabby groaned. "It's corned beef. I suppose I'll just have to imagine it's grapes."

"Head on up Cat!" said BD. "I'll get this waster to follow you."

I turned and crawled to the end of the tunnel. I felt the rungs of a ladder and began to climb upwards. Behind me I could hear Gabby whining some more and BD chivying him.

The apartment was more a storage room, although mattresses and a small camping stove had been put there by someone. There was also an exciting armoury of weapons and ammunition, even a rocket launcher. Someone had put a lot of effort into this place.

"Who did all this?" I asked.

There was a small generator in one corner and BD switched it on. A single light bulb lit up in the centre of the room.

"Ghost Squad have been setting it up for a while," he said. "I figured we might need a supply dump in Ridleybank one of these days. This place was too good to pass up."

Gabby slumped down on one of the mattresses. I checked the dressing on his arm. The bleeding seemed to have stopped. I tucked the blankets around him to keep him warm. "He'll be fine in a couple of hours, assuming he rides out the shock." Our half-zombie bodies recover rapidly from trauma.

"He doesn't deserve to be, after that stunt he pulled on the bar."

"That's not how he got injured."

"Karmic revenge, I expect. You OK Sis? Did the RRF hurt you? You've got quite a shiner over your eye."

I touched my face in surprise. The adrenaline of the escape had taken my mind off the beating I had taken earlier. Then it all came out of course, Mark and Jayden and Mark's plan to switch my allegiance, the broken fingers...

"Which one was Mark Wright?" BD demanded. "We've got some talking to do. Ghost are going to round that one up for sure."

I had a horrible vision of Mark Wright sitting there, while BD pounded his fingers with an iron bar. "No, don't!" I said compulsively.

"What the fuck?"

"Don't, just leave it."

"Sis did he get to you? Did he already start getting into your head?"

"No!"

"Then what's with the concern. The man's a louse. He deserves what's coming."

I knew Ghost did this. I pretended I didn't. Lots of us pretended we didn't. We didn't ask where BD got his information from. We didn't ask what he meant when he said someone had been paid back for the trouble they caused. But I couldn't face the idea of it happening in my name. I couldn't face the idea of it happening to Mark.

"No, BD please!"

"He's got into your head, Cat. He's got to learn he can't play games with us and ours. We let him get away with this and he'll try it on someone else, on Brittney or Jada. Fuck, looking at your face, he'll probably come round and pick you up again just to finish what he started. Do you want that?"

"No."

"So I'm teaching him a lesson. I'm going to send a little message that he doesn't get to play mind games with us."

"There are other ways," I began.

"There are no other ways Cat. There's no law in this town apart from what we make ourselves. There's no cell that will hold a zombie. We can't fine them or take out injunctions or confiscate their property. We can't even kill them. All we

have is pain and if we're going to send a message then it has to be written in pain. Pain is all we've got Cat."

"BD..." but I had no arguments. I felt sick and frightened and, frankly, scared of my brother, but I couldn't think my way out of the situation.

Then the drums started up again. A deep pounding beat that echoed through the streets of Ridleybank.

Part 7

"What's with the drums?" grumbled BD.

"Not sure, they've come up with some kind of cod-vooodoo religion."

BD made a disgusted noise.

"Can we see out of the windows?" I asked.

"Turn out the light first and remember to put the blackout back afterwards."

I switched off the light and then peeled back the corner on the thick blanket that was taped across the window. The drums continued to beat. In the street outside I could see burning torches and a small procession of zombies shuffling past.

"They must know we're around somewhere," muttered BD. "They're putting on a show for us."

Then I gasped. "That's Jayden!"

"Who?"

"The guy who helped me. They've got him chained up."

Jayden was alive, but he was bare-foot and stripped to the waist. His hands and feet were chained, forcing him to shuffle along in the centre of the crowd.

"Gotta hand it to them," said BD. "They've figured out he helped you and now they're trying to lure you out."

"What are they going to do to him?"

"Hurt him, I imagine. He looks tough. He'll survive."

"BD! We have to help him!"

BD sat back thoughtfully on his haunches. Then he pulled the blanket back down and taped it across the window.

"It's a trap," he said.

"Well of course it's a trap. We just have to think our way round it."

"No, I mean, what if the point was never to break you, but to plant their own man in the DHPD?"

"What? Jayden?"

“Yes Jayden, what do you know about him? Why is he with the RRF? Why did he help you?”

“Well, he’s...” I tailed away. I had made some assumptions, but I knew nothing.

“Cat’s right,” murmured Gabby from the bed. “We can’t just leave him. We’ll just have to be careful.”

“Aw fuck!” muttered BD. “Here was I thinking we’d hole up here until you were moving again and then we could bug out quietly.”

“More fun this way?” I suggested.

BD grunted. “Gabby, can you drive?”

“Of course he can’t drive!” I objected. “He’s never learned.”

“Cat I hardly need to know the fucking highway code around here,” complained Gabby. “How difficult can it be?”

“It’ll have to be an automatic,” I said.

“Don’t worry, it is,” said BD.

“You have a car?”

“Ghost have a vehicle, yes. This is Ridleybank, you can’t just tango in here and make do with government issue pea-shooters. We’ve been preparing!”

I left the issue of why Ghost had been preparing for an assault on Ridleybank. BD would have dropped hints and I’d have been no wiser about whether the DHPD, or some wider alliance of Malton survivors, had some plan to attack the place, or whether BD was simply operating in some fantasy land where he would get to teach zombie a lesson.

The drums didn’t get any quieter. The procession stopped in the street, not far from the factory. The whole show was clearly for our benefit. They knew we were here somewhere. BD made us converse in whispers. The factory was probably awash with zombies, swaying quietly in the dark, waiting for us to show up.

There was a second ladder from the safe room that took us up onto the roof. BD loaded us up with an infeasible amount of weaponry and we climbed up there. In the street below a rough framework had been erected and Jayden had been tied to it, arms akimbo. A figure stood in front of him waving a knife. It was a caricature of the devil, drenched in blood from its shoulders to its waist, naked apart from leather trousers and a horned headdress.

“We have to hurry!” I hissed.

“No we don’t. We can rescue him whether he’s dead or alive. I’m more concerned that we get out of here once the rescue is over.”

BD anchored one end of a zip wire to several struts and then looked at me. “You sure about this Cat? It’s going to make our lives a lot more complicated.”

“I’m sure.”

He shrugged and fired the other end of the wire from a small crossbow. It thudded into the side of a building across the street.

“Now or never, Cat,” he said.

I’m not sure I’ve ever been quite as loaded down with weaponry as I was when I slid down that zip wire. BD had strapped a makeshift holster for a fire axe to my back. I had two pistols in shoulder holsters and two at my hip, four more in a small backpack which BD had made me wear on my front ‘for easy access’ and a knife in a small holster bound to each ankle. When I walked I moved a bit like a sumo wrestler, arms and legs held wide.

The wire ride carried me down from the top of the building, the night air rushing past me and almost straight into the path of the devil figure. It turned towards me and snarled and I realised, with a shock, that it was Mark Wright.

He lunged. BD had aimed the wire so my descent would come close to Jayden. Mark grabbed me round the waist, pulling my hands free of the wire and wrestling me to the ground.

“Back in the arms of Lord Moloch!” he whispered in my ear and he dragged me to my feet. “Stay with me, Cat,” he said.

I grabbed one of the knives from my ankles and slashed. He cried out and let go of me. I ditched the knife and pulled the fire axe from its holster. I ran over to Jayden and brought the axe down as hard as I could on the handcuffs that tied him to the wooden posts.

The first one gave to my second blow.

“You won’t escape from me. We belong together.” It was Moloch. I drew one of the pistols and aimed it at him.

“Don’t count on me staying.”

“Your soul is mine, you just don’t know it yet. Lord Moloch will triumph.” I hardly recognised him. It wasn’t just the blood red facepaint but his whole persona seemed different.

He took a step towards me. I could see the bleeding gash in his side where I had struck him with the knife. He flexed his arms and the muscles across his chest rippled. The drums beat inside my head.

“It’s me, Mark,” he whispered. “Stay with me. I can keep you safe.” He took another step closer.

“Rrn rh,” growled a zombie. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Marinette. She was hunched and approaching cautiously from my other side. It should just have been noise but I understood her meaning well enough. “Join us!” she called to me. I could fall into the arms of Lord Moloch or I could join her in death but either way I belonged to the RRF.

“Give me the gun! I can hold them off while you free my other hand.” It was Jayden. He reached out his one free hand towards me.

I stepped back smartly and handed him the gun, blinking back the fog of nightmare. Then I turned my back on Moloch and Marinette and swung the fire axe down on the second chain.

There was a loud explosion somewhere off to my right. BD had obviously broken out the rocket launcher. I shucked off my back pack and passed it to Jayden.

“More guns in there!” I said and then turned to face the horde. Moloch and Marinette stood at their head, man and woman, live and dead, side by side.

I dropped the fire axe and drew two pistols.

“Going to shoot me?” asked Moloch. “You must know I’m only going to rise and rise and rise and I’ll keep coming for you.”

He wasn’t armed. I forced myself not to bother and instead shot Marinette through the head. She toppled backwards into the crowd. The swarm of the undead surged forwards.

I pressed my back up against Jayden’s and we kept up a steady fire as the horde swayed towards us. Each zombie we put down was replaced by another. Explosions continued to rain down over our heads, thinning out the horde for us. Moloch had vanished somewhere into the crowd. No doubt off to fetch the rest of Gore Corps and some guns.

“Was this supposed to be a rescue?” asked Jayden.

“Just hang on. Help is on the way.”

At that moment the doors of the factory burst open and Gabby arrived driving a vehicle that looked more like a tank than a car. The thing had once been a four by four, flatbed truck, but Ghost squad had clearly been having way too much fun with it. The Ghostmobile had armour plated sides, blades and spikes sticking out in a number of improbable directions and big headlights that illuminated the night sky. The sides of the flatbed had been raised to form defensive positions with holes cut in the metal at strategic places for firing through.

It obviously also had massive loud speakers somewhere. Guns N’Roses boomed out down the street as the vehicle careened haphazardly in our direction, knocking zombies down like skittles as it went.

“What’s that?” asked Jayden.

I shrugged. “Apparently my little brother has been preparing an assault on Ridleybank. That’s the transport.”

The car shuddered to a halt near us. It then lurched forwards slightly and promptly stalled.

“Who’s driving?” asked Jayden.

“Don’t ask.”

I dropped my empty pistols and drew the next two. Then I started fighting my way through the crowd towards the Ghostmobile. I heard Jayden’s guns click empty behind me.

Gabby leaned out of the window. “It’s broken, Cat!”

“You’ve just stalled it. Start it up again and drive forwards slowly.”

“K.” The Ghostmobile’s engine coughed into life. It jumped forward and stalled again.

Gabby leaned out the window with a shotgun and started blasting at the zombies between us. “I think you had better drive Cat.”

A large explosion blossomed directly between us and the Ghostmobile, clearing our way.

“Get going Sis,” shouted BD’s voice. “Meet up with you at the corner by St. Jude’s.”

I reached the door of the Ghostmobile and hauled it open. Gabby scrambled across to the passenger seat. Jayden hauled open one of the back doors and clambered in behind us. Then I started the engine, floored the accelerator and began to carve my way through the crowd.

It was very odd simply to drive through the zombies, treating bodies as skittles, even if they were rotting bodies. The car jumped and veered with the impacts and we were tossed around as we drove over the carcasses of the fallen. Gabby and Jayden hung out of the windows letting off shots.

Above us I could see BD running along the rooftops, jumping from building to building, where they were close. He made use of the network of ladders and planks that survivors tended to leave in their wake where he could.

I could see figures up on the roof behind him and more on the other side of the road. Someone dropped to one knee and I saw a rifle thrown up to a shoulder. I didn’t hear the sound of the shot, but I saw BD duck suddenly behind a parapet.

“Watch out where you’re going!” shouted Gabby. I swerved hurriedly to avoid a lamp post. “Bloody wimmenz!” he grumbled.

“Gore Corps are up on the roofs.” I snapped back. “They’re chasing BD!”

Gabby peered out of the window and shot. "We're going too fast to aim properly."

I steered the Ghostmobile up onto the pavement so that we were directly beneath BD.

"Jesus!" shouted Gabby.

I steered rapidly around a rubbish bin and knocked yet another zombie into the street.

"I'm going to die," said Gabby.

"You've died half a dozen times this month already. Quit moaning."

I slowed down once we reached BD and began pacing him. Zombies clawed at the sides of the truck. The door next to me swung open suddenly and arms reached in. I tried kicking sideways and the truck slowed to a standstill as my foot left the accelerator.

"Cat, down!"

Gabby had one arm around me pulling me towards him. I ducked my head down into his chest as he blew the zombie away with the gun in his other hand. There was a tearing sound.

"So much for that door," said Jayden from the back seat. He leaned forwards and fired through the open space. "Let go of her. She needs to drive."

"I can't shoot if she's sitting up."

"Well I can!"

I struggled upright and eased the car forwards again. Gabby reached one arm behind me along the back of the seat and joined Jayden in firing out into the horde.

There was a sudden crash in the flatbed behind us. I glanced in the mirror. Jayden swivelled to look through the back window.

"That was BD," he reported. "Let's go!"

I floored the accelerator. Progress was initially slow because of the press of zombies on the front of the car, but Gabby and Jayden managed to clear a path. Arms still reached in through the missing door to grab at me, but I had my second knife free now and could steer with one hand, while slashing with the other. Someone bit into my leg at one point, but Jayden shot them when I screamed.

Gradually we began to move and, as we picked up speed, the zombies became less of an obstacle then, suddenly, we were free and on the move.

I got us to the border of Ridleybank by which time I was running a raging temperature and had to take some anti-virals and lie down in the back. Gabby insisted on driving, I could hear Jayden in the front trying to explain what the low gears were for. I'd checked the back. BD's head lay at a strange angle to his body, neck clearly snapped in two. There wasn't going to be much we could do for him

until he sat up. We agreed to circle round Ridleybank and hole up a couple of suburbs away. Then we could cook up a syringe and bring BD back to life. After that, who knew?

I listened to Jayden's low tones in the front and wondered if BD had been right. Were we bringing a spy back into the DHPD? Then I closed my eyes and let myself drift asleep. For the time being, at least, I was as safe as I could get in Malton. Deciding what to do about Jayden was not my problem alone and, moreover, it was a problem for tomorrow. Tomorrow would be another day. I would cope with it's problems once the sun had risen once more.