

Well of Souls

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With thanks to Luka and BD for beta-reading

Chapter 1

Well of Souls

An Urban Dead Short Story

1.1 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.

1.2 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.

1.3 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!”

1.4 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.

1.5 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.