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Suite 16

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Children of the Forest
Shadow of the BronzeMoon

Phoenix Cycle

Dreams of the Phoenix
Phoenix Shattered
Scions of the Phoenix

Embers Cycle

Mother of Hope
Exile
Remnant

Novellas

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Demon Moon
Neptune's Daughter
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Apocalyptic Lullaby

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Apocalyptic Lullaby

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PROLOG



I decided to write this story about five seconds after I died.

The second time, that is.

I know, I know. I'm gettin' ahead of myself. Easy enough to do when yer dead, I guess. Got nothin' to compare it to, ya see. Never been dead before. Well, that ain't quite right is it? I just told you I done died twice. Doesn't really matter, I s'pose, since I got no way to write it all down, being a disembodied spirit or whatever. No one to read it neither, I guess, with humanity all but wiped out 'n all. But, got nothin' else to do fer the rest of eternity, prob'ly, so what the hell. Maybe I should say 'heck', 'case kids are readin' this.

If I *was* gonna write this book—and I am, I guess—I think I'd call it '*Apocalyptic Lullaby*', cuz that's the tune she was whistlin' when she set me free. How'd she set me free? Well, I'm getting to that. So the *she* in question be this li'l 15-year-old gal named Punkin Evelyn Brustah. Punkin to her mama. Punk-E to her friends at the Anaconda Gentleman's Club and Exotical Emporium on Angel Street, on the *shady* side of town. The name of the city

don't really matter much anymore, since there's only one person left alive here, and I seem to have trouble remembering much about a life that was, and ain't no more. Guess I'm gettin' ahead of myse'f agin. Easy to do when yer dead.

Hey, wait, did I say that already? Shoot! I cain't even look back at the first part to check. Gonna to be tough to find a decent editor when ev'rybody's a corpse, I s'pose. Well, 'cept Punkin, that is. And I can't seem to talk *to* her, at all, I jest git to see everything she does.

Here, le'me try this agin.

Back when folks was still warm and breathin', 'bout eight 'r nine year back now, I guess. Hard to keep track when yer a walkin' corpse. Not a lot to mark time with, y'see. Fact is *everything's* harder when yer a walkin' corpse, but that prob'ly goes without sayin'. Everything but eatin' those what's still alive, that is. Fer some reason, that's like super-easy. Ya git all mega-hungry 'n stuff and this here power jest comes *over* ya and...

Shoot, gettin' ahead of myself agin. Y'all have to forgive me, never wrote a book b'fore. Never been twice dead b'fore, neither. Takes considerable gettin' used to, let me tell ya'll.

All right, let me try this again.

Back when most folks was still who they originally was, there was this little gal, Punk-E Brustah, kinda named after some ol' television show or somethin' that her mama used to love when *she* was just a little scrub. I never seen it myself. So, anyways, this li'l gal, she spent a heckuva lotta time down in her uncle Connie's survival shelter. Her mom, Sasha Angelica Sanchez, she done worked upstairs in Uncle Connie's strip club. Connie, he wasn't really her uncle. That's just what Punkin called him, on acounta he looked after her mom and her—and all the other gals worked for him, too—for as long as she could remember.

Y'know, it's kinda weird how I know all this, since I only saw her for the first time when she put a .45 caliber hollow-point slug dead center in my forehead, and blew the backa my undead head clean the heck off. I was her first, y'see. First livin' dead she done put down. Maybe that's why I'm able to know all about her and watch everything she does from now on, when I can't even 'member my own name or none of my life before the invasion—or whatever the hell, er, heck, it was did that to all of us. Mebbe I'm cursed, or somethin', y'know, to foller her around whilst she frees up the rest of the undead, as I

was her first. Maybe the rest of 'em will do the same damn thing and there will be like a million unwrit books about her. Don't know, nobody tells me nothin'.

But I'm gittin' ahead of myself agin.

Uncle Connie, he was a Navy Seal at one time. Got all shot up in some Black Ops fiasco the gover'mint sent him into, trying to overthrow some other gover'mint or some shi, ah, some thing. Well, 'tween his musterin'-out pay and a bit of creative blackmailin' of some politicians involved in some shady stuff, he done set 'imself up pretty solid hereabouts. Then he made a whole bunch *more* money working in porn, I hear. Called hiself the '*Anaconda*' cuz he had a real big—well, you can probably guess. So that's how he come to be called Uncle Connie, you see. Bought himself a *real* anaconda snake, too! Just fer fun.

Yeesh!

Sorry, didn't realize a disembodied spirit or whatever could still get all squeamish-like. Cain't hep it. Ah *hates* snakes! Couldn't tell you why, just do. Always did, I think, but I cain't remember.

Well, there I go a-wanderin' off in my storytellin' agin. Bear with me, whoever you are. I'll get the hang of this storytellin' b'iness 'ventually.

Where the heck was I? Oh, yeah, Uncle Connie and his pet anaconda, '*li'l Connie*'. Thought it was funny callin' a giant snake 'li'l Connie', like it was smaller than his, well, you know. Yeah, I know. For a guy can blackmail powerful, rich guys out of millions, he ain't, well he *wasn't*, none too creative 'bout names. Well, anyway, Uncle Connie, he bought himself a rundown building on the edge of town used to be some kind of factory or somethin'. Had this huge underground complex where they stored dangerous chemicals or some such. Wasn't even on the city planner's maps, he said, so the gover'mint wouldn't know to come lookin' for him down there.

Anyway, ol' Connie, he built hiself one sweet ol' survival shelter complex down there, with a shootin' range, a deep well, all kinds of great stuff if'n yer the kinda paranoid mutha Connie was. I guess he had reason, though, havin' been Black Ops 'n all. Plus he'd pissed off all kinda rich 'n powerful people. Bottom line: Connie's shelter deep under the Anaconda Gentleman's Club and Exotical Emporium was as fine a set-up as even kings and pres'dints git. Could keep a dozen people safe 'n sound fer years. Too bad he and everyone but little Punkin Brustah was outside when the shi—I mean, manure—hit the fan.

But I done got off track agin. Good thing I got all eternity to write this here story.

Guess I should start with the night it all went bad, huh? I'd tell you where I was, and what I was doing when it happened. But, like I says, my only clear memories now are of the life of this here little gal, who grewed up all alone and, one day, put me down like a rabid animal. Bless her heart.

Guess I *was* one, at that.

...

"Connie!" Sasha called down the stairs to the first level of the bunker. Connie called it his sh@tstorm parlor. Guess it'll probably get writ in the book with those funny symbols and such for some of the letters, so's folk can figure what he called it, but little kids and churchgoin' folk won't be shocked. Not that any kids or church folk will be readin' a book won't never get writ, but anyway...

Punkin's mama, she calls down, "Connie! You better not be letting my baby watch that damned zombie apocalypse movie again! She's supposed to be in bed."

"We're not, Mama!" Punkin, she calls on back.

"Punk-E girl, *shush* it now," Connie, he says to her, "you're *asleep*."

"Right,... I'm *asleep*, Mama!" Punkin, she yells on up. Well, she *wasn't* even six back then, so she wasn't too good at lyin' yet. Not like her Uncle Connie, him bein' a ex-Black Ops guy 'n all.

"Dammit, Connie!" her mama done called, as she stomped on down, "I got a set in five minutes and now I gotta put Punkin down and kick your big, sorry, black be-hind to boot?"

"Sorry Sass, Punk-E brings out the *devil* in me, *you* know that."

"There's no bringing out of the devil with *you*, Connie... he's out *all* the damned time, day and night. 'Cept when he's hiding from *you*!" Then she yanks little Punkin from her Uncle Connie's lap in the huge, overstuffed armchair and takes her over to the big, ol' comfy sofa 'cross the parlor. Punkin, she climbs in her 'Hello Kitty' sleeping bag with the 'Malibu Barbie' pillowcase on her favorite down pillow and hugs up her plush-toy snake buddy, and burrows down all snug and giggly, while her mama tickle-kisses her ears and sings her favorite lullaby in her same little ears. Sasha shut off Connie's big

bank of TV screens then, all of 'em showin' nothin' but static after he done killed the zombie movie, when she started down.

Punkin's mama even made a recordin' once in Connie's music/video studio, in the level above, of that very same lullaby, with all of Connie's gals a-singin' along, and ol' Connie a-singin' the baseline in his deep, boomin' voice. Was Punkin's favorite way to fall asleep at night, listenin' to all her crazy-ass family sing to her, while they was actually upstairs workin'.

Well, li'l Punkin, she was well and truly sound asleep when some of the girls, they come a runnin' down sayin', "turn on the news, Connie!"

"Sound down, Connie..." Sasha, she says, "Punkin's asleep, finally."

Well, he does, and they all gawk at the bank of twelve screens, most of 'em small ones, surroundin' a hundred inch monster with picture-in-picture. Connie, he didn't scrimp, that ol' boy, that's fer damn sure. So's he puts on every news station in the city and a few from around the world. It was his '*see if the sh@t has hit the fan yet*' combo package. He had it programmed into the remote, bein' a bit of a paranoid, as he was. Fer damn good reasons, too. Though, in the end, it weren't the ones he'd figured on.

Well, they's all on, with the sound down, and not a one of them has a thing to say at first. They just stares. There on all the screens is pictures of the craziest lightshow any of 'em ever seen. And Connie, well he's been in firefights and wars 'n all. Same thing seems to be goin' on *all over* the world. Then some others of the girls, they come racin' on down sayin', "ya'll gotta come on outside and see this!" Stuff like that, all at once. Well, they's all crazy caught up in the 'citement of it all and they run on up 'n out, barely remembrin' jackets 'n such. It was kinda chilly that night.

"Wait... Connie! I can't go... Punkin's sleepin' in here."

"She'll be fine!" Connie calls down from the stairs, "we'll lock the place down all full tilt. You all have the codes... nothin'll happen to her. Couldn't be safer anywhere on earth."

Well, sir, Connie, he was right about that, fer sure! Nothin' *would* happen to li'l Punkin Brustah in his shelter.

But somethin' *sure* as hell happened to everyone else.



Well, after Sasha done kissed-up her baby and ran out after the others, Connie, he punched in the codes that locked down the shelter and then the ones locked up the club. Everyone, girls and customers alike, had gone out fer the show. It's kinda strange how I can see all this even though li'l Punkin never did. Jest one more dose of weirdness, in a whole dang ocean of weird.

It was fair mind-bogglin' to see, thin tracers of color zippin' through the upper atmosphere, splittin' into twenty, then forty, then hunerds of other threads of color, burstin' and spiralin' to beat the band. All of the downtown high-risers and skyscrapers cut off the most of it, so Connie, he says, "let's jump in the Caddy and go on up to Pascal's Leap... get a real show!"

"I can't leave Punkin alone down there, Connie!" Sasha says.

"C'mon Sass, don't be a party-poop," one of the gals taunted.

"Yeah, Sassie, C'mon, it'll be fun," Connie says then, "we'll be back in a flash, okay... Besides, not even a zombie apocalypse could get at her down there," he says with a laugh.

"Don't *ever* say that!" Sasha she says, makin' the sign of the cross twice 'cross her glitter-dusted cleavage.

"C'mon," Connie says, puttin' a big ol' arm 'round the tiny gal, all decked out, like all the other gals, in their last costume change of the night—of any night, actually, it done turns out. The undead in stripper costumes and glitter, with

wigs 'n makeup 'n push-up bras, it's a helluva thing to see, lemme tell ya'll. But there I go agin.

Anyways, they's all climb on into Connie's Pearle-white '53 Caddy convertible and race on up to the hill fer the show. Well, it gets a little fuzzy for me here. I mean, I was out there too, I guess, watchin' them spores from outer space or whatever the heck it was got us all, but that lightshow, it turned into a sorta net of shiny light 'n sparkles, and then it dropped down on us all and, well...

...

Let's get back to Punkin, since that's all I really can remember clearly anymore. She wakes up, still listenin' to her lullaby tape on her headphones, with that big ol' bank of TV screens all showin' the news feeds from all over. By the time she woke up, all hell had broke out up topside. The screens were showing crazy, awful stuff, and from time to time one would go all staticy for awhile. Then, usually, someone with a cheap handheld video camera or a feed directly from their smart phone would come back on the air for a while, showin' crazier, awfuller stuff, mixed with the faces of horrified folk talkin' fast and panicky into the lens.

Punkin, well, she went a runnin' about the place lookin' fer her mama, like any l'il critter would do. Then, *anyone* at all. When she realized that she was all alone, but safe in the shelter, she curled up in Uncle Connie's armchair, that smelled of Old Spice and cee-gars, just like Uncle Connie. She grabbed her plush toy snake and Li'l Connie, too.

Yeesh! Sorry. Snakes! I hate snakes.

Anyways, she curls up in Connie's armchair with Li'l Connie, her toy, her 'Hello Kitty' sleepin' bag and 'Malibu Barbie' pillow and the lullaby tape set to endless replay, and watches the world die on the wall-sized bank of TV screens. Makes me feel sorry fer the kid, even bein' twice dead like I am. But nothin' I could do fer her, now. I only seen all this years later, when she found me eatin' them poor puppie-dogs and...

Wait, I didn't tell y'all 'bout that part yet, did I? Well, I ain't too proud of that memory, but that comes later.

Anyways, our little Punkin gal, she curled in that chair fer three or four days, jest a-starin' at them screens and listenin' to all her family sing her favorite lullaby to her, slowly realizin' that they weren't never comin' back. She, Punkin, seems she's near genius IQ and pretty quick to pick up on stuff, even when

she was just a tyke.

That been the beginnin' of her first music recordin', 'Apocalyptic Lullaby', that she was a-whistling when she done saved that last puppy I hadn't quite eaten up—and me too, when ya think on it. It didn't sound like awful much that day I first heard her whistlin' it, jest to keep from bein' too awful scared on her first time out of the shelter since it all went crazy. Years before. In time, it became this amazing, sad, heavenly soundin' music, that had a sound to it I cain't describe. Like ya took a punk band and a buncha opera singers and stuck 'em in a big ol' box, added a old-school rocker, a church choir and one of them e-lectronical music box thingies, and shook it all up 'til it was one thing. Then added the voice of a teenage angel, just for toppers. Draws the undead like honey draws ants. It's a helluva thing.

Wherever I am, whatever the heck this afterlife is I'm in, it's a far sight better than what I was when she found me.

But I'm still gettin' ahead of m'self.

...

The years right after *The End* were purty awful fer Punkin—lonely, real lonely. As it happened, the fourth day after it all went bad, it was May 20th, li'l Punkin's sixth birthday. Worst one ever, sure 'nough. Punkin was wanderin' about the shelter in a daze, made her look awful similar to the undead wanderin' about topside, eatin' any livin' critter they could catch. The biggest difference was that Punkin, she didn't eat *nothin'*. Not fer a week or more. Damn near done 'er in, is what. Heartbreak and loneliness'll do that to a soul—faster still, when that soul is new.

I seen all this years later, mind y'all, so there weren't nothin' I could do to hep. Since I can only see and hear her, but she cain't see nor hear me, prob'ly couldn'a done nothin' anyhoo. Still broke my heart to see what she done went through, y'know, at the first. Well, y'know, if'n I still *had* a heart to break, I means.

I'm runnin' off agin ain't I?

Well, Punkin, she was a wanderin' all undead zombie-like about the place on this day that was her birthday 'n all. So she sees ol' Li'l Connie, and he been half in a cabinet at the back of Uncle Connie's office. When Punkin hauls him on out and wraps him 'round her neck like one of those stripper boa things...

Yeesh! Snakes! Hey! Stripper boas, *that's* why they call 'em boas, huh? 'Cuz they look like big feathery snakes. Shoot! Never thoughta that before.

Anyways, Punkin's about to go a wanderin' again, with Li'l Connie all wrapped 'round her, in her 'Little Mermaid' jammies that she been a-wearin' ever since that night, when she sees some flashy, gold-like paper in the cabinet Li'l Connie was a slitherin' 'round in. So she opens up the cabinet door and inside's all these packages with flashy wrappin' paper and pink bows 'n such. Well sir, seems her mama and Uncle Connie and all them gals, they all got her presents fer her birthday, wrapped 'em all up purty-like and stashed 'em there where li'l Punkin weren't never supposed to go. So there she stood, our Punkin, all sad and miserable, that stupid, yeller snake all wrapped around her itty-bitty shoulders, and just stares 'n stares. Li'l Connie, he just sniffs at her in that creepy, snakelike way, with that ol' forked tongue a flashin' in 'n out.

Yeesh!

Dammit! Anyways, finally she sees a note on one little package says, '*open me first!*', in pink glitter pen, all over it. So she reaches fer it but doesn't quite touch it. Like if she don't open it up, maybe the gals and Connie and her mama will still be okay or somethin'. So she leaves it lie, all the damn day long. Twenty, thirty time she'd done come back to stare at the presents, but still she don't touch 'em. So Punkin, she up and falls asleep, right there on the carpet in Connie's office, in front of the cabinet and the presents, sucking on her thumb like mama always told her she was too big for, cuddlin' with her plush-snake and Li'l Connie.

Yeesh!!

Anyways, somethin' wakes her up, and she sees from the clock that it's almost midnight. Some piece of her been thinkin' that all them folks she loves so bad, well, they's gonna come a jumpin' on out, yelling '*surprise!*' 'n such, any ol' minute. But they never done it. This is where li'l Punkin Evelyn Brustah really and truly come to accept what she already done figured. She was all alone, and mama and the rest was never a-comin' home. Not never!!!

Sorry, I just went to wipe my eyes, but I ain't got none no more. Felt like they was a leakin', but I guess not.

Anyways, at one minute to midnight, Punkin, she grabs that '*open me first!*' package and does what it says to do. Well, now, inside is a DVD disc. One of them blank ones ya gotta put yer own stuff on, not a store-bought movie or music album. It's got a picture printed on the face of it of all of the 'Conda Club

gang, with mama up front all pretty 'n happy and Connie at the back—all the gals in between. They's all a-wearin their Sunday-go-to-meetin' best, not the costumes or the jeans 'n tees she usually seen 'em wearin'. It's got this fancy, playful letterin' on it says, '*Happy Sixth Birthday, Punk-E! We love you, baby!*' all acrost it. Well, Punkin, she puts it right into uncle Connie's laptop on his desk and dubba-clicks it so's it starts on up. Well, sir, right there on the screen is her mama and all the others lookin' jest like they done on the picture on the disk. Mama starts to talking to her, but she hardly hears any of it. She's bawlin' like the baby she ain't no more, her little hand right there on the screen, a-touchin' her mama's face.

Sorry, I forgot I ain't got no tears to wipe at, agin.

So, then they all starts to singin' Punkin's favorite song, '*Eensy, Weensy Spider*', 'cept they done changed the words all up, like they all used to like to do, make 'em goofy 'n fun—and now, sad in a way they never meant it to sound, with 'em all dead 'n all, or worse. And they's dancin' all about all crazy-goofy, the way they all done when they wanted to get a giggle out of their Punkin, y'know, in the past 'n all. Even ol' Uncle Connie, and he cain't dance worth a spit—well, couldn't. But now, that giggle come out like cryin' more than not. *Saddest* damn thing I ever did hear, or see.

Dammit, when am I gonna 'member I ain't got no eyes to wipe. *Frustratin'* s what it is.

Well, in the end, li'l Punkin, she opened just one of the presents, the one from her mama and Connie both. Guess she was figerin' to open one each year, on her birthdays to come. She was a right sharp little gal, this one—so little 'n alone.

And so that's what she'd done, too. Each year she done put in that silly, sad DVD and watched her long-dead family of crazy-folk sing that goofy song and dance about like drunken Muppets, while she opened *that* year's present.



Well, that one present she got on that awful, awful birthday, it was *'Zom-B Pocalypz' 12.3*, the latest version of a underground, 3-D game a buddy of Connie's done created. Hardly anyone but rich folk and military types even had the quarter million dollar equipment ya need to run the damn thing. But Connie did, had it set up in his big, ol' Black Ops trainin' room, on the lowest level of his shelter. The tech got created for trainin'-up cops and soldiers, especially Black Ops, SWAT teams, Secret Service guys, and assassins. Y'know, the baddest of the bad-ass.

It was somethin', lemme tell *you!*

Well, this kid, this hacker-genius son of Connie's old Black Ops buddy, he used some supposedly top secret computer system, I ain't never heard of, as a foundation for his zombie game, jest 'cuz he could. Connie used to sneak Punkin down there when 'Sass' was a-workin' upstairs, when he was s'posed to be babysittin' her, gettin' her to bed on time. It was *'Zom-B Pocalypz' 3.5* he had back then. Nothin' like the new version, but fun as heck, nonetheless.

Connie recognized Punk-E's natural talent right away when she was barely three. Then, the only game he had was a dumb over-the-counter hack-game with a plastic gun ya aims at the TV. Punkin, she would sit on Connie's lap and kill every damn pixelated zombie that come on the screen, never once hittin' the still-alive folk runnin' about all crazy 'n scared. It was a weak-ass toy of a

game, but Connie, Black Ops vet like he was, he seen it right away. Baby Punkin was a gall dang natural with a handgun.

Sasha, well, she hated seein' her sweet, perfect, li'l Punkin with a gun in 'er hand, even a bright red plastic one. Punkin, she loved it so much, Sasha let her play, but only for one hour a day—when she was good. Takin' it away from her was the easiest way to get Punkin to behave she ever found. But ol' Connie, he done let her play it anytime her mama weren't around. "Genius should be rewarded," he'd be a-sayin', usually at a full-throated holler, with Sasha a-hollerin' somethin' diff'rent right back at 'im.

Well, later on, when Punkin was almost five, Connie done let her try out that first version of 'Zom-B' down in the Back Ops trainer, when her mom was doin' her sets up in the club. Within a few hours of practice, over a few days—since they could only get away with it fer a half hour or so at a time—Punkin had already moved to level VI, the highest level they had in the whole dad-gum game. Connie, Black Ops gunner that he'd been, was still on level V. That's when it started to sink in how good their sweet, little Punkin Evelyn Brustah really was.

At first, she used a light-weight plastic gun, what first level trainees use. Then he let her try the mid-level trainin' pistol. Still just a 'virtual ammo' gun, but real in size and weight. It even had a dial-up recoil simulator. Jumped clean outa little Punkin's hands the first time she fired it, and it give her a cut lip where it done smacked right into her cute little face. Had to tell Sasha she tripped on the stairs. But that fake-recoil gun, it never got loose from her itty-bitty fingers, ever agin, I'll tell you what! Not *once*.

Well, just a few weeks before them spores come down from space, or whatever, Connie, he takes her on down and sets up the system for the 'real-deal' pistol—a really pricey bit of equipment that was a *real* gun—a Glock 27, reworked with the 'lectronical insides the other guns had, to keep track of the shots, so it knows if'n you hit one of them 3-D simulated people. It only worked with the original training programs for military 'n such. No zombies, jest people.

Well, our sweet, innocent Punkin, she couldn't bring herself to shoot real people, not even 'sims'. So Connie, he says to her, "think of 'em as zombies disguised as regular folk." Well, that weren't good enough, but little five-year-old Punkin, she gets on into the set-up program and makes the bad guys look all super-pale skinned and wounded. It was in there somewhere, that'cha

could change the look of the sims. Connie didn't know how she done it, but it was good 'nough fer Punkin to be able to go on and shoot 'em, so he didn't care.

Well, she's a carryin' that big ol' Glock with her two tiny, little hands. Almost tipped 'er over, is what. But once she got used to it, she could aim it pretty fair for a itty-bitty thing, hardly weighed anymore than the dang gun. First time she pulled the trigger, it done put her on her little backside hard 'nough to make any other five-year-old start to bawlin'. Not our Punkin, though, no sir. She just mumbles two or three of Connie's Navy swearwords, she weren't s'posed to know how to say, got on up and made damn sure she was better braced next time.

Well, this trainin' room, it's got a dozen weird-shaped fake rocks and stuff you can move about in differ'nt layouts, y'know, to duck behind when the sims shoot at'cha and stuff. They got sensors in 'em so the game knows where they is, so they can hide the sims behind 'em and know if the sim's shots got deflected by 'em. Hell of a set up, it was. Anyways, once they had it all dialed in and Punkin had the real Glock ta shoot with, Connie, he sets up the simulation and gits behind the plexi-screen.

Well, Punkin, she takes out every last one of the sims that first time, without even runnin' or hidin' behind the fake rocks. Just blew 'em all away, the instant they showed themselves. So he upped the difficulty factor, or whatever, over and over agin. Finally, it was all cranked up to full, and li'l Punkin was a scramblin' about like a wild animal. In the end, the game sent three heavily armed zombie look-alikes—not like the real things could move so fast, nor carry any weapons but their teeth 'n nails 'n all. So any-who, li'l Punkin, she runs across the open space, as the three Black Ops zombies come a runnin' at her, and she stumbles. Connie, he jumps up all panicked, thinkin' Punkin would shoot herself or somethin'. Well, damned if she don't squeeze off three shots as she falls, and puts a shot to each 'n every one, right 'twixt their 3-D eyes.

“Holy *shit*, kid!” Connie, he calls out as he runs on out from behind the plexiglass observation wall, the one meant to keep the real-ass bullets from hittin' any observers or trainers. “Holy *shit*, kid!” He hollers, then he gets all red-faced. “Sorry, doll, holy *crap!*” he says, more fittin' fer a babysitter and a fake uncle. Then he reconsiders, “I take it *back...*” Connie says watchin' the replay on the video screen in the booth, “*HOLY SHIT!!!*”

Well, they got themselves in hot water with Punkin's mama later, lemme tell you. "Connie..." Sasha, she says upstairs, "why's my baby smell like gunpowder?... You better not be lettin' her shoot real guns!"

"It was my fault, mama..." Punkin, she says, "I got holda uncle Connie's little .22 derringer. I just wanted to try a *real* gun," she said. Sometimes she could lie pretty good. "Uncle Connie, he spanked my bottom real hard, too. I'm mad at him," she went on, all believable 'n stuff.

"Well, he *should've* spanked you, Punkin, guns are *dangerous!* What if that had been one of his big bore guns, baby? Little girls can't handle those!!"

"Sorry, Mama, I won't never do it again," she says, all smilin' at Connie, behind her mama's back.

"Good, now get off to bed, and no ice cream for you... for a month!"

"A *month!*... You're *mean!*... You're a mean ol' mama!"

Punkin, she really regrets that now, 'course, havin' said that to 'er mama. Not even being able to 'pologize fer it, now. But life goes on, fer Punkin, at least. After Punkin went off to bed all mad an' stuff, Connie cut off Sasha before she could light into him.

"I *let* her, y'know?!... She was just protecting *me!*"

"No *shit!* Uncle Connie... y'think I don't know the two of you better than that?"

"Well then, don't cut off her treats for a month... *that ain't* right!"

"*First* off, Jameson Lucius Franklin Junior... don't be telling me how to raise my Punkin... understand?! I *work* for you, and in the club I do what you say. But Punkin is *my* little girl, y'hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am..." he says, all bummed out and shy-like, "but someday she may need to protect herself... or *you*, for that matter. She *needs* to know how."

"Maybe," Sasha, she says all quiet 'n worried, "Maybe. But *I'm* her mama, and it's *my* job to protect *her*... y'hear?"

"I do, Sass... I truly do. But we're neither of us gonna be 'round forever. And no one can protect someone else *every* damn second, is all.

"And she's good, sweetheart... did you *know* that? *Real* good! ...like no one I *ever* trained, nor trained with."

"*Really?*" Sass says, proud and scared all at once.

"Really," says Connie, sober as a hangin' judge.



Well, here's it was a few days after Punkin's sixth birthday, her bein' all alone now, 'cept her toys and that damned snake, Li'l Connie. That and all that equipment 'n such, in all those dozens of rooms, spread all over hell 'n gone, deep underground, where she was safe as a baby in 'er mama's arms. Only she ain't got no mama, n'more.

That first month or two was bad, *real* bad. Little Punkin, she jest shuffles about down there, whil'st undead folk be shufflin' about topside. Hard to tell one from th'other, just to look on 'em. Punkin got all skin 'n bones, got a hollow look to 'er eyes ya don't never wanna see on the face of a sweet, tiny li'l gal like her. Hell! Like anyone, really.

It was Li'l Connie, of *all* things, what saved our Punkin.

Well, I don't need to tell you, she didn't do nothin' to feed ol' Connie's snake no more than herse'f. One day, Li'l Connie, he slithers on up in Punkin's lap where she was curled in the big armchair starin' at the TV's. Some of 'em was showin' grainy pictures aired by some of the last of the folks to turn or get eaten, tryin' to keep anyone who's still alive and watchin', knowin' what done happened. Some science geeks hidin' out in some university basement were tryin' to figure what happened to everyone, and tellin' everyone who was left what they figured. Their signal done went out fer a day or so, then come back agin, all weak 'n crappy, with a differ'nt room showin' in the background. They

was a sayin' how it was some kind of micro-orgasm or some such, y'know, like makes the flu 'n all. But this one come from space in them there shootin' stars. These damn space bugs, they don't freeze, even out in space, nor burn the heck on up when they hits the air, way up high.

I don't know nothin' 'bout science'n stuff, but Punkin, leastways, a part of her brain, it was listenin' real good. It done made some kind of sense to her, is what. I told you she was a near genius, right? Anyways, she had a little piece of her mind still payin' attention, even though the rest of her six-year-old self done give up. Well, all that crazy, awful stuff flashin' on the bank of TV screens, all the brainy stuff the smart ones was figurin' out and puttin' out on the airwaves, or whatever, that all was sinkin' in and spinnin' 'round inside our poor li'l Punkin's head—heartbroke and dazed as she was.

Well, that damned anaconda snake, he done slithered up into Punkin's lap with a dead rat in his jaws.

Yeesh!!! Dammit. Jest talkin' 'bout it ... Sorry.

Anyways, Li'l Connie, bless his slimy heart, or whatever, he tries to push that dead ol' rat into 'er mouth.

Yeesh! Dammit all. Sorry, I'll get through this, I swear.

So he's tryin' to share with our gal what to him is prob'ly a delicacy or somethin', and Punkin, she just don't care, don't even seem to notice. But her belly, *it* notices, sure as heck. It starts to growlin' so loud, it shocked 'er back to woke-up.

"P'tooie!" she says, spittin' rat hair out of her mouth, "Connie!..." she just calls Li'l Connie by just plain 'Connie' now, so she says, "Connie... yuck, what's this?" So Connie, he starts to chewin' at the rat, like he was tryin' to show Punkin how to eat.

Ugh! Sorry. Thought I was gonna puke-up a bit, but then I remembered, ain't got nothing to puke with.

Anyways, li'l Punkin, she wasn't no less sad after that, but at least she remembered to eat something, each day. Not fer taste, not to cure hunger, jest 'cuz she knew she needed to keep up her strength. 'Sides, havin' a big, yeller snake try to force-feed ya fresh-squeezed rat'll convinced a body to eat somethin' else, I'll tell you! *Anything* else.

Yuck. Sorry.

So our little Punkin, she done got saved that day by that big, damned, yeller snake. Guess I have to thank Connie for my salvation. If'n he hadn't done that,

Punkin, she might've just starved to death right there in Uncle Connie's big armchair, and that'd been the end of it. All of us undead would've stayed undead, maybe fer ever. I kind of got a soft spot fer that damn snake now. Like it or not.

So's, over time, Punkin, she starts to come 'round a bit. Not lookin' nor actin' so much like a zombie no more. So's over time, she starts to throwin' herself into Uncle Connie's Black Ops game, like t'was the only thing worth livin' fer.

And she got stronger 'n faster 'n bigger, like youngins are inclined to do.

...



Punkin's seventh birthday came and went without much note at all. She waited all day to turn on the DVD her family had made for her sixth. There were boxes of cake mix and powdered milk in the pantry, so our little gal done made up a sad, flat chocolate cake, but had no frostin' fer it. She put seven candles in a smiley face on the top and stared at it so long, I done begun to worry fer her sanity. But I'd be jest lookin' back in her memory, so there weren't nothin' I could do to soothe her. Nothin' at all.

She went to the cabinet in Connie's office where her presents from her sixth were still stored, still wrapped. She closed her eyes and reached out her hand. It closed on a small rectangular present and she pulled it out. It was from '*Desiree*'—Sandra McKenna, when she wasn't working. Inside was a dressed-up Barbie doll she had wanted, so bad, way back then. Now, she'd have gladly given up every birthday and Christmas present for the rest of her dang life, jest to have her family back. When she finally got up the courage to turn on her DVD, she jest set in Connie's chair with her brand-new Barbie doll and a humidor for Connie's cigars in her lap, her pathetic cake with its flaming 'happy face' of candles burnin' right on down to nubs before her. The TVs was dancin' with crazy, wonderful people she missed so badly she jest cried 'n cried. She never ate any of that cake. She never blew out any of them candles. She jest cried herself to sleep and curled up with little Connie in

uncle Connie's chair, with her unopened box in her lap—with Barbie's smiling face jest a-starin' up through the cellophane—and Connie's humidor under her little head like a pillow.

When her seventh birthday come 'n went, she was more or less used to the way things was. Uncle Connie's survival shelter, well it had everything a body could ever want, 'cept'n other bodies. But there was thousands of hours of video in the video studio archives of her mama and the gals practicin' their routines and kiddin' around, so Punkin, she created this sort of feedback loop of all her favorite ones, and set them to playin' on all the monitors and TVs in the place—all twenty-seven of 'em. So it come to have a semblance of how it used to be 'round there. Well, not really, but a damn sight better'n the silence was.

She set up a program that scanned all the airwaves fer broadcasts from survivors or whatever, but they been few 'n far between after the first few months. Seems the shootin' stars, they done took out most of the satellite thingies up in space, used to be used to send TV, radio and cell phone signals 'round the world. Plus, either all the survivors done turned, or got et, 'cuz one by one, the hodgepodge of broadcasts got weaker 'n fewer. Until, now it was just endless static commin' in. She had all the early broadcasts saved-up on Connie's huge-ass computer system, so she could sift through fer useful information and stuff.

She just couldn't bring herself to look at it fer the first year or so. Now, she done spent most of her awake time researchin' the files and all the databases Connie wasn't s'posed to have access to. The gov'ment weren't the only one a-gatherin' data from all over, back when folks weren't walkin' 'round all undead. And so, our li'l Punkin, she done schooled herself on them there computers. Sometimes studyin' the mystery of what come down from space and what it done to all the other people out there.

More 'n more, as she realized she didn't have enough details to solve the zombie problem, she jest studied the world. Well, the world how it was, y'know, before all that happened. Kept 'er busy, it did.

Kept 'er sane.



Well, life went on for Punkin like that fer a *real* long time, 'specially in the mind of a little gal, all alone. Connie, he was gettin' really big now. Punkin long ago stopped puttin' him in his glass box. He was way too big fer it now, anyway. He jest had himself free roam of the whole complex. Good thing there were no end of little vermin crawlin' about in the deep, dark corners of the old factory big Connie done converted, 'cuz the little white mouse habitat he kept around to keep enough live food for Li'l Connie got all eat up one day when a big, hungry Connie done knocked it over. Some of them critters got loose though, so they started up their own little mouse colony in the shelter's hidey places, fer the snake to hunt. Not that that were the mice's intention. Ol' Connie, he would eat big Connie's survival rations if he got hungry enough, but it weren't good for him. Didn't taste much like fresh kill neither, I'd guess. Not that I woulda ever cared, 'cept after savin' Punkin, well, now I *do* cares.

So here's our li'l Punkin, not so little no more, and a big old, yeller snake what could be in one room and still be in another. Well, Punkin, she wakes up one day and starts to screamin' and Connie, he starts to slitherin' around all agitated at the sound. It wasn't like Punkin didn't know what a period was, I mean, she done lived with a whole passel of gals when she was little. But, just then, first time, first thing in the morning 'n all, wakin' from her zombie dreams, it scared her somethin' awful. Well then, after she done realized she weren't

half-eaten by zombies like in her dreams 'n such, she took herself a shower and went lookin' through the big room with all the supplies. Sure 'nough, Uncle Connie done thunk of everything—y'know, expecting to have his gals stayin' in the shelter, maybe. So there, settin' on one of the shelves in the gigantic storeroom, was about five hunnerd boxes of tampons and pads.

“Thanks, Uncle Connie...” she says to the walls. And it made her think of how lucky she was that Connie was as rich and paranoid as he was. It would be years before she had to go out into the topside world to forage fer stuff. Something she'd've had to do as a little bitty thing, if'n she didn't have this place. Probably be a undead herself, otherwise. A teeny, little zombie brat, with the face of a dead angel, ferever 'n ever. Made her skin crawl to think on it.

Me too, y'know, if'n I had any skin fer crawlin'.

Well, after she got her period 'n all, Punkin, she remembered how her mama done said after she gots her womanly flow, our Punkin, she could get her ears pierced. It was a long time back, now, but Punkin had used to beg fer pierced ears like all the other gals had. But her mama done said she could get 'em pierced when she been a young woman. So now, Punkin set there in the chair in the dressing room with the piercing gear all laid out in front of her and almost changed her mind. It was one thing when she been a teeny gal not knowin' all what been involved in the havin' of pierced ears 'n all. Now she'd read the pamphlet what come with the piercing gun, she done got her some cold feet. One thing to be brave enough to sit still while someone else operated that gun-thing, but to do it herself—well, that done give her the willies, is what it done.

So fer a couple of days, Punkin walked around with sharpie marker dots all up and down her ears, indicating where she wanted them holes to be. This one morning, Punkin done looked at herself in the mirror and thought, *'you wuss... do it or wash them stupid dots off'n yer baby-ears and git on with yer sissy life!'*

She raised that old contraption up and aligned it with one of them dots. The noise it made as it bit a hole in her tender, young earlobe done made her jump, and she growled at it as she held it out and rubbed at her ear. Now she knew what to expect, our cute, perfect little Punkin done poked holes all up and down her ears. She even put a couple in her eyebrow, like Zebra had, but wasn't all that sure she liked it. Rememberin' how some of the gals had

pierced their titty-nipples too, Punkin took off her jammy top and stared at 'em fer a bit.

I done so too, fer a sec. Then I remembered to look at the wallpaper instead.

I gots to say, when Punkin done chickened out, I been relieved. She were just so teeny and perfect, I didn't want her to butcher herself all up 'n all. Guess she figured there was plenty of time fer other piercin' as she done growed-up more.

It was about this time, when Punkin started to bloom 'n all, she started to think more about the topside world and whether there was anyone else warm-blooded up top. 'Specially if there was any boys out there, y'know, to kiss 'n all. To slap at when they tried to touch her little boobies, and the like. And they was gettin' to be cute little boobies, too. Not that I'm lookin', it's jest, y'know, I cain't close eyes I ain't got. Nor turn my back like a gentleman would, 'cuz I got no back, neither. I just try to count the lilies on the wallpaper in the washroom, or what ever, when she ain't got no clothes on. Gets harder to do as time goes on, 'cuz she's all, y'know, curious about her womanly stuff. So she walks and dances about, all nekid 'n all, front of mirrors 'n such. More so, the bigger her titties get, let me tell you!

Now I ain't no pervert, y'see, least ways I don't *think* I was, y'know, when I was warm-blooded 'n all. I mean, our Punkin, she's cute as a button, more cute, than sexy. But cute as a button is pretty sexy to some, and she surely *was*. Cute as a *button*, that is. But, like I says, I trys not to notice. Our Punkin, she's like a kid sister to me, or a daughter, or hell, even a granddaughter, I guess. Not like I can remember how old I was when them spores done took me over. It's just, y'know, I can't *not* see. But I try real hard not to notice, nor get all warm 'n stiff. I mean, I ain't got nothin' to get all warm, *or* stiff, It's just...

Oh, hell, I'm just gonna talk about somethin' else.



We's gettin' closer now to where Punkin and me, we had our one and only meetin' up top. Me, all undead and hungerin' fer warm flesh, and her, all scared 'n jumpy 'n hungry for regular food. See, it done run out finally, one day, Connie's rations, just before her fifteenth birthday. The first one that she didn't have no more presents left to unwrap from the gals at the Anaconda Gentleman's Club and Exotical Emporium.

She was something to see, now, she was. All growed-up and decked out in a crazy-sexy getup she done sewed up in the sewin' room in the club upstairs, from bits and pieces of the gal's old costumes. There was plenty of jeans and T-shirts layin' about, once belonged to the gals and her mom, but our Punkin, she loves to dress up all wild 'n sexy, now she had the body fer it. Only she had no one to be shocked by it—nor hornied-up by it, neither. Well, no one but a disembodied spirit what thunk of itself as a older brother or whatever.

Sucked for us *both*, is what it done!

This is when she done got all caught up in her music 'n such. Practically lived in Connie's production studio, recording her own voice and learning to play every damned instrument there was—and some she just plain made up—on that there e-lectronical equipment. I only heard the stuff when she would blast it through the shelter on the speaker system. Rest of the time, she kept on these big ol' headphones and microphone that Connie got for his video

b'iness—state-of-the-art, 'course! Ol' Connie, that boy din't never scrimp, none, not on tech stuff. No sir. So I never heard how she made it up 'n all, not till she was finished with it. I could hear her when she'd sing, singing along with whatever was on the headphones, or when she sampled her own singing voice into that computer-thingie. And it was always so sweet 'n sad 'n powerful, I'm forever wipin' at eyes I ain't got no more, with hands I ain't got, likewise. Got a voice like an angel, our Punkin. But, I'm telling ya, boy, it don't sound *nothin'* like that when she gets it all up in the computer 'n all. She adds in the craziest collection of sounds and music, and bits 'n pieces of other folk's music—folks what are long gone or undead now—and her family's video singing and laughing and talking, too. I cain't describe what she has when she finally sets it to the outside speakers and calls it done. But it makes a fella want to weep and run and dance and die and kick zombie-ass and fly in the sky, all at once, somehow. I know that don't make no sense, to say it out loud like that. But if'n ya ever heared it yerself, you'd know why I sound so daft-minded when I try to describe it.

But I'm still getting ahead of myself here. Awful easy to do when ya get all this memory, or whatever, all at once-like.

Make a man lose his mind, if'n he still had one, I mean.

...

Well, when Punkin, she sees how close she done got to being out of the rations she been eating all these years, she starts to really study the old broadcasts for clues. These science guys said the stuff what came down was some life form from another world. It seemed, they's insisted, to come here in some spore-like form encased in carbon 'seed pods' or some such. They survived the cold of space and the heat of burning up in the sky. When the pod burnt all up, the spores came free, and came alive, as they spread in all directions and fell down to the surface of the earth. Once in touch with live bodies, they entered the cells of the body and, so small was they, they's git right on in there and rewrite the dang DNA's in folks. Even only one dang spore was enough to spread it all through till that body it been, technically, made of these spore colonies just pretending—mimicking was the word they used—the look and function of the cells. So's creatures still look almost jest

like they done as people, or dogs or whatever—but they was actually massive colonies of plantlike stuff what had a 'hive-mind'. So's they move all about like they's the critter they done took-over, y'know on these new worlds, but they's actually these alien plant-things—like mold or algae, or whatever. That's why they don't move too good. 'Cept when they sense more critter flesh to eat up and use the lifeforce of to rebuild their ripped-off bodies. They said it seems like the key to ending them been cutting off the pathway from the took-over brain, to the took-over body. If that gets messed up, them spacebugs—that's what / been calling 'em, not them science geeks—well, they lose hold on the form they's mimicking and then they react to the air or whatever and lose 'co-heshun' or some such. So them geeks, they been telling folks severing the spine or neck, or damaging them fake brains is the way to finish 'em off.

Then, not long into that broadcast, there been a whole lotta screaming and then there been no more science geek talk at all. All that information it didn't hep her none, that she could tell. 'Cept she really understood how all of them undead out there, they ain't people no more. They's jest colonies of them spacebugs, in the shape of bodies that look kinda like the one they done took over. That not *one* cell of one of them bodies was still human, or even *earthling*. So shooting at 'em ain't like shooting the person it used to be.

Our Punkin, she goes on down to Connie's underground garage. She come down here every once in a while, to sit in one of the cars or trucks parked down there, mostly 'cuz some still smelled like Uncle Connie's cigars and Old Spice. Well, this one little ATV kind of rig, Punkin, she used to drive it around down there sometimes. There weren't much room to drive it, there being so many cool old antique cars and hot rods 'n such, stashed all bumper-to-bumper down there. Plus some military-looking rigs too, parked near the front. This one little git-around, it been some one-of-a-kind assault vehicle, more like a dune buggy than a jeep. It was way smaller than the big Hummer with the machine-gun turret up top, or even the Jeeps or the cute little one-man tank to the far side. It was all electric, with some kind of photo-volcanic paint and panels on it, so's even dim light will recharge it. Full sun give it enough charge to run even if'n the battery packs were dead flat. Well, it had two seats, but was as tight crammed as it woulda been if it were made for just one person, and was more *fast* than *armored*. Connie done named it '*Gretl*' 'cuz it was made in Germany, or 'cuz that was part of the factory name or something. Anyways, our Punkin, she got as good as she could get at driving it in that

tight-packed garage. But all she could really do was race up the one side, with enough width clear to fit the thing, spin it around in its own length, kinda like tanks can, and raced back down the side of the garage. There were a couple of narrow alleyways open back-to-front and side-to-side through all of them tight packed vehicles, but it didn't give her much in the way of practice for driving, when she got out topside.

When she finally had to go out foraging, this would be the vehicle she'd take. There were some moto-sicles down there too, but she felt safer in something with four wheels and at least a little bodywork around her. Plus, if she found food 'n stuff, she'd need room to put it. Ol' *Gretl*, she was a open-air ride, but had a rollcage and some side panels that made her feel a bit safer than a wide open scooter would. So she got it all ready, full charged 'n all, so when she had to, she'd be ready to roll.

Well, the idea of going out topside sent a thrill through our Punkin, is what it done. Both the thrill that was like excitement, and the thrill of stark, raving terror. Her dreams were full of it now, too. Her, all starving 'n all, out there *tittie-deep* in hungry zombies—sometimes winnin' free, sometimes not. She watched every scrap of the early broadcasts that showed them-what-already-turned, chasing and eating folks 'n critters ain't yet turned. It was ugly and awful, and it give her terrible night-frights. Not like she hadn't had her fair share of 'em all these long years a-hidin'. But now, they was way worse, 'cuz she knew she'd have to get on out there with 'em, soon. She'd wake up in the middle of the night, almost every night, and go on down to the Black Ops trainer and kill herself a million Zom-B sims, 'til she was so tired she done fall asleep right there in that trainer—with her head on that ol' Glock, like it been some terrible pillow or a steely, cuddly-toy.

When Punkin, she wasn't slaughterin' Zom-B sims, she was working on her music, or practicing her dancing. All three of them things done put her in some kind of trance-like place. She liked it. She weren't so scared when she got all caught up in what she done best. Sometimes she'd go on up to the 'Conda Club and use the sound system up there, working the stage and the props. She especially liked using the stripper pole. Some of the gals, they was really good at working the pole. And Punkin, she done watched every second of video of her mama and the other gals practicing their pole dancing—regular speed and slow, both. There was some video of actual performances with a audience of creepy men all gawkin' and a-grabbin'. Punkin didn't care to watch

that, especially when her mama was working. But the way they all avoided the grabby hands and pulled free when men caught hold of 'em, all without missing a beat or breaking their character in their performance, it give her ideas. When she started watching them clips, pretending the customers were the undead 'n all, it got her even more scared, but she soaked up all those tricks like a sponge, is what.

When she wasn't preparing for the going on out, or killing Zom-B down in the trainer, or dancing to, or making-up her music, she done made clothes. Crazy, wild, sexy outfits probably've been too crazy, even for the Conda Club, back before *The End*. One of her favorites, 'cuz it had been one of her mama's favorite looks, was a 1940's looking outfit. It had a short skirt look that puffed out kinda pear-shaped from an elastic waist so high it pressed against the underside of her perky bustline, to a billowy gather that were actually short shorts, though it looked more like a dress. From that high-waist point down, it been bright red with teeny white polka dots. The upper part was a teeny, puffy white 'tank top'-lookin' thing with tiny red buttons down the front and a halter-style strap rising from jest in front of her shoulders, up around her neck and back to the other side. It had stiletto pumps in the same red and white polka dots as the majority of the dress. She found some thigh-high white stockings with tiny pink hearts up the seams in the back and held in place with bright red garters with tiny white silk roses on them. A polkadot scarf got wrapped about her head, like the gals working in factories during Dubya-Dubya-two done. With a pair of Connie's German Lugars in her hands, and one of his Cuban cigars in her bright red lips, she were somethin' to see.

Another of Punkin's favorite outfits was straight from the 'Great Gatsby Roarin' 20s'. Ramona Devin—'Gazelle' when she performed—used to do a routine in it, sent the older gents into a positive tizzy, it did. So Punkin done overheard once. It was a white satin, spaghetti-strap dress what looked more like the classiest slip ever made. Looked like three times the material needed to cover so little, had been gathered and tucked and swept about by cherubs—something an empress might wear to sleep in, up in heaven. There was nearly a dozen strings of pearls, some real, some fake, that she looped about her neck and waist and wrists, plus a headpiece that looked like what a fairie princess might wear to play at being an Indian Princess. It was a simple, elegant band of delicately cut silver with the representation of feathers, crafted of silver and crystal, held fast by a button of cut glass jewels and a tassel of

three delicate short strings of pearls hanging from it at her temple. With the perfect hairdo, delicate stilettos in pearl white, a long ivory cigarette holder and Connie's big ol' chrome-plated Thompson submachine, she made Bonnie and Clyde look safe as kittens, in comparison.



Punkin done stretched out the last of the rations by eatin' a third less fer a month, then half as much, then, finally, only three bites a day, 'til it were all done. When that happened, it was May 20th, Punkin's 15th birthday. There weren't no presents left from her sixth—weren't no food, neither—just the sad, silly DVD of her family's birthday song and dance.

She woke up on the floor of Uncle Connie's parlor a-layin' inside Li'l Connie's big ol' curled-up self. Connie, he was a old man by anaconda standards, and he was nearly twenty-seven foot long when Punkin, she measured him last. She used the cloth tape from the sewing room to do it and it took three lengths of the tape to go the whole way 'round, since he was all coiled up at the time. All this time, scared as she was, Punkin would be curled up inside his coil when she'd wake up, go kill Zom-Bs 'til she was exhausted, then find Connie again and use him as a bed. Looked disturbingly like one of them little kiddie pools, he done, all yellor and curled in a big circle on the carpet. Ol' Connie, he was gettin' real slow in his old age, probably hadn't caught nothin' in ages. Punkin, she noticed and started using have-a-heart traps to get him live mice and rats. Sometimes, they got away even when she done put 'em right in front of Connie's jaws. She didn't want to think on it, but she knew from the research she done, that them 'conda snakes, they only live about ten year in the wild. Our Connie, he was already nearly twelve—something like eighty or

ninety in people years. Didn't do much now but for holdin' down the carpet and being a comfort to Punkin. Which weren't no small thing—the second, that is, not the first. So's she slept with him—*on* him, really—and hugged and cuddled him as much as she could, while she still could. It don't even make me want to squirm to see, no more. Seems I got me a big, old soft spot for that big, old, yellor snake, is what I done. Life's a mysterious b'iness, is what, and that's fer sure. Even in the afterlife, it seems. *Maybe, especially here.*

So now, Punkin, she done overthunk and overthunk the whole goin' topside b'iness. She got her outfit all laid out on the bed she never slept on no more, and went on down to Connie's armory and picked out pistols she liked the feel of—and a crap-load of ammo, too. Made sure all the guns she pulled used the same slugs, so's she didn't need to take more than one kind. Wouldn't do to waste precious time trying to put the wrong shells in a gun, with the undead un-breathin' down her neck, or whatnot.

So, here wakes Punkin, fifteen now and no one to take notice but a sleepy, ol' snake what's more kiddie-pool then critter anymore. She puts on her old birthday DVD and drowned the whole complex with a full-volume, endless-loop track, the visuals of all her long-gone family of crazy characters jest dancin' all goofy for her, on all the screens in the place. So she takes her a shower and dries her hair, hanging upside down from the shower curtain rod, after moussing it all up stiff. It was the way her mom used to do fer her as a little kid, so's it stands up straight, jest like she were a-fallin' straight down a elevator shaft—or she been a cartoon character what seen a ghost. Then she stares at her new outfit on the bed like it were her very last birthday present from the gang—and it *was*, in a way. There was something from every last one of them dear folks on it, or in the jewelry she done laid out with it.

Scared as Punkin was, she took all the religious tokens of all the gals from the makeshift altar she had long ago made up from everyone's little religious paraphernalia. There'd been a big ol' range of spiritual beliefs in the gal's backgrounds, and so, there was all sorts of odd tokens. There was christian stuff from her mama, Connie and several of the gals. One gal was Hindu, two were Buddhist, and Rhonda, she was a Jew. One gal was half Cherokee and the rest were a hodgepodge of the world's religions 'n colors. All them bits of religious jewelry was all in one big altar on the desk in the back corner of the parlor now, where Punkin, she done all she could to offer respect to all them different gods, or whatever. Punkin, she done figured they was all the *same*

God 'n all, anyway, whether folks realized it or not—and I cain't say she were wrong about it, no sir. If'n there *were* any God, or Gods, at all, seeing as They, or He, or It, done let this horror happen. But our Punkin, she was still warm and breathing, and if that been the work of a God, well, then, *shoot, maybe they is a God up there—or out there, or whatever.*

Not like I'd know. Nobody tells me *nothin'!*

So, like I been a-sayin', Punkin, she takes all the jewelry-like tokens from the altar and done puts 'em all on. Then she stands, all nekid-like, like on her very first birthday—glorious 'n beautiful 'n sexy as a flawless fifteen-year-old girl is liable to be—with nothin' on but her mom's rosary and the chain with the tiny silver cross, a six-point star on a different chain, five little pendant statues of weird little gods or whatnot. There was a round medallion with two fish-shaped teardrops a-curlin' 'round each other, one white enamel, the other in black, one little circle of the other color in each, like a single eyeball. Then she takes a bright red lipstick and puts a red dot, dead center on her forehead, like that gal from India used to do on *her* holy days, and just stares at herself in the full-length mirror. Figuring she was just about as God-blessed as a child all alone among the undead could hope to be, she done got into her new birthday outfit.

Our Punkin, she starts to dress-up for her trip topside, trying to ignore the flutter of her belly and the dark pictures she seen on the broadcast and in her dreams. In the background, her family been singing their goofy birthday song—on the twenty-seven TV screens all about the place—them same crazy-ass, wonderful folks been dancing around all ridiculous 'n all, and our Punkin, she starts to get a bit brave. But not enough, not by half! So she lights up one of Connie's big ol' Cuban cigars, not so much to smoke it, as to be smelling a smell what used to make her feel all safe 'n loved 'n all. So she squeezes herself into the silver-gray lizard-skin spandex pants with the gold lamee thong underneath, all poking up out of them hip huggers all trashy 'n sexy. A sparkly-blue bustier goes on over that.

Good! Now at least all her delicate parts is finally covered on up, and I can look again.

So over her push-up bustier, she pulls on a deep purple kid-leather jacket with these big ol' black feathers sewed into the collar and sticking up and out like a evil queen from some ol' Disney cartoon or something. Punkin done hung some of the gal's earrings and belly rings 'n such all over that jacket,

dangling and rattling as she moved. Fingerless black leather gloves come next. Finally she done strapped on the holsters for the guns. One on each side, way down low so's she can yank 'em on out fast. The other, she jabs on into the jacket, in a shoulder holster she had to cut way down to fit. Connie, he been a big ol', black man and his holster straps was way too big for her, even on the smallest notches. So she stands there, our Punkin, and she pulls those pieces out, one at a time, aiming at her reflection in the big mirror. The one with the laser-sight done filled her vision with a bright red glow, bouncing straight off the mirror, back to her forehead.

She didn't want to admit it to herself, but she was *all kind of* scared, and was actually stalling as much as she could and still look like she was readying herself. She'd killed herself a zillion Zom-B sims, but even if'n she had just dropped her gun and done nothin', them ol' sims, they'd a done nothin' to *her*. They was just smoke and mirrors, as they say in the carnie game. Up top, them what be walking about up there, all undead 'n all, they wasn't no dang sims, no sir! She was powerful hungry, even as scared spitless as she been. Before long, she'd start to look all junkie-like—or, all runway-model-like. They all look the same to me. Hell, she damn near looked like the undead herself, 'cept'n she still had color to her cheeks.

She starts to pacin' about, unable to stand still, unable to go topside. So she wanders on down to the garage to check on her ride. There's old 'Gret'l just waitin' on her, like she been sayin' *'Hey... we going for a ride or what?'* Then Punkin, she checks the mechanism that opens the hidden door to the garage, checking the outside cameras for undead folk, but she don't see none. Well, the door done opens and she closes it right on back up, a second later. She weren't even *close* to ready yet—maybe never would be! But then her belly, it starts to growl its emptiness, and she stomps on out and up to the club.

She cranks up one of her compositions on the sound system and *'works the pole'* a while. Here and there, she done yanks out a pistol and aims at a place where some horny, sleazy guy used to sit and stare at her mama and blows a hole or two in the chair backs, while she's a-spinnin' on the pole or struttin' around all forbidden-sexy-like, 'til her courage, it come back. Then, all at once, before her terrors come back to plague her, Punkin, she leaps on down off the stage and races on through the complex. She runs into the parlor and makes all the religious gestures she ever seen anyone, anywhere, make, at her jumble of a altar, she freeze frames her family, mid-jump, and kisses the

screen where each 'n every face was frozen. Then she run to ol' Connie, curled up 'n sleepy, and give him a hug 'n kiss, too.

Now, Punkin, she feels this rush of power 'n bravery surging through her, slaps the hardened steel comfort of the pieces she be packin' and runs on down to the cars. She slaps the switch for the big, steel door and jumps into *Gretl* like a gazelle on fire or something and done zooms on out and up the ramp, before she can chicken out. Ol' *Gretl*, she flies on up and out so fast it snaps Punkin's neck back against the headrest, leaps off the end of the up-slanted driveway and catches five or ten feet of air, crashing down on the street outside, and sliding to a stop.

Outside!

Top side!

Outside!

Out of her comfort!

Out of her safety!

Out of her damn mind!

“Okay, Punkin... Okay,” she says out loud to herself, “... calm the heck down!!” Glancing back, she can see the shadow of the outer door a-closin'.

Closing her out!

She hit the remote taped to *Gretl's* dash all reflexive-like, and lets out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, as it starts to open back up. Then she gets braver, and closes it on down again, as convinced as she was gonna get, that she could get back in to safety. But safety don't mean nothin' without food, no siree! For the tiniest of seconds, Punkin, she thinks of how ol' Connie, he been about a hunerd pounds or more of fresh meat. Then she wipes it on out of her mind, all in one fast, ugly second.

Well, *that* done it for her. In a way, ol' Connie, he done saved her again, just then—himself, as well. The scared, panicky wild animal in Punkin had had a thought, but the good girl—the good friend—in her done killed that thought dead, right then 'n there. She'd a-never been able to live with herself had she give in to that terrible realization. So's, a-foragin' she goes. GPS don't work no more, with the satellites all taken out by the meteorites, but she'd done taped a ol'-school paper map on the side of the dash, with likely spots for food and other supplies marked off with glitter pen circles. One way or the other, Punkin, she got's to come back with food for a while—but mostly, this were a scoutin' expedition. See what's left of the place, see how many of them

undead monstrosities there be left all wonderin' about.

Well, our Punkin, she remembers one of the scientist broadcasters saying that the bright of day done hurt them spacebugs, what took over folks. So she weren't too surprised to find herself all alone out there in the warm sunshine, something she ain't felt since she were five years old. There were plenty of evidence of the craziness that done went on long ago. Some of the buildings was burnt out. Cars and trucks and buses was all catawompus here 'n there—sideways in the streets or on their sides and such, up on the sidewalks, crushed together or stickin' out of store windows and ditches 'n all.

For a bit, our little Punkin, she just sets and cries in the warm sunlight, thinking on all that once was, on all that folks had suffered. Hell, on all *she* done suffered, hidin' away in a hole while so many died in horrible ways up top. She heard something crash over down in the basement of a burned-out building she was stopped in front of, and so all that pain 'n horror, she put it all away—for later. Had a job to do, she done—first one ever, topside. So she relit Connie's Cuban and took a few puffs. The tobaccee cleared up her head, though it made her cough, too. That coughing, it done caused something to take notice in that basement. So she closed her eyes, just for a second, of course, just to feel the sun and remember big ol' Connie and how safe she used to feel. Then she guns it on out of there, zippin' between wrecked cars and other debris. Turning left at the end of the street, she headed on out to the 'Grub-4-Less' outlet, a half-mile off—not to be confused with the 'Grubs-4-Less' counter at the bait shop down by the river. She found the place easy as pie.

'*Mmm... pie!*' Punkin, she starts to salivatin' the second she seen the sign, with its pictures of a Thanksgiving-like feast all over it. That the sign was half off the building and hanging sideways didn't matter none, nor that the place got no roof. With the prospect of a building full of food, come some teeny bit of courage and so she parks *Gretl* out front and starts to get out. Then she thinks better of it, and turns *Gretl* around to face on out from the building—in case she's runnin' fer her life when she comes on back.

So Punkin, she takes one more big ol' puff of Connie's Cuban and jumps on out. She was looking like an avengin' angel, is what, gun in hand, cigar a-hangin' twixt her lips. Only thing was, *I* knew, down deep *inside*, she was all rubber 'n butterflies, barely holding on to her tiny scrap of courage. Then, with a sniff of tobaccee smoke, Punkin, she done strode right on in through the

front door. Well, right where it once been, that is, when it was still attached.

It was a helluva thing, inside there. Roof was mostly fall in, and everywhere fresh food had once been, there were all sorts of green life a-growin'. Some of it was mold and algae and mushrooms 'n such. But all about, other plants had growed up, now that the dead 'n rotted food had become topsoil, and some of the seed lyin' about had took. There was a spray of pretty pink flowers to one side, and Punkin, she picked one and put it behind her ear, the way her mama used to when they went for walks in the park. It was so long ago, it made Punkin cry to realize she couldn't hardly picture it no more.

So here's our Punkin, looking all sad 'n sweet 'n sexy 'n terrible all at once, a pretty pink flower behind her ear and one salty tear a-slidin' on down her baby face—deadly weapons on her thighs and in one hand, a stinky cee-gar in the other. And so she starts to walking out of the once-produce section, toward collapsed shelves with tons 'n tons of cans and boxes on them, and all about the floor. So she grabs herself one of them big ol' outlet shopping carts and rolls on up 'n down the aisles, grabbing the most useful stuff—what was most likely to still be usable. She makes three or four trips on out to *Gretl*, the whole time grumblin' to herself on how Connie's ol' Hummer, it would've been a better choice for running errands, 'specially in zombie country. But she hadn't knowed what the streets would be like, and wanted the most maneuverable ride she had. It was mostly a recon mission, after all. Next time, it'd be the Hummer, with the machine-gun turret up top and its flatbed trailer behind. She could get half the store's goods in one run with that set-up. Well, not really, but compared to what poor ol' *Gretl* could hold, even all bungeed-on all over her outsides, it'd be nearly as good as.

So, Punkin, she brings the shopping cart back inside, like Ruthie used to always tell her to do. Ruthie, she was a-workin' there at the outlet store when she started at the 'Conda Club, and it'd been her job, back then, to go out and round up all them carts folks'd just leave all over hell 'n gone. So she always took their cart back in after loadin' up Connie's Caddy. Guess it kinda stuck in Punkin's head, 'cuz she just done it all automatic-like, even in that bombed-out store in that undead city. So, as Punkin, she puts the cart back, all neat 'n tidy-like, she sees some yeller color under a thick mess of leaves over at the once-produce stand. Lifting up a leaf, she seen it's a melon, all ripe 'n lush and yummy-lookin'. It had a little bug nibblin' on it, but it looked as good as any ever come out of Zebra's roof garden, on top of the ol' factory where the

'Conda Club been hunkered down in the bottom of. Zebra, she was one of Connie's gals, the one was half Cherokee. Well she, and anyone wanted to help out, they had a garden up on that roof. And this here melon, it looked as good 'n ripe as any Punkin ever saw come from up there. For a short start, Punkin, she feared it might be took over by them spacebugs. Then she remembers them science geeks saying that them tiny micro-orgasms, y'know, from outer space, they didn't seem to affect plants, nor insects neither. The only critters they seemed to have a hold on were mammals. Mostly the primaries, y'know, like monkeys and g'rillas and humans. Which was weird, the geeks had been saying, 'cuz them space critters, they was more plant-like than critter-like, y'know molly-cule-wise, way down small.

So anyways, our Punkin, she had yanked her hand away at first, but then she goes and plucks up that there melon, and goes out to find a safe place to stash it. Now that she had twenny, thirty days eatin' or more, she done relaxed a whole bunch—and so she gawks around for a bit. Staring off down the road, Punkin could almost forget how bad it had been. Some of them buildings looked like it was just a big holiday or whatever. No one walking about, no cars parked in the parking lots, but otherwise nothing at all amiss. But right next door stood a building looking like it had been snatched from a war zone or sometin', and dropped off here, in a peaceful city. Doors 'n windders was blown out, dumpsters overturned, trash cans and automobiles here 'n there. Every third or fourth structure showed evidence of fire. Some was merely blackened, some was not much more than piles of ragged rubble. Shredded scraps of clothing chased other random trash about the alleys and down the streets, herded about by stiff winds and swirling breezes. Here 'n there doorways and windders was stacked up with furniture, or scrap lumber, as bulwarks against a savage enemy, now moved on to other battlefields.

Or not.

Far-off down Franklin Street, the front wall of a store leaned at a steep angle out over the road, fetched up agin a city bus half crushed by it—all its escape windders kicked on out, all its tires flat. Off to her right, the bleached white of some poor soul's leg bones lay wrapped in some scraps of cloth what used to be a postman's shorts—his mailbag showing evidence of varmints gnawin' on it and organic debris of what once was letters and packages bound for friends 'n family. If Punkin let herself search the fringes of the alleys and the breached walls of stores and homes, other evidence of long dead body parts were easy

to find.

So she didn't.

There was some kind of disturbance, over by the mound of brick 'n plaster what had been the nail salon, next door to the outlet, but try as she might, Punkin just could not assign a likely source to it. It did not sound '*of this world*'. Then it went quiet, or at least the thousands of small, haunting sounds whipped up by a stiff gust of wind, masked it off with a sudden chorus of indistinct noises. Down one of the side streets she could see from her position near the intersection, it looked as normal and everyday as any street ever had—before *The End*. Not one item out of place, not one building showing damage, at least, not from the angle she saw it. Turning to look down the opposite way on the same street, the very next block made 1940s London look like a freakin' kiddie park. Two or three storefronts were toppled into, even across, the street. The ass-end of a taxi barely showed, where it had crashed into a doughnut shop at sufficient speed to flip half over, crushing all the tables and booths to kindling.

More of that same weird noise became louder just then, or maybe it had just got quiet again, as the wind died. Punkin, she can hear things moving about, way off in the dark corners and inside the cellars 'n such. Then, something low and fast-moving come a-scramblin' around behind broke cars and downed buildings 'n all. She can see it through the tiny spaces between things, as it races about, making a ugly, gurglin', growly sound. It weren't coming *at* her, exactly—but it were comin' *for* her, no mistake!

Well, now, I'd be scared pissless for our Punkin right now, 'cept I know she done survived this, to finish me later on. So I stops shudderin', though, what it was that was a-shudderin', or what I would've pissed, I cain't say.

This here growlin', racin', unknown thing, it gets lost to Punkin for just a few seconds, but long enough for her to get all jumpy panicky. So, when this ragin', growlin' thing jumped on out of nowhere, almost right in her face, Punkin, she done lights up a dozen slugs in a blink, making a horrible racket. One or more of them bullets took the frightful thing, and it went all tumbly and smoky-lookin' as it went right on through her—or so it seemed to Punkin. She spins around to find it again, and all she sees is a black cloud of gnats—or so it looks. And that ol' cloud of gnats, it turns to smoke or fog or something and disappears in a cascade of glittery dust, that turns to nothin' at all, before it settles to the street.

Well, Punkin and me, we'd a been all relieved and pleased 'n all, right then 'n there, 'cept one or more of them dozen slugs what missed the monster, they done hit a tipped over car right in the gas tank. Now, most of that old fuel done e-vaporated over the years, but there was more than enough to blow the holy hell out of that car. And scare the holy hell outta the both of us! Let me tell *you*, boy.

Thank the Lord, disembodied folk don't crap, 'cuz the afterlife would be knee-deep in the dang stuff if I could.

So, Punkin, she picks herself up off the pavement and makes sure, real quick, all her parts are still attached and workin' right. Then she runs and dives right into ol' *Gretl* like she had wings on, all set to call it a day and get back to li'l Connie and safety, with food enough to last awhile.

Then she hears a sound, stops her cold as ice.



That sound Punkin done heard was puppies, scared, tiny, little puppies—puppies in pain, *horrible* pain! Puppies gettin' eaten, like they was dainties at a fancy party. And with it were some growlin', awful sound, that raped the ears the way hell must sound, every time it done swallows up folk. Well, sir, our li'l Punkin, she cain't stand fer that, no sir! So she jumps on out of ol' *Gretl*, feelin' all the righteous wrath of a little girl avenging wrong on innocent critters, not caring one tiny bit she were walking away from safety and right into a hell like she only dreamed of. And no mistaking, she *been* dreaming of just that, every gosh-dang night fer ten year now.

Well, now, here's where we get to the part I hate like the dickens, though it done ended with me free of that awful hell. Y'see, that growlin', awful sound, like hell must make—well, sir, *that* were me. Well, not me no more, just looked like me—leastways, like I would've looked, half-starved and half-dead of drugs or something. But dammit all, I was *still* in there. Whatever the heck I am, here, now, in the afterlife—now I'm twice dead—I was *in* there. And though I didn't have no voice or no say in what got done with my body—that weren't mine no more, but for the looks of it—I still saw what *it* saw. I felt what *it* felt, I *tasted*—well you see where I'm goin' here. It was like you was miles away, or you was feelin' the world through cotton balls, or opium or something. But still, *every* damned thing, you *feel* it, *see* it...

Sorry, had a fearsome shudder come over me just then.

This is real hard to look at for me, and weird too. Here is one of the only things I still remember from before, and here I am seeing it from the outside, too—while I follow Punkin around.

Disconcertin' don't *even* cover it!

Anyways, them damned spacebugs, what got me trapped in a 'fake-me' body, they'd been chompin' on down these poor little puppies their mama done un-died trying to protect. They made that poor mama into one of them undead itself. Then *that undead mama dog* done run off and tried to eat something out by the street, before something else done blew the hell on up. And so, them damned me-shaped spacebugs, they was munchin' down these cute little puppy dogs, and I'm doing my very best not to see 'em, nor feel 'em wigglin', nor taste...

Ugh!

Anyways, I looks up, through them spacebug eyes, and I sees this here vision standing there—like a scared, angry angel, in stripper clothes and a punk hairdo. A teensy, li'l thing, with a presence that done fills up that cellar we were in, and *then* some. She'd been draped in holy pendants 'n such. And they'd been glowing with a sacred fire, each 'n every one of 'em. She had a fiery red dot in the center of her forehead, looked like the Wrath of God Itself shinin' through. So I see them things way clearer than anything else around, and I realize it's 'cuz it's me what sees them—not the bug-eyes I'm a-lookin' through. And I hear this whistling tune, like it's a billion miles away, but still burns on through to me, somehow. And it makes my heart start to cry, or whatever, y'know what I mean.

Well, them spacebug-eyes, they look at her, and them spacebug-nostrils, they sniff her warm blood or whatever, and I try my best not to feel how hungry it makes us. Then they turn to the last little puppy, the one done tried earlier to protect its littermates, and got kicked unconscious for its trouble. This last, limp pup, just now coming to, he smells the closest, to them bugs. So they go and bite off a leg, figuring to go eat the other warm-blood in a bit. All the time, I'm trying to force them spacebug-eyes back to that punk angel, praying to whatever Lord done sent her down, to blast the damn things, what took me over, all to hell.

For a second, she looked too horrified to react. Then, in a split second that seemed like forever to me, she took a puff on some ol' cee-gar, raised that

terrible pistol, till all that them bug-eyes seen was the red of that lasersight, what that angel clearly didn't need, then she squeezed the trigger.

Well, sir, that bright flash brought the most peaceful feeling I could ever remember feeling. Then, five seconds later, I was a-lookin' on over that li'l gal's shoulder, at where that spacebug-me used to be. Where now lay a pile of greasy clothes, a yelpin' puppy with a bloody stump where it once had a back leg, and a cloud of sparkly glitter, that faded in less time than it just took to describe it.

And right there and then, I decided to write all this down. Somehow.



Well, now, here lays our Punkin, all heart-poundin' and dry-mouth, back with Li'l Connie on the parlor floor. She *done* it, is what! Done went out into her own personal nightmare, grabbed herself some supplies and got herself on back home safe 'n sound. Now, she been all curled up into Connie's wading-pool coils, half cryin', half laughin' all hysterical-like. A tiny little three-legged puppy asleep on her titties, all up close where Punkin, she can give him kisses and tiny little hugs whilst he sleeps.

That little puppy, well Punkin already been calling him Tripod—'cuz he got just three, well, y'all probably guessed. Not exactly rokit-science, now, is it? Well, she, Punkin that is, she been kissing his little fuzzy head and Tripod, he be whimpering and growling in his sleep. His little legs, well, the three he got left, they's a wagglin' about like he been chasin' rabbits 'n such, in his dreams. Maybe chasing zombies, instead, given what just happened to him. And his tiny little teeth been worrying at the lapel of Punkin's leather jacket and chewing it up purty good 'n all, as he been chompin' on them dream zombies, or whatever.

Ol' Connie, he's a moving so slow these days, he been like a old school clockface. If'n you stares right at it, you don't see no movement, but if'n you look away for a bit, well, sure enough he been in a different position when you look back. Well, ol' Connie, his flicky ol' forked tongue, it been flashing over

Punkin's shoulder as he comes—well, as his head done comes—on over her shoulder to see what's got Punkin so sad 'n cuddly. Punkin, she starts to patting Connie's snout, the way he likes, all absent-minded-like. Well, Connie, he don't know what to make of this little warm thing oozin' blood out of him and smellin' more like food than a cuddle-toy.

“Tripod's *not* for eating... Connie,” Punkin says, flickin' Connie's scaly snout with her finger as he gets up close enough his tongue was flickin' against Tripod's ear. Well, Tripod, he done snaps 'n growls at that red, flashing tongue in his sleep, all cute-like. Punkin, she starts to giggling, finally sounding like the still-little gal she was inside—and weren't far from yet, on the outside, neither. So Connie, he recoils a bit in that slow-as-molasses way of his, then lets his head rest against Punkin's cheek and jest goes on back to sleep—or whatever the ol' boy done when he jest lay still for hours.

Now, our Punkin, she been settlin' down slowly from her awful trip topside, knowing she don't gotta go out again for a month or more. Cuddling her sleepy, three-legged puppy friend and her sleepier, mile-long yeller snake friend, Punkin thinks over all that happened out there, puffing on the last of Uncle Connie's cigar butt, trying to feel as safe as she once done, but she *can't* no more. Now, *she* been the one got to comfort someone littler than her. As Tripod, he settles on down a bit too and just whimpers a bit as he nestles into Punkin's cleavage, Punkin's mind drifts back to the first time she seen the brave little munchkin. Hell now, since he been munched *on*, maybe I won't call him a munchkin—too creepy. Especially since it was me, well, what used to *be* me, what munched on that leg he ain't got no more.

So our Punkin, she's half asleep herself, all curled up in Connie's coils and her mind went wanderin' on back to when she seen Tripod, still with all four legs, strugglin' in the hands of that undead, what used to be me. He was a growlin' and wrigglin', head end down, tail end up, as that un-me done chomped on down on that squirmin' li'l leg. When she squeezes off that round, that one what done sprung me lose of that hell, and the puppy, he falls from hands that ain't more than smoke 'n sparks no more, well she runs on over all horrified for the teeny thing. She scans all about for other puppies, but there's only pieces. Then she scans for more undead, but that just-turned mama dog and me, we was all that was there. But more was comin'.

Punkin, she droped to her knees, tearin' out the snake-skin spandex on the sharp debris, and scooped up little Tripod—hearin' that name in her head

almost instantly—and checked his wound. Well, Tripod, he'd pulled back that leg, just as them spacebug teeth was a-clampin' on down and all the bastard bugs done got was the lower, bony part. The whole muscly thigh he gets to keep, and the joint below it, too. So the bleeding's not too bad, but Punkin, she seen it ain't quite right, somehow. There weren't hardly no blood at all where it should've been drippin' steady. Then, lookin' closer, she seen this dark, sparkly, smoky looking stuff hoverin' about the wound. Then it started to movin' on up that stump, and our Punkin, she figured right away it's them damn spacebugs trying to infect the pup where it got bit. Like how that poor mama-bitch got turned from the bites it got trying to protect her puppies.

Punkin, she knew something about cauterizing wounds from Uncle Connie's war stories. So she done what he said he done more than once in the heat of a firefight. She sucked three or four times, real hard, on that there cigar she was squeezin' the life outta, 'cuz it give her courage against her fears, then ground the red hot 'cherry' of that stogie right onto the end of that poor ol' gnawed-off toothpick of a puppy leg. Well, our Tripod, he didn't yelp or struggle to get loose. He just snatched hold of Punkin's leather lapel and tore at it while he been growlin' to wake the dead. And that's just what he *done*, too!

Well, cain't be shootin' guns and blowin' up cars, yelpin' in pain nor growlin' in anger and not draw the attention of the undead—not up top side, not near dark. So as that '*hell-swallowing-up-folks*' growly noise started to building all up all around her, our sweet, little Punkin, she stood on up, Tripod in one arm, still worryin' at that lapel, cigar in her pouty, teenage lips, that still warm Glock clenched in the other hand and strode right on out of there, back toward the street and *Gretl*.

Well, I been yelling, '*run*, for Christ's sake, girl... *run*', at the top of the lungs I ain't got no more, but Punkin, she don't hear. Or, leastways, she don't do what I'm yellin', no sir. She just walked, fast, proud and determined, but jest a-walkin'. Well, the first of them undead, they come a-runnin' at her, dead faces all distorted and unholy hungry-like. I was shrieking, like a little girl with her toe caught in a thresher, though no one heard me—not even me. But Punkin, she just nuzzled ol' Tripod, who done gone all quiet like he knew not to distract her, and she jest noted where the raging undead mouthes are, each 'n every one. Then, just as the first was five shamblin' paces off, that old Glock, it snapped up and all about, and seven blasts made seven clouds of sparkly,

smoky gnats out of them there zombies. She didn't so much as miss a step, nor a shot, as she negotiated the busted-up wall she were walking over, spinning like a deadly ballerina, to hit 'em all.

Then she was in *Gretl* and way past ready to blow that ol' pop stand, when she seen something shiny glitterin' among the pile of rotted clothes, in the street where one of the undead done vaporized. Pulled by it, Punkin set Tripod on her seat inside *Gretl* and ran on over and snapped it up. It was another crucifix on a chain, expensive one at that, big and made of gold. More shuffling about in the dark corners snapped her back to her surroundings, so she ducked her head into the loop of chain and let it hang there with all the other tokens of faith a hangin' twixt her nubbies.

The race back to the shelter was a blur to her, and though she seen a shamblin' hulk or two easin' on out of the shadows as dusk was creepin' down, she took not another shot. She jest concentrated on maneuvering *Gretl* through the war-zone-lookin' streets and looking to Tripod, all cozied-up in her lap trying to see out at all the buildings flashing by. She barely remembered slapping the remote, taped into the dash, as they closed on the 'Conda Club, or the rolling down of the driveway, the sliding to a stop in the garage, nor the closing up of the big steel door.

So now, sitting in the big yeller wading-pool that were Connie, Punkin's belly starts to growlin' so loud it wakes up Tripod. He stands there on her chest on his three legs and barks at Punkin's belly-button and the growling sound beneath it. So Punkin, she unwraps Connie's neck and head from her shoulder and thinks twice about leaving Tripod with Connie, thinking he might jest figure she left him a yummy little treat 'n all. So she grabs up Tripod and curls him up in one arm so he can chew on his favorite lapel, and goes on down to the garage and *Gretl*, all bungeed-up with her supplies.

Punkin she sees she done better than she thunk. A quick estimate told her she could make it all last fitty, sixty day or more. Maybe less, now some had to go to feeding Tripod. But for now, li'l Tripod, he hardly fills a fifteen-year-old gal's delicate hand, so she didn't think it'd make much difference.

And so, once she got stuff all carried on up to the pantry, she opens cans of fruit cocktail, chili, and brown bread, y'know, like comes in cans, and sets them up in Connie's coils. Lucky she grabbed-up a case or two of evaporated milk. She'd thunk it would be a nice change from years of only well water, but now, it were for Tripod, who weren't quite weaned from mama-milk yet. And

so, here's our three warmblood friends—well, two warmblood and one cold—all curled up together with open cans of cold food all about, like they was gutter-trash royalty or whatever. They was all nestled in, snug as a bug in a rug—in another rug—sleeping off the most intense day ever, for two of them, anyway.

And they all snored, and whimpered, and fretted away the night, all safe 'n warm 'n full.



Them couple of months of not having to go back outside was a mixed blessing for a couple reasons. First'n being that, comfortable and snugly as it were, Punkin, she lost most of that terrible confidence that had her walking all calm 'n centered, while wiping out them undead. Second being the extra love and happiness that little Tripod done brung was offset by old Connie's continued decline. But that were still slow as clockworks and difficult to register true.

So they been getting to loving one another, Punkin and Tripod. And Connie, he been putting up with the wiggly, noisy, little bit of food Punkin wouldn't let him eat, that kept chasin' and a-chewin' on the tip of his tail. Punkin, she very nearly forgot all about topside 'til her scanning software done grabbed onto some faint signal what had a human voice coming over it. It were just five words, all broke up and weak, but it give her a start to hear another live voice after all this time. Well, sir, that was a mixed blessing, too, 'cuz it was months before that scan program done found another bit of broadcast. Punkin, she was listening for a big part of every day and the enthusiasm she felt that first day, it done faded over time—to be considerable worse than it had been before that scratchy five word blip.

Punkin, she had been damn near accepting of being all alone on this here blighted earth. Now, the idea of being the last warm-blood human made her as

sad 'n empty as she hadn't been since she was six and fresh alone, so little 'n scared. In a way, it was as bad as it had been back then. Maybe worsen, 'cuz now she was old enough to really understand her situation. With her body getting all growed-up womanly 'n all, the idea of never havin' no one to quench her sex-fire with, nor lay all tangled with after, well, it damn near broke Punkin's will to go on, y'see.

So here's where this little three-legged pooch, he saved our Punkin like that ol' yeller wadin' pool done saved her, couple times before. I'm convinced ol' Connie, faded near to nothin' as he done got, wouldn't have been able to save our poor, sweet Punkin again. But Tripod, all brand-new and innocent wiggles as he was, he kept her heart open and moving onward. No mistakin', *any* little needle-tooth, goofball puppy'll lift a body's mood with their antics 'n all. Our intrepid TP—that's Tripod's nickname, case you didn't figure that—he had a power to him, even so small's he fits in a teacup, that was twice what any ol' dog ever done had, as I see's it.

Well, Tripod's poor old nibbled-off leg stump, it done healed up good as new, 'cept it been half agin too short to reach the floor. By the time he got his co-ordee-nation up, he figured how to race about on just one back leg so skillful-like, you'd figure they was designed for three legs in the first dang place, and the fourth one was just a spare, dogs didn't really need at all. Well, little Tripod, he done this here helicopter-spin when he got all fired-up, was just the cutest damn thing y'ever wanna see. Where's most overexcited pups done lurched about or wiggled themselves half apart when you get 'em all riled-up, ol' TP, he just started to spin like a top. Until he stopped himself so fast, he done fell over dizzy. Then he would jump on back up and start to spinning all over again, 'til he bumped into Connie or Punkin would put out a hand or foot to steady him. If not, he'd just fall down so dizzy, he'd just lay on his back, his three legs stickin' on up in the air and make that teeny little growlin' sound he made when he was frustrated. Well, sir, I got to tell you, that goofy little pup, he done pulled our Punkin back from the brink, is what he done. Me too, if'n we're gonna be all truthful-like.

Punkin, she done looked up in the computer files to see if she could tell TP's breed. Hard to tell when they's so teeny 'n all, but turns out our Tripod, he was a breed from England called a Bull Terrier. One of the breeds gets called 'pit bull' sometimes. 'Cept there ain't no *actual* breed called 'Pit Bull'. That was just what them good ol' boys what bet on dogfights called any breed that was

strong 'n stocky enough to win in pit fightin'. Staffordshire Terriers are the breed most dimwitted folk think is actually called 'pit bull'. I didn't know myself 'til she studied up on 'em. But, like I says, it *ain't* a breed. It just be a label for any dog or breed done good when miserable bastards stuck them in a hole with another abused dog and bet money on which one would tear up the other first.

Don't know if I'd been one of them assholes, y'know, back when I been warm-blooded 'n all. Hope not.

Anyways, our Tripod, he been a Bull Terrier. They get stocky, muscular bodies just like them Staffordshire Terriers, folks done called 'pit bulls', but they got these cute-homely faces that almost look like they got mule blood mixed up in 'em, too. Though TP still had the teeny, round puppy face, it would draw out long and bowed, with eyes that look just a bit too small for their heads. Ol' General Patton from Dubya-Dubya II, he kept a Bull Terrier. Don't know where that memory done come from. Anyhows, Tripod, he was white in the face and belly, but he had this silver-gray brindle on him that looks like a jacket made of chain mail. That same gray brindle color was on his left ear and a big oval patch over his right eye. What really delighted Punkin was the white patch on his chest in what otherwise was just solid silver brindle. It was in a heart-shape, and no guff, like he done had a heart as pure as driven snow. I always thought it was odd how the only part of TP that that spacebug, fake-me done et, was a part not covered by that there silver-gray brindle 'chain mail' jacket. I knows it's ridiculous 'n all, but so is nearly everything done happened since that there meteor shower.

So, who's to say?

...

Punkin done took Tripod with her everywhere she'd go, at first. Connie, he been as slow as molasses in Janawary, but still, TP was just a tidbit to him, and though she was near certain they both thought of each other as kin, like *she* done, nature was still a powerful force. And there been enough eatin' done to Tripod already. She didn't want to find TP just a lump in Connie's wadin' pool coils. But when she was right there with 'em both, she done let 'em play together.

TP, he done all the playing really, Connie, he just laid there and flicked his

tail and his tongue. Well, this one day, Punkin was searching through the computer files like a part of every damn day now, researching or listening to weak, static noise for human voices. Down on the floor, little Tripod, he been growlin' at and chompin' on Connie's tail tip. He done it so much that Punkin, she had to make a leather wrap for it, 'cuz TP been shortenin' ol' Connie by a bit more, every day. Sure, twenty-seven foot of snake'll take awhile to whittle on down in little doggie chomps—but still. It was all wove-up outta strips of leather like one of them dang 'Chi-nee' finger puzzles. So Tripod, he gets to being bored with that leather wrapped tail, like every few minutes of his 'tween-nap time and comes on over to Connie's front end. They's snout to snout, purty-much, TP chompin' at Connie's flashin' tongue, like it was a fly or somethin' and never quite getting it. Then he'd be growling that cute, teeny, little growl of his, then snapping a sec later, when that ol' snake tongue come a-slitherin' out agin, taunting him.

“Don't think you're gonna like it, if you ever catch that thing, Tripod,” Punkin done says, only half noticing, “neither of you!”

Well, sir, something sounding like a newscaster a mile underground, or underwater, caught Punkin's attention for a bit. When she done listens back to her two goofball buddies on the floor, li'l Tripod, he's still barking, sure 'nough, but he sounds like he's all wrapped in a towel or something. Well, that snatch of almost-human sound had her focus, so it took a sec for it to sink in. So then, she flashes her eyes on over to the carpet and sure's shoot, there's Tripod's little backside, tail all flailin' about all crazy-like, jest hangin' out of Connie's jaws. TP was jest barkin' up a storm, there inside the 'conda's mouth. Well, I'm guessin' ol' Connie, he'd done had a *bellyful* of Tripod. So he figured he'd get hisself a belly *full* of Tripod. Well, Punkin, she skids on over against Connie and thumps him good, right top of his ol' cranium, “Spit it out, Connie... Bad snake! Bad! Bad! Snake!” she yells, punctuatin' every word with another thump on Connie's skull with her knuckles.

Ol' Connie, he moves like a wound-down clock 'n all, 'cept when he gets his ol' tongue chomped on. So, Punkin, she gots to pry open his jaws with her fingertips, getting little pinprick toothmarks in them for her trouble. Out pops our Tripod, still holding that flicky, snake tongue in his jaws. So Punkin, now she gotta thump little, wet-headed Tripod on *his* snout. And he jumps on back, spinnin' the way he does when he's all flustered-up and barks and growls at Connie each time his li'l face come 'round to facing the 'conda.

“Nobody eats nobody! Hear me?” Punkin done yells, not sure if she should be laughing or crying’.

“Connie! Tripod is *not* food!”

“Tripod!... Connie's tongue is not food *either!*”

Tripod, he done shook out his snake-saliva-covered head so hard he spun half way about, and looked all disoriented-like when he didn't see Connie nor Punkin at first, when he stopped. Then he spun back around and yipped his little bark-like noise, then growled at Connie's tongue, then jumped into Punkin's lap all wiggly 'n happy-like.

Seems puppy memory's quite a short affair.

“Dammit Connie... now I gotta take Tripod with me everywhere 'til he's too big for you to swallow.” To that, ol' Connie jest lay his head on his coils and flicks his tongue—a little bit bloody from being chomped on by pointy li'l puppy-dog teeth. Little Tripod, he jumps up 'n down in her lap, licking at her chin and she goes and hugs 'n kisses up the both of her naughty boys, not being able to stay mad at neither of 'em.

...

Well, sir, it weren't long after that, what with Punkin and TP being constant companions, and ol' Connie holding down the carpet like he been doing for months 'n months now, Connie started doing something he ain't never done before. Instead of holding down the parlor rug all day, he'd be gone when Punkin and Tripod come on back from the Black Ops trainer, or the garage, or wherever. So she'd put li'l Tripod down, growin' like a weed as he was, and off he'd shoot. When Punkin heard him yippin' up a storm, she'd know he found Connie. Well, sir, it was a different spot each day, but it was always at the threshold of one of the doorways out. First she didn't think none *of* it, not yet noticing a pattern. Then, for a while, she writ it off to him sensing the fresh air, or wanting sunlight, or something. Now, finding him at the front door to the club, it starts to sinking in. Ol' Connie, he was getting ready to crawl off and die and he wanted to be out in the 'nachral' world to do it.

Our Punkin, she weren't ready to lose the only friend she done had for a decade before Tripod come along, no siree. But she knew, down deep, she needed to do this for the big, yellor snake that done, lit'rally, saved her life—over 'n over. It was the last thing he was askin' her for—and she knew she

had to do it for him, she did.
She jest couldn't face it yet.



Fifty-seven days after the first topside run, what got her li'l Tripod, Punkin was preparing to go on out agin. She weren't too all-fired happy about it, let me tell you. All that bravery that done come over her when she saved Tripod, well, that was well and truly gone from her now. Sure, she'd been practicing in the Black Ops trainer purty-much daily for all this time, but now that she done gone out in that *real* hell, the electronical version weren't at all helpful.

She was mad at Connie, too, with him liable to be swallerin' down li'l Tripod if'n she weren't about. Now she gots to bring TP with her on the grocery run. She could've put one or the other of 'em in a locked room, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it. What if she didn't come back? Least they would have the run of the place and each other's company. That was stupid and Punkin done know'd it. Even if Connie didn't eat Tripod all up, TP couldn't open up cans 'n boxes to eat. Plus, 'til she brought home more stuff, wouldn't be no more cans to open, anyhoo. So, eventually, Punkin, she just accepts that TP was best off with her. If zombies done got *her*, old Tripod'd be out where he stood a chance. He was near three times the size he was when she found him. So he could at least run or fight better'n he could as a newborn.

Punkin done got herself all worked up thinking like that and had to do extra sets up in the club to get into the '*zone*'. So, while'st Punkin strutted and swung about on the pole on the 'Conda Club stage, li'l Tripod, he done chased

her feet, and her hair when she was upside down. Then he'd spin his 'copter-spin when he got all revved-up, that one back leg moving him sideways as much as forward, when he got excited.

When Punkin was down wiping out Zom-B sims, TP done chased and growled and snapped at them ol' 3-D Zom-B, while Punkin blew their simulated brains out. At first, Tripod yipped 'n spun about like a top, every time that ol' Glock done barked out a round. Punkin was a-feared she might hit TP, but he was always down low and them simulated Zom-B brains was always up high, so it didn't happen. She worried how TP was always trying to chomp on them Zom-B feet, but since they was all insubstantial 'n all, nothin' never come of it. If Tripod done that to real undead folk, then what? Would they just stomp on him? Or just pick him up and eat him? And what if he got himself a mouthful of spacebug flesh, would he turn undead like his mama done? I think *that* worried her most. But she wasn't gonna let her mind run off on that there tangerine, no sir, not yet!

She'd take TP with her on this run. Had to, or she'd be fishin' him out of ol' Connie's belly when she got back. She was gonna take Connie's—*Uncle* Connie, that is—big ol' Hummer this time, and the big flatbed trailer, too. She could fill up them outlet shopping carts all full and wheel 'em on up onto the trailer real fast-like. Just leave 'em packed up and strapped down, then she could use 'em to unload, back at the complex. If things looked okay when the trailer was full, she could start stuffing the Hummer itself. It could carry half again as much as the trailer probably. But with TP in there, she'd be afraid he'd run out when she opened the door. Didn't hurt her calm none to know she had that there turret-gun up top, if'n the undead come at them in numbers.

Well, sir, Punkin got the Hummer and trailer all set up—fueled and checked-out—and set at the door to the outside, a few days before she had to. Then she spent the next few days killin' Zom-B down below, hugging on TP and Connie in between. Something about having Tripod with her and being in the huge old Hummer made it seem considerable less scary than the last time.

She set out the same three pistols she use that first time—feeling they be good luck 'n all, since she got back in one piece and still warm-blooded—and more ammo then she could carry in her skintight outfit. So she grabbed up a pair of bandolier-style ammo belts to wear. Along with all that, Punkin done put three sawed-off, pump action shotguns and an old chrome-plated Thompson machine gun in the cab, as backup.

So she was as set up as she could possibly get and then spent a whole day settling her nerves and cuddling with her critter buddies.

...

Well, sir, the day done come when Punkin and Tripod were to go on up topside to run errands. She liked to call it that, 'cuz she could remember when she and her mama, or others of the gals, would go on out for supplies. Back then, not one damned zombie done tried to eat 'em, not even once! And so, that's what she done called it, now. Made it one *tiny* bit less terrifying, thinking of it like that. Punkin, she done printed out a copy of that cover shot on her birthday DVD—of all her long-departed family—and taped it on the dashboard next to the remote control for the garage door, just to have 'em there with her, to stoke her courage. One of Connie's stoagies, well two actually, in case she needed a back-up, was tucked in the ashtray.

She done showered, dried her hair all punked-up and hung all of them godly chains 'n such about her neck and stares at herself all nekid 'n beautiful. Then she wiggles on into her newest outfit. This one had a big, full, heavy woolen skirt she sliced right on up the front, right to her skimpy pink panties. Them panties had the 'Hello Kitty' logo she done sewed on, cut from her favorite little-girl undies, what don't fit her no more. Over that, was a black leather bustier with a deep-plunging cleavage, what shows them perky titties of hers all squashed together, into a cleavage like a middle-age Madam might show. Then she put on a black leather shorty biker jacket all skintight 'n stretchy, left open to show off her squashed-together cleavage. Over that went a cute, short-sleeved wool jacket what let the leather jacket sleeves hang out and had a double-breast button-up, right at the waist. So she pulls on these little, ladies combat boots Zebra used to wear in her '*soldier*' set, that was all she'd been wearing at the end of that set. They was kinda clunky looking, but light 'n strong and would have good traction if push come to shove. Lastly, our fatal-looking Punkin, she straps on the hardware and the bandolier with all her ammo, 'cross her nekid cleavage with all the God-stuff hanging there. Then she tops it all off with a set of tiny, round goggles like biplane pilots wore in Dubya-Dubya One.

Like before, Punkin goes on up to the stage upstairs and works the pole while she worked up her courage, blood-red wool skirt flying around her nekid

legs, kicking and wrapping around the pole like any red-blooded man'd killed to have wrapped around them—y'know, if'n they had a body still, which I ain't.

So, Tripod, he's barkin' and 'copter-spinnin' up there on stage with her like he was saying in puppy-language, *'let's go get us some zombies... girl!'* So, our Punkin, she lets go of that pole, that seemed like safety to her, and she done says right back in people-language, “let's kick us some zombie-butt... eh, Tripod?!” TP, he done leaps right into Punkin's arms as she jogs from the stage and all through the complex. She don't kiss her family on the TV this time, she's got them on the dashboard of the Hummer. And she don't go looking for Connie, neither. She done said her goodbyes to him a zillion times since he started trying to get outside.

And so, they's out and gone before she hardly registers the steps it took. Rolling down the road in that monster Hummer, well it was a boon to her flagging courage, I'll tell you. When it was too bulky to get through in places, she'd just gun it on up and crashed right on through, hollering a bloodcurdling *'yee-haw!!'* would've made all them dead good ol' boys stand on up and cheer in their graves. If they was *in* their graves, which lots of 'em weren't.

It took but a moment to get to the *'Grub-for-Less'* and she just swung about that big ol' Hummer and backed that trailer a yard or less from that broke-down front door. “Stay! You hear me, Tripod?” she says to the pup, quiet and forceful, “stay put, now!”

Well, Tripod, he done flipped on out as Punkin closed him in. “Shush, now...” she adds as he starts to growling and barking, “be quiet, boy!” Well, Tripod, he done shuts-it awright, but he weren't none too happy about it. He starts to three-legged running all about that big, sprawling cab, looking out at his Punkin and looking for a way out. Well, Punkin, she knows you don't lock critters up in cars without crackin' a windder or such, so she left the sunroof open, enough to let air in, but not so's undead folk can get in easy.

Punkin, she lights up a stoogie and puts her family's birthday song on her earbuds and jogs on into that outlet store. Ain't no undead anywhere she sees and with the hazy sun streaming in through the cave-in roof, she feels purty safe-like. Well, she gets one, then two, and finally, seven big, ol' carts of supplies on that there trailer. Ol' TP, he was racing around that ol' cab, staring out everywhere he could at his Punkin, squeaking all excited 'n all, but not barking.

Good boy!

Punkin, she done seen a pet food section way on down back where it was all dark 'n dreary, and now that she had months of supplies already on the trailer, she went on back for some Tripod treats. It was getting late and a big, ol' thunderhead done swung on in and made the hazy day near as dark as dusk. So our Punkin, she figured it was about time to hightail it on out of there, soon as she did some puppy-shopping.

Her brave had just about run out, as it got all nasty dark and that there pet section done got black as night, nearly. So Punkin ramped-up the volume of her headphones and the gang's goofy song done lit-up her dark mood—even if it done nothin' to lighten up the back of the store. So, she's tossin' every damn thing she can get hold of onto that last cart, not being able to read the labels no more in that nasty darkness, figuring at least some of it'll be doggy-stuff.

Well, sir, I'm about to explode with nervousness for Punkin, then I starts to yelling, even knowing it be totally useless 'n such. Undeads have got on up from down in the dark and are just about to jump our Punkin, who was so caught up in getting treats for Tripod and so deep in the music on the earbuds, she don't see nor hear them things shamblin' about behind her. Then, just as I was about to pass out cold from the terror, that closest undead, it went flat on its back, as a snarlin', snappin' Tripod, he done run into that spacebug zombie's foot so hard, it flipped them undead legs right out from under it.

Well, sir, our little Punkin, she'd still not heard a sound over the music, but that zombie kicked a bucket up in the air as it went down, done hit Punkin right on the butt. She spun about and ripped off twenty-seven shots so fast I couldn't hardly count 'em, and all around that dark place, sparklin' gnat clouds done bloomed 'n faded. Tripod, bless his soul, was snapping at them sparkles what used to be that zombie he knocked down.

Punkin, she done ripped them earbuds on out and kept on shooting at anything moving in the dark what weren't a snarlin', three-legged puppy-dog. “Get in the cart, TP!!” she yells, and damned if he don't do *just* that. They runs on through the store, just as lightning and rain done come a-hurtlin' down all around. Punkin, she was squeezing off shots, and TP was growling at them sparkly clouds, as she pushed the cart on through where a undead been just a sec before.

As they break on out through the dilapidated front door, Punkin shoves the cart into the trailer, flipping it upside down with the momentum. Tripod, racing

across the groceries, done jumped up on the back of the Hummer like he were full-grow'd and had all his legs still, and ran right in through that sunroof. Somehow, Punkin slammed the tailgate shut and spun about to take three more undead, racing way too fast for dead folk to be racing, right 'tween the eyes. All about, now it was dark 'n stormy the way they likes it, undead folk was coming, shamblin' along and wailin' that horrible sound. Just like Tripod, our Punkin, she just races across the top of that food and the roof of that Hummer and dives right on in through the sunroof. Damn near got stuck, too, but she be teeny and skinny still, and none too calm-spirited at that. She left a bit of skin and blood on that sunroof and a undead that nearly got her, done started to licking that bit of her off the glass. She spun about, all tumbled into the driver seat, with loyal TP snappin' at that zombie, what was a-snappin' at him. Punkin done squeezed one off, and blew that nasty face to bits as she hit the button that closed the sunroof on the next ugly face to snap at what it couldn't get at no more.

“Holy crap... TP!!” Punkin said to the crazy-brave puppy licking at her face, “how'd you get out?!” But she knew. Somehow, he got up on the headrest and jumped on out the sunroof, teeny as he was. Didn't think he could do that. Damn glad he done it, though, I'm a-thinking. “Never mind... you bad boy!” she yelled, kind of laughing all crazy-like, “I'll spank your be-hind later!”

Well, looking about through the rain, as the lightning done lit all and everything on up all freakish-like, she seen more undead than she'd ever seen before, all crawling on the trailer and the Hummer. She knew, least ways she hoped, they couldn't get in the armored truck. But she couldn't go driving back into the garage with undead a-clingin' on like that, neither. So she flips about on the seat, takes TP on into her lap and guns the Hummer on out of there. Well, sir, half them undead, they flys right on off with the acceleration. Some more, when she done jerked the wheel to head left down the rainswept street. Then, just as the last few got up on the roof and hood, our Punkin, she stomps on the brakes and off they flys, a-tumblin', all busted up, along the street. She almost just guns it, to run them over, then she slams it in park and tosses TP to the floorboard, yelling, “stay!” Well, up she pops into that old Gatlin' gun turret and sprays down the surroundings with a sound fit to drown out the thunder of the storm. 'Til not one thing more moved, except a storefront that done collapsed with all the machine-gun fire.

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Well, the drive back was short and anti-climatose compared with the last twenty minutes. But as that Hummer slid to a stop, Punkin done jumped out and ran on back by the slow-closin' door with one of them sawed-off shotguns, ready for any undead trying to get in while the gettin' were good. She seen some way off in the distance, but they only move fast when they smell warm blood, up close. So, she don't let fly with no buckshot, as it won't do no good at that distance, all spread out 'n such. As the door makes that sound, that she never realized was so damned sweet, latchin' down all solid, our Punkin, she leans her head against the cold steel door, finally feeling safe 'n sound, once more.

Well, as she turns around to call Tripod, I'm a-screechin' my silent scream and she sees a undead face not two paces from her and comin' fast, out of the trailer where it must've got stuck when she pulled out. Well, that ol' scattergun in her hand, it didn't come up near fast enough! So, Punkin, she's thinking, *'this is it, then!'* and I'm thinking the same, when a silver-gray blur with a heart, white as snow, come a-blastin' outta nowheres and knocks that ol' zombie sideways just enough, it gets a mouthful of cold steel door, instead of warm, teenage flesh. A second later, in the deafening, roaring echo of that shotgun, sparkling glitter-gnats be flutterin' on down and gettin' snapped at by our teeny, li'l Tripod—tiny slip of a thing, with the courage of a lion.

I can tell you, our Punkin, she done searched every inch of that trailer and Hummer for undead before she sat right down on that there concrete and laugh-cried 'til she was hoarse. TP, he crawled into her lap and licked at them tears as they fell and he growled in the direction that ol' zombie done vaporized in.

Well, Punkin took the rest of that day and evening unloading the haul she got and putting it in the pantry upstairs. She put the excess in the big ol' storage room down by the garage. She didn't have to do anything right away and she knew it. Nothing she got would spoil and she didn't have to go on back out for months. She could've just laid down on her bed and done nothin' at all for as long as she wanted. Mostly, she put stuff away just for something to do to keep her mind off how close she come to bein' zombie-poop.

That one getting in, made Uncle Connie's survival shelter seem none too secure to her anymore. It felt more like a giant coffin than a fortress, now.

Some folk probably would've hunkered on in tight, there—locked up every door on every level just to feel safe. Probably would've walked about every second of every dang day with all the firepower they could carry, everywhere they went down there. But that weren't what happened with Punkin at all! Screw them undead, spacebug zombies! She were thinkin'. Punkin wanted to feel the sun and breathe fresh air and move about free 'n unfettered, is what. Hidin' in a hole was for rats 'n vermin, not for people. After ten year a-hidin' in her luxury hole, it done got too damn small, even for one little gal and her teeny, little dog. For a half second, Punkin regretted how she didn't even tally ol' Connie up with her and Tripod just then, and it made her feel guilty and sad. But Connie, he wanted out too, didn't he? Somehow, someway, they was gonna take back the topside world.

Punkin just had no damn idea how that was gonna happen.



A few weeks went by with our, sweet, Punkin gal feeling more 'n more claustrophobical down here. She paced most of the time she was awake—and TP, he done paced about with her. It was like little Tripod, he wouldn't leave Punkin alone for a second no more. Punkin, she were plenty grateful about that, too. While Punkin stashed all the supplies, she worked out that there was enough food, she didn't have to go back out for a year, maybe more. But all that did was make her breath come so short, she done felt like she would suffocate, right there in front of the fresh air vent.

Another year in this hole?!

Even the stark, raving terror of them undead weren't enough to make her want to stay down there any longer. So, first thing she done was go on into the apartment building that sat right up on top of the Anaconda Gentleman's Club and Exotical Emporium. Twelve stories of mostly empty rooms and hallways with a roof garden up top. Punkin knew Zebra's old garden weren't likely to be anything now but wild growth, or maybe nothing but dirt 'n bugs. But it was up topside, and way up from where them undead they be most likely to hide.

She done locked a pissed-off li'l TP down below and went, packin', on up to the second floor just above the 'Conda Club. She waited for a bright, shiny, sunny day and tore down any shades or curtains in the hallways to let as much light into the place as possible. Partly that was 'cuz she knew them

spacebug bastards couldn't brook the bright-ass sunshine. Partly it was 'cuz she really needed to feel the sun, and anything that made her feel she weren't in a concrete mausoleum, waitin' on death. She didn't know if she could get the old elevators to work again, didn't really know much about how they work. Hell, she didn't even know if she could stand to get inside one of them tight-packed boxes anyway. But one of the three, it been broke down when Punkin were a kid, she remembered. That one weren't nothin' more than a vertical tunnel that went from right above the 'Conda Club, right on up to the roof, where the upper machinery done got housed in little bitty shacks, that stood up on the otherwise flat, empty roof. If nothin' else, it could be made to be a rapid escape route from the roof, straight the heck down—like she were divin' staight into hell.

That first trip up through the apartments was tedious and nerve-racking, even for a disembodied spirit just along for the ride. Punkin watched for signs of the undead, stuff knocked over or busted up, shamblin' footprints in the dust, and whatnot. She got the impression the zombies didn't like to climb up in buildings 'n such, but she weren't hardly certain of that. Needless to say, she was all jumpy 'n shaky as she investigated the corridors. She checked every door, and when one was open or unlocked, she marked it with spray paint, or locked it up if she could. She figured the hallways were safe enough if nothin' could jump out from the doorways. Once she established a secure path up to the roof, she done littered the blindspots and doorways with anything would rattle 'n crash if it were shuffled through by them undead.

When she got up on that there roof, she almost broke down and cried. The view was beautiful and horrible all at once. The city was quiet 'n calm, like nothin' was wrong down there. But all about, were the unmistakable evidence of violence past. Nothing was burnin' no more, but every third or fourth structure was burnt or crumbled. Cars and trucks, buses and even trains, were where they shouldn't be—in positions they weren't supposed to be in. Boats on the river were driftin' about, most long ago run aground or stickin' up out of their watery graves. Some been all burned up, some not.

Way off, out of the city proper, the world looked new—fresh green growth all about, trees full 'n shady in the summer heat. There was flocks of birds swoopin' about, feeding on the swarms of summer bugs she remembered gettin' in her mouth when they was out drivin' in the country in Connie's big ol' Caddy, with the top down. Them memories was so far off in Punkin's mind, it

was more like she done read about it, than actually been there. That begun to make her all sad 'n angry again, so she forced herself to just think on what needed doin'.

Somewhere along the line, Punkin's fears, they done turned to terrible, awful angritude, and she used all that there angry to focus her mind and her actions. This was *her* world, *dammit all*, and she was good 'n fed up with them spacebugs takin' it over. That's when she first realized that she been put here—least-wise, left alive—to wipe them spacebugs right the heck off'n her planet. Even if she were the *last* damn warmblood human left alive to breathe free—maybe, *especially!*

*F@*k them spacebugs!!!*

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Well, sir, that there clear path up to Zebra's roof garden done kept our Punkin from losin' her damn mind, that's for certain! Now that she felt reasonable sure no undead could get at her, in her corridor or up on the roof, she done brung Tripod up there with her most times. She would've brung ol' Connie up there too, but he done weighed twice as much as Punkin now, maybe more. She just couldn't do it, and ol' Connie, he was too slow and none too motivated to go all the way up there on his own.

Punkin made a stash of sniper rifles up there, and brung up a few up-close guns as well, just in case. She boarded up every door what opened to her corridor. Not like them undead couldn't bust on through, but they sure as heck couldn't do it quiet-like—nor hide the evidence after. She found rolls of crêpe paper, for the party what never happened, and strung it up in doorways and at corners, figurin' zombies wouldn't bother to step through without breaking it. So whenever Punkin and Tripod done go on up, a quick glance up 'n down the hallways told the story. Nothin' but the two of 'em been through there.

About the only time Punkin spent down in 'Connie's Coffin'—that were what she been callin' it in her head these days—was to sleep, practice Zom-B killin' and listen for transmissions from any warmbloods might still be out there. She got the roof garden producing again, but she weren't no green-thumber, our Punkin. A few crops done grow'd purty-much all on their own, so Punkin tended to favor them. It was more about helping life to continue, than the eatin' of fresh produce. Though she got a thrill of pride and wonder every time

she done bit into something what grow'd up in the sun and fresh air—living on canned food for so long as she done.

One evening, sitting on up there after watching a sunset so wondrous it would've made a blind man weep, she been petting ol' TP, now getting real near to his full grow'd size and filling up her little lap with his muscles and bulk. It occurred to her, looking out over the black skyline without so much as one lone electric light, that all this time she's been listening for others over the wavelengths, she never transmitted *nothin'* herself! How was it she never think of that? Was she so dang certain she was all alone, it never occurred to her?

Well, that right there was the beginning of '*Killshot Punk*', the album. She done writ herself all kind of songs, and even recorded up a bunch of them, just for fun. Just 'cuz if'n she didn't, she'd have gone ravin' nutz! Well, Punkin, she done thinks, why *talk* over the wires when she could play her music? It set a fire to raging in her, where nothing but just *survivin'* been before.

Well, now, buddy-boy, she done got on it, right that night. She didn't come out of that music/video studio for a fistful of days 'n nights. At first, it was just the making, and the re-tooling, of her songs she was so lost in. Then she went through all of Connie's notes about his half million dollar broadcast set up. See, ol' Uncle Connie, remember how he was thinkin' all hell was gonna come loose one day, war-wise, or civilian uprising-wise? Well, he had a few tricks up his sleeve he didn't tell nobody about—nobody except Punkin! She couldn't understand how she had forgot all about it, but she'd been only five at the time, and she hadn't really understood why her Uncle Connie been so secretive about some stuff. She just listened to him ramble on 'cuz she loved him so much, and liked the way his cigars smelled. But now, slowly, like it was comin' to her through tar or sap or molasses or somethin', it done come, sure as shoot! And the more it come to her, the more she done figured out. There were tie-ins to all the broadcast towers on this side of town. Took Connie years to get it done—thousands 'n thousands in bribes to disgruntled employees of the city and the broadcast companies. But it was there, the ability to send out signals to the city, the state, and if'n she weren't mistaken, even the whole country. Maybe the world. In some cases, she'd have to infiltrate buildings and tap into power backups that may or may not be usable no more. The complex itself had enough power to broadcast its own self, for a lot of miles, good 'n strong. Maybe a hunerd miles 'r more, weak 'n staticky.

For the first time since that there undead nearly got her in the garage, Punkin didn't give a rat's patootie that she were deep underground. In her head, she were already on her way out through the airwaves to all the big, wide world.

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Well now, about a month or so after this, '*Killshot Punk*'—that was the name she done come up with for both the style of her music *and* her 'band', even though it was just her—released its first ever album. She called it 'Apocalyptic Lullaby', same as the first song she done writ and recorded. So after researchin' up how music folk used to deal with such things, our Punkin, she done scheduled her very first album release party.

Now, I know what you're thinkin' here, can't have a party without any guests. But all Punkin had was Connie, TP and the ghosts of the Anaconda Gentleman's Club and Exotical Emporium. Well, now, I didn't say it was set to be the event of the season or nothin'. But, considerin' the state of the world—and mankind—it was a purty-dang good turnout. As Punkin would find out later, like any good music release party, it was gonna have gatecrashers. Figuratory, if not literal-like.

But that comes later.



Well, it was the morning of the day Punkin was to be a big music star, with her first ever album release party. She done printed up pictures of all her family of goofballs, as they been when they was alive. All the gals at the 'Conda Club, they had big ol' posters and cardboard cutouts of themselves on the walls and around the club, so she brung those on up too. Punkin even hauled up a grocery cart from the garage, put an old quilt in it and spent fifteen minutes heavin' a drowsy li'l Connie into it so she could bring him on up, too.

She done a few sound checks early that worked the glitches out of the system that hadn't been used in ages. So the speakers up on the roof were all set and the broadcast seemed to be puttin' out across a wide range of wavelengths. She set up some video cameras from the studio, send out pictures with the sound and have it to watch later on, too. She had no idea if anyone could pick it up out in the world, even if anyone was still warmblooded out there. But it *would* be going on out and that was for sure!

Punkin done a bunch of searchin' around the archives for information about album release parties and the like, back in the day when thousands of bands were alive 'n kicking about the big, wide world. How amazing would that've been? Touring the globe and blasting your own music to thousands of excited fans, fighting to hear and see and be part of the happening. Struttin' about on stage, spotlights picking you out from the blackness, and singing your songs.

Not like takin' off your clothes for creepy men all hunkered down in the dark and leering. Wearing cool clothes and hair and makeup and having folks dyin' to get in to see you—hear you! Boys dreamin' about touching you and rollin' about nekid with you 'n all. Conservative folk gittin' all shocked 'n judgmental at you. Articles gittin' writ all about you and what kind of life you done lived and how you live now, all rich 'n beautiful 'n famous.

Punkin found a bunch of articles and documentaries about famous bands way back in time. She even found stuff about a band called the Bugs—no, wait, the Beatles. Well, actually they spelt it different, but near the end of their career—of that there band anyway—they done a concert on a rooftop in some big ol' city without tellin' nobody nor askin' permission. There they was crankin' their music, up on that roof, and crazy folk be climbin' up on all the roofs all around, y'know to see 'em, to hear 'em. It was something, is what! Then they did their last ever concert in a sports stadium. Fact, lots of bands done used stadiums for their concerts if they had enough fans to fill one. Made Punkin think about that there stadium in the middle of town—but, maybe some other time. Y'know, when KSP—that be *'Killshot Punk'*, case you didn't figure—when they git all rich 'n famous!

All that prep done got checked out and by noon, it was all ready. Well, Punkin, her research told her release parties needed food 'n alcohol 'n drugs. Least ways, that's what the articles in the old Rolling Stone magazines said. Food weren't no problem, though it weren't none too fancy. But the only drugs Punkin could find were aspirin and cough syrup—cherry flavor—but she was purty sure that wasn't what them ol' time musicians used. Didn't matter much, 'cuz it was just her and Tripod and Connie gonna be up there. Dogs 'n snakes don't do drugs, she figured. And she weren't sick, so she didn't have no need of drugs, neither. But she brought some on up and put it on a silver serving tray, y'know like some of them parties had, just for authenticity-ness.

Now, alcohol, that, there was plenty of. I mean, the 'Conda Club bar had all sorts of bottles in all sorts of colors, and the storeroom in the club was full of the stuff. Punkin never tried any herself. Mama would've been mad at her and, well, she didn't want her mama to be lookin' down from heaven all mad at her, so she never tried it. But maybe tonight—just a bit—it was a music industry party, after all! So, she brung up a cartload of bottles 'n glasses and made up a little bar in a corner of the roof.

Punkin strung up Christmas lights all over up there, too, and hung the last of

the crêpe paper, stringin' it all about. Looked pretty dang festive, too, even in the daylight. But this was a grown-up party and all grown-up parties was held at night... wasn't they? So, while she waited for her party to start up, Punkin walked the corridor t'wixt the club and the roof, reinforcing barricades and setting traps 'n such.

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Well, sir, it was nearly sunset. So Punkin, she hauled Connie on up to the roof, in his shopping cart, pushing him along the corridors and started up the first flight of stairs. Well, now, that would've been it for ol' Connie comin' on up to the party, right there. Five steps up and Punkin was already a sweaty mess. This just weren't gonna work. No way she was gonna get him on up thirteen flights of steps in that there shopping cart. Connie's tongue was flicking out at her like he been snake-laughin' at her, as he lay there all poured into that cart atop the old quilt she put in their to keep his scaly hide from getting all waffle-like from squishin' on through the wire-mesh of the cart.

Well, sir, much as Punkin, she'd been claustrophobisizin' over the cramped, windowless boxes of the elevators, she figured that was the only way to get a gigantical snake all the way on up there. Connie was a full one third of the party guests—one half, if you consider Punkin as the hostess. So, her skin crawlin' and her heart poundin' at the thought, Punkin pushes the button on elevator number two. Well, nothing seemed to happen, so she pushed ol' Connie on down to the other elevator that done used to work. Well, damned if it don't start to making all sorts of squealing, clanking noises as it starts up for the first time in a decade. When the doors done wooshed open, Punkin jumped out of her skin, almost. Damn near blew holes in the back wall, drawing her Glocks, all ready for undead to jump on out. But there weren't nothin' in there but a little gray mouse, what went all stricken at the smell of that huge ol' snake. It smacked right into the wall as it raced for its nibbled-out hole, missin' it in its panic. Punkin thought about feeding it to Connie as it lay there all dazed, but it snapped back to its senses and shot out of there like lightning.

So Punkin, Connie and Tripod, they get into that coffin-like box and Punkin, she takes a big ol' deep breath as the door slides shut. Then she pushes the button with the number twelve on it. A moment later, all that nasty squealing,

clanking noise starts on and up they goes. It might well've bin the longest sixty seconds of Punkin's short life, but then the horrible noise stopped and ten seconds later, the doors wooshed back open. Punkin shoved the cart out so fast she pulled a muscle a little bit, and Tripod, who was sniffin' at that there mouse hole, he come a-racin' out to Punkin's call, just as them doors slid back shut.

Punkin, she was figuring she'd have to git on up in the workings of that damned thing and see if she could grease up the gears or whatever was in there. She didn't wanna never get back in the dang thing, but it was the only way to get Connie up 'n down, if she ever wanted to. Sure make getting the party stuff back down a bunch easier too. But that didn't matter none now. It was near sundown and all she had to do was wrestle Connie's cart up one last flight of stairs to the roof. It done took a bit, and Punkin's new outfit was all sweated-up and rumped, but Connie was up there with her and TP, so she called it a bargain.

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Well, sir, crazy as it might have been, Punkin, she done set up folding chairs for her audience. Each one with a life-size print-out of one of her family's faces taped to the back. Full-sized cardboard cutouts of the gals in their costumes, from the club, were set about the edges like extra audience members. It was sad 'n lonely in some ways, warm and uplifting in others, to have them all there watching. Connie, in his cart, was set alongside them chairs, front 'n center, and one empty chair beside it had the old sweater on it Tripod liked to sleep on and chew up when he was a teeny thing. That was Tripod's place of honor. Punkin, she done watched that big, yeller sun set behind some puffy, golden clouds and looked over the other way at the big, ol' full moon pokin' on up. Her last party guest—fashionably late, of course. Always *one*, right? Wouldn't be a music biz party without a grand ol' Diva, showing up at the last minute.

So, Punkin, she frets with her costume for a sec, hid behind the elevator shack, waiting for her grand entrance. Well, our Punkin, she'd done put on one of her mama's fancy gowns—a blood-red satin number with one bare, strapless shoulder and one with a thin strip of red satin sweepin' up from her cleavage and over her shoulder to the plungin' backline that dern-near

showed her butt-crack in the back. It was full length, with a trickle of a train draggin' in the dust and topsoil of the roof. She had on all of them holy chains 'n all, about her neck, and her hair was all swept up in a loose pile, with tendrils hangin' across her angelic cheeks—like a high-priced escort what just rolled out of a sex-tumbled bed. She wore teeny, oval shades settin' down low on her nose and her eyes were accented with grand sweeps of eyeliner that made her eyes look somethin' between a tigress and that E-gyptian queen—Cleopatracide, or whatever. Her arms were bare, but she had on long, fingerless black silk gloves that went halfway up from elbow to shoulder, with every ring any of the gals had, on every one of her fingers 'n thumbs. There were over a dozen waist-chains in the gal's jewelry boxes and she wore 'em all, strung on the outside of the skin-tight red satin gown. That gown done had a leg slit what went near all the way up and let her left leg sweep right on out of it as she walked. She had a black lace garter belt, what held up thigh-high black lace stockings with a pattern of Chinese dragons a-swirlin' up the sides. Lastly, was these six-inch stiletto-heeled, black, ankle-high leather boots with more chains 'n baubles than she had on her whole body—or so it seemed. She was a sight, I'll tell you! Sexy 'n sweet, profound 'n shy, all mixed up together, just like her music. Well, it was past dusk now and the full moon was high enough it could see the concert good as all them paper people—Connie and Tripod, too. Our Punkin was as nervous as she'd have been had there been real live folks watching. So, she took two deep breaths and one deep pull offa Connie's special gold flask, that she done filled with the top-shelf cognac he liked best, that she kept in her mama's black lace cleavage-squashin' bra. “Yeesh!” she done said, shakin' her head like a wet dog. “People *like* this stuff?” But, a second later, she seen why, and took one more, y'know, for good luck.

Showtime!

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Well, now, earlier in the week, setting up the broadcast equipment and the speakers 'n all, she found a goofy little app what they used to use when Punkin was little. It altered a body's voice to sound like someone differ'nt. There were all kinds of prefab digitalis-like voices you could use, but it also let you read a script, what had most of the sounds we use in our language, or

somethin', and the computer would make up a electronical version of that voice, it could use to change the sound of your own voice.

Well, now, Connie—that be *Uncle* Connie—and Punkin, done input their own voices once, long ago, so they could talk 'n laugh in each other's voice. It was fun for a week or two, then they both done forgot all about it. Now, our Punkin found and dialed-up her Uncle Connie's voice file and used it for her intro. So, in Connie's deep, booming baritone, Punkin shouted out, as she brung down the lights and rolled the video cameras, "Ladies 'n Gents... Puppies 'n Snakes... Posters 'n Cutouts... Clouds n' Moon, put your hands, paws and scales together... for the single greatest musical sensation to come along since the End of the World as we knew it. Quite possibly the last living, breathing, warm-blooded human being on this or any other world. She's a teeny slip of a gal with the heart of a cowardly lion and the voice of a drunken angel... a lost soul looking for the secret to the Salvation of the Human Race. The last hope for Life as we once knew it... the one and only Punkin Evelyn Brustah!

"...So, without further ado, I give you the next great musical sensation... Killshot Punk!... performing live from their first ever album, 'Apocalyptic Lullaby'!

"Let's hear it for ... *Killshot!* ...*Punk!!*"

Well, sir, as she brought them lights on up, that crazy, electronical music, it done thundered on out of them speakers and out over the wavelengths to whoever might be out there to hear it. Punkin's skin went all goosefleshy and that there cognac, it done raced through her veins and into her brain. She got herself a wild-hair impulse and raced on up the slanted roof of that there elevator shack and dove right on off'n it, above that makeshift stage she set up. As she flew, all angel-like, arms wide like wings, she been thinking, '*damn fool! I'm gonna break my neck or leg or something, right here 'n now...*' But instead, our glorious little Punkin, she tucks quick and lands hard, but perfect, dead center in that there stage, just as her singing part come 'round. Then she sings her dang heart out, loud 'n strong, not missing a beat—so loud, that mic she been wearing weren't hardly needed.

So, she just struts about, singing her heart out, flashin' a deadly smile and that sinful, nekid leg. It's like every dang human being ever lived was right there soaking it in—every boy in the world wanting her. Well, our Tripod, he gets all caught up in it and starts to barking in time with the beat and spinnin'

like a top, whilst ol' Connie done flicks out his tongue, tasting the performance. All of the 'Conda Club gang is smiling their pride out of them printed-up pictures and cardboard cutouts. Well, Punkin always got lost within her music and dancing down below, in the studio and in the club. But here, now, she was on a cloud, made of the pounding bass and the trilling of her voice and felt herself a mile above the earth—etherial and eternal.

Didn't thunk I knew words like that, did ya? Well, I don't. Them's what Punkin was thinking and I been just feeling her feelings and thinking her thoughts, is all. But I'm right on up in that cloud of music right beside her—and it be so glorious, I cain't draw a breath. Lucky I don't need to, n'more. Our Punkin can, though, no lie! That angel voice of hers be shredding the heavens and bringing tears to the eyes of real angels, I'm bettin'. And all the world done radiated in the power 'n purity of her voice. When that first tune faded, it seemed like the world crashed in on itself—so empty and cold were that silence, in comparison. Punkin, she held that last note, standing all straight and majestic. Her head lifted to heaven, her delicate, silk-wrapped arms out to the side—like the Savior on his cross. Only she looks defiant 'n proud instead of beaten-down and bloodied—free and alive, instead of nailed and dying. Tripod, he sets down hard on his puppy-butt and howls at the moon, who echoes that howl with a silence so profound it aches.

As the ache and emptiness of that silence done tears out the heart I ain't got n'more, a soft, distant rhythm starts to building and I'm saved by the next tune from her album, *'Death in Paradise'*. Where the first was sweet and sad and angelic, the next is hard and sharp and angry! Punkin, she starts to dance and sing and strut, like a body had had all she could take, of something she once felt powerless in the face of. Body language what said, *'get the f@#k outta my way, 'cuz I be done hidin'... and I'm comin' for ya'!!!!* It weren't that those were the lyrics or nothin', that's just how it hit me to hear it, is all.

Well, sir, Punkin done tore through all of *Killshot Punk's* album in a blur of wonder 'n glory. As the last cut come to a close, Punkin was standing, like she damn sure shouldn'ta been, right on the wall that bounded the rooftop, her back to the fourteen story drop, like it didn't concern her one bit. As the last electronical heartbeat of music faded, Tripod yipping his excitement, and me 'n Connie screaming out our delight all silent 'n all, same as the 'Conda Club gang, Punkin looked down at the street below. Well, sir, way down there, all undead ass to undead elbow, stood dozens of zombie folk just a-starin' on up

at the roof. The whole time her performance filled the air and the airways, them damn spacebug bastards drew on out of hiding and just stood there listening. Not trying to climb up, not acting all hungrified 'n all, just listening, like they was real people again—or the people inside was trying to regain control. And with the end of that music, they just started to act all undead again—shufflin' about and bumping into one another, y'know, 'cuz they was all bunched up close and was all brain-dead 'n all.

None looked up after that. None acted like they smelt warm blood or nothin', maybe 'cuz we was so high up above 'em, or whatever. But slowly, they all moved off, back into the shadows and out of the bright moonlight. Well, this give our Punkin a thought. She had a tiny remote jammed into her cleavage to operate the music and lights and cameras, so she punched up one of her songs again and let it play. Well, sir, some of them undead, they done slowed up and come on back. But when Punkin's angel voice come back, they *all* turned and shambled back over, all crammed together like folks at the verge of a concert stage, all mesmerized-like—just staring and listening. It sent a thrill and a shudder up one spine that was still in use, and another, don't exist n'more. And so, Punkin, she just stares on down at them all and they all stares on up at her, like she was a rock 'n roll diva—them, all hungry for every scrap of sound, the way they was usually hungry for flesh.

And it give our Punkin a thought.



Well, in the aftermath of that little concert on the rooftop, Punkin kept seeing them undead all mesmerized by her music. Raw ideas were spinnin' about in her head all that day and she spent part of it down in the garage. After unhitching the trailer from the Hummer and swinging the big, armored truck on around to face out, she set to guttin' the speaker system in it. Connie, he'd put a few grand into the sound systems of his Caddie and the Hummer, his two favorite rides. So, Punkin, she relocates all them kick-ass speakers and the base woofer up onto the roof of the Hummer, facing out in all directions. Zip-ties and bungees would be good enough for this test. If it went well, she would try to weld up a cage, or something, to anchor and protect them for later. She redirected the spotlights to shine in every direction.

The whole time down there working, she kept remembering how absolutely free she had felt up there on that roof, under the full moon and the clear sky, lost in her music 'n dance. Compared to that, the garage felt like a tomb—nothin' but concrete up, down 'n sideways. Connie's 'coffin' done got smaller 'n smaller feeling to her, and she got more 'n more pissed-off at them spacebug monsters up topside.

Her topside, humanity's topside!

It was time to take it all back! If this sliver of an idea panned-out, *Killshot Punk* was gonna make personal appearances all over this city. *Free* concerts,

she thunk with a grim humor. Not free 'cuz they didn't cost nothin' — *free* concerts 'cuz she intended to *free-up* every last victim of them bugs from outer space. *Free-up* the earth from them bastards, block by block, city by city, if it took the rest of her born days!

...

Well, sir, next evening our Punkin, she gets all set up for a test of her idea. She didn't want to take Tripod out with her, but no way he would let her lock him up or leave him in the garage. She kind of needed the moral support he give to her, too. This would be the first time she ever went out *looking* for the undead. It weirded her out more than a little. As strong and determined as she'd been for two days since she seen them undead gawkin' at her performance, it was crumbling to dust purty-damn quick, now. She knew she could just stay inside that big ol' military truck and stay safe. Without the trailer, it was way easier to maneuver and had no place undead folk could hide out and try to eat her when she drove back into the complex. Even if it all went all '*worst-case fiasco*' on her, that there Gatlin' gun up top could cut a path through a gosh-dang brick wall. It would make smoke 'n sparkles out of even a army of undead, if it come to it. In the end, that was what compelled her to push on through the iron-cold dread that flooded her veins and she got in and hovered her delicate finger over the '*open*' button for the big ol' steel door.

Punkin hadn't gone through her ritual of dressing for the outing. She just put on a no-nonsense ol' leather flight jacket from *Dubya-Dubya-Two*, from Connie's military surplus gear in the supply room, over skintight leather pants and a black leather vest that was tailored-up to be both vest and bra, them same jingly, army boots of Zebra's on her feet. She always wore fingerless leather gloves 'cuz she liked the grip it give her without making her fingers clumsy 'n insensitive. She done took twelve deep breaths, her hand still poised over the garage door opener on the dashboard. She checked the monitor by the door what showed her the outside spy-camera views. It was just about dusk outside, so she kicked on the outside flood lights what done two things. First, they let her see all the camera views clear 'n bright, even as it got dark. Second, was the fact that all that bright light would repel them undead, might otherwise come around the club.

"Well, Tripod... we ready?" Punkin asked her copilot, gigglin' a bit,

remembering the ol' bumper sticker she just found in the garage file cabinet and put on the Hummer, what said, '*Dog is my Copilot.*' Well, that laugh was just what the doctor ordered. It shook loose her dread just enough she banged her fist down on the door opener and as it opened like the great maw of a dark beast from a little girl's hell, out they roared.

...

Punkin, she wanted to get a ways from the 'Conda Club neighborhood and into a wider-open space, so she drove that gigantic ol' Hummer right on past the turn to the 'Grub-4-Less' and closer to downtown. She looked just a bit like a little, tiny baby driving a regular-sized car. Tripod, he done jumped up on that there big, ol' dashboard and jammed his aquiline nose right on up against the windshield. His thick, muscular tail was waggin' so hard, it nearly sent him off to the floor boards.

When Punkin saw a park, one she could still remember going to with her 'Conda Club family, all of them long, lonely years ago, she knew it was time to test her theory. She pulled that ol' Hummer right dead-center in the midst of that broken down playground what hadn't seen live, warm-blood children since she was six. '*Dead center*', that term done set funny in her head, even more so in her heart. She swallowed it on down and hit the play button on the Hummer's sound system, ramping the volume all the way up. Then she turned on the tiny video cameras she set up in the cab. Well, sir, as that album of Killshot Punk done tears open the silence of that dark, dead place, what used to be teeming with innocent joy 'n love every day of the week before them damn bugs come on down, our skin went all '*goosefleshy*'. Well, Punkin's did. Mine sure as heck felt like it, but, as I keep realizing, I ain't got no flesh to goose-on-up.

We all sat there waiting. Well, *Punkin* sat. Tripod, he done run all about that Hummer interior and I, well, I was just there, I guess—hoverin' or whatnot. Well, it weren't too awful long before the far shadows, they starts to waverin' about. Then, the silhouettes of undeads, shambling on out of whatever dark holes they been skulkin' in all day, start to coalesce out of the murk—first, one or two, then several. By the end of the first cut, I counted over thirty of 'em out there. Just like when the release party done drew 'em on out, back at the club, they all come up real close and gets to be shoulder to shoulder out there—but

they don't go all feral 'n desperate. They just gawk, with a look behind them cold, dead spacebug eyes, almost looked human—almost looked alive—like the folk trapped-up inside were pushing to the fore. It was like the music done woke up them poor bastards what had no control before and probably still didn't. If you looked at them real hard—which put a awful chill through me—you could see their undead hunger fighting with a sense of wonder 'n hope. It dang near stole all of Punkin's fury 'n determination away to stare at all them dead, bluish faces. But, before she could lose her nerve, she done hit the outside spotlights what she had pointed out in every direction.

Them spacebug zombies didn't like all that bright, no sir, but they couldn't pull away from the music. That bit of undead hunger you could see fighting with hope 'n wonder, it done got a bit of a cringin' fear to it now, just made the hope look all the stronger. Like them dumb spacebugs done knew they was caught like bugs in a spider's web. Then, out comes our little spider-gal, Punkin, right up through the turret gun hatch. “Tripod!... Stay!! Hear me?!” She called down to a yelpin', angry TP. “Stay! Dammit,... Tripod... I *mean* it!” Well, our Tripod, he does as he's told, but he don't like it none, let me tell *you*, boy. So, I'm figuring our sweet, li'l Punkin, she's gonna set up in that turret and spray 'em all down with hot Gatling-gun lead, but she don't. She climbs on out and stands up on that Hummer's roof like she be the queen of the world, just staring at them transfixed undead. Then I damn near crap the pants I ain't wearin' as she somersaults right on off the safety of that there truck roof, right in among them spacebug hulks. She lands in a low crouch and I lose sight of her for a ugly second 'r two. Then she stands up all proud 'n calm, not even an undead arm's reach from some of them zombies. Damned if she don't just look deep into them undead eyes with the kind of look ol' Jesus must've give to them lepers in the Good Book—sad 'n compassionate-like, with a tiny smile, so innocent 'n sweet, it could break the heart of a monster.

Well, sir, I be damned if them undead don't just stare at her like she been the very salvation they don't realize they craved. As the music throbs and builds, our brave, beautiful, courageous Punkin, she just strolls about through them dazed, undead folk, searching every face—every pair of undead eyes—like she was sayin' goodbye to them what were trapped within. Them dang zombies, they just eddied about her like algae floatin' in a pond she been wadin' through, spreading out around her as she moves and curling back in behind her as she passes. Where Punkin got the strength of will, *hell*, the

sheer *'gal-balls'* to do it, I'll never know. If I had still been alive, I'da fell over dead of fright, right then 'n there. But while KSP was raging through them speakers, our Punkin, she strolls all about that there kiddie-park full of undead, marking every single trapped soul, frozen in the ecstasy of her angelic voice—with the crazy-weird beat of her e-lectronical music, soaring 'n weaving about one another in its mystical way.

As she come full circle about the Hummer, she stops cold at the edge of a bunch of little-kid toys. There, settin' on one of them springy, tippy-toy things, warm-blood kids used to ride on laughing 'n playing, was a undead not even three-foot tall. She must've been about the same age as Punkin was when them bugs from space done come down. She was wearing Sesame Street jammies what were so torn 'n stained it was almost impossible to read the logo printed on what was left of the top. She had one ruined fuzzy-bunny slipper on one foot, the other one bare 'n filthy. Clutched in her dead, little arms was a terrible-dirty, raggedy doll, couldn't tell n'more what it once was. That teeny, li'l zombie-gal, she hugged that there scrap of dolly like it were the very last shred of love left in the world, just starin' deep into Punkin's beautiful green eyes. Punkin's hand come up and cupped that dead little face under her dead little chin, the way a mama or a grandma might. I'm halfway bawlin' and halfway getting ready to scream at her not to touch the poor, dead thing, when our Punkin, she leans in and brushes her full, living lips against the top of that zombie-baby's head. Then, lips still lingering on that foul, undead hair, her free hand it draws that cold, awful, Glock on out of its holster and raises it up to rest against the little zombie-gal's pale, cold temple.

...

Well, sir, I don't know if Punkin, she realized that the next tune, *'Hell to the Chief'*, was just about to split open the night with its pounding beat and angry, raging fire, but as it did, she pulled that there trigger and did not stop until that song was over 'n done.

It was the damndest dang thing I ever seen, the way them undead just moved into position to be shot. Not attacking, nor running away, just drawn to our Punkin like Christians receiving the sacrament at church, or them folks in bread-lines during the Great Depression. They looked all quiet 'n sad 'n calm—just waiting patiently on their turn for salvation. When that last tune faded,

Punkin touched the button on her remote what paused the playback. She had never even moved from that one tippy-toy where that poor little undead girl bin settin'. Well, sir, tears was flowin' like floodwater down Punkin's cheeks and causing her heaving cleavage to shimmer in the flood lights like it was encased in liquid glass. When Tripod done jumped up through the gun turret hatch like he weren't supposed to, he raced on over to his Punkin and hopped up against her legs till she squatted down to scoop him on up. She hugged on him like *that*, alone, kept her heart from crumbling to dust.

Well, now, as she started to stand up to walk on back to the Hummer, she seen that poor little gal's ruined doll and snatched it on up and hugged it to her breast with one arm, whilst she hung on to TP with the other. Before she left that lonely place, she picked up everything that might've identified anyone who bin took over, then liberated by them terrible Glocks. When they got back to the complex, Punkin, she got out a big ol' empty box and put it by the garage door. In it she put all the little treasures and identifying trinkets from all them poor folk, in case there ever was a chance to identify the deceased—put 'em to rest, proper-like. All but the religious tokens some of them wore, those went on the altar or around her neck.

Then our Punkin, she went on up to find Connie and curled up in them big, yeller coils, with Tripod and that ruined doll, and drained Uncle Connie's flask, lettin' the oblivion of sleep swaller down her heartache.



After her experiment, Punkin, she had a fire blaze-up inside her like she never felt before. There was a glow to her, in her eyes and kinda all about her, really, that I never seen in anyone. A calm certainty crept over her what got deeper and stronger with time. Near every night now, she would go out and find a spot to park the Hummer and play *KSP* music through them speakers until all the undead within earshot had crawled on out from the dark corners they haunted during the bright, sunny summer days. She captured each mission on video and added it to the broadcast loop. The box by the garage door was getting so full of wallets and watches, rings and other jewelry—even the occasional titanium hip or knee—she had to add another box, then another still.

Punkin got bolder 'n bolder during the daylight hours. At first, it was just up on the roof above the Anaconda Gentleman's Club and Exotical Emporium that she and a purty-much full-grow'd Tripod would hang out and soak up the sun and breathe the fresh air. But after a month or so, she done started to go out there in the streets. She took the ATV, Gretl, most times, in the daylight. It didn't have a sound system in it, being a no-nonsense military-type machine, but Punkin, she done fixed that up with a speaker system had once been in the Caddie. She used the little iPod she had with her in the 'Grub-4-Less' that time, when the earbuds damn near got her all ate on up by them undead she

couldn't hear. Y'know, when our brave, li'l Tripod done saved her. When she was in Gretl, she had the iPod plugged into them speakers, just in case some enterprisin' undead come on out into the light o' day to feed. That hadn't happened yet, but she knew better than to push her luck.

Punkin's mood went two separate directions at once during that time. Being out and free in the sunshine done made her heart all light 'n joyous, but seeing all them poor trapped souls every night pulled a cold, wet blanket over her heart that even the glory of the next sunrise couldn't seem to pull free. She seemed to rise up in the morning weighed-down like a hunnerd-year-old hag with the weight of the world on her shoulders. Then, slowly she would get as light 'n playful as the six-year-old she was before *The End* done crashed on down from the heavens. Me 'n Tripod, we loved *that* Punkin best of all, we did, and Tripod, he showed it in his excited waggle of a walk, his big, strong tail whippin' his three-legged back-end all about. Then, as dusk come pressin' on down around them shoulders, the weight of the world come on back and she got all '*older 'n wiser*' looking at first. Focused and determined, she'd get, like a queen what now put her own needs 'n pleasures aside to look after the welfare of her people, no matter how hard 'n harsh that might be.

Made me *proud*, it did. Made me heartsick, too. Our Punkin, she was still but a young gal who shoulda been gossiping with her friends and taunting horny teenage boys with her burgeoning womanhood—dancing and dressin' up, eating junk food and watchin' movies.

But Punkin, she had a sacred mission, she did. Out there in the world was most of mankind, all took-over and trapped-up inside them horrors from outer space. Our Punkin, she was never gonna be free until every last trapped soul was free, if it took every ounce of her courage and every scrap of energy God done give her. But we both knew, even *that* weren't never gonna be enough, not by half. The world was just too big a place and the tragedy was too far-flung and too extensive for one little gal to fix, even in *several* lifetimes. That was what made of her a hunnerd-year-old crone, each 'n every morning.

If the human race stood a chance, there had to be others, and them others had to take up the quest she started. But Punkin, she knew if any others were still out there—still breathing, still hiding, still running for their lives—they needed to know what she had discovered. She spent part of every damn day listening to the most likely signals her spy-scan software had picked out of the endless static of the airwaves. She had a folder in the computer with clips of

sound she'd copied-over of anything sounded like it might be human-sent. It stoked her hope that there was *any* at all. But, thus far, she couldn't even say for sure that any of that broke-up, statickey stuff was actually human voices.

Punkin realized she had the ability, theoretical anyway, to broadcast her own signal far, far further than she was able to hear coming in from others. So she spent part of every day researching how to get it stronger, and projected further. Punkin was smart, near genius, her teacher said once, but she had no learnin' past first-grade level, except what she done figured out herself—which were considerable, but, still. She fought hard to stay upbeat and confident. A body got a lotta time for second guessin' itself, when it's all alone in the big, wide, empty world. I cain't do one damn thing to help her. I ain't no smarty-pants geek kinda guy—least, I'm purty sure I wasn't—but even if I had any ideas at all, I'd have no damned way to tell Punkin.

Well sir, she come to the conclusion that if she could tie into one of the broadcast towers in the city, she could reach a thousand mile or more. But for that, she had to get on up top of one of them high-rise buildings with the equipment to do it. Connie's secret files told her which buildings he tied into, y'know, 'case all hell done broke loose. But, so far, except to forage for supplies, Punkin, she hadn't gone inside *any* buildings, but her own. There'd be no way to take the Hummer or Gretl up into a skyscraper, so she would be back to her original vulnerability to zombie attack if she did. The idea of traveling fitty or sixty floors in one of them '*coffin-on-a-string*' elevators, all closed in-like, well, it done crippled her some. The longer it went on, the more certain she got that she'd *have* to do it. At the rate she was liberating trapped souls, it'd take a lifetime just to clear out this one city. The earth would never win free of them dang spacebugs without other folk doing the same as her, and, even if there were able-bodied warmbloods left in the world, they might never get the nerve to try it, if they didn't see it could be done.



Then, one day, the best and the worst happened all together—sort of. Punkin and Tripod come back from a recon mission, planning where they'd go that night to draw out and put down some undead. As they rolled back on into the garage and got on out, Tripod he done run off out under that there closing-down steel garage door.

“Tripod! *Dammit*, Boo-Boo!... Where the hell...” Punkin yelled, swattin' the open button for the door, but it had to shut all the way before it would lift back up. “Come back here!” Well, I can tell *you*, our Punkin, her heart started to pounding and her breath come all short and hard. Her skin got all clammy and the chill of the garage done went right on through to the bone. As the door lifted back up, so slow Punkin wanted to scream, she imagined her Tripod out there attacking a whole army of the undead—or worse, getting eat up by 'em.

She grabbed that cut-off shotgun by the door as she skidded on her side and rolled under that slow-as-molasses door. As she come on up into a dead run she spun about, three times or four, looking for dead faces to shoot, but there *weren't* none! When she finally let herself search down low for ol' Tripod, it took a full three or four seconds for her brain to recognize what her eyes done seen. Her heart sunk in a whole different way than it had a minute before. Right up there near the top of the slanted driveway where Tripod—whole and, not only alive, but all aggervated to beat the band. He was yelpin' with a pain

worse than when he got his li'l ol' leg chomped off, leaping about and growling, but his body were all in one piece. Well, except for that lower leg what been gone since he was a pup. It was his li'l ol' doggie heart what was dyin' on him.

There, slithering on up that old driveway, slow as mud oozin' uphill, was Connie, poor Tripod spinning and yipping up a storm all about him. It was like they was operating at two entirely different speeds. Punkin realized ol' Connie, he musta come all the way down to the garage when she and TP went out reconnaisizin'. Then he musta waited, probably all curled up, right there by the door, waitin' on it to open on up agin. Guess poor ol' Connie, he got tired of waiting for Punkin to let him on out. Probably a good thing, too, Punkin was thinking. Left to her own mercy, she'd maybe never let him go—and he wanted out, he surely did. He'd already crawled further that day than he had in the last month or more, just to get on down to a door he musta know'd would finally open, sometime.

With that realization, our sad, little Punkin, she done scanned about for danger, but it was still midafternoon, and plenty bright enough to keep undead folk back in them dark places. So, shotgun resting up on her shoulder, Punkin walked all slow 'n mournful up to and alongside her longtime friend, what had saved both her life *and* her soul, cryin' softly—strangely enough, without no tears. She figger'd she'd been preparing for this day for a long damn time. She was more grateful than she could put into words, that Connie saved her the decision she woulda beat herself all up about for years 'n years, by letting *himself* out. That was one helluva noble critter, our li'l Connie, I tell you! And I'll be damned if I weren't all heartsick myself to see him go. Not just 'cuz it hurt Punkin and poor, goofy Tripod, too—It hurt *me!* I don't know if I was one hunnerth the friend to anyone as ol' Connie been to our Punkin, back when I been breathing. And I'd bet good money that I wasn't nowhere near as noble a beast—ever.

Well, sir, Punkin, she just marches along with Connie, rememberin' all their time together and every so often looking about for undead, so not to be surprised, unpleasant-like. Poor Tripod's pain-racked yipping woulda been comical to see, if it weren't so heartbreaking to hear his poor, sad puppy voice all full of pain. Tripod knew exactly what was happening, leastways enough to know he didn't like it one bit. As Connie licked at the cool, dark shadow of the rain gutter, his ol' yeller head done turned back to Punkin and she laid down

next to him, right there on the asphalt. It was nice 'n warm from the sun, and she give him one last cuddle 'n kiss, letting him slither right on through her arms, that she just couldn't quite let go with. Tripod was caught between licking Punkin's sadness away and looking to her like he wanted to ask, *'you just gonna let him go?'*

But she *was*, sure as shoot, she was!

So, just as Connie's ol' yeller head was starting down into that there storm drain, it coiled back out to look, snout-to-snout, with his puppy buddy, what he once thought was a wiggly *snack*, and flicked that ol' tongue at TP. Tripod, he done snapped down on that there red ribbon of a tongue, what *he* once thought was a wiggly snack, and made one last growly objection. Connie swallowed on up the play between them 'til his scaly snout was tickling TP's furry one. Tripod let go of the rest of that ol' tongue and licked the tip of Connie's snout—yippin' one last, lonely time, as Connie turned away and oozed on down into that comforting darkness.

As the last of ol' Connie's considerable length played out through Punkin's arms, she pushed up to kneeling, right there in the street, checking once again for unwanted guests. Connie moved so slow, even on that sun-warmed pavement, it was near dusk as the last few feet of his body slid on into that storm drain's gaping maw. Tripod, he'd snatched that ol' tail tip, the one he done shortened-up a bit when he was an excitable li'l pup. He growled and pulled at it like he would drag ol' Connie back out—and back home. Well, that ol' leather cover Punkin put on Connie's tail, to keep TP from nibbling off the tip, it come loose in Tripod's jaws and the last of ol' Connie slipped right on down into darkness.

“C'mon Tripod...” Punkin, she says in a surprisingly steady voice, “Let's get back home.” Tripod, he looks up and shakes his head like it was soaking wet, then he looks at her all perplexed. “C'mon, boy... Connie's where he wants to be.” She patted her leg and TP, he comes along reluctantly, stopping every few feet to look on back to see if Connie been coming too.

Just as Punkin stepped back into that cold, dark garage, feeling considerably colder and darker than when she'd run out, Tripod dropped that there tailpiece and took off racing back out, growling like the devil himself was a-comin'. Well, our Punkin seen why and was racing on out right behind him. As she crested the driveway, Tripod, he slammed into the undead that had shuffled out of the dark and was crouched on down, fishin' in that there storm drain with one

undead arm. The momentum of his impact pushed over that damned spacebug thing so hard Punkin could hear the soft, wet snap of the dead arm bone that was trying to grab their Connie, as it leveraged back, caught in the drain.

Our Punkin, she tossed down that there scatter-gun, afraid it would get TP if she used it. Then she pulled one of her Glocks from its holster and just as Tripod leaped at that undead throat, Punkin squeezed off a shot that took it clean through the temple. TP just sailed on through that sparklin', swirlin' stuff and tumbled across the street. Punkin snatched him on up before he could run back, turned, grabbed the shotgun she had tossed down and ran back in, hitting that there close button. Laying on the concrete, squeezing TP to her side real tight, so he didn't run off again, she watched under the closing door for more undead.

But that one was the *only* one, it seemed.

...

For the next several days, ol' Tripod, he carried that there tailpiece of Connie's everywhere he went. First time Punkin could get it away from him, while he slept, she got some yeller food coloring from the kitchen and dyed that scrap of 'conda tail covering the same color as ol' Connie was. Close enough, anyway. That poor Tripod, he slept with that yeller thing, what smelt like his ol' friend, from that day onward, worryin' it with his teeth as he dozed at night.

Punkin was amazed that she handled the loss of that ol' yeller snake as well as she had. But one thing about that day that really shook her up, was the sight of her brave ol' Tripod attacking that there undead. She knew he'd do that again to protect her, sure as sugar! Even if he was too fast and strong to get caught and et all up, the way he'd been about to chomp on down on that dead thing put a terrible fright into her. She didn't honestly know whether or not he would be infected if he got a muzzleful of spacebug flesh, but it would be too late to do anything about it—but put a slug in his cute, goofy face—if he did. So she started to think on how she could outfit her brave companion, so it couldn't never happen.

Something crazy come to her, right then 'n there.



The other thing that happened, on that day ol' Connie left, was a signal come on in over the airwaves that had a human voice. Punkin didn't know it was there for a few days, tore up as she was by the loss of that ol' yeller snake.

Punkin was planning-up, in her head, what she could do about Tripod and his bullheaded approach to attacking the undead, least-ways when one of his friends needed protecting. She was at the computer researching some stuff when she noticed the flashing icon on the screen that said her search program had found another possible signal. She was on a roll, feeling the fragility of her one remaining friend, now that the only other one she had had since she was teeny, was gone, so she was prepared to ignore it for now. If something happened to her Tripod, well, sir, our Punkin weren't prepared to think none on that—let me tell you!

That flashing cartoon-spy icon kept grabbing at her subconscious—not that it flashed any faster or changed color or anything—it just, well, she didn't know. It just kept grabbing at her attention, until, finally, she put aside her puppy-armor idea and went on and opened up the file, put on the big headphones and listened.

Well, now, I can't never hear what she hears with them things on—but I could feel her emotions. It was a voice—a real *human* voice. Almost like she knew I was listening—which she didn't, of course—she switched to the

outside speakers as she got up to pace.

It was weak as all get-out—maybe coming from a long way off, or just was half-assed broadcast equipment pushing it out—but there was definitely a human voice and English words that was breaking up so badly on them there speakers.

“...y one out there...” She heard, then a minute of nasty-staticy nothin', followed by, “...obby McInt... ..ing to reach Killunk... Heard musi...” More than two or three minutes of nothing you could make out, followed that, then, “...is is Bobby Mc...”. A short break ended with, “... illshot Pun.....re you out th...” then there was nothin' again, after that.

Punkin listened to that clip over 'n over again for hours, but the static was always too much to hear past. She came to the conclusion that out there, somewhere, was a real live, warmblood human being—someone named Bobby Mc-something. She took to thinking of this person as *'Bobby-Mac'* and she couldn't even say for sure if it was a boy or a girl—a man or woman. The voice was just too weak to say for sure.

Part of her, afraid to hope, kept telling her it might be a TV program or some broadcast that was just looped over 'n over, saying the same short bit of dialogue. Something left running by folk long dead. But the rest of her kept pushing that aside. It sounded like that voice was saying *'Killshot Punk'* in there. If that was so, then this mysterious Bobby Mac must've heard her album release party broadcast. The odds of him, or her, using that term all accidental-like, well it was just too high for her to imagine. It just wasn't a common combination of words for a person to use. Granted, it was still far from certain that the pieces of words she heard were actually her band's name, but it sounded like the word *'music'* came right after the pieces of words that sounded like the name of her band.

She searched through the likeliest sound clips her program had found since that one broadcast, but, like before, she couldn't find anything she could definitely call a human voice or an English word. It was exciting and deflating all in a jumble, almost worse than not having heard it at all. Punkin wanted to get back to her ideas about protecting Tripod, but that dang Bobby Mac kept intruding on her thoughts.

Finally, she went into Connie's sound studio and recorded a short clip with one cut of her music and a short statement from her, in just plain talk. “This is Punkin Brustah of Killshot Punk... I am still here and safe... If you can hear

this broadcast, please send out your signal.” She added some technical information about the bandwidth she could best receive and such. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, “Bobby Mac... I hear you... Please send back... Stronger if you can.” Our Punkin, heart in her throat, made up an endless loop of that short clip and sent it out on as wide a range of wavelengths as she could.

Well, sir, the weeks after that were a slow burn of hope, fading to hopelessness. Several times a day she would check her spy software for a likely signal. But the few times it had found anything at all, Punkin couldn't discern nothin' that sounded like either a human voice or English words.

So, slowly, she went back to the business of liberating folks from their zombie prisons—but to say her heart weren't in it, would be a understatement.

...

Before Punkin would let TP on out topside, she created a sort of 'kill suit' for him. She'd seen him in action enough to know two things—one, he always knocked them down like he was a tiny bull. Being a Bull Terrier, Punkin thought it was purty apt. But once he did that, his instinct was to rip them up with his powerful jaws, and that was what absolutely terrified our Punkin. She still didn't know if getting spacebug flesh in his mouth or in his belly would infect him, but there was absolutely no way to find out, but to let him. Then, if it was true, it would be all over for li'l Tripod, who just wasn't all that little n'more. He was a big ol' mass of muscle now, he was, though he was still only up to her knee when he stood next to her.

Much as she hated doing it, much as Tripod hated it more—much more—Punkin made him a leather muzzle. She made it so it didn't squeeze his jaws tight-closed, but stayed on real good, anyway. So he could growl and bark and let her know just how much he hated it on him, but, in time, he done put up with it. Hell, he'd have put up with almost anything his Punkin asked of him, so long as she let him stay at her side. That was the part made Punkin feel best and made Tripod feel worst. Knowing TP wasn't likely to turn undead on her, just following his instinct, trying to protect his Punkin, that put aside a bone-deep dread she could hardly let herself acknowledge.

Well, now, the rest of ol' Tripod's new zombie-fightin' gear was right crazy-looking. Punkin dug on through this ol' costume trunk of one of Connie's gals,

Rhonda, who once had a lap dog she made costumes for that matched some of her own costumes. Punkin barely remembered that ol' dog of hers, she was only three when it went to live on a farm. Now that she was a big girl, our Punkin realized that had been a metaphor for 'died'. Well, sir, she had no intention of letting her Tripod get sent off to no fictional farm by no damned undead, so she worked real hard on TP's gear. The fact that several days passed without her going out and puttin' down any undead, didn't matter too much to Punkin. If she was gonna be doing this for the rest of her life, she wanted her TP right there with her, until his time run out, natural-like. That was something else Punkin didn't want to think on. Best-case scenario, she would still live *much* longer than her three-legged buddy. After losing li'l Connie, that thought burned a hole in her heart *and* her calm. Being, maybe, the last human alive on earth, our Punkin done her level best not to look too far into that future. She had a sacred calling, and that would crumble to dust if she let herself fall into a pit of depression, what she'd have no way to get out of, especially if she was all alone. Shaking her head, the way Tripod did when he got wet, she jumped off that there train of thought. As she made the last few adjustments to Tripod's outfit, she put it on him and laughed. He was a sight, all right! One of the doggie outfits Rhonda done made up, was a World War II fighter pilot outfit. It's little brown leather flight helmet was way too small for TP's Bull Terrier skull. It's little doggie goggles actually fit them 'slightly-too-small-for-his-head' eyeballs of his just fine. Looked cool as heck, too, and if shredded zombie flesh could infect from getting into his little eyes, this would fix that right up. That there little doggie leather flight jacket of Rhonda's, it fit TP about as good as a baby's nightshirt would fit a pro wrestler. But with some creative touches—and three times the leather was in the original—it fit Tripod like it was made for him, which it was, now. The only thing left was Tripod's ability to finish what he starts when he knocks one of them dang undead off'n their undead feet. For a bit, Punkin thought about some way to add a gun to his outfit, maybe a prison-like zip-gun or something. But the idea he might accidentally shoot her in the leg or something put that idea back in the drawer, real quick. It was when she was wandering the weapon's stash of Connie's that it hit her—literal-like.

She was bent down looking through bins full of old war surplus odds 'n ends, when she backed up and got poked, right in the backside. As she jumped up and yelled, Tripod ran over and grabbed hold of what poked her and shook it

loose of the pile of old crap, growling 'n chopping on it. “Hold up, Tripod!... What 'cha got there?” Punkin called over, rubbing her perky, perforated bottom. Well, now, I knew what it was right away, but Punkin puzzled over it a minute till she saw another just like it hanging off the barrel of an old Springfield rifle. It was a World War I bayonet, sort of a giant ice pick with a bent end, with a round ring on the bent end to slip over the barrel of a rifle. It was for pokin' enemy soldiers with, if your gun was empty or you were in close quarters and couldn't aim a rifle.

Once Punkin seen the one on the old rusty rifle hanging on the wall above the bin it was in, she put it all together. She took that there jacket of TP's and made a reinforced belt for it and riveted it on dead center on the back. Then she found a big brass ring what was part of a belt or something and used leather and rivets to hold that right on the top of Tripod's leather flight helmet. When she was certain it was all real solid-made 'n all, she called over Tripod, who jumped up on the sewing table and stood real still like he know'd what she was doin'.

After she got it all strapped on solid-like, she stepped back to check her handiwork. Well, sir, that there dog, he was just the cutest damned 'killing machine' you'd ever wanna see, all dressed-up like he was a copilot in a World War I biplane or something. That ol' bayonet, it set on his back, the end that used to go on a gun barrel, all hitched up solid at his shoulders. The pointy end, Punkin done slipped right on through the ring atop his leather flight helmet and it jutted several inches out past his snout.

“TP... look over here, boy!” Punkin called. When he did, that ol' bayonet point, it done swiveled right along with his head, fixed-up solid at his shoulders. “Look down boy... Down, look down...” she continued, tapping on the table he was standing on. With the loose pivot of that ring on his helmet, he had free range of motion in that crazy rig, and everywhere he pointed his snout, he done pointed that there bayonet. So far, so good! “Good boy, Tripod!” She praised, and ol' Tripod, he damn near jumped up to lick her face, which woulda poked her right 'tween the eyes. “Okay, down boy... We'll have to work on that. No jumping up on me when you're in your soldier suit!... Okay?” That dern dog, he was all confused 'n sad that he couldn't be a lovey puppy-dog when he had that suit on, but he done got over it right quick—and Punkin, she didn't sharpen up the tip of that pokin' stick 'til he did.

Our Punkin was purty-sure she could get into the settings for that Zom-B

trainer downstairs and set it up to trace knife-fight scenarios. It was the figgering how to get it to recognize the bayonet and TP too, so he could practice his knockdown 'n stab technique, that flummoxed her. For now, she took one of the CPR dummies Connie had, so his gals would know how to resufficate if one of them old lechers ever got over excited in the club, and marked in bright red bull's-eyes the most vulnerable places on the head and neck, as best she could figure from her search of medical data files. She'd heard that dogs see in black 'n white, but red stood out real obvious-like against the light-colored dummy, so she figured he could see them just fine. It took a bit of trial 'n error to get Tripod to attack one. She got behind it and made it walk, making that growly sound the undead make when they's feedin', the same as she heard when Tripod's littermates got all ate-on up. But it wasn't until she had the bright idea of turning the dummy around and acting like it was attacking her that Tripod went all 'Cuckoo-for-Cocoa Puffs'. When she did, he knocked the thing right out of her hands and tried to tear it up with his muzzled-up jaws. So Punkin, she gets an inspiration and grabs that bayonet right between the back end and the loop on his helmet and done jabs it right into some of them bull's-eyes, like TP was some deadly spy briefcase with legs or whatnot. Well, it took all day for him to get the hang of it, but by dusk, our Tripod was wiping out that CPR-zombie so relentlessly, that dang dummy head done come completely off.

“*That's my boy!*” Punkin called down to Tripod, now running about the sewing room with that ol' dummy head skewered on the end of that helmet bayonet like some gruesome squish kebab. Like them carrot farmers used to hang out in front of a stubborn mule to convince it to start to movin' along.

...

Well, now, that cool, ridicalus-lookin' set-up paid a premium, not one week later. Punkin was more settled in her heart about losing Connie, and had let go of her hourly scan for another signal from Bobby Mac—or anyone else for that matter. She done got back to her nightly task of drawing out and terminating the undead. At the end of this night's set, she'd played to gather in and enthrall the undead, she was gathering up remembrances of folk from where they fell when them undead bodies done e-vaporated, or whatever the hell it is they do. Ol' Tripod, he'd just left them trance-like zombie be, not feeling his

Punkin was in any danger, I'm guessing. *'Just as well'*, Punkin was thinking, if Tripod never went near one, *ever*, that would be just hunky-dandy with her. He just stood up on the Hummer's roof and watched it all. This was the fourth time they been out hunting since he got his outfit, and all he ever done was watch.

Well, now, our Punkin, she done froze as she picked something up from a pile of filthy, torn clothes. It was a little beaded ankle bracelet, clearly made by a child. It was the li'l bitty bone bead in the middle that had caught her heart in a vise. Punkin knew exactly who the little child was who made it.

Her.

She had made one for every gal at the 'Conda Club for that last Christmas right before *The End*, the very last Christmas she had ever celebrated. Her mama had helped her engrave each gal's name on them bone beads and then they painted over it with red nail polish and wiped it off of the bead before it could dry—leaving the scratched-in name filled in with pretty, red enamel. This one was way too filthy to read the name on it. So, until she washed it off, she wouldn't know who it had been she had set free with her deadly Glock. She was froze solid and so deep in her emotions, she didn't hear nothing going on around her—not till a big, heavy weight done landed on her and knocked her over.

Lost as she'd been for them deadly few moments, she rolled with the impact and came up to standing with a gun in each hand, but she didn't squeeze off even a single round. There on the ground, where she'd just been, flailed an undead, on its back. Before she could even take aim, that dang zombie done blew up in a puff of smoke 'n sparkles. Right there, snapping and snarling in his leather muzzle, was good ol' Tripod, right where that hungry, undead head had been a second before. He was spinning about in his best helicopter-blade imitation, looking for more, or just unable to rev on down. That recently-sharpened bayonet point was scattering the sparkling remains and the beam of the floodlight, too. When he seen there were no more targets about, Tripod got all puppy-dog happy and ran at Punkin like he would jump on up on her. But he slid to a stop and sat his one-legged backside down in the dirt right at her feet, his tail a-waggin' so hard it done moved him around a bit. "Good *boy*, Tripod!" she called out breathlessly, carefully bending down to half-hug him as best she could without pokin' herself. She'd hug him-up for real, later, back home and stripped on out of that remarkably effective 'killin' suit. She'd wash off that bracelet too, back home where she could get all emotional without it

risking her life in the process.

...

Back in the shelter, Punkin got TP out of his '*kill suit*'. His snout was all sweaty from being in that muzzle and Punkin felt a glimmer of regret at doing that to him, but if it eliminated the chance of infection, it was a good thing. Tripod was getting used to it. She'd have to find a sports bottle with a long squeeze tube though, so he could drink plenty of water while he was in that rig. God forbid, if she were to die or get taken over while TP was in his muzzle, he'd starve to death, locked on into that thing. She vowed to herself to set up a way for TP to shed the thing if he had to, without making it likely to come off accidental-like—a snap or velcro fastener he could worry open with a paw or catch on an obstruction to pop it loose. She had a few seed ideas spinning in the back of her mind, but that dirty ankle bracelet dangling in her hand was calling to her. She stood at the bathroom sink for what could've been five minutes, could've been an hour. She wanted to read that name—had to know who it had been—but it was like cutting herself with a rusty butter knife just to take that last step closer to the sink and turn on the tap. Tripod sensed Punkin's mood and nuzzled at her bare leg with his damp muzzle, but she barely noticed. That handful of glass 'n bone beads on its elastic cord, what weighed barely more than a sheet of paper, felt like a ton of lead in her quavering grip.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, our Punkin, she had known some of her family may have '*survived*' as undead. In her mind, she had long ago buried them all, all peaceful-like, in the arms of their various Creators. She realized, just now, that she had never let her conscious mind entertain the possibility that they might be in that undead hell with all them other poor, innocent folk. That naïve bliss was about to shatter, forever. If this turned out to be her mama's bracelet, would she be relieved or horrified she had put a bullet into the skull of her own mother? She couldn't say! She didn't *want* to know, but she *had* to know.

The baleful whimper coming from her Tripod finally pushed her past her sticking spot. She bent down and scooped him on up and let him stand on the counter by the sink, for moral support. Punkin kissed his warm, dry nose and turned on the faucet. She waited a while for the hot water to build—or just for

the raw nerve to plunge that ol' bracelet into the stream and wash her innocence away with the dirt 'n grime obscuring that name. Thinking back, Punkin couldn't remember if her mom's bracelet said 'mama' or 'Sasha' on it. It was just too far back in a lifetime of dim memories—mostly awful. As the stream of hot water made the brownish clump of beads into shiny red 'n purple and the yellowed white of that bone bead, she felt like she might swoon. Just as her extremities got that tingly, cold feel you get just before your legs go all wobbly, the first letter of the name washed clear enough to see what it was. Most of the red enamel was chipped off or tainted with caked-in mud—but the letter itself were clear as a sunrise. 'Z'. It wasn't 'mama' nor 'Sasha', neither. It wasn't her mama's bracelet. It had belonged to Zebra, the half Cherokee gal that had started the roof garden.

Well, Punkin, she found herself sitting on the bathroom floor, her butt stinging from the fall she hadn't even noticed. Such a swirl of ragged emotion spun through her, she was glad for the solid feel of the cold, hard tiles. TP had leapt on down and was half in her lap, licking at her face as gentle-like as he might've cleaned newborn pups. Punkin stared at that bead, wavering in her sight from the tears welling up there. She tried 'n tried to find Zebra's face among the blur of undead faces that haunted her memories, but she couldn't do it. I'm figuring that to be a mercy, but I could be wrong. Better she remembered the often-serious, always kind 'n lovable, bronze-skinned beauty the way she had been when she was who she was before *The End*.

Would she have been able to squeeze that trigger, if she had recognized what was left of Zebra, in that mall courtyard? Would it have been easier or harder? Impossible or irresistible? Guess it don't matter. What's done, as they say, is done. Will it change Punkin's future outings? Will she look all the more deeply into all those undead eyes, or less?

When Punkin had recovered sufficiently to get up off the bathroom floor, she finished washing off that bracelet and went on over to the altar and hung it on the corner of a framed snapshot. It showed Zebra and her mama, hanging off'n each other, margaritas in their hands, at some rooftop party when she was just a baby. It was her favorite shot of Zebra. It showed that undefinable quality that was so, 'Zebra'. That her beautiful mama was in it too, and looking so happy 'n alive, well it hurt her too much, just then, to remember. But that would soften over time—all hurts did—slow as that process seemed to be.

...

Scared as Punkin was that she would find other evidence of family members in the leavings after her 'termination outings', it didn't happen again. I'm not sure if that was a relief to Punkin or not. Nothing about this mission of hers was easy. Only knowing she was freeing used-to-be people from that nightmare, kept her going. I wish I'd been able to tell her how certain I was that it was the right thing to do.

She had re-rigged TP's leather muzzle to be able to come off with effort. She taught him how to get it off, so, at least she knew he'd have a chance at survival if the worst happened to her. That was a comfort, of a kind—a cold comfort.

Very cold.

For a girl who'd witnessed the End of the World before her sixth birthday, a certain fatalism was to be expected. Fact is, it was a wonder she hadn't put one of them there Glocks to her own temple and just ended it all, and gone on to find her family. Personally, I'm of a mind that had she not had Tripod, and old Connie before that...

Well, I'm not gonna bother to finish that thought.

...

Ever since Punkin started sending out her endless loop of her music and her short speech, there had been an increase in likely sounding snatches of radio signals, but never enough to communicate with anyone. She had to accept that there might be at least three, maybe as many as six or seven, different voices on them recordings. Sometimes, it seemed like the voices were trying to speak to her. Sometimes it seemed they were talking to other voices. Never could she hear a whole sentence, but she was increasingly convinced it was more than one source and not some old TV broadcast just running on 'n on, long after its operators were dead, or worse. She had taken to assembling a loop of the most understandable clips and playing that softly as she fell asleep, or when she woke up cold 'n scared, all alone—which was nearly every single night.

...

Well, sir, whether Punkin's quest was more successful than she could hope, or the remaining undead were learning not to come around when she blasted her music from the Hummer, she couldn't say. But fewer 'n fewer undead were drawn to her nightly sessions. She was beginning to feel her reason for survival fading. Still she had no clear and obvious contact with any other warmblood folk, and fewer 'n fewer undead in her city—or smarter, more cautious undead. Now, *that*... that was a horrifying thought. Of all the harsh truths forced on our Punkin, the idea that them undead, spacebug bodies might be getting smarter, not just mindless hunger in physical form, well that darkened an otherwise very dark future even more.

When folks face such overwhelming horror, they got basically, two ways they can go. Either give up, or push on with religious-like fervor. Thank God, or whatever, Punkin chose the latter. Nothing mattered more to her now than getting this corner of the world clear of this plague, and getting word out about how she done it. For the first, she decided she needed to do it all bigger—for the second, well, the same thing.

Doing the terminating bigger was the more difficult, she figured. Doing the broadcasting bigger, was scarier—probably near as difficult, too. She'd have to get at least one of the secret transmission tie-ins, her uncle Connie had worked so hard and spent so much money on, up and running. That was gonna mean going inside one of the three tallest buildings in town and getting the emergency generator running and whatever else was required to connect with Connie's network. That meant going inside dark, close corridors and either elevators or stairwells. The smallest one had thirty or more floors. The Regis Building, the tallest, had over forty. So far, Punkin and Tripod hadn't gone into *any* buildings, but their own. Except to dash on in and grab supplies—usually on the ground floor—then hightail it on out. The idea of being inside so huge and scary a place as them hi-risers, well it made Punkin's skin crawl. You cain't bring the Hummer, or even Gretl, inside a building. Cain't flood the air with her music to soothe any savage undead breast, neither. But, it had to be done, and she knew it.

As for the other part, the going bigger with the termination concerts, well, she had some ideas about that, too. There was a lotta planning to be done, a lotta setting up of things. All she had was her own self and a brave, three-legged pooch who'd have done anything for his Punkin—but simply wasn't able to do

much at all, but to keep Punkin company, and to keep her safe. That he'd surely do, until he breathed his very last doggie breath.



For the next couple of weeks, Punkin, she didn't get out at night for the putting down of the undead. Wasn't really necessary, since what she planned, what she was gonna have to work hard to prepare, was gonna end *all* the undead in this city, that could be herded up by her music—if it worked, that is. If it didn't, well it would probably be the most dramatic failure of Punkin's short life. If there were any warmbloods left out there, they would probably all see it, but Punkin was as convinced as she could be that this had to be done. There were a lot of parts of this plan that Punkin had absolutely no experience with, and, seeing as she was all alone, she had to do every last bit of the work.

First few days were all research, some of it in the database, some of it searching about in Connie's extensive storehouse of *'end-of-the-world'* resources. The rest of it was all out in the field. She had two primary targets for her time out topside, the Regis Building and the Robert E. Lee Stadium, conveniently, both near the center of town. She'd never been to either place, not as a child with her family and not as a crusading hunter of the undead. The skyscraper had the most powerful broadcast tower for a hundred miles, if everything still functioned. The stadium was simply the ideal location for her final *'Free'* concert, freeing up the last of them poor trapped souls—sort of a *'Grateful Undead'* concert, if you will.

The sheer scale of what had to be done, both with the sweat 'n strain and

the technical know-how needed, buried her in doubt and second guesses. That didn't even include the fear factor and danger of being out in those deserted places—quite likely crawling with undead, hour after hour, day after day. But the only way to scale a mountain was to concentrate on one step after the next. Never letting the impossibility of the final goal ever set in to a mind with way too much to do.

So, our Punkin planned and researched. Tripod did all he could to keep her cheerful and keep her company. His biggest contribution would be guarding her back out in the field. Here in Connie's shelter, face lickin' was his primary job—and damned if he wasn't the very *best* at that. He'd stay near, but out-of-the-way, until he sensed Punkin's mood fall, or that she was pushing too hard and needed some playtime, or sleep. He was purty-dang good at sensing Punkin's mood. His other invaluable contribution to the effort was just listening. It give our Punkin someone to talk to. It was a dang shame he couldn't talk back, but really, she just needed a soundin' board most times. She just needed to hear her ideas outside of the confines of her own head, and not feel like a crazy person for it.

The beginning of the second week of her concert planning started with farming Connie's armory and military surplus warehouse. There were a lot of aspects of her plans that were still very loosely conceived, since she didn't really know what she had to work with down there. Way to the back of the armory was a vault Connie never give no one access to. He hinted to Punkin when she was little what all he had back there, and that it was very serious gear. *Very dangerous.*

Well, that was Punkin's very first recon in this crazy venture. It took her all morning to crack Connie's code to open the vault. In the end, it had been so obvious, but not till she had exhausted dozens of far more complex approaches. It was like Connie had used something he knew Punkin would be able to figure out. Almost like he had foreseen the possibility she would either be alone in the shelter in a crisis, or she would be the one to protect whoever was here with her.

Looking back, she remembered how Connie had made sure Punkin knew how everything worked around here, what his code system was based on, even when he didn't actually give her all of the codes. All the worst-case preparations he had made, with all his Black Ops training and contacts and resources, he had always showed her the basics of what he had and how it

worked. What had hit her, frustrated by her failures at guessing the code, was something ol' Connie had said to her every dang time she'd asked him what was behind that door, as a tyke. *'You listen to me good, baby girl,'* he'd say over and over, all serious-like, *'not for li'l scrubs.'* It had taken a few trys at the spelling, before she typed in: not4li'lScrubs.

"Thanks uncle Connie," she said to the wall—and not for the first time, let me tell you.

The door looked like it could resist anything short of a direct hit with a small nuke. As it moved open at a snail's pace, accompanied by the soft whir, and the grind of hydraulics and mechanicals, she tried to suppress a shiver of cold dread. With all Connie had down here that wasn't really heavily secured, she wasn't sure she even wanted to know what Connie would protect so fiercely. When the door finished opening, she took three deep breaths to center herself before she even glanced past the door, that looked like it might've been from a bank vault. She decided not to let TP go in. Who knew what an overexcited puppy-dog might get into in such a dangerous place.

"Stay, Tripod... Hear me? Stay *right* here!"

Well, that wasn't at all what that dern three-legged pooch had in mind, but he knew when Punkin was serious and when she was just trying to sound that way. So he made a show of settin' down hard on his butt with a soft whining whimper what said, *'I don't like this... but okay!'*

"Good boy, TP... You stay!"

When she finally stepped in over the raised, round threshold, the interior lights came on with a hum of electrical strain. If it hadn't been so necessary, Punkin would've stepped right back out, closed up and made herself forget the code sequence she'd spent three hours figuring out. She found she didn't even want to breathe loud in here. More than half of what she saw at a glance was entirely lost on her. Much of it was in crates, labeled quite clearly with the contents, though in many cases that still didn't tell her much. One thing was quite clear though, nearly every object in that long, narrow room was explosive. There were mines, grenades and rocket launchers. Some very frightening looking artillery—huge, but small enough for one or two strong men to transport and use—loomed in the back. Some sort of exoskeletal armor or other, stood against the near wall looking like a robotic assassin.

"Jesus!" Punkin gasped, this was way above her paygrade, as military types liked to say. She could level the city with all this—and then some. "Jesus,

Connie... what the hell were you expecting to happen?" she asked walls that had absolutely nothing to say to that.

Well, sir, just inside the four foot thick door was a computer terminal. Turns out it was isolated to this room and had a full inventory of the room and all the detailed information and directions for use for each 'n every item. So Punkin sat down on the flip-out stool under it and went to school.

...

When Punkin stepped out and started the slow process of resealing the Armageddon chamber, she was shocked to her very toes. When she had thought to herself that there was enough munitions in that room to level the city, she'd only been half serious. Turns out, it was very *literally* true—maybe ten times over, even. As the last sequence of hydraulic titanium bars slid into their lock-down position with a soul-quivering thud, Punkin joined a confused Tripod right there on that dusty concrete floor. Not that she had intended to, but her legs just kinda give up on her for a moment.

"Jesus, Connie..." she berated the walls once more. "... Holy Mother of God!" It was a good half hour before Punkin could get her legs to support her. She'd seen things in there she didn't want to know even existed, let alone existed right here in Connie's shelter.

'*Jesus, Connie...*' she said, once more, just inside her own head this time.

...

Well, as absolutely horrified as our Punkin was after investigating the Armageddon chamber, she knew what she was gonna use for the finale of her ultimate concert. The exact mechanics of it still had to be both planned out and, ultimately, set up out at the stadium. The idea of handling that stuff froze her up solid, but she would do it—or die trying. Funny, she was thinking, that statement had been said a million times in the past, by people who may or may not have really meant it. This time, it was as real as it gets. If she screwed up, chances are there wouldn't be enough of her left over for even a forensic specialist to identify, or a zombie to snack on.

At least it would be quick. *Real* damned quick.

...

Well, sir, puttin' all the dark consequences and possibilities out of her mind as much as humanly possible, Punkin began to make daylong recon missions out to the stadium, to see what resources were there, that still worked. She had to figure out how to tap into the systems out there so she could control them from the Hummer. That truck would be, not only a part of the stage, but the primary vehicle to transport everything out there that she'd need on that fateful night.

The first trip was *entirely* reconnaissance. She set up Tripod with his *kill-suit* and brought water bottles with long tubes so TP could stay hydrated inside his muzzle. Punkin opted for simple military fatigues and no-nonsense hiking boots again. She couldn't help herself doing something creative with the oversized fatigues, tailoring them as if they might be for a military-themed fashion show or a set at the ol' Anaconda Club.

They spent all day out there. Punkin climbed up to get a look at the stadium lights and speakers. She didn't realize there was a giant 'Jumbotron' screen at each end of the stadium, and figured that would have to be part of the halftime show, what didn't have a game surrounding it. It took a bit to find them emergency generators, but they had more than half full fuel tanks. Her research told her that the generators could run the entire stadium on a game night, flood lights and all, for twice the length of a football game. Considering she'd only need the field floodlights and the sound and video equipment, the fuel would be well over what she would need.

Just before dark, she managed to fire up the huge generators and tested the equipment. She'd like to have put on music and video to check out the screen and speakers, but it was already dusk and there were a hell of a lot of places in the sprawling stadium for undead to wait out the sun. She had what she came for and she would be back here many more times, setting things up. She could test things more later.

"C'mon Boo-Boo..." she called to Tripod as she jogged out to the Hummer. It was parked on the fifty yard line, right where it would anchor her performance, and the stage, when the concert happened. Tripod started growling at movement or sound off by the visitor's tunnel. "... Let's get home, boy... not getting our hands dirty tonight," Punkin called as she leapt into the Hummer's driver-seat and Tripod bounded up onto her lap. She slammed the door shut

and tore up all that sawgrass and weeds, as all four wheels spun with the torque of that jacked-up motor Connie had modified-up special. Shambling silhouettes haunted her rearview mirror. Today was not their turn for freedom —but soon, *very* soon.



Along with all the research Punkin was doing for her big concert, she had dug up a handful of halftime performances by the big stars and bands from before *The End*. Mainly she wanted to see how they staged the performances, but three of the performances she found also included some footage of either the setup or breakdown of the stages themselves.

The stadium she would be using was a small-town facility much less elaborate than the big-money venues in those documentaries, but what she saw helped her immensely. It showed how very impressive setups were made from many small, removable bits 'n pieces, broken down and removed in ten minutes or less at the end of the show, to clear the field for the rest of the game. Of course, these setups used dozens of people to get it up and then broke down, in minutes. That didn't matter much since Punkin had days to set up and she basically could leave everything out on the field afterward—weren't no deposit to lose, nor fines to pay. In her case, the performance would be the whole show. No one was gonna come out to play a game after. Not one of the audience would still be *'of-this-world'* at the end, to watch anything at all, not if this worked. If it didn't, well, nobody was letting their mind even go there. Failure was *not* an option. Every coach of every team had always said just that. In truth, failure, for them, was just an *extreme* disappointment. Failure for Punkin would be far more than just disappointing.

It could mean the end of her life. Or worse, the beginning of an eternity of undead hunger. Failure, *truly*, was not an option for Punkin Evelyn Brustah.

...

On the next outing to Robert E. Stadium, Punkin and Tripod went searching in all the storage areas in the place. This was the part she dreaded most, the part she had nightmares over. They'd be poking their noses into every dark corner and dingy tunnel and storage room in the whole complex. Tripod was on full alert the whole time and it made Punkin feel marginally better knowing it. More than marginally, actually, but she was just so totally terrified, it seemed only a small improvement. Whenever TP growled down a black tunnel or through a shadow-strewn doorway, Punkin generally just backed on out of there and looked somewhere else.

Finally, at the far end zone was a low-ceilinged storage area right under the end zone bleachers that had some solid, but well-used, folding platforms. They were on flatbed carts meant to be dragged out by the groundskeeping tractors or whatever. As Tripod patrolled the far back of the area and circled back to the front, sniffin' and gawkin' about, Punkin pulled several of them out by hand, far enough to drag 'em out to midfield with the Hummer. That whole day was shot to the searching for and setting up of a stage. By dusk she had them all out at the fifty-yard line and loosely set according to her even more loosely planned concept. There were some small, sturdy trampolines in one of the storerooms and Punkin put a few into the Hummer with a dim idea brewing she didn't have time to consider yet.

As the descending dark crowded in and a fine mist of rain began to make everything slick and treacherous, TP's animation and growling told her they were done for the day. She quickly measured the stage pieces and the layout so far and made notes on her laptop in the Hummer. Locked in and lost in her reorganized plan, she hadn't noticed the fleeting shadows shuffling about in the darkest corners of the facility. But Tripod sure as heck did. "It's okay, boy," Punkin said without looking up, "We're locked in, Boo-Boo." At a particularly vicious attack by Tripod against the window on his side of the truck, Punkin looked up to find a dead face pressed right up against the glass. Tripod was slamming against the window so hard the bayonet on his head was causing small nicks in the bulletproof glass.

“Easy, TP!!” she said, grabbing hold of the bayonet, like it was a ‘carry-handle’ for her little, musclebound puppy-dog and pulling him over closer to her. Other once-human silhouettes were lurching about in the rain, now sheeting down like they were parked at the base of Niagara Falls. That one undead was in very poor shape. Half its face had been shredded off. All that was left was that horrible blue-gray color of decomposing meat. It was big, really big. It looked well over six foot, at least when it had stood tall and human. It probably went well over two hundred pounds—again, when it had been a real, live person. What was left of the scalp had tight, curly hair. The remaining facial features gave her the impression it had been of African descent in its human life. It stared in, not so much like it wanted to eat warm, living flesh, but like it recognized her—kinda sad, instead of crazed with hunger.

Uncle Connie?

Suddenly, Punkin was colder than she had ever felt in her entire life—like she was hiding in a walk-in freezer, rather than an armored truck with the heater on full hot. Flailing around in the cab, unsure of how to interpret Punkin's mood, Tripod's paw hit the switch for the outside spotlights. In the sudden glare, all Punkin could see clearly was the rain sheeting down. Other silhouettes flicked about in the harsh glare, but all of them shrank back from the brightness, including the huge, sad one at the window on the passenger's side.

At a plaintive yip from TP, Punkin put the Hummer in gear and rolled slowly out from the loosely positioned platform. Then she headed out the far end of the field, into the parking lot and on to the shelter.

...

That night, Punkin found herself watching clips of her once-happy family of misfits on the huge bank of TV screens. Anything to drive away the disturbing images of that big, sad, dead face at her window. There was no way of knowing if that tragically misused body had once been the big, black man who'd been the closest thing Punkin had ever had to a dad. Even if it wasn't, it had been *someone's* daddy, once. She was *sure* of that. Something about the way that tiny scrap of humanity, way at the back of those cloudy, undead eyes, looked at her. Like it took every fiber of whatever there was left of that once-

daddy, all swallowed-up in there, to resist that unholy hunger that wanted her. It had won, it seemed, if only for the half-inch of bulletproof glass between them, that kept the undead hulk it had become from acting on its need.

Now her mind kept superimposing uncle Connie's big, sweet, grinning face over the top of that horrible mess that had once been the face of someone's proud, loving papa. She tried her level best not to sleep that night, knowing the kind of dreams she would have with all that so clear 'n fresh in her mind—but she did, fight or not. Awful, terrifying blends of living family and friends, with rotted, hungry monsters, did indeed haunt her dreams.

She woke early, her family still being kooky and funny on all them TV screens—the sound now muted either *by* her or by accident, as she dozed on top of the remote. Tripod growled and wiggled in his sleep in her lap and she snuggled up tighter to him and watched those intact, living, breathing people until she slid back into a troubled, but dreamless sleep.



That next morning, Punkin had a burr under her saddle. What had seemed to be an open-ended, *'whenever-the-heck-it-happens, it-happens'* kinda outlook, now felt like it had a time-crunch that wouldn't be satisfied by anything but getting it all done before the next time she had to go to sleep. She realized it couldn't happen any sooner than she had already figured, but now she felt she was racing the clock of her sanity. There was still at least two days worth of hard labor and electronic jerry-riggin' to be done at the stadium, but she just wasn't ready to go back there yet. Terrified of heights and closed spaces as she was, the broadcast equipment on top of the Regis and the generators down in the sub-basement were her mission today.

She had planned on putting this off until last, mostly because it was her worst nightmare, in a life with nothin' much but nightmares left in it, but that encounter out at the stadium last night had shook her. Even a skyscraper, with its endless hallways, stairways and elevators, seemed less forbidding today than the stadium. Ultimately, the whole point of this whole insane venture hinged on being able to put the video of the concert out on as wide and strong a bandwidth as possible. Not that she wouldn't do it anyway, she was convinced this was the way to end the infestation of her city, whether others saw it or not. But the fate of the world and mankind might well be tied to showing any survivors out there how to clear their own cities. Give what's left

of us a fighting chance at survival, at a *life*. Not just one of hiding in terror, but a chance at the life we all had once, and done took for granted.

...

When Punkin and her sidekick pulled up in front of the Regis Building in the Hummer, she went ahead and parked right there in the quad in front of the imposing building, right next to the water fountain that was dry and filled with whatever debris the winds could blow about. She'd motored slowly around the dry fountain until the Hummer was pointing out at the deserted street. She never got out of a vehicle anywhere anymore without it aimed in a direction she could race straight off at, if she were running for her life. Just Driver's Ed-101, post-apocalyptic rules, that is.

As she cut the motor, she and Tripod both craned their necks to look up through the sunroof at the staggeringly tall edifice. It looked a heck of a lot taller from right at its base, than it did from a distance. That far-too-familiar, ice-cold dread flooded her veins in a rush, that made her glad she was sitting down. Beside her, a silent Tripod had his tail tucked 'tween his legs, well, beside his one back leg, I guess is more accurate.

"Well, Boo-Boo..." our Punkin said through the cracking in her voice she tried not to notice, "...here we are. You as happy 'bout this as I am?" In answer, TP turned to lick at her face, but couldn't. He already had his zombie stabbin' gear on, including the muzzle that kept his tongue contained. Punkin slipped her pinky finger in through one of the vent holes in the thick leather of the muzzle for him to lick, not really noticing she done it. Then she rubbed at his belly, where she could get to actual furry, doggy parts. She was lost to the looming horror above.

She didn't want to go in, definitely didn't want to go down to the sub-basement, didn't want to go into the endless stairwells. She sure as *hell* didn't want to go into the elevators. Well, elevators won't work without power, so that wouldn't happen at all unless the generators were functioning—and *they* were all in the sub-basement. Something about going *up*, even forty or more floors, was less terrifying than going down the five floors it was to the generator room. But, since nothing mattered at all without generator power, that had to be first. No sense climbing fifty flights of stairs if the power couldn't be resurrected.

Punkin knew it'd be black as pitch down there where even a trickle of ambient outside sunlight couldn't reach. Zombie heaven, in other words—human hell, more like. She had found some interesting gear the other day, backpacks with serious battery power for spots and flashlights, as well as room for tools and her laptop. If she needed to repair anything, she had all the schematics she could find for the building, and both the emergency generators and the broadcast equipment way up on the roof. She hated the weight and awkward balance of the pack, but she had to have all that with her. It would sure make maneuvering in a fight, or just plain runnin' for her life, a dangerously slow and clumsy affair. Nothing to be done for it, though. She had set Tripod up with a pair of powerful flashlights zip-tied to his back, on either side of the bayonet, so he'd be able to see in any direction. It'd even help temporarily blind undead eyes, in a pinch.

God, she—and I both—hoped to hell it was not gonna come to a 'pinch'.

This here was the worst for me, since I could see and hear everything, but couldn't do one thing to help—not even to call out a warning. Sure, I had no life to lose no more, and no way to feel physical pain. But now, I exist for this sweet, brave, terrified little gal and anything that happens to her, happens to me—in its own twisted way. It was a horrible thing to go through, but for Punkin, it was *so much worse*.

...

The big glass doors to the main lobby were blown out—or in—it was hard to tell, didn't matter none now. The unique diamond-shaped debris of the shattered safety glass was spread inside and out. It crunched underfoot and tried to stick to the bottom of her boots and Tripod's paws both. Inside the lobby, still looking all high-class 'n snooty—like the decor of the whole building, no doubt—she paused to read the placard with the names of all the tenants and facilities on the various floors. The lower twenty floors were medical offices and research centers. The very topmost were corporate offices, radio and TV stations, the ones the rooftop antennas were for. All the ones in the middle were private offices and, apparently, some had been private residences. Maintenance and power were on the lower floors, with negative numbers that had red icons identifying them as off-limits to unauthorized personnel.

Well, as they stepped off to find a way down to the black depths of the dead skyscraper, something on one of the listings tugged at her consciousness. Pausing to search it closer, Punkin saw what had caught her eye, like a headline of an article in a magazine you were only skimming through in a waiting room or on the can. Gottlieb Research Group: Prosthetics and Robotics Development. 17th floor, rooms 1701 through 1799.

She looked down at her Tripod, scooting around the debris-strewn marble floor on his three legs. Prosthetics meant artificial limbs, arms and legs. Probably only for people, but now, suddenly, Punkin knew she'd come back here again, even if all she came here to do got done today—or simply couldn't get done at this location. She would see what secrets and wonders the 17th floor held in its rooms and data files, but not today. No, today was a nightmare that had to be addressed first. With as deep a breath as Punkin could manage, she said, “Okay, Tripod... let's get this here leviathan back to life... huh, boy?!” TP's yip of approval echoed away down the empty corridors like it was tryin' to lead the way.

...

The stairway down to the maintenance levels were guarded by swipe-card ID locks. Without power, these wouldn't work anyway. On a hunch, Punkin went back to the front desk and poked about behind the big, circular marble counter. No keys, no swipe-card.

Crap.

She had hoped a guard might have taken something off or out of their pocket and left it under the counter when everyone had run outside for the meteorite show—the one that ended the human race.

Okay, have to use a *military skeleton key*, as Connie would have said. Punkin already had her usual three handguns in their usual holsters, ready for the worst, but now she trotted back out to the Hummer. Tripod stood in the shattered doorway tipping his head this way, then that, wondering what she was doing. A moment later, she was strutting back, a sawed-off, pump-action 12-gauge over her shoulder. “I was hoping to do this quietly, TP... but I guess we'll have to risk waking the neighbors,” she said with a forced-sounding laugh. Then, without preamble or hesitation, Punkin put the barrel an inch from the lock and let loose. Luckily, this area wasn't considered important

enough to use seriously strong hardware. She felt a spray of debris and lead shot pepper her chest and legs, but it did not breach the fatigues she wore. It stung a bit, though. Tripod growled menacingly, but Punkin couldn't tell if he sensed undead or was just reacting to the contained violence of the blast.

Well now, moving right along was a real priority now that she had announced their visit. Even the undead couldn't sleep through that. Punkin kicked open the fractured door, all SWAT-team-like, and had to grin at Tripod as she did. "Yee haw," she whispered comically, then got *real* damned serious, as she followed her dog buddy on through that murdered door and down a flight of stairs. As it turned out, once on the restricted stairway, no more doors needed a 12-gauge skeleton key until they wanted out of the stairwell and onto one of the floors. She had turned on Tripod's flashlights and had a long, heavy mag-light in the hand that didn't hold the shotgun, resting on her shoulder, cop-style, ready to crack an undead skull with it, if pressed.

The deep shadows had her heart rate way up, but, so far, there were no nooks or crannies for anything to hide in. If any came down the stairs, they'd be cut off and have to shoot their way back up, but there was work to do first. Paused before the door with 'Subfloor # 5' printed on it, Punkin gathered up her courage. If any undead were down here, even if killin' the first door didn't wake 'em up, *this* one sure as heck would. "Ready TP?" she asked, but her stocky, muscular doggie, with the flashlights and zombie-poker on his brown leather outfit, was already nose to the door, growling softly. "Here we go... be ready for anything, buddy."

The bark of that there scatter-gun clubbed her ears hard in the close-set walls, leaving her a bit deaf for a time. She kicked this door with a bit more force than the last time, built on a growing panic at the dark, claustrophobical feel of the lowest sub-basement.

Tripod shot in, growling like he was charging into a room full of monsters, but he spun, slowed and quieted when nothing happened. No monsters charged out of the gloom. No unearthly sounds echoed around the black chamber, dancing wildly in the beams of their flashing lights as they gawked about. Punkin couldn't make any sense of her surroundings at all in the tiny scraps of light bouncing off walls and unfamiliar machinery and the stark, black shadows that flitted and lurked about as the beams searched. She'd done her homework, found information on both the layout of the Regis Building and the schematics of the type of emergency generators the building

supposedly had down here.

Something banged, way off in the fetid darkness, something that shouldn't have had any reason to move, unless it was human, vermin or undead. Two of those would have been welcome, the other, not so much.

"TP..." Punkin whispered, "stay sharp, pal... okay?" Tripod's tail whipped about in answer, but he did not make any noise but for that soft growl, deep in his throat. He'd heard whatever was back there, too.

Punkin tried to remember the layout she had seen, but looking at rectangles on a floor plan is nothing like walking in dark, haunted rooms full of looming, intimidating machinery—and worse things, best left in the dark. After several tense minutes of searching, feeling the blackness all around sneaking in on her whenever she leaned in close to read the plaques on the hulking machines, Punkin found the three emergency generators. When she found the control panel for the first one, she searched it for anything that seemed familiar to her from the material she'd read last night.

She carefully walked through the startup procedure, then pushed the big green button that would have spun over the diesel motor that would run the first generator. It made a deep, loud clunk as she pushed it in with her thumb, but nothing else happened. The starter motor's battery was dead, probably. She knew this might be the issue. There were two more, maybe not all three were dead. Worst case, she'd have to bring down a battery from one of Connie's trucks. She briefly considered pulling one of the Hummer's, but thought better of it. Last thing she wanted to do was risk her escape vehicle's mobility. No, if she had to bring down a battery, she'd go get one from a different vehicle entirely, but she didn't want to have to leave and come back. It took all the courage she could scour up to get this far. She wanted to get it done and get the hell out! Something scraped, not nearly so far off this time as last, and Tripod started to run off toward it.

"Tripod!" Punkin whispered harshly, "... stay here, boy... stay with me, please!" Well, TP grumbled in that doggy way of his and milled about nervously, but he stayed put. '*Well, # 2 then*', Punkin told herself, moving down the line in the direction of the scraping sound, now gone silent as a tomb. This one actually turned, sluggishly, as she pushed the big, green button, but the motor didn't catch. Checking the gauges, she saw that the fuel tank was below the 'E' mark.

Dammit.

They probably ran this generator when all hell broke loose, ran it till it was out of fuel. Good news was, its battery was still charged, if barely. She could disconnect it and use it on # 1, maybe, but first, she would try # 3. Moving the rest of the way down to the third emergency generator, Punkin felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck standing up. She was already way past her threshold for panic, barely staying calm, barely restraining herself from running out of there screaming. She almost hoped for another scrape or bang, off in the dark—way off, of course. That would be better than waiting endlessly in this black mausoleum for something horrible to leap out of the shadows. As she stepped up to the panel on the last generator, now more than halfway to the far back wall, she felt bony fingers wrap around her ankle. With a gasp—one that went in, instead of out—making a bloodcurdlingly quiet, desperate sound, Punkin leapt so far back, her shoulder whacked something hard and solid. As both the mag-light beam and the shotgun barrel aimed down where she had been, she saw the remains of a severed hand and forearm. It was long dead and was shrink-wrapped in paper-thin leather that had once been human skin.

“Son of a bitch! Tripod...” Punkin said as her heart raced, “...son of a...”

Well, sir, the rest of what she was saying got lost to the sound of three horrifying howls, that combined to sound like the voice of hell itself. One was hers. One was Tripod as he smashed into something no longer illuminated by the mag-light that went flying. The third was that unmistakable sound of undead jaws raging after warm flesh. In the blackness and the dizzying dance of Tripod's flashlights, he fought with something what couldn't be seen but for the lightning-flash, split-second glimpses of his flashlight beams. Punkin still had the shotgun but had no clear target. Then the twin beams that marked where TP was flew to the side, and the thud of muscular dog against unforgiving steel, punctuated with a yelp of pain and a growl of renewed attack, echoed through the terrifying, flash-blinding darkness.

The growl that told of undead teeth coming for her, gave Punkin a split second of warning, and a direction to aim. With Tripod's flashlight beams well off to the side, Punkin emptied that scattergun into the dark, in the direction of the last noise the monster in the blackness had made. In the throbbing silence of that gun's echo, Punkin tried to see or hear any indication of the thing that attacked them. The mag-light was way off under one of the generators, aimed at the far distant wall. Just as she pulled one of her pistols to ready herself for

another attack, she saw the pale, golden glimmer of the sparkling remains of a terminated undead.

It was dead quiet down there, but if it actually was or her ears were sound-blind now, from the roar of the 12-gauge blast, she couldn't tell at first. Finally, Punkin realized she could hear her own ragged panting. The silence beyond that gave her a thrill of relief. No monster growled or moved about. *She'd got it.* Then, suddenly, that same absolute silence made her heart clench in her chest.

Tripod!

"Tripod!" she yelled, crawling toward where the two flashlight beams lay, motionless and illuminating only the rusty, blue legs of some piece of machinery. She found his still form easily but couldn't tell anything by touch. Her ears were pounding as hard as her heart, as she scooted on her belly over to reach for the mag-light. She could feel the dead, severed arm under her own as she stretched as far as she could, barely touching the flashlight handle. Sacrificing skin, she shoved in hard and caught it with her fingernails and moved it enough to grab it.

A quick look about the chamber showed her a pile of old clothes nearby. All that remained of the thing that attacked them. She saw no other movement anywhere, including where Tripod lay. "Tripod!" she cried, not willing to accept what she feared most. To this last call, a tiny, weak whimper broke the silence and the twin beams wavered about listlessly. "Tripod, boy... you okay?" she asked, hoping against hope he wasn't bit, hoping his back wasn't broke. But, with a paltry whine, TP got to his front feet and searched about dimly for the voice that had roused him, his butt still dragging on the floor.

"Hold still, TP!" Punkin shouted through tears, still worried about bite and broke back both. Tripod got up on his third leg and shook himself, dancing drunkenly sideways, but he remained standing. *Okay*, she thought, *no broke back*. Now, she looked for bite marks. She nearly crapped herself when she saw blood on his thigh, but, looking closely with the mag-light flooding the wound with illumination, she realized it was from the ragged, rusty bolt he'd been thrown against. It was nasty, but not fatal. It was not infected by undead teeth. As Tripod blinded her and almost poked her eye out with flashlights and bayonet, trying to lick her face, she saw tooth marks on his muzzle. It had scraped up the leather badly and cut through one of the straps holding it on, but there was no evidence of his nose being cut by those foul dentures.

Regardless of whether him biting on an undead would have infected him, getting bit on the nose by one would have done it for sure. That dang leather muzzle had saved Tripod, and Punkin too, really. I'm quite certain her heart would have broken right then and there had he died, or turned. I don't think she would've survived it, to go on.

Well, after all that, the next few minutes were a bit anti-climatory. Walking unsteadily back to that last generator, Punkin hit the green button and the starter spun. The motor caught and, with a satisfying hum that vibrated her toes, the #3 emergency generator spun to life. Lights came on all around the basement room. It didn't seem too all-fired scary, flooded with light, but Punkin's heart was still racing.

The fuel level in #3 was low, but would do for her concert needs for sure. She'd leave it on until she left the Regis Building and then she'd have to come back to fire it up when she was ready to broadcast. That was still days away and she still had to go to the roof to check out the antennas and Connie's tie-in to them.

Searching about, now she could see everything, Punkin found the remains of two or three people that the undead she had finished off must've killed, having been the first, or the only, to turn. Among the remains were two swipe-cards on neck-cords. One was in the pile of rotted coveralls the former maintenance man had been wearing when she had vaporized him. The other was near some gruesome bones, spread about wildly as the undead had feasted on them. Well, she now had access to a lot, if not all, of the Regis Building. She figured a maintenance pass would open most doors here, so long as there was power.

"Well, TP... let's go out to the Hummer and get some first aid for your boo-boo... Boo-Boo!" she said with weak and relieved laughter, "Then its up to the roof for us."



The slice on Tripod's leg from the ragged metal was nasty looking, but didn't need stitches, she thought. Punkin doused it with a spray disinfectant in the first aid kit and wrapped it with gauze and tape. Closer inspection of his muzzle told her the teeth that wrecked it, would have done serious damage to Tripod's nose. Not that the wound would've been so bad in and of itself, but he'd have been infected by it, she had no doubt. Unlike his poor little leg stump, grindin' a lit cigar into it would not help—nor would emergency amputation have been an option. She would've had to put him down. Punkin had a rush of after-the-fact panic at how close they'd both come to being dead—or worse. She closed the Hummer's door, locked it and hugged Tripod while she shook uncontrollably.

I know she felt like a weakling just then, but in truth, she was as brave as anyone I can think of. More than I would've been, I'm sure, had our places been reversed. As Punkin's heart calmed and her body stopped shaking, she got back out and went back in the skyscraper. When they were back in the lobby of the Regis Building, Punkin had to decide whether to walk up forty-some floors worth of stairs or try the dang '*coffin-on-a-string*'. Even if the world were still the way it *had* been, Punkin would've hated riding in the elevators. She wasn't sure if her aversion to small, confined places was part of who she always was, or if it had developed from hiding underground from

nightmarish monsters her whole life. Didn't matter much, really. It was, what it was—*maybes* and *what-ifs* were just a waste of time. The idea of an hour of climbing stairs up, then down again, was too daunting for her to not at least consider the elevator instead.

Swiping the card on the maintenance lift keypad, she waited for the ten-year dormant machinery to do its thing. Far too soon for her liking, it arrived at the lobby level and the doors wooshed open. Even knowin' it was about to happen, Punkin flinched back at the sudden movement. She leaned in without stepping in and hit the *hold* button, then leaned back out and took several deep breaths. Then, as a first step, she walked just inside the thing, one step from diving back out. The service elevator was far larger than most public elevators, that helped a bit. It was clean and modern, but utilitarian, not like the plush luxury of the regular lifts, or the sad, worn look of the teeny ones in the building above the 'Conda Club. Tripod stood, half in, half out—wondering if they were stayin' or goin'. He could feel how ready to bolt his Punkin was. Punkin stared at the row of buttons for the floors, forty-seven, apparently, plus one marked 'R', for roof, she figured.

“Oh hell, TP,” she said to her little wounded buddy, “can't be scarier than that damned basement, right?” Tripod looked at her like he weren't willin' to make that call, quite yet, but wherever his Punkin went, he was goin'—even if it were straight down hell's gullet. “Awright, Boo-Boo... let's get this over with, huh?” she said, stepping the rest of the way in and over to the side with the buttons. Tripod waggled on over to stand at her side and she flipped the *hold* button off and suppressed a shudder as the doors quietly slid shut.

When she punched in the 'R' button, she made just the tiniest squeak of suppressed horror as she felt the car move upward. The g-force was quite a bit more than the barely noticeable one in the 'Conda building elevator—made sense, it was traveling five times as far up. She stared at the flashin' numbers as they rose, rather than let her claustrophobia get the better of her. Tripod tried to lick at her ankle, sensing her distress, though the muzzle prevented it, and she crouched down to pet him gently in reward. As they passed the fiftieth floor, she felt her stomach flutter as the rapid rise slowed. She stood, backed up and closed her eyes a second against a wave of dizziness, then raised the shotgun at the door as the last of the upward movement halted.

“We're here, TP,” she whispered, not sure why. As the door opened, she pounded her fist on the '*close door*' button in a flash of panic.

Dammit!

Right there across from the elevator was a desiccated remnant of a person in a cop uniform. Actually, as she thought about it, it was probably a building security guard. The uniform weren't quite right for a cop. '*Alright*', she thought to herself, '*just open the door and finish it!*' The encounter in the basement had really rattled her. Bangin' the stock of her cut-off 12-gauge against the '*open door*' button, she took one shaky breath as the door wooshed open again. Her gun was up and her finger taut on the heavy trigger as the door cleared from between them and the guard, but, just an instant before the shell fired—she held up. TP growled, but it weren't the '*I'm about to kill something*' growl she'd become so used to, and he didn't charge on out and take the thing down.

First of all, it was already down, more or less. It was reclined against a low wall what had nothin' but open sky beyond it. Made Punkin more than a little dizzy trying not to notice. The parts showin' from out of the uniform—the head and hands—where not more than bones held together with parchment-thin skin, lookin' more like old wax paper. The head—the skull, really—was leaned back and to the side. There was *no* movement whatsoever.

It was not *undead*—just *plain* dead. Near one of the skeletal hands was a rusting revolver. Punkin flipped the switch to hold the elevator on the roof and stepped out. Stepping closer, she could see the back of the skull was gone, exactly where that revolver would have been aimed if the man had put it in his mouth and squeezed the trigger. Which is precisely what he'd done, ten years ago. He had a swipe-card ID around his neck and a weather-faded wallet in his other hand. It lay open to show a photo so sun-bleached she could barely make out the woman and children it had once displayed. A weather-worn cap and badge lay nearby where swirlin' winds or hungry crows had displaced it. Punkin picked it up and placed it over the skull-face, the way a man might to take a nap, offering what respect for the dead she could. She took the ID and wallet and put them in her pack. She'd add them to the small mountain of possessions she kept by the garage door, back home. He may have taken a coward's way out, this poor soul, but Punkin did not think poorly of him for it. She only hoped his soul had found a peace she feared so very many had not.

Shaking loose the cobwebs of that tragedy, Punkin moved to the equipment shed where all the controls and connections were for the antennas, standing impossibly high above their heads, scratchin' at the clouds. It had a swipe-lock

as well and the maintenance man's card worked just fine. Opening the door, a small rat raced out at the sudden spill of sunlight, right across Punkin's boot and she damn near blew her own foot off in a knee-jerk reaction.

"Son of a *bitch*, Tripod... *Damn*, I'm jumpy today!"

But who could blame her? There are—or at least there were—plenty of full-grow'd men who'd have had a heart attack by now, doing what this here li'l teenage gal has had to do. And she weren't done yet, no sir—not by a long shot—although the last of what she had to do here at the Regis was nearly done. It took the better part of an hour to check out the details on her laptop about this antenna array and Connie's expensive, illegal tap-in to it. When she closed it all back up, she was as certain as a complete novice could be, that it was ready to go—and, so long as it had power, Connie's system under the 'Conda Club should be online.

As the doors closed on the service elevator, Punkin tried unsuccessfully to look away from the corpse of the security guard. The trip down was a blur of suppressed sadness, fear of falling, claustrophobia and the realization that she still had to shut down the generator before she left. Since the elevators would be useless traps without power, she got out at the lobby, once more. She forgot to be ready for trouble when she stepped out, but it was still daylight and the lobby was all glass—leastways it once was—and just about as bright 'n cheery as any place could possibly be, in the middle of a God-damned zombie nightmare.

She walked down those five flights of stairs, behind the door she'd unlocked earlier with buckshot, slow and nervous-like. Standing back before the rumbling generator, she decided to check fuel levels again. #3's level hadn't moved any in the couple of hours it had been running, which meant it had more operating time than she had thought. #1, which didn't have battery power to turn it over, had nearly as much in its tanks. Checking around, she found a half dozen, mostly empty fuel cans. The tanks had drain petcocks underneath, high enough that the cans could be stood directly under them. All told, two, maybe all, of the generators could be made to work and there was enough fuel for one full tank or so.

She didn't think she had any mental fortitude left to do anymore here today, but before the concert, she'd try to set it up so she could make full use of the Regis tower for her globe-spanning broadcast. Coming back down here would be a nerve-racking experience, but at least she knew the lay of the land now

and had three swipe-cards to get at things. Not bad for a day's work, if she had to say so herself—and, of course, she *did*. All things considered, it could've gone far, *far* worse. Any of the parts of the puzzle might not have worked, and she, or Tripod, might have died here—for nothin'. But, they didn't, and, so far as she could tell, everything she needed to work, now did.

So now comes the part she dreaded most—shuttin' down the generator. When it went down, so did all the lights. On a whim, Punkin took a pail of sawdust and sand someone had there for fluid spills and shook it on out on the stairs and at the door to the generator room, which she would leave wedged open. Next time she came down here, a quick look would tell her if anything had crossed the threshold besides the tracks she and TP would leave as they raced up and out of the dark.

“Okay, TP... ready to run?” she asked past a building panic, not expecting an answer. Over by the #3 generator, she turned on *their* lights, read the panel to make sure she did everything what needed doin'—then, they were wrapped in pitch black silence. Those tiny spills of flashlight beams seemed all but insubstantial after the overhead fluorescents when out, but, holding to a pace just short of a jog, Punkin and Tripod moved up the five flights, barely breathin' until they burst into the sun-flooded lobby once more.

Moments later, they were strapped and locked into the Hummer and the Regis Building was just a shrinking Goliath in the rearview mirrors.



The success at the Regis had lit a fire in Punkin's soul. The scare in the basement had done something similar to her resentment. She was dog tired—no pun intended, Tripod—of the constant companion of stark, raving fear in her every movement topside. Her dedication to her plan, the removal of the zombie threat and the end of suffering for all them trapped souls, tripled. Then, it did so again. There was so much still to do to set up the stadium for the concert event. She were just one li'l gal, with one li'l dog, who were big on protection and companionship, but left a fair bit to be desired as a roadie.

But this was a brave new world, and, in it, even rock 'n roll divas had to hump their own gear around, set up their own stage and exterminate their own undead audience. Bet the likes of Diana Ross or Beyoncé never had to wrench on bolts, run cables or blow the faces off'n dead folk what wasn't really dead. Well, what they did in their personal time, notwithstanding, they probably got to just be nervous or pompous or both, in their very own dressing rooms or trailers, with ass-kissin' peons racing about, seeing to their every need. All while dozens of big, burly men set up and broke down their lavish, over-the-top productions.

Well, now, our Punkin's concert was set to give all them 'hothouse flowers' a run for their buckets of money in the over-the-top production department. That one little teenage gal would have to do every, single thing that needed done—

and do it potentially knee-deep in the undead—made the upcoming 'Grateful Undead' Free Concert a truly one-of-a-kind happening, if the whole damn thing didn't blow up in her face come showtime. That was a distinct possibility, made even more so by the contributions from uncle Connie's 'Armageddon Chamber', but this here concert was happening, come *hell* or high water. Y'know, when most people used to say that, it wasn't one hundredth as literal as it were for Punkin, 'cause, if all went according to plan, all *hell was a-comin'*! And it'd be comin' for *her*—and her alone.

...

Her days now were split between twenty-seven separate chores, according to her numbered list, on its little note pad with the pink tulips on the top. At night, she researched concerts, especially big production shows like Super Bowl halftimes and Olympic commencement and closing extravaganzas 'n such. The sound, lighting and pyrotechnic exuberance in those shows really stoked her fire—again, no pun intended.

She researched up the publicity angle as well, ads, posters, interviews and documentaries. Well, Punkin went to Connie's video and music recording studio often for tools and tricks to haul on out to the stadium. She also created a half dozen or so PR clips to broadcast as the event got closer. Having watched a passel of archival interviews of rock stars from the past, Punkin decided to do one of her own. After all, it might be the only thing left of her soon. After setting up the camera angles in the studio, Punkin done took a framed picture of uncle Connie and set it on one of the three chairs in the room. Punkin had researched the kind of questions people asked musicians in these types of interviews and had reformulated them to fit her situation. Those, she set up on a table next to the interviewer chair with the picture of ol' Connie on it. Then she patted one of the other chairs for Tripod to jump on up onto, taking the last for herself.

Punkin done dolled herself up a might with makeup, but not with no crazy-ass costume, just tight jeans, a skintight T-shirt with a picture of Tripod on it, all tied up just below her tender boobage. To finish, she donned an old trucker's hat of Connie's, in camo, with the Anaconda Gentleman's Club and Exotical Emporium logo on the front in hot pink, her un-gelled ponytail pulled out through the back. She was barefoot and tucked her legs up under her on

the chair, feeling unaccountably nervous, all of a sudden. She done set everything up with a remote that she could control lights, camera and sound with, stashed in her pocket.

Taking a big ol' deep breath, Punkin hit the button that made her voice go through the app that made it sound like Connie's deep, gravelly bass voice and cued camera # 1, aimed at the chair with the picture on it.

Interviewer: *"We're here today with Punkin Evelyn Brustah of Killshot Punk. Punkin... Is that what I should call you?"*

Using the remote to switch to camera #2, Punkin answered in her own voice.

Punkin: *"You used to call me Punk-E, uncle Co... I mean... Connie."*

Interviewer: *"Okay then... Punk-E. Thanks for meeting with us."*

Punkin: *"Thanks for having me."*

Interviewer: *"You have not had a long and distinguished musical career. What was your big break?"*

Punkin: *"Well, sir... I'd have to say that meteor storm had a lot to do with it."*

Interviewer: *"The one that wiped out the human race?"*

Punkin: *"Most... of the human race. But, yes... that one."*

Interviewer: *"What do you think would have happened to your music career if that hadn't happened?"*

Her own question kind of threw her.

Interviewer: *"Punkin?"*

Punkin: *"Sorry... I don't know. But I wish I'd had a chance to find out."*

Interviewer: *"Tell us about your first ever album... Apocalyptic Lullaby. What can fans expect of it?"*

Punkin: *"Well, Connie... that depends."*

Interviewer: *"On?"*

Punkin: *"On whether those fans are human or not."*

Interviewer: *"Fair enough. What would humans fans enjoy?"*

Punkin: *"I hope they will enjoy the music for what it is. But mostly... I hope they see in it the promise of human survival."*

Interviewer: *"That's a tall order, Punk-E, do you think Killshot Punk can deliver?"*

Punkin: *"I hope so! More than anything! It's really the driving force of all my efforts."*

Interviewer: *"And what of the rest of your fans. The undead... I guess we're*

callin' 'em. What will they have to look forward to?"

Punkin: "Freedom from an eternity of horror... I guess."

Interviewer: "Wow! That's a butt-load to take on for what is essentially a solo performance."

Punkin: "It's very important to me, Connie. It's all I ever think about these days."

Interviewer: "Since The End?"

Punkin: "Right."

Interviewer: "You have crafted your music all on your own, voice, instruments, production, special effects. Any special guests on this album?"

Punkin: "Well, sort of. Having access to most of the music made before The End, I have shamelessly looted bits and pieces from all over to get the sound I was after. But no one live... of course. I don't have their permission to use it either, so..."

Interviewer: "Their ghosts may press charges or something?"

Punkin: "That's not funny, Connie! But, if any survived the meteor storm, they may have a problem with it."

Interviewer: "But, if you do help with the whole, promise of human survival thing, maybe they'll cut you some slack?"

Punkin: "I hope so. But I would gladly lose all I have, in a world where humans survive. Nothing else means as much to me as that."

Interviewer: "Who are some of your musical influences?"

Punkin: "Hmm... Everyone!"

Interviewer: "Everyone?"

Punkin: "Yes. Every piece of music, every song lyric I've ever heard, has shaped my sound."

Interviewer: "Can you give us a top 10?"

Punkin: "Yikes... um, okay. Let's see... Hendrix and Bowie for sure. Debussy and Rachmaninov... Xian Xinghai, Rage Against the Machine. I love that name! Bjork, Cream, Velvet Underground and... um... the Sex Pistols, I guess. That's ten, right?"

Interviewer: "That's an impressive and quirky list."

Punkin: "I'm a quirky and impressive girl."

Interviewer: "Yes ma'am, you are that. Can you tell us how your recording process has evolved over the years?"

Punkin: "When I started I was only seven or eight years old. I never had any

kind of training at all, so I just listened to other people's music and experimented. My... uncle... had a serious studio set up down here. I was just a lonely kid in a huge candy shop... kinda with my whole life to work with."

Interviewer: *"What are your interests, other than performing?"*

Punkin: *"You mean besides survival?"*

Interviewer: *"Yes... besides that."*

Punkin: *"Love."*

Punkin done shocked herself, again—with her *answer*, that time.

Interviewer: *"Um... I... okay... what...um...has been your proudest moment... as a musician?"*

Punkin: *"I guess, finding out that it can be used to liberate the fallen... that maybe... just maybe... those poor souls can be free."*

If she only knew how true that were.

Interviewer: *"Speaking of that... your audiences consist mostly of the zombie horde. How do they differ from the living and how do you modify your performances to suit them?"*

Punkin: *"Never seen any living soul at my performances except my faithful Tripod, here. (Sound of yipping nearby) so I can't really answer that. I'd dearly love to find out though. I'm still hoping there are living folks out there listening."*

"As far as how I 'modify' my performance for the undead... well, sir... I terminate them."

Interviewer: *"Yeouch!! Seems a bit counterproductive for a band to exterminate its own audiences."*

Punkin: *"Extreme circumstances call for extreme measures. Or so I've gathered."*

Interviewer: *"I understand you'll be doing all the prep work for your upcoming 'Grateful Undead' Free Concert. Cute name, by the way."*

"Lights, camera, sound, stage set up. You'll do it all. Do you envy past bands and divas their support personnel and recording companies?"

Punkin: *"Hard to miss something you never had. Besides... they're all dead now... or worse. I don't envy that!"*

Interviewer: *"Are you focusing most of your energy on this concert, or can fans expect a tour in the future?"*

Punkin: *"If this works... if I'm still... me... when it's over... I don't know. I hope so. Even if I succeeded in clearing the undead from this city, there is a whole wide world out there under siege."*

“Someone will have to continue the work. I hope I will be just one of many.”

Interviewer: *“I can't finish up without a few questions for your good friend here. Tripod? You are bodyguard, companion and sounding board for Punkin. Is that true?”*

TP: *(Yip)*

Interviewer: *“What was your scariest time with her performing?”*

TP: *(wimper)*

Interviewer: *“How do you feel about the zombie horde and their fascination with Killshot Punk and your Punkin?”*

TP :*(growl!)*

Interviewer: *“I see. Well then, Tripod, if you could be any type of tree, what kind would you be?”*

Well now, Tripod, he just tipped his head at that old picture of Connie and made an odd little doggie-sound that seemed to ask, *'how stupid are you, anyway?'*

Interviewer: *“One last question for you, Punk-E. If you could change one thing about your career, what would it be?”*

Punkin: *“That I never needed to have one. Not this one, at least. But, other than that, I think it would be collaboration. Working with other talented, warm-blooded musicians. That would be incredible.”*

Interviewer: *“Do you have any final words you'd like to share with your fans?”*

Punkin: *“Well... for those poor souls trapped in all those hellish bodies... We can save you. We will save you!*

“To the rest of humanity... It can be done. We can take back our world!”

Interviewer: *“With that, we thank you, miss Brustah, and you too Tripod, and wish Killshot Punk all the best in their career and their sacred mission.*

“God bless us all!”

Well now, our lil' Punkin done shut down the recording equipment and just stared at the chair with Connie's picture in it. For them few minutes, she had almost felt a part of a world where humans still lived and flourished.

Tears was leakin' on down and TP, he done jump up in her lap and licked 'em all off, as they spilled. Punkin just set there and felt sad and lonely for a bit. Then, propped up once more by her faithful, three-legged buddy, she stood, in a bit of a haze, and went into the booth to edit and add the interview to her outgoing loop.



Having gotten a good look at the generators of both the stadium and the Regis, Punkin researched deeper and found that, with the output set to stand-by, the generators of both could run for several days on the fuel present. It changed a few things.

For one, Punkin started to run loops of clips of her performances so far, the ads she'd made and the interview about the big event, each day as she worked at the stadium. Tired of feeling vulnerable whenever she had to go into dark, scary places, Punkin took a powerful floodlight and battery pack and attached it to an old camping backpack, pointing straight up. Above it, she attached a bounce umbrella from the photo studio in the complex. When kicked on, it flooded the area all around Punkin with serious illumination. Its glow was soft but bright, eliminating the harsh-edged shadows the flashlights caused, that always looked like fiends and monsters racing about in the dark, giving her heart failure 'n all. It weighed a whole bunch, but lightened her mood so much it woulda been welcome even if it had been twice the weight and half as bright.

She would go to the stadium each day and work away the morning. At lunchtime, she would run over to the Regis, shrug on her *'raging daylight'* pack, run down to the basement and kick on the generator—and the broadcast network with it. It took serious jerry-riggin' to do it, but she could

now operate all the set-up back at the shelter with remote access in the Hummer. Even more cobbled together were the controls for the lights and sound in the stadium itself, but she done it—and tested it as best she could, in the days of preparation. So, while Punkin and her faithful Tripod built-up and tested the elaborate set-up on the fifty-yard line of the football field in the stadium, that loop of clips played for three or four hours a day—regular as clockwork. She could only hope other warm-bloods were actually out there, alive and able to receive it. Periodcal-like, our Punkin would tune through the channels of the radio and TV to be sure it was actually broadcasting out. Whether any living ears were out there to hear it, was something she tried not to dwell on, over much.

She spent hours dissecting old radio ads for monster truck rallies and such, then sampling and rebuilding them to announce her Grand Event, still without a date. She wouldn't assume any surviving humans even had any idea what the date, or the year, might be. When she was certain all was ready, she would create new ads counting down the days, with the concert set for just after dark.

Connie had two dozen little digital video cameras, y'know, like folk put on their helmets and machines when they did daredevil stuff like race motorcycles or jump out of planes. These she put around the stage, and one or two would be on her costume come showtime. There were three high-end TV cameras on permanent pedestals in the stadium. She got them online too, set to randomly project on the Jumbotron.

She was doing the documentary thing, too, while she set it all up. She did it for fun, and for posteriority—y'know, for others to find if this all went to hell and she didn't survive. In no small way, she done it just to make her feel she wasn't so all alone in the world.

She planned her routine, loosely of course, so she could have plenty of room to be spontaneous and interact with her 'audience', as the situation dictated. She tried to figure how the set-up would be laid out, in the center of the playing field. She planned how she would work the stages, and the crowd, during the performance. She was concerned that she didn't get more than a few hours sleep a night, but as the work progressed, as the event loomed closer, she was so revved-up and energized, she couldn't seem to shut it down in her head enough to sleep. *'Plenty of time to sleep when we're dead!'* Connie used to say. Now, that memory triggered several trains of thought

Punkin wouldn't allow herself to indulge.

There was a dozen small, gymnastic trampolines at the stadium, the kind used to be used by college cheerleading squads, she figured. She experimented with placing them about the stages—*on* some of them, next *to* some of the others. To keep herself focused and loose, Punkin would work out on her breaks, getting from one stage to another, or just while getting down off of the scaffolding, she set up for an elevated stage next to where the Hummer would be parked. She had always worked out on the trampolines set up at the 'Conda Club for Raven and her 'Flyin' Titties' set, as she and the gals used to call it. It helped with her balance and kept her gymnastic skills sharp. Now, with the performance of a lifetime coming up, Punkin found herself drawn to the 'tramps' night 'n day—at home *and* at the stadium. They helped keep her sane. They helped her focus. They helped her find that place athletes called '*the zone*', where her mind sped up, as the universe slowed down—the world becoming a surrealistic dreamscape where she felt in total control of her body and surroundings. She'd be needing that, too, no lie! That's the place she *had* to be, in just a *few* days time. The *concert* depended on it. Her *life* depended on it. All those lost, trapped souls depended on it. The fate of *mankind* depended on it.

Shoot! No damn pressure *there*, eh, Punkin?

...

As the preparation neared readiness, Punkin added another element to her daily routine. When dusk closed in, she fired up the stadium generator. She and TP got in the Hummer, drove to the Regis to shut down the generators, checking on fuel consumption, then circled the city. She started at the far outer districts, spiraling slowly in toward the stadium. Her '*Pied Piper*' time had the music most inclined to draw the undead, blasting on the Hummer's outside speaker system as she created a slow draw toward the stadium. When they'd reached the venue, she'd use her hobbled-together remote control system to send the music to the stadium's PA system. She had already altered one in three speakers to face out toward the city, the rest she left aimed in toward the field. She'd let that play, loud enough it could be heard all across town, for fifteen to twenty minutes. Then, all fast and jittery, Punkin would drive around to the dark, lonely back lot, where the generator sheds were, shut down the

power and dive back into the Hummer—racing back home in relative silence.

She hoped to get every last undead in her city to that final concert, if at all possible. Knowing the undead didn't come out and move about until it was dark, she did this right at dusk each 'n every night, leading up to that fateful day. Even if they only moved a block or two closer each time, the stadium district should be lousy with the creepy things by showtime. Punkin knew it made working there more dangerous every day, but there was less 'n less each day that required her to brave the dark, dank places where they would huddle when the sun glared on down. Tripod always kept watch while she worked and, though she saw evidence they were near, the undead maintenance man in the Regis basement had been the last of the undead she had had to put down. It was actually encouraging to our crazy, brave Punkin that they *were* there. It helped her feel she wasn't wasting her time. It helped fuel her determination, which got her through day after day of hard-ass labor and sleepless nights. Now that the stages, lighting, cameras and sound systems were set to go, Punkin had to get to the part she'd been putting off and putting off—Connie's firepower, both from the armory *and* from the nightmarish 'Armageddon Chamber'.

She had absolutely no idea how many undead were out there, or how many would make their way to the stadium during the concert. But she knew she damn well better be ready for a gosh-dern sea of undead. If even one out of a hundred of the city's population were in that purgatory between life 'n death, there could be thousands of 'em. The thought of being alone and warm-blooded, in a stadium full of even hundreds of zombies, felt like a cold steel bear-trap had sprung on her insides.

She had always preferred small semiautomatic handguns to assault rifles and shotguns, they were more precise, more fitting to the sacred task of liberating trapped souls. But, *hell*, if hundreds were drawn out, hundreds would need puttin' down. Handguns wouldn't get it done, not with only two hands operating them. Like it or not, Punkin knew she needed to have a worst-case scenario plan—and, heaven forbid, an even *worse*, worse-case plan. After hours 'n hours of disturbing research in the 'Armageddon Chamber', she thought she had the answer. If it worked the way she hoped, it would be one *hell* of a finale! For that matter, even if it all went wrong, it would still be one *hell* of a closer! That's what the cameras were for. They'd archive to Connie's computers, as well as going out in an endless loop over the Regis

broadcast tower, until its generators ran out of fuel. At least, if anyone else was out there and still warm-blooded, the secrets she had discovered, and demonstrated, would be part of her legacy to the human race—her enthralling music as well. All in all, Punkin would've rather passed that all on first-hand, rather than posthumous-like, but it would *be* what it would *be*.

Well, now, the Hummer would have a half ton of ammo and a small armory of firepower right there at the stages, centerfield, but she'd be moving all about during the concert, most likely. So she done set up caches of rifles, pistols and even grenades in every corner of the field. Them undead never showed the least interest in using any tool or weapon except their teeth 'n nails, nor did they seem to mess with anything at all, unless it stood between them and warm blood. So leaving dangerous weapons laying about, as well as the stages 'n all, didn't seem to be much of a problem. Even if the stadium were absolutely *crawling* with undead each night, everything was just as she done left it, next morning.

It was that last part, the Grand Finale part, was giving Punkin frights. She researched, planned and researched more. She did a couple of tests, in the street out in front of the 'Conda Club, to make sure they worked, at all—and worked the way she planned. They *did*. It didn't make Punkin any less freaked out, though, let me tell you. She did her final calculations and took the munitions on out to the stadium, driving as slow 'n steady as she'd ever done. It really wasn't necessary, but you couldn't have told Punkin that, no sir! After carefully setting up the fireworks and the extra ingredients from the 'Armageddon Chamber', there was nothing left to do but plan her concert outfit, practice her moves—on the 'Conda Club stage *and* in her head—and sweat. Punkin did *way* more of *that* than any young woman would ever admit to.

Now, there was one more day, to rest and advertise, and then it would be the day she'd been waiting a lifetime for.

Showtime!



After returning to the shelter last night, Punkin spent the night in the sewing room, assembling and modifying her outfit for the concert. She'd gone back 'n forth for weeks on what she would wear. Maybe that's something girls do, changing their minds and frettin' over what look they want for a particular night out. I might've known once, but I can't seem to recall no more.

Anyway, with sleep so hard to come by, Punkin had taken to watching old movies and legendary performances by bands and singers, late at night, until she drifted off to sleep. The whole time Punkin overlaid her projections for her own concert on top of what she'd been watching. She had already begun four or five way-over-the-top get-ups since she realized she was gonna do this thing. Some had themes, some were just flights of fancy that came to her while she dug through the costumes, *and* the party clothes, of the 'Conda Club gals. For an hour or so, Punkin tried on some of the gear and studied herself in the bank of full-length mirrors. Generally, she looked for five seconds or less and stripped right back out of 'em.

There was this slutty, fairy princess look she discarded the instant she had it on. There was a futuristic astronaut get-up that one of the girls had used in a very popular act at the club, but most of that went away just as quick as the fairy costume. After, came plenty of others, then *mix-'n-match* time followed that. Nothing felt right to her. Punkin was getting frustrated, so she closed her

eyes and began to fling elements all about the room, willy-nilly-like. Opening her eyes, she cursed in frustration and strode on out. Whatever else she did, she had to come back to this later, with a clearer head.

The night before the concert, along with the *'Wardrobe Malfunction'* Super Bowl halftime show, she had watched the Matrix trilogy—all three, end to end. That probably did a lot to influence her final choices. But I'm getting ahead of myself again. First, Punkin raced up to the club, with Tripod right on her heels, and worked the pole and the trampolines. Partly, she wanted to work out, and partly, she needed to run ideas for her performance through her head, as the *'zone'* cleared it.

After, sweating like a longshoreman on the equator, Punkin stripped to her altogether, while she paced the levels of Connie's survival complex. As she cooled enough to think straight, she found herself down in Connie's military surplus storeroom. Even though still no idea had shouldered its way to the front of her mind, she was getting serious goose-flesh standing all nekid 'n damp down in that cool, concrete chamber, deep underground. Tired of aggravatin' over it all, she grabbed the first thing she could reach, to put on over her goose-pimplly fifteen-year-old body. She didn't even notice what it was at first that she had grabbed. Her mind was on the more practical consideration of how to outfit herself with lots of firepower, readily at hand.

Earlier in the week she'd been looking at all the S&M outfits the girls had. There was a tight-fitting top of Zebra's that was nothing but black leather straps crisscrossing from waist to shoulders, that Punkin had riveted holsters for a half dozen handguns onto, all in places her hands wanted to reach, easily, while she moved. She had figured that rig would work over any tight-fitting top she might wear. She found a way to add on two short, soft leather tubes on the back that would let her put a pair of cut-off 12-gauges on her back, that she could reach over each shoulder. It helped redirect her thoughts to think of practicality and the danger element, instead of the ethereal, girlish need to look *fabulous*.

Then, as she was walking out into the corridor, she caught sight of herself in a plate-glass door that, with the room beyond it dark as night, was nearly a perfect full-length mirror. There stood her reflected image, her slicked-back hair dark with sweat, naked as a jaybird in what she had thrown on to chase the chill. It was a World War II submarine commander's full length black leather trench coat. One sleeve was hanging from a handful of threads at the

shoulder and, on a whim, she reached across with her other arm and tore it loose. Staring at that apparition in the glass door, what looked like someone else entirely, sleeveless black leather trench coat over a shimmering, naked body, she was struck by inspiration.

Fabulous *and* deadly!

That leather coat done flew out behind her like a superhero's cape, as she ran up the three levels to the sewing room—or maybe like a super *villain*, considering the material. In the sewing room, she started kicking and tossing all the rejected outfits to the side, or clear out the door. Pulling off the coat, she had the other sleeve off in seconds. Cutting and sewing the leather sleeves, Punkin quickly created a large black leather yoke and attached it to the shoulders of the coat.

It occurred to her, out of the blue, as she shrugged back into the coat, that the only thing to mar the impact of that look was her ridiculously young-looking, freckly baby-face. As she fussed about, the helmet of the rejected 'sexy astronaut' outfit fell to the floor and cracked apart. Picking up the dark faceplate only, she held it up where it was meant to go. It was a perfect quarter-sphere that would cover from the crown of her head to just below the tip of her nose, like the most oversized sunglasses ever. It was polarized, so the gal wearing it could see out and not be troubled by the glare of the spotlight, but would seem like a mystery woman, with only her full pouty lips in view. Isolated like that, Punkin realized she had herself one fine, *world-class* set of full, pouty lips.

Hot damn! Punkin thought, with a devilish grin that even sent a thrill of sexual desire through *her* to see. '*Hot damn... now we're cooking*', think she. Sleeveless leather trench coat waving in the breeze, Punkin run on over to the costume change room with all the S&M stuff and her crisscross body holster gear. Suddenly, she saw it all clear in her fertile imagination. She grabbed up a dozen bits 'n pieces and ran back to the sewing room and got down to business, still naked as a jaybird. She was way too revved-up to be cold n'more.

She was on fire!

...

When our heroine, she comes on out of that room hours later, there was a

light blinking on the computer that she'd never seen before. It had three letters flashing under the warning icon. *ATM*. Now, Punkin never had the chance to use money before. As a kid, she didn't have none. As a sole survivor of the human race, or whatever, she didn't need none. But she knew '*ATM*' was a thing people used to use to get cash, back before *The End*, because she remembered seeing folks use them—on the way to the grocery store, mostly.

But this here *weren't* that. A quick search showed her the icon list for her spy software. '*ATM*' stood for '*Alternative Transmission Method*'. Well, hell, that didn't mean squat to Punkin, still. When she put on her headphones to listen to the clip that the program had found and stored, all she heard were beeps. It meant nothing to her at first, so she listened to it several times. Soon, she began to notice a pattern to them, one that repeated, over 'n over. Listening more carefully, she realized the beeps were all either short or long, and that the spaces between them were also only short or long. Then, way up out of her deep-down memories of childhood, she remembered something. So she grabbed a pad of paper and marked them down the way she only just barely recalled how to do.

You see, when Punkin was a tiny scrub, her uncle Connie, he taught her a simple system of communicatin' that started out in the Navy, she thought she remembered him saying—Morose code, or something like that. She and her uncle Connie used to use laser pointers to send coded messages to each other when she was supposed to be in bed asleep. Them two shined them lights right past her mama, as she watched TV—until her mama figured it out and confiscated the pointers. But that there code was still in 'er head and when she had trouble with her recollections, she searched it up on the computer and printed out a cheat sheet. Ten minutes later, she had her translation. It was nine words, over 'n over: '*KSP keep sending we hear you we see you.*'

Well, sir, our poor, flabbergasted Punkin, her emotions done flew off in a half dozen different directions right then 'n there. She was glad she was already settin' down. Tripod sensed her mood and ran over to her, yipping to be let up on her naked lap. Well, she done let him, even though his doggy-nails scratched up her lap a bit. While her head and heart were doing backflips and racing about, caught between excitement and cautious restraint, she re-translated, re-read, then re-turned to the computer's '*Morse*' code key. That's right, that's what it was called. Five times through that process, Punkin was

finally ready to believe her eyes. It was a message from a living, breathing human being—more than one, it seemed. The message said ‘we’—*twice*.

Punkin wrapped herself around the only warm-blood creature she had in her life, weeping uncontrollably. Tripod, he was a-lickin' up her tears, trying to rescue her from an emotion he couldn't understand—his thick, muscular tail just a-thumpin' like a drummer against her bare thighs. “We're not alone, TP! ... We're not alone,” she said through the gasps and hiccups of her bawling.

If even *one* person was still alive, maybe *way* more were. Maybe others heard or saw her broadcasts, too, but had no way to let her know. Whoever this was—this Morse code person—she loved him, or her, almost more than life itself. Just when she was at the end of her determination, at the very edge of her courage, she was saved.

“Thank you, Lord!” she said out loud. “Thank you, Connie...” she said for what must be the thousandth time now. The clarity that took over our Punkin then, was so strong it nearly swept *me* away. Every last bit of doubt and despair she had tried so hard, for so long, to hold at bay, washed away like dust in a downpour. Punkin jumped up and danced with her Tripod to music only *she* could hear, spinning and leaping and hugging-up her puppy-dog as she moved about the place, unable to keep still any longer. It was maybe midday outside, in the world she was gonna take back for the living—tomorrow. It was so little time, but now, she had more energy than she knew what to do with. Putting down her Tripod, she raced about like a madwoman—an ecstatic, driven, divinely inspired madwoman.

A madwoman with a plan.

Quickly, she recorded a clip to add to the afternoon broadcast, threw on fatigues and sidearms and took that ol' Gretl zooming on up to the Regis to fire up the generator. A quick trip to the stadium, assured her all was still as she'd left it, there. Then she raced on back home to put the finishing touches to her costume and armament, listening to an endless loop of the most wonderful set of tiny little beeping noises she had ever heard.



That evening was a blur of creative madness and barely contained joy. She *wasn't* alone. For *so* long Punkin had hoped, hoped against hope, that it might be true. Now she finally had a proof that even her most defeatist subconscious self could do nothing to undermine. She began to realize just how much of her energy had been used up, just holding that fear at bay.

Other warm-blood, human beings *were* out there. They'd heard her broadcasts, seen her images, received her secrets. *She* was giving *them* hope. The feedback loop of hope was a powerful creature and it was beginning to take on a life of its own. As if it were possible, the realization that others were definitely out there watching and listening, put even *more* pressure on Punkin to give the performance of a lifetime, tomorrow night.

Before, the idea that she might not survive the night had held a certain icy comfort for her, knowing it might be for nothing if she were alone in the world. Now, that risk loomed monstrous in her future. As ready as part of her might once have been to die, now she *had* to survive! Nothing meant more to her now than looking into another set of living eyes, feeling warm, living arms around her—hearing a real, live voice in her ears. Kissing a real, live boy.

She'd never let herself really acknowledged it, but the idea of dying without ever feeling the warm, soft lips of a living, breathing, horny boy on her own now seemed the most cruel fate imaginable. Considering the fates Punkin had

already witnessed in her life, that was saying a lot. Could be there were no more boys left in the world. Maybe all that's left is women and girls, maybe old men or tiny babies. That would be cruel in its own way, but Punkin realized that even meeting face to face with a sewing circle of blind, senile, old crones would be a godsend. At least she would have someone to talk to *about* boys. Even if the boys in their stories were old men or long-dead, far-distant memories. A real conversation, with a real person—one settin' right there in front of her—when push come to shove, that was what she dreamed of most. The simple companionship that nearly every person alive *used* to take for granted. How many of the millions 'n millions of people alive before *The End* had realized just how sacred that simple human contact really was. *Punkin* did. God *help* us, she surely did.

After a decade without it, and the prospect of a *lifetime* without it, she felt like a swimmer, far too deep underwater, swimming desperately upward toward a surface that forever got further away—lungs burning 'n burning for air. Now that that surface, that air, seemed nearly within reach, it somehow felt farther away than *ever* before. Poised between the swimmer and that elusive surface, was the looming obstacle of her concert, as if all she had to do to break through that surface to all that fresh air, was to swim through a school of famished sharks. *Nothin' to it, right?*

She was gonna have to swim through them sharks anyway, surface or no, air or no. Now, she had a *real* prize to fight through to. *That* was what she had to focus on. *That* was what she had to draw her courage from.

It would have to be enough.

...

Somewhere deep into that black night, our Punkin finished up her outfit and laid it out on the bed. Beside that were the thirteen firearms she would wear on her person, with holsters for shotguns and derringers alike. The pockets of the heavily modified trench-coat were stuffed with magazines of ammo for the guns she'd be packing. She tried to keep the types of ammo to a minimum to avoid fumbling with the wrong type for whatever gun she was reloading. She was so hopelessly wired, she knew she might not sleep at all, but she set an alarm and tried to sleep anyway. She curled up in Connie's worn-out, overstuffed armchair that didn't smell like her uncle Connie no more, so she lit

up a cigar and splashed a little Old Spice around, for good measure.

Snuffing out the stogie, our exhausted Punkin finally slid into a shallow, restless sleep where she cuddled with uncle Connie and her mama, swam through hungry sharks, desperate for air, flew through the air amid bullets and explosions, and sang her heart out—rescuing millions 'n millions of lost souls, to a backdrop of teeny beeps.

...

When she woke, to the sound of Tripod barking in an alarm-clock-sounding yelp, she felt more tired than she had three hours before, when she'd finally plummeted into the jaws of sleep. She had unintentionally left the loop of the Morse code transmission on the shelter's speaker system and within a handful of heartbeats, it had caught her ear, then her heart.

Showtime.

She would come back here a couple hours before dark, before the concert, and get into her costume. First there were hours of pre-show details to attend. Punkin pulled on some no-nonsense gear for her prep work. Of course, she took her three handguns, that were to her now what her cuddly-snake, plush toy was to her when she was five—a security blanket. Except that this one was capable of ending lives, or freeing trapped souls. Suddenly, she was powerful envious of all them li'l girls in the past that got to live lives where the worst of their fears were shadows in their closets at night or mean girls embarrassing them at school. But none of those lucky little girls were living that charmed life any longer, were they? Any of them still breathing, were hiding in fear of *far* worse things than shadows and mean girls. The rest of them *were* those worse things, themselves—forever 'n ever—unless Punkin, and others inspired by *her*, ended their nightmarish nonexistence.

It was a slow crawl from the haunted, sleep-deprived state she woke in, to the divinely inspired, empowered, deadly rock-and-roll diva she would have to be in less than a dozen hours. When that garage door lifted and Punkin and her copilot motored, quite slowly, out topside, she could already feel the transformation begin. She put down all the windows in the Hummer just to feel fresh air on her skin and in her hair. After her dreams of swimming through sharks for a surface she never reached, just the feel of fresh air in her lungs was what a fix must've felt like to a dying junkie, or water, to a soul lost in a

burning desert. Like childbirth, to a woman afraid she was forever barren, or love, to a little girl, all alone for a lifetime.

It felt pretty *damn* good!

She had absolutely zero fear of attack on this gorgeous, windswept, sunny morning. At one point, Punkin stopped the Hummer in the middle of the street and got out, just to be out and unafraid in the real world—a world she intended to take back before this day was done. “You can't *have* it anymore!” Punkin screamed to the city around her. “It's *ours*... we're taking it back!” Tripod punctuated her rant with the doggie version of the very same challenge. “You *tell* 'em, TP!”

They walked quite a ways from the safety of the huge military vehicle, just to prove they weren't afraid, practically daring anything foul to answer that challenge. Tripod, who had his bayonet rig on, but not his muzzle, came running over with a badly weather-worn old baseball he had dug out of a stairwell, near a middle-school playground nearby. For the better part of an hour, Punkin threw that ratty ol' ball across the playground and Tripod ran after it. Then he ran back *with* it, tail waggin' like it were the old days he had never experienced and Punkin barely remembered. That innocent interlude was like a balm to Punkin's battered soul and exhausted body and mind. For a brief slip of eternity, the two of them existed only for the pure, elemental bliss of being young 'n alive. It felt to them like they had restored that feeling to the whole wide world, just then—a world that had all but forgotten that feeling had ever existed.

Innocence, more than life itself, was the casualty of that horrible day, ten long years before. It had always been the fundamental essence of life itself—the natural state of life, for *all* creatures, until experience and strife dash it to bits.

...

Back in the Hummer, windows down like they were on a Sunday drive through the country, rather than a patrol through a battle zone in preparation for a final offensive, they moved on to the broadcast tower. At the Regis, TP's muzzle went on and Punkin shrugged on her '*raging daylight*' backpack, before they strode, slow and confident, down into the bowels of that skyscraper and reanimated the monstrous edifice with a tidal wave of

electrical power. They were stripped back down and rolling on toward the stadium, within minutes.

The world already felt like theirs, to Punkin, as she negotiated the now-familiar streets over to the stadium. The air felt clear and pure, something no one could have said ten years ago. Back when microorganisms from outer space hadn't yet fallen on our heads and the streets were still clogged with filthy, gas-burning motors. The verdant growth of plant life was slowly reclaiming this valley it had once owned, uncontested. A calm had settled down on her that she knew might just be an early stage of complete exhaustion, but she didn't care. She slowed to a crawl and just closed her eyes and breathed deep, letting the Hummer nudge large debris out of its way and roll straight over anything else. She could almost hear the kids laughing and playing in the parks, old ladies yelling gossip from windows and over fences, the laughing voices of parents disciplining rowdy children with the near total lack of conviction a warm autumn weekend used to inflict on disciplinarians and juvenile offenders alike.

A thump, that brought the Hummer to an undignified stop, caused Punkin's eyes to open to the immediate now, but with that same lack of motivation as those imaginary weekenders. It was up against a dumpster and the two big metal objects inched forward together, at a snail's pace. The dumpster was outside of a burned-out mattress outlet. She could see the ragged corner of a discarded mattress sticking up out of it and it clicked a thought into place that she had been pushing to the far back of her mind for days, a possible solution to the one last, potentially dangerous, problem she had with the performance. She had damn near forgotten all about it—until now.

Out she jumped, barely remembering to put the Hummer in park and started rummaging around in the dumpster. There was really nothing in it but worn out, half-burnt mattresses. *Perfect!* Why hadn't she thought of this before? She rearranged the ones in there to lay flat on the bottom, then she hopped out and back into the Hummer, nudging the dumpster along until it was right outside the front door of the store. Grabbing one of the cut-off 12-gauges, she jumped out and, blowing out the door with five rapid-fire blasts of buckshot as she walked up the steps, she and TP jogged on in. While TP ran about sniffing for trouble, Punkin tossed several mattresses, still in plastic wrappers, out the front door.

“C'mon, Boo-Boo!” she called as she went out and pitched the mattresses

into the dumpster. Then, hauling the half-filled dumpster out to the street with a tow-strap, she secured it to the back of the Hummer and headed to the stadium with a big, goofy grin spreading across her face, that Tripod did his very best to lick clean off as she drove.

...

The stadium was awash in a strange blend of the silence of a barren wasteland and the pregnant anticipation of a momentous event in the making. With the clamour of the dumpster reminding Punkin of the odd, reluctant trailer the Hummer was dragging along behind, the two eased out onto the vast playing field in the ghostly, deserted venue. Parking close to the sprawl of mini-stages and the skeletal steeple of the scaffold tower, Punkin went out through the sunroof, bounded across the Hummer's roof and scaled the tower, using its support bars the way a gymnast uses the uneven parallel bars.

For a few minutes, Punkin just stood up there and turned a slow 360°, soaking up the view and the buildup of anticipation—not just her own. She could feel the tense anticipation of the facility itself, as if the stadium were a living thing, sick 'n tired of its unwanted, nocturnal squatters. She pulled herself from the projection of what was to come, on to the immediate issue of the dumpster's placement in the stage area. Looking down from that high vantage, Punkin saw immediately where it needed to go. She had set the small stages, all at different heights, in a sort of asymmetrical stagger that left small gaps between them where their pattern overlapped one another. Right below the tower, on the far side of the Hummer's spot in the tangle of makeshift stages, was a gap very nearly the size and shape of the dumpster. With the big ol' Hummer not yet parked in its place, it was a relatively easy adjustment to make the gap a bit larger. Pulling the Hummer through and past its spot, the dumpster was ready to be wrestled into place, after dragging one of the mini-stage platforms five feet to the left. Ten sweaty minutes later, it was done and she backed the assault vehicle into its *'showtime'* position among the stages.

Climbing back up, as high as she could get, Punkin grinned at how well it fit the maze of stages, and how perfect a solution it was for her needs. She couldn't believe how close she had come to not having a solution for that one last, critical, problem, at all. But now, standing twenty-five feet above the field,

a slight breeze chilling her sweat-drenched skin just enough to feel more refreshing than uncomfortable, she marveled that all the enormous mountain of preparation was actually complete. And she'd done it *all* herself. Her stages were set. Her music and the stadium sound and video were ready. The tie-in to the central broadcast and recording equipment back at the shelter was in place. The power was on at the Regis and would continue to broadcast for two days or longer, even if things went badly for her out here and she never returned to shut it down. The new loop of ads, interviews, clips of early 'termination' sessions and the album release party, was cycling through, now that the Regis building was pulsing with electrical life. Added to all that was her revised message to her phantom fans—especially the mysterious Bobby Mac and whoever had sent the Morse code message—telling them how much it meant to her that they were out there, listening.

For over a week, she and TP had done their 'Pied Piper' sweeps each day, at dusk, luring undead closer and closer to the stadium. They would do it once more as they returned to the venue at sundown. Punkin had created a remix of the intro to the opening number that was one endless, building loop, meant to draw in the last of the undead souls until, as she felt it was time, she would release the loop to seamlessly flow into the show opener.

Eyes hooded and nearly closed, Punkin let her fertile imagination carry her through the performance, all the time, poised high above the stages on her rickety tower. She could feel the wind wrestling her costume as she raced and danced and spun and dove through the night. She could feel the bliss of the 'zone' as the world slid into a slow-motion universe, while she continued to move at the speed of light. She could almost feel the bark of weapons-fire punctuating the baseline of her ethereal music, driving it on, driving the alien creatures back into the void—freeing the brothers and sisters of mankind from a prison she could not imagine and would not let her mind ponder. She could hear that driving beat build and flood the stadium with relentless power, flooding her soul with righteous indignation, and her heart with fearsome courage. This was as close to the transcendent experience of being in the 'zone' as Punkin had ever been, standing absolutely still and silent. In a matter of minutes, she had played out the whole performance in her head, leaving vague and instinctive, the endless variations possible in the heat of the moment. She imagined responding to the unknowable, intangible variables of the actual event and the mass of tortured souls that would storm this quiet,

serene place—where once innocent children and enthusiastic adults whiled away hours, cheering the athletes providing them with vicarious thrills.

On a whim, but mostly just to taste the visceral experience, Punkin dove, headfirst, toward one of the lower stages. Tucking, in a snap, she flipped, feet down, onto the mini-trampoline anchored there. Adding momentum with her legs as she rebounded off the taut, rubberized surface, Punkin executed a 'Double Layout Full In', regaining over half the height that the dive from the tower had given her. Nearly absently, Punkin registered the mini-tramp on the lower stage as she soared and twisted and hit it solidly as she came out of her Layout. Not letting herself over-correct, Punkin added only a hint more spring, with her legs, than the trampoline offered. Arcing slowly, effortlessly, like she were a stiff baton spinning above a cheerleader's head, she hit the mini-tramp out on the field in front of the stages. Rebounding off that last springboard, she assumed a graceful 'swan dive', legs together and toes pointed classically, arms held wide like the wings of an angel, looking as if she would dive face-first into the flat, solid playing field. Barely more than her own meager height off the weed-choked grass, Punkin snapped around and landed in a kneeling crouch, arms still out straight to the sides.

Stuck it!

In Punkin's mind, her outstretched arms held her Glocks, squeezing off the first of thousands of soul-freeing rounds. Tripod was racing around in a tight circle about her where she kneeled, slowly rising to stand, eyes to heaven, arms wide and becoming.

“Let's go... TP,” she said softly to the frantic Bull Terrier, spinning in his three-legged way, at her feet. “Everything's as ready as its gonna get!”

...

Before leaving the stadium, Punkin drove around and, like she had at the Regis, fired up the generators so all would be ready when she drove in to the venue at dusk, dressed to the nines and ready to rock. Her skin was tingling as she bounded back into the Hummer's cab and roared off at considerable speed toward the former 'shady district' of the dead city and her decade-long home in the ground.

If all went according to plan, tomorrow she might well be able to sleep outside, or any damn where she pleased—safer even than she ever could

have been, before *The End*. And if it all went poorly, she hoped she'd be sleeping in heaven with her mama and Connie and the girls, rather than haunting the topside world for all time. Forever caught between the mystery of life and the glory of the afterlife, in a living hell she never let herself imagine. A shiver went through her then that nearly cracked the fragile veneer of her determination and confidence. Then it died in ignominious defeat, as her Tripod licked her cheek and reminded her of all she was grateful for—even in this hellish environment she had come to call reality.



Back at the complex, Punkin put on her music, soft but ever-present, echoing through every room in the place, then stripped to her altogether and took a half-hour shower.

Already in a sort of 'pre-performance zone', she moved in a near trancelike calm, lying on her back on the towel-covered counter in the master bathroom. With her head out over the edge, Punkin let her heavily gelled-up hair hang straight down, while it dried in a position that would flow straight back from her head, like she stood in a wind-tunnel, when she got up. Punkin combined her gymnastic stretches with the wrapping of her wrists, ankles, knees and elbows with ace bandages and neoprene supports, all while lying flat on her back, naked as a cherub, moving her arms and legs through their full range of motion. The elegance of her form, of the subtle lines of her flawless, young body, was astounding. It was a perfect physical representation of the soft, fluid perfection of her music, scoring her every movement. I think there was a time I might have felt a strong, visceral longing course through the body I once had. Now, it only made me want to cry to see the grace and heavenly perfection that is this pinnacle of the human creature. Thank God I was looking at her from the direction her head was laying, for she spread her long, lithe, limber legs so wide they nearly lay flat on the countertop on either side of her, then she drew them together on either side of her head, flat up against her body,

straight as two arrows. Her glorious womanly area was presented to the mirror in a way that would make congressional prudes name it porn, but the innocence and purity of both her form and her nature, transformed that interpretation into aesthetic perfection. Mesmerized by the liquid grace of her movements, time stopped for me—though, dead as I bin, time were already a meaningless notion.

Her angelic body cleansed and protected, Punkin took a hair dryer in each hand and, still motionless on her back, hair cascading straight down, she created a vortex of warm, dry wind to fix her 'do' in place. Blindly capturing bottles of wash-out stage dye, Punkin created rainbow streaks, flashing back from her temples to make of her hair a sort of cross between the rudder of a jet plane, or a spaceship, and the tailfin of some exotic tropical fish. Rolling off onto her feet, Punkin checked her look in the complex of mirrors that let a gal see herself from every conceivable angle. Her hair did exactly what she had envisioned, and whipped side to side menacingly as she turned her head to take it all in. Her pale mocha skin, accented by nothing but black neoprene bands at her joints and a spray of golden-brown freckles across the bridge of her nose, glowed in the fluorescent light. For the space of a few moments, Punkin looked at herself as if for the very first time, as a woman. The wave of thought and emotion that flooded her ran along a dozen different lines—from the astounded amazement of the six-year-old girl she had once been, to the timeless pride of a grown woman seeing both the goal of idealized perfection, and the exaggerated fear of the flaws and age stalking her future. A future that now took on possibilities she had barely let herself dream of in the fast-dissolving prison of her past. Looking askance at her reflection, Punkin tilted back her head the way she would at various points in the concert, especially when she flew through the air on the trampolines, and noted with pleasure how her 'flying fin' of hair came to rest against her back like it was a dorsal fin.

Perfect!

...

Punkin stood looking at the elements of her outfit, lying strewn across the bed as if an undead stripper or love-goddess had vaporized right here, leaving the evidence of her existence sprawled where it fell—as the usurped body lost its cohesion and went wherever the hell those things went, when they were

terminated.

For a moment, all the drive and optimism of earlier fled her. She stood there, not a champion of the human race, but merely a tiny, young girl—cold and naked and vulnerable. She closed her eyes while that debilitating realization raced through her veins like icewater. She didn't *have* to do this. She had supplies enough to hide safely for years, only having to go out every now and then to pilfer food. She didn't have to face a stadium packed with all the horrors of her nightmarish city.

'Is it odd that I'm more nervous about being seen by unknown human survivors, then by being eaten by a sea of zombies?' she wondered. This might be what performers felt just before a big performance, back before *'The End'*. Minus the prospect of becoming a zombie hors d'oeuvre, that is. She knew there had been a bit of blather out there about this star or that, puking their overrated guts out before a show, stage actors, musicians, dancers, even standup comics. Anyone about to go out before hundreds, thousands—sometimes millions—and say *'Hey! Look at me!!'* It was a hollow, empty, powerless feeling. When she remembered her first close calls with the undead, that seemed to pale in comparison to this fear of public performance. This was an unwelcome surprise, self-consciousness of the highest order, rather than the pure, elemental terror of imminent death—or worse. How the *hell* could she be more terrified of people seeing her embarrass herself, then of dying a horrifying death? It made no sense, but there it was. Of all the things our Punkin had faced since awakening all alone in this ravaged world at such a young age, stage fright was what finally threatened to cripple her with an all-consuming dread. There were still a few hours before she had told the last remnant of mankind she would take the stage—take back the night—and take back the earth. Take back at least this one sad, little corner of it, and show whoever was still out there, warm-blooded and nursing a dying hope, how they might do the same. For all she knew, there was only one or two people even left—Bobby Mac, the person who knew Morse code, and the other handful of voices she'd heard trying to broadcast their existence to whoever was still alive. People still struggling, still fighting. Ironically, imagining the human race all but wiped out actually took the edge off of her stage fright, and replaced it with the all-too-familiar fear for her life—and, far, far *worse*, the fear of being all alone forever. *Great!* Some improvement that is. But it *was*, because Punkin Evelyn Brustah had lived with *those* fears for as long as she

could remember and, unlike the unfamiliarity of stage fright, they were like an old friend to her now. A terrifying old friend, but one to which she had become insensitive, if not immune.

The devil you know, right?

...

That brief crisis had bloomed and faded in little more than ten minutes. Her bare skin was beginning to erupt into tiny pinpoints of gooseflesh as the cool of the room sunk into her still damp body. Scooping up her gear, Punkin strode with determination up to the 'Conda Club. Tossing down the various bits of her costume on the edge of the main stage, she hit the play button of the sound system remote and began to work the pole bare-butt naked, but for her joint wraps and pads. Halfway through the first number, all thought of stage fright, death or an eternity as an undead, flew from her as if it were carried off by the copious sweat of her exertion. The world slowed and her mind accelerated and focused. At the end of each song, Punkin would shrug on one part of her elaborate costume at a time and work the stage, the pole and the trampolines. First was the spiderweb of leather straps that had the look of a long-sleeved, high-collared top of black leather, so perforated by the weave of fine straps, it showed more of her body than it concealed. The neck was a wide, leather choker that accented the swan-like sweep of her neck as if she were the devil's own concubine, lithe and forbidden. It cut off just above her navel and left her abdomen exposed. Somehow, that naked belly seemed more risqué to her than the skin of her torso peeking through the lattice of leather—even more than the exposed breasts circled by perfectly round 'portholes' of leather and rivets. They'd been created for a woman with a more substantial cup-size than our sweet, young heroine and made them look all the more nubile in comparison. The set she performed then, naked but for this snug cage of a leather top, would have given most men cardiac seizure to behold. For me, only the fluid perfection of her form and movement existed. I no longer felt lust, nor struggled to look away. I saw only the purity of God's labor, the subtle majesty of the human machine.

Punkin had dug out Raven's pirate costume boots for her ensemble. She remembered that Raven had used them in her trampoline routine and had told her they were the lightest, most functional boots she had ever worn working

the tramps. The tops went all the way to her crotch, when unfurled. Rolling down the tops to mid-thigh, they did more for the shape and sexiness of a well-turned leg than anything she'd ever seen. The heel was high enough to give that graceful look women want and men salivate over, but not so high it made running, jumping and dancing too difficult or dangerous. She worked the club in just the leather-strap top and the thigh-high pirate boots, the glory of her womanly area and her flawless bottom unfettered and free. Our sweet, little gal might well have been the most exquisite woman to ever grace that stage, her unselfconscious strut enough to make kings hand over their crowns — misers, their fortunes.

Next, Punkin drew on a tiny pair of black leather short-shorts, with tiny cuffs at the high-cut legs that came to a pair of points at a 'V' at the hip nearly as high as the low waist. The sharp upward cut angled from the crotch to leave the lower third of her bottom exposed, making of the shorts not much more than a leather thong. Her ever present fingerless gloves came last and, as that last tune ended, Punkin somersaulted off the trampoline to land at a determined stride that took her out and down the stairs, as she thumbed-off the music and tossed the remote to the stage.

All that remained was the sleeveless trench-coat she had modified with a wide leather yoke she'd built out of the discarded sleeves and other elements lying about the costume room. Her headgear lay beside it, now adorned with a light-weight stage-mic on the side, angled to curve around her jaw to hover at the curve of her luscious mouth, emphasized by blood-red lipstick and black lipliner. She had begun to overdraw the lines, to make her lips more dramatic, but, at the last moment, she decided they were too near to perfect to ruin with gaudy excess.

Last, of course, came her deadly firepower. The woven strap top now had holsters for thirteen weapons—two sawed-off, pump-action 12-gauge shotguns, five Glocks and an assortment of derringers. Some of those held only one-shot, some two. One of them was a unique, antique 'ladies companion' with a four barrel, rotating set-up that reminded Punkin of the legendary Gatling gun of the Civil War days, shrunk down for use by mice. All in all, not counting the ammo in the seven pockets of the old German U-boat trench-coat, she had over a hundred rounds on her, much of it locked and loaded, ready to fire. Staring at herself one last time in the multi-mirrored bathroom, still without the coat on, she had to admit she looked like an angel

of death—and she was, at that.

Her freckled baby face either completely ruined the effect or added a component that made the effect cut right to the soul. But only those lips, that just now looked stolen from a 50's sex-kitten, would show once the visor was on. The deadly sexuality she oozed, lit that fragile courage she wondered if she could ever recover, and she felt that cold certainty come over her, that she would ride right on into the long night. At the last, she reverently slipped that full collection of religious ornaments over her head and arranged them between her breasts.

There was only one problem and, though it seemed a tiny, insignificant thing, she felt the weight of it now. Her teeny, li'l nipples, they were right out there for all the world to see. *Mama wouldn't like that... would she?* Punkin thought to herself, looking guiltily up at the ceiling, toward heaven. *Dammit!*

Stomping back out past a silent, confused Tripod, now holding his 'kill suit' gear in his jaws and wondering what was wrong, Punkin raced to the costume room and started rummaging through bras and pasties and tassels for something to cover her poor, naked nips. They were so tiny still, not like mama's or the other gals', it almost seemed a ridiculous waste of time. But Punkin knew what mama thought all *too* well. She wouldn't go out there risking her life with her mama looking down from heaven, all disappointed in her.

Nothing worked. Nothing seemed right. It was pissing her off. Jamming her hands deep down into the drawers she yelped and yanked her hand out. TP dropped the gear he was carrying all around waiting for Punkin to dress him up and growled at the drawer. Something had snagged her middle finger and, though it wasn't bad, it bled rather profusely. Walking back to the bathroom, holding her middle finger way up high, like she was flipping-off the angels above, Punkin rummaged in the medicine cabinet for first aid. She put antibiotic cream on it and fished around for Band-Aids. A box of 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle' Band-Aids fell into the sink and popped open. She found a butterfly shaped strip and put it on the cut digit. Now she had a bright green middle finger. She giggled uncontrollably. Somehow, it was the *perfect* counterpoint to the serious, deadly, sexy look, that was really far too grown-up for such a sweet, innocent girl—a sweet, innocent, *deadly* girl. As she scooped the spill of assorted Band-Aids back into the box, one caught her eye. It was tiny and perfectly round, a lime-green circle with the smirking face

of Rafael on it. Peeling off the backing, she placed it directly over her left nipple. *Perfect fit!* A quick search found two others. She took the one with Leonardo, her second favorite Ninja Turtle, and covered the other nipple with it. There! If ever there was a perfectly idiotic counterbalance to this femme fatale costume, these were it. Two lime-green nipples with her childhood hero's faces right there looking out from her otherwise totally exposed, flawless B-cup titties. Since she was so tickled by the lime-green departure from the black leather S&M look of her deadly 'femme fatale' outfit, Punkin dug through the scarf drawer and found what she half remembered seeing in there — an actual Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle knit scarf, bright green, of course. With a schoolgirl giggle, strangely unprecedented in spite of her actual schoolgirl age, she tossed it around the back of her neck and then drew it on up under her fish-fin hairdo, tying it up at the crown of her forehead, like in those 40's pinup posters down in Connie's army surplus storeroom. *Now it was perfect!*

She flipped-off her reflection with her lime-green middle finger, just for laughs. All the struggle she'd had with the paralyzing terror of her insane mission and all it took to bypass it was a dollop of goofiness. "What d'ya think, Tripod?" she asked her nervous, three-legged shadow, as she stepped back and did a slow 'runway turn'. His excited, slightly muted, bark may have said, *'Hot as a pistol!'* Or it might have said, *'You look like an idiot!'* It was hard to say. Dogs can be brutally frank, if hard to comprehend. But the next bark, as he dropped his outfit at her feet, was definitely, *'Get me into my gear, dammit!'* And so she done just that.

...

As they reached the Hummer, now decorated with all the framed posters and cardboard cutouts of her mama and the other gals in the windows, she tossed the trench-coat and the headgear into the cab. It was hot and bulky, and she felt, somehow, like she should protect the look until she was on stage and ready to go. So she grabbed a big, stretched-out old hooded sweatshirt of Connie's from a peg on the garage wall and shrugged it on. It hung way past her knees and the huge sleeves had to be rolled and bunched-up to let her hands show. Zipped up, it took Punkin from deadly sex-kitten to little-girl-lost in an instant, bundled up in the rough equivalent of her daddy's shirt. It made her

look as tiny and helpless as a girl could look. Luckily for Punkin, there weren't no mirrors down there to see herself. Who knows what it might have done to her courage, because it stole it *all* from me, let me tell you. If I had arms to gather her up and protect her, not even a legion of undead would have been able to pry her from my embrace. But that was not to be. I could do nothing for her but be her witness. Punkin scanned through the radio one last time, drawing courage from the clear, strong sound of her broadcast loop.

Not ten seconds later, the gut-wrenching sound of the outer door lifting, shattered my calm and the Hummer roared to life. It left four, wavy black streaks of rubber behind as Punkin put her tiny, li'l gal foot to the floor board and TP leapt up onto the dashboard with a feral growl.

Showtime.



Punkin considered circling the city in an ever-tightening spiral once more, but it was nearly sunset and she wanted to be at the stadium before dark descended and the undead rose from their shadowy dens—set up and ready, before the stadium became a meeting ground for her nightmarish audience. Tripod growled at the shadows and blackened windows as they drove, but Punkin did not look aside to see. She was already moving toward that place in her mind where she was in total control—control of her body, control of her fears, control of her surroundings. And though he did not understand it, Tripod knew to let Punkin be, when she was in that place. His job was to protect her, never to interfere. Tripod was in his 'kill suit', the creak of leather and the occasional click-clack of the century-old bayonet on his back the only indication her copilot was there at her side. She knew he always would be. Her hand reached over to pet his aquiline nose, not yet in its leather muzzle, and he licked the sweat from her wrist and nibbled softly at her fingers in that newborn puppy way he had when he was worried.

“It'll be all right, TP... I promise,” she said distractedly, recognizing her faithful Bull Terrier's mood without it fully registering. In her head, the concert was in full swing. She was hearing her music, looking into the cloudy eyes of the undead, at that faint spark of hope she instinctively knew was the glimmer of the soul trapped within. She knew she would look deep into every pair

before she squeezed the trigger and set them free—if she could.

If this worked as well as she hoped, as well as she feared, there may well be a thousand or more lost souls out there tonight. She and TP will be the only warm blood within miles of the place. They would be right there, front 'n center on those stages, like fragile rafts in a raging sea of hunger. Part of her was a mere heartbeat away from blind panic, but that part was not in control. Compassion and righteous indignation were her strength. She found her hands caressing the chains, and her mama's rosary beads, hanging around her neck as she reached the parking lot of the ghostly stadium, just now being swallowed in the gloom of dusk. Without slowing, Punkin maneuvered the big Hummer through the open gate, through the tunnel and out to the skeletal silhouette of her tower and stages on the fifty-yard line. Tripod was growling quietly at movement in the recesses of the structure, but Punkin only jockeyed the truck into its place as part of the stages. When she was convinced it was right where she wanted it, she killed the motor and lights and took three deep, shaky breaths.

“You're not gonna like this, Tripod... but I want you to stay in the car,” she said kissing his nose awkwardly, with one hand on the bayonet point to avoid poking herself in the eye with it. “*Hear* me, boy? No... I *mean* it, TP... This will be *very* dangerous for you!” she continued, holding his face so she could look straight into his sad, little eyes, “I've *got* this... I *do!* Nothing will happen to me... I *promise!*” she finished, wondering if she was assuring the dog or herself. She could tell by the sheepish look and the lonesome whimper he made that he understood what she wanted and was not at all pleased by it. But he would do as she said, at least until, and unless, he thought she was in danger. Then, he would probably tear his way out of the Hummer and do his very best to chew up every last one of them undead. She knew, even brave and determined as he was, he'd never survive if he did that. All the more reason for her to survive the concert, as if she needed more. She was fairly certain she would prevail—*fairly* certain—but, alone among a zombie horde, won't she look to TP like she *is* in serious danger? She would just lock him in and hope he couldn't muscle his way out of a locked military vehicle, except, if all went badly, he would die if he couldn't get out of that fancy four-wheel drive coffin. Punkin had tried to rig up some way to set the locks on the Hummer to unlock after sunrise, just in case, but she just couldn't figure it out in the time she had left. So, she had to settle for leaving the sunroof open just enough

that TP could force his way out if he was determined enough, but not leave enough room for undead to get in. Much as she hated it, she left his muzzle off, too. She left water, kibble and other doggie treats in there for him and gave him a thousand teeny nose-kisses before she stepped out and tossed her gear on the stage next to the Hummer.

“*Stay! TP... Stay!*” she said leaning into his chest to keep him in when she shut the door, “Good boy! I’ll see you after the gig... I love you, Boo-Boo,” she finished as she shut and locked the door. It felt lonelier out there without him than she could believe, but she had plenty to do. Looking to the entrances, she could already see the telltale shifting of shadows that told her the audience was already arriving. Her haunting instrumental music was slowly building on the stadium sound system, one lonely spotlight picking the stage area out of the gathering gloom of the falling night.

Before Punkin finished dressing for the performance, she double-checked her padded dumpster and found everything just as she had left it. As an afterthought, she stashed that old Thompson repeater in there. Stripping off the oversized sweatshirt of Connie's, she tossed it aside and grabbed her gear, melting from the stages, into the shadows. One last “Stay, Tripod!” was the last sound she would make until the show began and she sang her ever-lovin’ heart out.

...

Crouched on the highest part of the upper reaches of the Stadium, Punkin watched with barely contained dread as, first a handful, then dozens, and, ultimately, hundreds of bent, shambling forms oozed from the black of the city streets and into her concert hall, roofed only by the stars. Turning to look the other way, she saw a smattering of forms wandering about the field looking like lost, dead children. The sound had drawn them there and, now, they were milling about, confused by the 360° of sound containing them.

Fish in a barrel, she couldn’t help thinking.

She shrugged on the trench-coat and felt the unrestrained wind whip its bulk about like a superhero's cape. Even with the visor on, she could see perfectly well, even in the low light. It would be especially useful as the stadium lighting came up and she found herself center stage, with untold megawatts of illumination assaulting her sight.

It was time to begin the countdown. It was really for anyone out in the world listening, watching. If they were having trouble receiving the signal, it would give them an hour's heads-up that showtime was imminent. As she hit the code on her remote to change the playback, the first announcement went out in Connie's simulated digital voice saying that the concert would start in one hour, then returned to the loop of instrumental music that left the undead milling about, enthralled and quiescent.

The countdown cut in every ten minutes, to update the estimate of the wait time. Meanwhile, Punkin, in full costume, walked the far upper wall, calmer than she thought possible. She could hear Tripod, in the brief moments when the soundtrack eased toward silence, barking at the sea of undead. They seemed oblivious to him so far, captured by her music. Punkin flashed her laser pointer at the Hummer until she got his attention. Tripod's frantic face poked out from between the 'Conda Club gang's posters and cutouts, arranged in the Hummer's windows. It made Punkin feel a bit less guilty about locking him in. It looked like everyone she had ever loved was keeping him company and cheering her on. She had practiced simple Morse code commands to Tripod since receiving the incoming signal, but she knew he had not come to recognize the meanings. He did, however, recognize the attempt and, knowing it was his Punkin, he settled down. She was glad she had thought to bring it.

Good boy.

She had timed her cycle of the upper-level to the countdown and was standing above the single spotlight that shone down on the stage, as the final ten minute warning boomed out. That familiar lurking dread began to stalk her, but could no longer rattle her focus.

Racking her brain for days for a suitable Grand Entrance, Punkin had already discarded a dozen ideas, when she'd found the equipment for rigging a zip-line, in the stadium storage, two days past. She strung the rig from the upper wall to the scaffolding of her tower, right through the path of the single spotlight, so she would be picked out of the black night as she 'flew' to the stage. She had tested it twice and figured the timing so she would touch down on the stage just as her vocal part came up.

She hoped.

Suddenly, in the black void of the venue, hungry undead mouths filling the darkened stadium field below, it gave her a thrill of trepidation to lift her feet

and slide down into the jaws of hell. But the intro to her first number was building and suddenly, the digital voice of uncle Connie came up bold and rumbling, *'Welcome to the first ever... Ungrateful Dead... Free Concert Tour... featuring the musical sensation... Killshot! ...Punk!'*

At the word 'sensation', Punkin had squeezed the handles of the zip-line rig, lifted her feet and let the pull of gravity draw her out and down at a rapidly accelerating pace. She held her body in the flawless shape of an 'L', holding her legs parallel to the playing field, teaming with undead, far below. Her trench-coat streamed out behind her to match the gelled-back fin of her circus-hair.

She could almost hear the collective gasp of humanity—those out there in the wide, unknown world, as well as those trapped within the ungodly parody of the bodies they once thought of as their own. The transformation from terrified little girl to righteous berserker took place in the 7.5 seconds it took to travel from the nosebleed seats to the cluster of stages. When she readied to let go of the zip-line handle, the universe had already slowed to a snail's pace and Punkin's mind and body had reached that place of perfect control and fearlessness. It hadn't been her plan, but, in the lazy flow of time she commanded now, it was too easy and fun to pass up. She let go a full twenty feet earlier than planned and, rather than land on stage and skid to a stop, she let her legs drop and swing backup for momentum, releasing the zip-line to execute a perfect, lazy backflip, dropping thirty feet or more to hit the trampoline out among the eddying undead. She ricocheted off it into a complicated *'Double Gainer with a Twist'*. She landed deftly on the main stage, facing the undead crowd, belting out her angelic voice in perfect time with the music that had built just for that, bathed in the single spotlight.

The surge of pleasure and adrenaline it gave her might well have carried her right on through the long night, but, in truth, that power had only begun to build. This first cut began with a powerful flourish, but eased to a haunting, angelic melody that had me as transfixed as all of them spacebug horrors. Punkin strutted about those stages with every bit as much poise and power as any trumped-up diva or rockstar ever had. At one point, she bent to kiss the glass of the Hummer's back window, leaving a bright red lip-print in lipstick there. It gave the comical appearance of being on Tripod's worried face, pressed as it was, right up against that very spot, on the other side of that bulletproof, zombie-proof, glass. While the music settled to a sad ballad-like

rhythm, Killshot Punk's sole member somersaulted down into the necrotic audience, strutting about like she owned the place. She looked, as best she could, into every cloudy, undead eye, offering hope and respect to the souls trapped within. She had no firearm in her hands yet. It was only the otherworldly sound of her singing that she wielded out there. The shambling masses simply eddied around her as she strode about, cowing them with her angelic voice, and her staggering presence.

For a bit, Punkin found herself looking for people she knew—trying to superimpose the memory of radiant, loving faces, filled with life onto the dead, gray, decomposition that surrounded her. Every face seemed to fight a private battle within, feral need trying to dominate the hope and humanity that clawed its way to the surface, drawn by her ethereal sound. Over the course of that first long, haunting melody, Punkin let her compassion build and fought down the natural aversion to being so close to death, until those two dueling aspects became a nasty stew of hunger and hope.

One old woman, stared at Punkin with a hollow sadness behind her milky eyes. The ragged remnant of her matronly garb reminded her of how she must have looked to loving grandchildren, when they had come to her house on Sundays, back before The End. That sadness looked so deep, tears trickled down from behind the sci-fi visor that hid Punkin's eyes from all but God Herself. To our Punkin, the haunting swell of the harmony in her ballad took on a quality that she would swear carried the empty echo of every trapped soul before her, adding a poignancy and power to her music, she had never felt before. By the time she had circled the stages and stood back before the thickest knot of undead bodies, the ballad was on its last lingering notes. At her best guess, Punkin estimated there were over two hundred of the cursed undead crowding about her.

As the first cut faded to nothing, Punkin counted down the seconds before *'Hell to the Chief'* erupted, with its razor-sharp vocals and staccato beat. The faces, only an arm-reach before her, stared at her as if, in the brief silence, they might regress to the feral hunger the music had temporarily subdued. It was subtle, but, immersed in a sea of danger, it was as conspicuous to her as an avalanche. *Thank God*, Punkin found herself thinking. Her compassion had nearly frozen her, causing her, for a moment, to feel they could be saved in some other way. Perhaps music could bring them all the way back. But, of course, it couldn't, and that glimmer of monstrous hunger in those once-

transfixed undead faces cured her in a heartbeat. *Her* heartbeat, the only one in this vast wasteland of imprisoned souls. That undead granny's sweet, dead face sharpened and a feral snarl built in her throat, and all those about her. As the segue silence grew long, Punkin felt the fingers of both her hands close on cold, hard steel.

Say good night, Gracie.

Not two more beats of silence separated that first sad, haunting tune from the second. Where *'Apocalyptic Lullaby'* was soft, *'Hell to the Chief'* was harsh. Where *'Apocalyptic Lullaby'* was haunting, *'Hell to the Chief'* was devastating. Rapid, staccato electronic power blasted the stadium so fiercely, had living ears still survived in that city, all would be turned to the stadium. The sound of gunfire and retribution drowned in a flood of otherworldly rock 'n roll. With that first concussion of the techno-punk beat, muzzle flashes lit the unstartled faces of long-dead citizens, as the sparkle and swirl of clouds of insect-like confusion eddied and faded all about her. No shot did she take that was not perfectly timed with the savage beat of her music. Not one shot did she take that did not pierce true, ending a hellish parody of life with machinelike precision.

Once again hopeless captives of her music, the undead vaporized by the dozens. Punkin's movements held a stylish grace that could not be called dance, but was far more profound than mere striding. As the music moved her, Punkin swept north, then south, parting the sea with gunfire. She spun at times like a ballerina from hell, punctuating the raging beat with her deadly accuracy. The sea of necrotic humanity all about her circled and flowed with her, never closing on her, never seeking cover. As if it were elaborately choreographed, empty magazines dropped from smoking handguns, replaced an instant later with a dramatic flair that followed Punkin deeper and deeper into her trancelike bliss.

That second song ended, abruptly. Its final, explosive sequence of percussive dissonance was matched by the last rounds of her matching Glock. Punkin rebounded off the outermost trampoline, shedding the guns as she pirouetted through the smoke and sparkle-shrouded air to land deftly onstage, strutting over to her cache of weapons. Distractedly, she realized she had spent every round she had in her trench-coat and every automatic pistol she carried. Spinning to look out over the crowd, she suppressed a surge of horror. There were now hundreds more of the walking dead out there, moving

ever closer.

She stayed on the stages for the next number, if only to catch her breath and recover her calm. A glance to the exits showed more ruined silhouettes shambling in at a horrifying rate. *What the hell did I get myself into?* she heard a part of her swear, but the next song was another violent, frantic piece she had engineered for just this purpose, so she took a pair of assault rifles from the stash on stage. The cut-offs on her back were still there, feeling more and more comforting by the minute. A flying leap, timed to the intro of harsh, rapid electronic snares, sent her soaring off a tramp, high above undead heads and back into the swelling mass of former humanity. She stuck the landing, but the imprecise spray of the two machine guns nearly flung her to the turf. Her grip on the 'zone' was weakening and the sheer numbers of her targets was building far faster than even automatic weapon's fire could slow. Once or twice, a far distant sliver of her mind wondered what the people out there, all those Bobby Macs, would feel if she were to fall before this was done. Would she be a martyr, used to flog their terror into courage and inspire their rebellion to retake this planet from the invaders? Or would she be the last nail in humanity's coffin? The cautionary tale told by terrified adults to their children, to warn them away from such foolish acts—to accept a living death of hiding, only hoping for another day of that hell, terrified of every shadow?

As that debilitating train of thought bubbled up from down deep inside, Punkin was fiercely holding to her desperate sense of control and invulnerability. Magazine after magazine of cruel, hollow-point slugs flew through the crowd, her aim now somewhat less surgical and far more desperate. Where, earlier, each and every round ended an abomination, now every third or fourth round missed its target. Some of the missed shots still took another, so close-packed had the bodies become, but, as time drew on, Punkin's sleepless exhaustion began to take its toll. Her set was well past the halfway point and dozens of smoking, empty munitions lay about the field, discarded and silent. The beauty and finesse of her performance had deteriorated to the frantic, near-panic of battlefield frenzy. Nearing the end of her impossibly well-stocked armament, blind panic became Punkin's true nemesis, cutting down her will, even as she cut down her targets.

More for the reprieve, than to assess the threat, Punkin bounded back onto the stage and up the scaffolding, again using cross-braces like a gymnast. Other than the turret gun on the roof of the Hummer and the derringers tucked

into her outfit, the cache of rifles on top of the scaffolding was all she had left. That, and her deadly finale, with the surprise she had pilfered from Connie's Armageddon Chamber—that she had hoped to God she wouldn't have to test.

The final number of her concert tape began to build as she stood, superhero-like, at the apex of her skeletal tower. There seemed to still be hundreds of undead out there. The rapid assessment in her head of the rounds she had brought, even figuring a 50% kill rate, which she knew was low, told her she had ended over a thousand of the nightmarish undead. Nearly that many still remained.

What the hell did I get myself into?!

She heard Tripod's plaintive whine, as he raced about in the Hummer, trying to keep her in sight while trying to eat zombies, right through the Hummer's windows. *Stay put! Now... more than ever*, she willed to her best friend. Just a few more minutes and either this is over or we are in the Hummer together and fleeing for our lives. '*Stay, boy*', she mouthed to a Tripod that looked, to all the world, as if he understood her. He calmed then, staring at her as if nothing else existed in *all* the world but his Punkin. For Tripod, that really *was* true.

That last tune came on and, as she had planned, it built from quiet wonder to brutal power over the course of 2.73 minutes. Letting the late night breeze tease the trench-coat out all around her, billowing in perfect resonance with her composition, she began to sing. Her voice was soft and sad as it built. She stood like a goddess, high above a nation of undead, arms out wide, head back, eyes to heaven, as if she offered one final benediction for all the lost souls milling about below. A slow spin let her shed her trench-coat, slowly and with renewed flourish. Holding her arms out like a helicopter's blades, she let the weight of the leather coat drive it further and further off her shoulders. It slid out along her arms until it was captured by her long, graceful, desperately fatigued fingers and her spin became the flamboyant movement of a matador. She guided and teased the leather 'cape' in graceful arcs and powerful sweeps until, at a crescendo she knew was imminent, she released it like an Olympian flinging a gargantuan discus. It flattened to a perfect plane and its considerable weight carried it well out beyond the stage, into the milling, undead crowd. Her own momentum, after releasing the oppressive weight and heat of the coat, took her to the stage and, tumbling in fluid grace, she came up with one of the two AK-12s at the back edge of the tower's stage. Her music had gone feral and wild now and, sighting only on the stragglers far off

by the exits, she picked off all but the chilling mass of undead close in, surrounding the stages. The rifle roared with precise semiautomatic fire and every squeeze brought the smoke and glitter of another soul freed.

With less than thirty seconds left to her concert's repertoire, Punkin squeezed off the last rounds of the last rifle. She felt a flicker of satisfaction that not one shadow lingered out there now, but those hundreds pressed together, staring helplessly up at the vision atop her tower. Letting wild abandon overtake her in a visceral rush, Punkin worked that stage with more energy and presence than the 'Conda Club' stage had ever witnessed, timing, in her head, the last of the song's powerful climax. In the frozen moment just before the last note signaled her departure from the stage and the three-second countdown to the finale's radical conclusion, Punkin's eye noted the exact location of the dumpster with its array of mattresses and the hidden Thompson machine gun she had almost forgotten she had stashed there at the last minute. The remote she'd hoped she would not need was in one hand, the other remote, that had controlled the lights and music, in the other. Marveling, in spite of her barely-harnessed terror, at how slow time flowed in moments of extreme focus, she heard those seconds count off impossibly slowly. At the six-second mark, her thumb pressed a button on the light and sound remote. She was spinning slowly, like a top, about the edges of the tower stage, seeing every footstep in perfect clarity that would have her front and center as she hit the last two buttons—one on each remote. A ring of flame and smoke followed that first button press. Hundreds of flaming missiles left pale trails of smoke as they flew skyward from all about the stages, tracing a luminous crown all around her, reaching for the stars. As the three-second mark chimed in her head, Punkin threw herself from that tower like a sacrifice to the gods. To her, the arc of her fall was so slow she felt she could catch a quick nap on the way down. Noticing, peripherally, where the trampoline below was, Punkin tucked in a perfect 'Triple Tuck' and struck the rubberized surface. She exploded up into a complex series of effortless contortions, her eye locating and aiming for the mattress-stuffed dumpster, as she flew.

At the zero-second mark, perfectly timed to the apex of her trajectory, Punkin pressed the last of the buttons on each remote. Another ring of dull pops and flames sent a dark cloud of fist-sized objects a mere ten meters into the air, arcing out over the mesmerized throng, and down, as the stadium went dark. The sky above erupted in a fireworks finale Punkin had never seen

the likes of in her handful of Fourth of Julys. They overlapped one another as the last, brutal pulse of Killshot Punk's '*Farewell to Fear*' bloomed and faded. In her molasses-like 'zone', Punkin watched those beautiful explosions fill the sky with iridescent blues and greens, violets and reds, as she tumbled, knowing she would hit the mattresses only a tiny bit off target. Her trajectory would carry her just a little too far, but she would only rebound a bit off the inside wall, rather than hitting the dead-center point she had aimed for.

As crazy as it seemed, her mind was running so fast she had time to recall all she had learned about Connie's surprise. She had pilfered, from that horrid Armageddon Chamber, nearly a thousand fist-sized fragmentation grenades, with digital altitude triggers. If she had done everything right, they would go off when they were precisely 1.5 meters above the baseline she had programmed in—the playing field, conveniently, level as a tabletop. *If* she'd done everything right. She had tested three outside the shelter. They had worked quite well. *Horrifyingly* well, when you considered that all these things had originally been created for killing living, breathing *people*—fellow human beings, not invaders wearing the commandeered bodies of *former* people.

Still falling, still transfixed by the fireworks spectacle above, real-time crashed in on her as her body crashed into the dumpster, her makeshift spiderweb of straps pulling the mattresses standing against the sides on top of her like a smothering protector.

The instant the last of the fireworks burst above, the first of the grenades reached shoulder level among the zombie horde. In less than a long second, all 987 detonated in a blur of overlapping pops. That cacophony was followed, instantly, by the sound of thousands of white-hot, razor-sharp shards of shrapnel peppering the steel sides of the dumpster. More than a few tinkled between the mattresses and the inner walls, having penetrated through, but with insufficient velocity remaining to knife through the bedding. Then, her world went pitch black and silent as the tomb.



Punkin lay in the utter dark of the dumpster, softly crushed by the weight of the three mattresses piled atop her. The utter silence, felt like a solid thing against her ears, in the wake of so much percussion and volume. Her heart thundered in her veins and echoed in her ears as she tried unsuccessfully to locate even a scrap of sound outside her padded, steel womb—or tomb, depending on what happens next. Slowly, silently as possible, her hand fished about for the machine gun she had stashed in there earlier. But it was at the other end of the dumpster.

Dammit.

In the dark and utter silence, any undead still standing would quickly recover from the enthrallment of her music and their aversion to bright light. Maybe she should have left the stadium lights on, but the dramatic effect of cutting them just as the fireworks filled the sky above had seemed too perfect to pass up. But now, both the remote control and the only loaded weapon left in the venue were somewhere, lost in the dark, confined space. *Showmanship*, of all things, was to be her undoing, then, she chided herself, with a hint of gallows humor.

As the considerable ringing of her ears faded to a level where she could finally hear her own labored breathing, Punkin strained to identify any movement or sound outside. Freed from the shackles of the techno pop beat

and her angelic voice, unburdened by megawatts of burning illumination, any surviving undead should have sensed her warmth by now and gone feral and ravening. As slowly and silently as she could, Punkin managed to curl about and move to the other end of the increasingly coffin-like dumpster. Her fingertips finally found the cold, steel barrel of the Thompson, but her own weight on the mattress it was buried under, prevented silent extraction. Feeling marginally safer with her hand touching the gun, she calmed some and listened, hearing the sound of a growling, scrabbling disturbance somewhere not far off. Her blood went cold and she patted at her top for one of the tiny, nearly useless derringers hidden there. The antique, four-barrel was gone, lost in here or out on the field. She had no way of telling.

Alarmed at the sound of something moving fast and frantic across one of the stages, right toward the dumpster, she went blank as to the location of the other teeny 'lady's companions'. She abandoned stealth entirely then, and dug furiously at the Thompson submachine gun. It scraped harshly along the echoing steel wall, but it was still snagged. As a snarling mass hit the outside of her death trap, she yanked with all her strength, feeling the edges of sharp, ragged shrapnel tear at the skin of her forearm. The gun came reluctantly free as the scrape and squeal of ragged nails clawing for purchase on the outer steel and upper lip of the dumpster electrified her nerve-endings. The press of the weight of a body landed directly on top of the mattress, crushing her down and effectively trapping the Thompson, now in her hand but in no position to fire. Pinned and helpless, Punkin knew it was over. In her final moments, she called out her best friend's name—not to summon his help, just to hear his name one last time. “Tripod!!!”

A tiny, wet nose shoved in around the edge of the entrapping bedding and the unmistakable smell of snausages on puppy breath filled her nose, as doggie saliva covered her grinning face. “*Tripod!* Holy *shit*, boy! You scared the *piss* out of me!” she yelled through relieved laughter and, after taking a moment to check herself thoroughly, she added, “... *literally!*” Then, in a strangled heartbeat, she realized she still had no idea of the situation outside.

“Shush, boy!” she whispered harshly, trying to hear beyond all the ecstatic doggy sounds, “... Hush, now.” Finally working the Thompson loose, she felt a small, hard object against her foot and snagged it. She could tell by feel it was the remote for light and sound. The grenade remote was still lost, but it was useless now, anyway, its one-time function performed—but how effectively?

Moving as quickly as she dared, still listening for sounds of a threat, Punkin got out from under the mattresses that had both saved and trapped her. She readied herself for a frantic dash to the Hummer, clearing a path with the limited rounds of the Thompson, her very last weapon. “Ready, TP?” she whispered. Tapping the switch that flooded the field with dozens of massive flood lights, Punkin stood up, head and shoulders just barely clearing the upper edge of the dumpster, finger quivering on the trigger. She found no movement, no undead face, jaws agape, inches away and ready to leap in to devour them. In seconds, she had repeated the move to the other three compass points about the dumpster. Still no movement.

“Stay, TP!” she yelled, diving out onto the adjacent stage that was nearly level with the dumpster's open top. Rolling to her feet, she dashed about the stages doing her best 'SWAT team' assault poses, like she'd seen in the movies, checking near and far for danger. Still nothing.

She leapt to the roof of the Hummer, feeling considerably more powerful within arm's reach of the turret gun atop the truck. Still she saw no sign of life — *unlife*, she amended. A sloppy backflip from the roof, put her on the playing field so gracelessly, she landed on her leather-clad bottom, facing the murky shadows under the stages with her Thompson at the ready. *Nothing!* Holding up her bloody arm to offer the smell of spilt blood, Punkin called out, “hey you! Zombie fuck-heads... Come and get it!”

Still Nothing!

'*Sorry mama,*' she whispered to the clouds. She knew she shouldn't swear, but, *shit!* She'd *earned* it. It might have been a figment of her imagination, but all the faces of the 'Conda Club gals seemed to wear expressions of anxious concern, where they originally had worn naughty smiles and sexy pouts. Tripod, poor thing, was doing his level best to get out of the dumpster. Front paws over the lip, his one rear leg scraped uselessly at the smooth steel on the inner wall. His bayonet point was flailing back and forth as he searched for his Punkin, and anything foolish enough to threaten her. His desperate whimper tugged at her like the day she had rescued him, yelping his anguish while he nipped at his severed leg, trying to end the pain.

“Hold up, TP... mama's coming!”

That threw her a bit. She'd never referred to herself as 'mama' before. That was a name for just one person in all the world, until now. She couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to say those words to a real, live child.

Feeling, suddenly, cold and conspicuous in her revealing leather-strap top and pee-soaked leather hot pants, Punkin snatched Connie's hoody from the Hummer's rearview mirror where it had fetched up when she'd taken it off and tossed it aside. As she turned, she caught sight of herself in that mirror. Her bright red lipstick was smeared across her face, looking unsettlingly like blood on the face of a savage predator, feeding on its kill. Her 'wind-tunnel', 'rainbow fin' hair was now cocked at a severe oblique angle, still so stiff with hair gel it stayed where it had been bent.

"You're a *vision*, Punkin," she told her reflection as she turned to free her struggling buddy. She was shrugging on and zipping up the sweatshirt, that still held a hint of tobacco and Old Spice, then slipping out of the damp shorts, as she hopped unsteadily toward the dumpster.

Punkin reached in and grabbed her frantic puppy, still dangling by his front paws, by the bayonet that served as a perfect handle for that purpose. After a tearful, face-licking, snout-kissing reunion, punctuated by a halfhearted scolding for not staying in the Hummer, our two brave zombie-slayers began to walk about the stadium. First and foremost, Punkin was not yet ready to assume every last undead had been terminated. She doubted that even every one of them that had been drawn here to the stadium had been, let alone all that had haunted her dead city for a decade. But there sure as shootin' was a hellofa lot fewer of 'em, now, that's for dang sure!

"Stay close, Boo-Boo!" she called out to Tripod who ran from pile to pile of ragged, discarded clothing, sniffing and growling at what he smelled there. "Stay here by me... okay?" she called sharply. He ran on back her way as delighted as any dog ever was, to yip and nuzzle at his Punkin. "G'boy!" she bubbled, crouching down to scratch at the snow-white heart on his chest where his stocky, muscular body didn't allow him to scratch himself. Dogs have a reflex to scratch with a hind leg when you scratch their undersides, unfortunately for Tripod, that left him one leg short for standing. So he set down hard on his not-so-little doggie-butt and sort of skittered around a bit, as she scratched.

She mostly stepped around the remnants of the poor folk she had released so violently, as she wandered near the bleachers and the exits, compelling TP to heel. It was nerve-racking, especially with the fresh blood on her arm and Tripod's paw pads from the razor-sharp shrapnel, impaled in the dumpster walls. But, still, nothing moved but for windblown scrap, one small, exhausted

girl and her little three-legged puppy-dog.

Almost as an afterthought, Punkin reached for the switch to turn on her mic, to address whoever had witnessed all that had happened. Touching it, she realized it had been on the whole time. Whoever was listening had heard every word since she found herself trapped in the crushing darkness of her dumpster bunker.

“This is Punkin Evelyn Brustah... of Killshot Punk...” she began in a soft, conversational tone, “... If you saw or heard *any* of that, you know it *can* be done. We can release *all* the trapped souls of our families and friends... and take *back* our homes.

“I see no evidence of any undead remaining in possession of the bodies they've stolen, but I will continue to hunt them down. Here...” she paused, not really knowing *what* she intended, for a future she could not, at this time, envision. “... Here, and wherever they infest my world... *our* world. This is my question to you... Who is with me?!” Punkin could almost hear the earth herself answer that challenge, and a grim smirk creased her lipstick-smearred face.

“This is Punkin Evelyn Brustah... and my brave sidekick, Tripod, the Valiant... on behalf of Killshot Punk.

“Good night... and God bless us all!”

...

After killing her transmission, Punkin and Tripod went back and cuddled on the roof of the Hummer. Punkin set there cross-legged, next to the turret gun with her TP snoozing contentedly in her lap. She may have dozed a bit herself, the truck's Gatling gun a cold, hard, but infinitely comforting pillow. Mostly she just let her mind go blank, staring out at the hundreds and hundreds of piles of the last earthly remains of so many good people, now freed from a fate worse than death—at *her* hand. Hers and *Connie's*, she had to amend. *Thanks Connie, you paranoid, crazy-ass, astounding old coot.*

You truly were a *piece* of work.



About a half-hour before the sun broke free from the distant hills, the sounds of the sputtering generator stopped. Its absence was the first indication of its constant presence Punkin had even noticed. The ring of powerful stadium floodlights went dark, but the sky was already a pale lavender, on its way to dawn's golden splendor. Nothing had moved all night in that lonely place. Punkin was as calm, centered and free as she had ever felt. The city was *free*. *She* was free. A thousand or more souls were free.

Exhaustion was circling like a starving jackal, but refused to come any closer, just yet. Tripod stirred in his sleep, growling at something haunting his dreams. Punkin bent to kiss his nose and he roused and licked her face. "Watch the eye-poker, buddy-boy..." she said, giggling with an innocence she thought she had long ago lost.

'Did anyone hear?' she wondered. *'Will they join the fight?'* For now, it really didn't matter. She had done what she had set out to do. She and Tripod were alive and well, and free to live in the sun again—in the topside world, *their* world. As if on cue, the first rays of the new dawn sliced through lazy, low hanging clouds and bathed the two of them in its glorious warmth.

"C'mon TP... I hate to say it, but we've got a butt load of housecleaning ahead of us." She could've let it all lie—forever, if she wanted—but it felt right to do it, and do it now. Her grim determination and utter relief was driving her

on, and while it lasted, she had plenty to occupy herself with. Anything to put off wondering about the fate of the rest of the world. The flatbed trailer was there, part of her makeshift stage, so she hitched it to the Hummer. Behind the trailer she strapped the dumpster that had saved her life. The first thing she did was put down *all* the windows and open the sunroof, something she had *never* done before. The feeling of freedom and the feel of fresh air wafting through the cab re-energized her. She had to move a few of the cutouts of the gals, where TP's fervor had knocked them around. Now she couldn't help arranging them so that their sweet faces were all at, or hanging out of, the open windows and sunroof, where they could enjoy the morning sun and watch as she and Tripod straightened up.

The glorious sun burst through the bleachers and gates making golden fingers of light that picked out the remnant piles of people's last possessions, as if it meant to cleanse them of the horror they had recently contained with their heavenly radiance. While TP ran ahead to tease loose the piles with his bayonet helmet and snout, Punkin meticulously sifted through and tossed anything precious or identifying into the trash cans she had set on the trailer, tossing the ragged scraps of clothing into the dumpster. The dumpster was overflowing long before she had made the rounds of the playing field, so she cut it loose and left it where it was when it could hold nothing more.

The dozens of discarded pistols and rifles laying all about were tossed into the back of the Hummer. She didn't do it because it was dangerous to leave them lying about. She just wanted to put this nightmare behind her and this seemed to help. Besides, they weren't hers to abandon. They were Connie's, and she would put them back where she found them, as she'd always been told.

She wanted desperately to forget the code for the Armageddon Chamber. She wanted to forget that mankind had ever made such horrible things, designed to be turned on fellow men. The world was not safe from the threat from above—not yet—and, much as she hated to think it, maybe not ever. There were things in that room that could level a city—and many, many things, not *so* horrible, that were still horrible *enough* to give our Punkin nightmares.



In the days that followed, Punkin found a half dozen places in her dead city that she truly loved. Slowly, meticulously, she removed every indication of the terror that had been. She picked up rubble and, in a few cases, repaired windows, doors and walkways. Anything she found useful, she organized as best she could. Cars, boats and cycles that still could be started, she moved—parking cars properly, and mooring boats to docks. Until, from her handful of favorite places, she could almost pretend that all that had gone wrong in the world, had *not*.

Except, she was still alone.

TP was there. A surprising number of wild animals, birds and scavengers at first, slowly came back into the city. That, more than anything, told her the undead were gone. She had not seen a single live bird nor woodland creature within the city limits, until now. And so, she brought out the cutouts and posters of her wonderful, crazy, long-dead family of misfits and arranged them in protected places at each of her favorite spots. One of her coveted places was the Regis building. It had scared the living crap out of her once. Now, she felt she had claimed it for herself. She had figured how to get at the thousands of gallons of fuel still in tanks beneath service stations, at least the ones that hadn't burned to the ground in the first wave of the assault from space. She could fuel any vehicle or generator. Like everything else, it just took time and

elbow grease. The Regis generators had full tanks now and she rigged lobby access to fire them up if she wanted to take the elevator up top or access the medical offices, without having to go down to the basement. One of the first things she did there was retrieve the body of the guard up on the roof. She put the body on a gurney she found in the medical wing. It was gruesome work, but effortless. There was almost nothing left of him but his clothing and bones. She brought him to a nearby cemetery where she had already begun to carve long trenches with the backhoe there, after she figured out how to operate the thing. She placed any remains she found anywhere in the city in them and plowed over as they filled.

One day she had spent hours in the Gottlieb Research Group Prosthetic Research Lab, pouring through the records on the computers and looking at devices in their clinic. Everything there was for human patients, of course, but, in the archives she found over ten thousand pages of information and schematics for animal prosthetics. A full third of it was for canines, like TP. There were actually designs for a dolphin tail, created and refined for some poor creature that had lost its tail to a fishing net. Someone had been pushing the envelope with equine prosthetics, a feat made all the more difficult by the size, strength and grace of the huge animals. Most of it meant very little yet to Punkin, but she had plenty of time to learn, and to experiment.

One day Tripod's name might no longer be so apt.

...

Three weeks, nearly to the day, from her fate-altering concert, just when the absolute lack of any signals from other warmbloods had nearly convinced Punkin she was truly as alone on the earth as she had always feared, everything changed. As she rolled out to spend a day in the country with Tripod, she suddenly skidded Gretl to a halt at the edge of town.

There, standing hunched and filthy in the center of the road was an ancient-looking man. Peeking out from behind his legs were a pair of filthy faces that looked identical, though the grime made that a guess more than fact. He brandished a long, gnarled branch with a large hunting knife lashed to it with leather laces. Huge, wide eyes stood out like lanterns in the gloom against the blackened faces. Punkin fished around for the scattergun she still always carried with her, without taking her eyes off of the apparition she couldn't yet

except she was actually staring at. She'd had no use for a weapon in so long, she couldn't remember where she had stashed it.

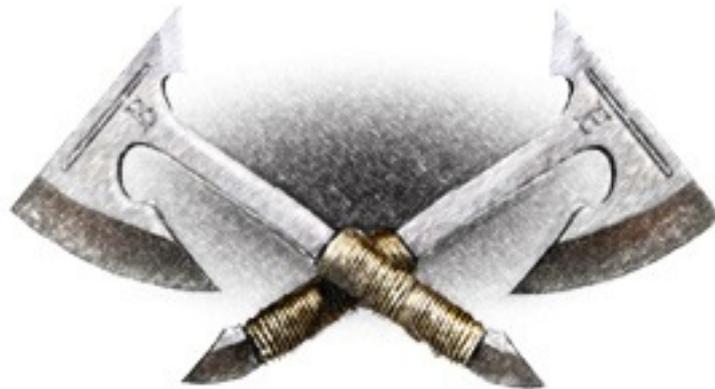
They were filthy. They were ragged. They looked like every undead she had ever seen, but the skin that showed through the grime was warm and healthy, not gray and dead. Their eyes sparkled with a fear for their lives—lives they obviously still had.

“You Punk?” she thought she heard the ancient one say, “... Killshot Punk?”

Unable to do more, fearful that any sound from her would break the spell and wake her to her empty, lonely reality, Punkin just nodded. Beside her, Tripod's tail beat out a frantic rhythm against her leg.

“We've been looking for you, my dear... *everyone* has.”

EPILOG



I decided to chronicle this young man's story just seconds after I died. The second time. Robert Redford McIntyre is the name of the lad who killed me. Maybe I should say 'freed' me. Maybe I should say, 'killed what had already killed me.'

Maybe I should start over.

I guess I should say I owe my freedom to someone or something called 'Kill Shock Punt'. Without them—or him, or her—Robert would not have been where he was, or done what he did. Or if he was, if he did, he may have ended up just like so many others had, as a horrible satisfaction in a stomach that was once mine. Or worse, with a ragged bite that would've made of him, another one of us. That's how I, maybe I should start over.

My name is, well it was, Veronica, Veronica Sim...S...um, that's strange. It'll come back to me. I am, well I was, a... a teacher? Wait, what was I trying to say? My goodness, that's odd.

Anyway, Robert, he's been calling himself Bobby Mac lately, or was that what that Kill Ship Hunk called him?

Let me start over.

There was some kind of broadcast. Someone or some group was singing, or killing, or setting free. Oh, pooh!

Maybe I should start again.

I don't know what's got into me today. I've always been quite eloquent and succinct. What was I saying? Oh yes, of course. Bobby Mac! He had gone back into town when all the elders in the woods told him not to. Too many young people had gone back to town for supplies and never come back. At least, they'd never come back in the same form they had been in when they left.

Pooh. I should start over.

Bobby was sick of hiding in the trees like everyone else. He told them all we *could* be killed—those who had been transmogrified, transformed, possessed—any of those terms will suffice, I suppose. The undead. Those who were still still in possession of their bodies and minds had survived for over a decade by staying off the ground at night, and staying out of the town limits completely. They'd made the state park and its 200-year-old oaks their home, living like vermin on the fringes of civilization. Cowering in fear had become their life's work. All but Bobby Mac, that is. Well, Bobby and several other boys, and a few girls too. Of all those brave adventurers, only Bobby still drew breath, still had warm blood.

Mmm, warm blood.

I apologize, it seems the craving lasts even after the end. But, I was saying? Ah, yes. Bobby Mac.

Maybe I should start over. Bobby had heard a broadcast from this *Kill Slap Chunk*. It was weak and so broken up, it was difficult to discern, but he was certain it held the kernel of their salvation. No one believed him—not the elders, not most of the younger refugees either—and all those he *had* convinced had all died, horribly. No one would listen to him after that. Kill Skank Pump was his last chance. He risked his life, again, to prove it. He broke in, again, to our one radio station, the one in the new five-story high-rise behind the Piggly Wiggly. He had done it before. That's when he lost his best friend, and the very last of the support for his harebrained notion that the monsters could be defeated. He'd barely gotten out alive and unbiten himself.

But he had gotten off a broadcast of his own, before the emergency generator died. Nobody cared. He had led another child to their death. That he was the youngest of all of them, mattered not at all to the adults. He was shamed and ostracized. But, since he was one of the very, very few brave enough, strong enough, clever enough to help them survive, they accepted his presence and his help—but did not welcome his ideas. They no longer listened. When he insisted he had heard a reply to his signal from this Kill Snot Spank person, they had turned their backs. This Kill Shop Paint had called him 'Bobby Mac', and since no one else in the world spoke to him at all anymore, he took on that name for himself—in gratitude to this mysterious person.

I would tell you how long ago that was, but I'm having a bit of trouble with my memory. Odd, too, because I'm only... well, I *was* only... oh, heck in a handbasket! I can't remember how old I am, or was. Not that a proper lady would ever say.

Well, that's just aggravating. Let me start over.

Even though no one wanted to hear his crazy notion of fighting back against something they were sure could not be beaten, Bobby Mac kept searching for other signals. When he caught enough scraps to realize this Kill Shark Poop intended to do something very big and broadcast it, Bobby decided to go back into town, repair the badly damaged radio equipment and record this 'free' concert he thought he'd heard about.

I should tell you, our little town, it was sleepy and a bit behind the times. It had only one movie theater, one radio station, one grocery store and one hardware/sporting goods store. When everything changed that night of the meteor storm, the town was ravaged. It had nearly burned to the ground. Every gun and box of ammo in the sporting goods section had been pilfered and spent—killing fellow townsfolk, no less. Even though the tree people had gathered up a number of discarded guns since then, there was not one single round of ammo left in the whole town. Not that anyone thought it mattered. Several of them had seen the undead shrug off vicious gunshot wounds and keep on coming, keep on eating. Bobby and his friends had snatched machetes, hatchets and axes and brought them back to the state park and the survivors hiding there, but not one person to ever face the ravenous hunger of one of us undead had ever survived the experience—except Bobby Mac.

That's where I come in—well, the thing I had become, anyway. That thing I had become first smelled Bobby's intoxicatingly vital young blood in the lobby

of the Hobart tower. It followed the scent trail up to the roof where he was finishing up the last of his repairs to the antenna array. That unholy thing I'd become was shivering with an all-consuming need, and a hunger so compelling, even the part of me trying to tell the poor young man to '*Run... run! Dammit all... run!!!*' was entirely impotent. Just as what I'd become opened its filthy mouth to gorge itself on tender, young flesh, it froze in confused wonder. A sound flooded from the speakers below that sounded like the hosts of heaven commanding it to stop, and stop it did. Then, Bobby Mac turned, saw what was only three strides behind him and pulled his two hatchets out of his belt. The experience of decapitation was one I could barely endure, but it was not pain. It was a *release* from pain, a release from horror, a release from a hell so awful, I cannot possibly describe it.

Now I seem to be with him every step he takes. I feel every breath he draws, every sensation he feels, every thought he has, and every emotion that compels him. Kill Snap Plunk had shown him how he could prevail, and I must thank God for that.

Now, racing from town, laptop charged and receiving the transmissions from his hobbled-together masterpiece of engineering desperation, Bobby Mac was still alive! Not just surviving, but alive! It *can* be done, he knew it could. *He* had done it.

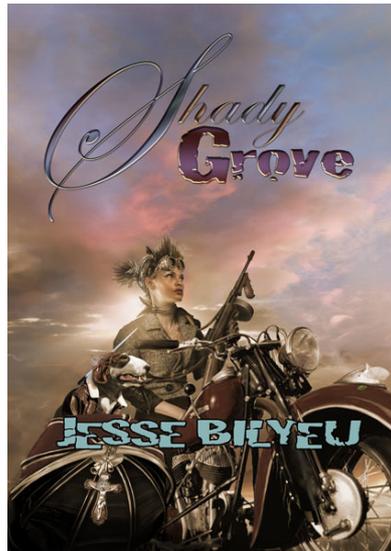
If this Kill Sharp Skunk could accomplish what was promised, *if* his repairs work and hold up, *if* it sends to his laptop, perhaps others will know it too. Then maybe, just maybe, he will be able to convince others to fight, to take back their town, to take back their lives.

Perhaps, one day, they would take back their world.

Coming Soon

Episode Two of the *Killshot Diaries*

Shady Grove



(A short excerpt follows below)

The three of 'em—human, canine and machine—motored leisurely along all that day. They weren't in *too* much of a rush really, they'd be on the road for two or three days, no matter what. They would have to sleep out in the open at least twice, each way, no matter how fast they went. She had printed out a Google map that was still in Connie's ludicrously huge database, rather than just taking an old-style paper roadmap—which she did, as well. The actual photo images gave her a better idea of the landscape she would be traveling through, especially where tall, barren hills might be, for a safe camp at night. Of course, natural vegetation changed over time and these shots were at least ten years old. Nothing new had come from them satellites after the meteor storm took 'em all out.

She found a good spot, about an hour before sunset, on the first day out. It wasn't as barren as it had looked in the old satellite view, but it still offered no place for anything nasty to hide.

They saw a big, ol' mama bear, her cute little cubs almost curious enough to come right on up to the bike, but a blast of Bessie's 'ah-oo-gah' horn sent them joggin' on their merry way. There was an astounding amount of wildlife about. She had to figure, with the human population decimated, they were probably proliferating at a staggering rate, especially them critters that hunters had favored. Deer and elk were everywhere, fox, coyote and wolves too. If she had more of a fascination for biology, she'd have been in heaven out here.

She slept reasonably well, only vague glimpses of troubling dreams had made it through to the dawn. Then, they were away, once more. Midway through the second day, they stopped for a bite atop a rise, just before the road dropped down into a dense wood. There was a sign, well sun-faded, just down the hill that said, '*Shady Grove Campground 1.5 miles.*'

That set a glimmer of an old memory free in the back of her mind she tried to pull forward, but was just too far back in her little girl memory. Connie, Mama, a teeny li'l Punk-E and two or three of the 'Conda Club' gals had spent a Fourth of July, or some other holiday, at that campground. All she could remember of it was tall rock walls and trees so towering, it seemed like they were in a cavern. Kept it nice 'n cool, on a weekend that had been triple digit hot, or so she remembered someone complaining. There was a little burblin' stream running through, that went under a covered bridge, that there road through had to cross over. She remembered there had been a few huge ol' wooden picnic tables spread all about, and some sunk-down fire pits, too. Other than that, Punkin had no clear memories, except that it had been the most fun she had ever had, at that time in her life.

So, why was she getting such a stomach-cramping feeling, lookin' down there? Her period was a couple weeks away still, so she didn't figure it was that.

She knew that there road went through some ten mile or more of close-packed forest, and she sure as crap didn't want to be in there as the sun went down. So she finished the apple she had cut up and, kissing her copilot on his cold, wet nose, she kicked over Bessie Mae and headed on down—figuring to race on through, lightnin' quick.

That squeeze on her insides got worser as them trees loomed overhead, all dark 'n creepy. She damn near spun Bessie about, fixin' to go on back and take Lost Rebel Road instead, but it would be nearly a whole day just to get back to the cut-off. Then there would be an extra day or so added on to the

ride, going that route. It was why she had picked this way, in the first place. Well, she just quickened her pace a might, not wanting to jostle TP or Bessie Mae any more than needed, but that cold cramping in her gut was drivin' her decision. As she passed the moss-covered '*Welcome to Shady Grove Campground*' sign, she almost didn't let her gaze even leave the roadway, so strong was her icy dread down in that dismal wood. There was a half-rotted picnic table just back from the road, beside what was left of the turn into the campground. It looked like it had been abandoned for a century, not just a decade. She'd have given that place not a shred of a second thought, so fixed on gettin' through that dark, imposing forest was she. Except, as she looked from that table, back to the road before her, she had to pile on the brakes. That there wooden bridge, so cute and fun in her hazy memory, weren't even there, no more. Nor was the roadway that used to go over it. Just two rusty I-beams reached across, set wide apart, that leisurely stream rolling on by, ten foot below it.

Dammit! She'd have to go back and go all the way around on Lost Rebel Road after all. It almost eased her shattered calm to have a good reason to just turn around and get the hell on outta there. She begun the slow, awkward process of k-turnin' a sidecar rig what ain't got no reverse. Then her heart exploded right up into her throat, *damn* near right on out of it, it seemed. There, right next to that there disintegratin' picnic table, stood a man—tall, ragged and filthy—lookin' *right* the hell at her.

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The **Killshot Diaries** continue with:

Episode Three

Triple Threat



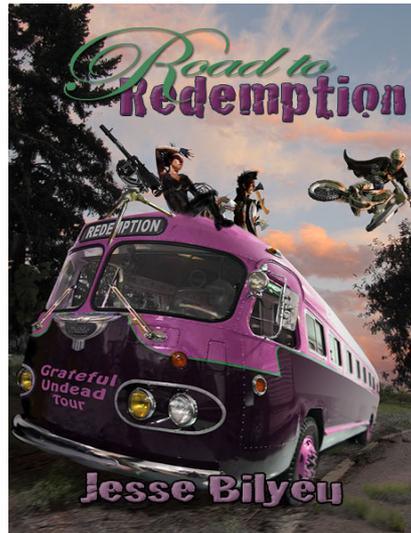
The man she had dreamed so long of finding, was now in New Hope, but arrived there at death's door. Punkin Evelyn Brustah is horrified to discover 19 year old Robert Redford McIntyre's battered psyche has buried all memory of his life before waking in New Hope's medical clinic.

In spite of the warnings of those closest to her, Punkin is unable to avoid falling for the man he has become — a man he may no longer be when those lost horrors force their way back to the surface.

Meanwhile, the world remains infected by a deadly plague of alien lifeforms in the guise of humans they have transformed.

Episode Four

Road to Redemption



The meager population of New Hope slowly continues to increase, as other survivors make their way to the one place known to be swept free of the threat of the undead. With their refurbished tour bus/mobile stage/assault vehicle finally road-ready, Punkin and her companions embark on the first ever 'Killshot Punk' Grateful Undead Free Tour. Braving roadways untraveled and unmaintained for a decade, the band sets out to free other towns from undead infestation and, hopefully, discover more survivors and bring them back to New Hope.

First on their 'Free' Tour is the tiny mining town of Redemption, where not all survivors are what they expect. Surprising discoveries lie in wait that will have a profound effect on the struggle to free up their world, and present moral dilemmas no one had ever imagined.

Episode Five **Chosen**



With the first ever *'Killshot Punk'* Grateful Undead Free Tour behind them, the citizens of New Hope find themselves one soul more. Unfortunately, a force has been awakened in the tiny mining town of Redemption, a force bent on their destruction—a force even more disturbing than the victims of the mysterious alien plague that had ravage the earth and left many in a hell far worse than death.

Life within the sanctuary of New Hope is a fragile paradise, about to turn to nightmare, one that no one there could anticipate.