





*Deadlands™: Hell on Earth™ Dime Novel #2*

# Infestations

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***Deadlands: Hell on Earth*** created by Shane Lacy Hensley.





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## Chapter One

Colonel Green froze, his arm upraised in warning. Hardcore ex-mil to the bone, Teller thought, and he's got his friends well-trained to boot. Reno froze the moment Green signaled, and even the dog stopped in its tracks. Teller paused as well, watching as best he could from his position at the tail of their little group.

They were east of Eureka, some 20 or 30 miles at this point, heading up Route 96 into the NorCal hills. Teller had taken up with this odd duo (trio, if the dog counted) because they were headed the same way he was, they seemed like decent enough folks, and it was always a good idea to have a few extra guns along on any trek through the desolate wastes that had once been a civilized land. The colonel was a bit gruff: stocky and coarse, loud and in-your-face, the type of leader who, like a drill sergeant, wielded volume and shock as favored coercive tools. Teller had known a few in his own military days, back before the Earth exploded in a fiery rain of ghost-rock oblivion—some uptight posers, determined to make up for insecurity or incompetence through sheer bravado; others gifted with insane fortune and intense vision that guided them—and those they led—through the deepest perils and thickest fires miraculously unscathed.

His friend—the one with the dog—was a different sort altogether. His thinning, sandy hair was cropped close in what might almost have been a military cut, but his lax air was



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civilian through and through. Like Green he carried an assault rifle (along with a long cloth-wrapped bundle that Teller guessed was a sword), but that meant little—thousands of the west's survivors had armed themselves with the detritus of the long war that had raged over the American continent 13 years before.

Reno had a wry smile, a quick laugh, and the tendency to say "dude" a little too often. With that, a perpetual sunburn, and a laid-back slouch in his walk, he might easily pass for an aging beach bum—the type of guy who made a living guiding whitewater rafting trips or leading affluent tourists on those expensive eco-tours that had been the rage before the bomb. Still, civilian or not, Reno'd been around—Teller could see it in the way he responded to Green's signal, the way he quietly crouched into an almost predatory stance, eyes scanning the forest and rifle ready.

Teller himself fell somewhere between them. Like Green, he'd been a military officer, and though he'd never seen combat (he'd been an army veterinarian, of all things) the skills he'd picked up had served him well in the years since. He'd like to think that he too was an effective leader when needed, though his style was more one of subtle influence and friendly persuasion. But in bearing, in temperament, he was closer to Reno, easygoing even in the toughest of times; never having trouble making himself liked among even the most spooked and cautious survivors of this wasted west. That's how he made his living, in fact: wandering from settlement to settlement, regaling the locals with stories of the things he'd seen, the terrors he'd found or heard of and how they'd been defeated—in short, bearing a little good will and hope to people that badly needed both.

Green, up ahead along the road, turned back toward them and flashed another quick signal. Teller crossed the cracked, weed-strewn pavement quickly, making his way up to Reno's position in a running half-crouch.

"What've we got?" he asked as he settled into the roadside undergrowth. Reno pointed.

"Green's scopin' a vehicle," he whispered. "May have been ambushed."

Teller looked ahead to where the road disappeared around a gentle bend. The Colonel was no longer in sight, but from here Teller could see what caused their halt: a column of dark smoke making its lazy way into the sky just beyond the dense pines.

"Or might be an ambush waiting to happen."

Reno nodded, absently swatting at a mosquito or midge with a quiet motion of his hand. They were thick here in the roadside ditch. "The colonel's checkin' it out."

At just that moment a form emerged from the foliage at the bend. Green waved them an "all's clear."



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"C'mon, Snakebite," Reno said as he stood. The big malamute—a handsome half-wolf-lookin' thing, gray-furred and blue-eyed, crawled from a nearby bush and shook himself off. The three of them headed in Green's direction.

"It's a truck," the Colonel said when they reached him. His voice was gravelly, somehow seeming to boom even when he whispered, so that Teller couldn't help but cringe and eye the forest about them for alerted ambushers. "Old military rig. Northern Alliance five-ton prime mover."

Teller pulled his binocs from his bag for a closer look, though they were now only a hundred yards from the wreck. "Definitely ambushed," he confirmed. "I see one—two—maybe three bodies. Lotta loot scattered around." The black smoke was coming from beneath the hood, which had been crushed under a felled log.

Green nodded. "Seems the attackers took off. Let's have a look-see, shall we?"

They approached with Green's apparently instinctive caution, he and Reno along either side of the road, moving slowly and on the alert. Teller almost felt like an outsider, a spectator, tagging along behind—these guys were a team. It had been a long time since he'd trusted anyone so implicitly. And that was just the way he liked it. In his line of work—bringing hope and communication to the lost and isolated people of this forsaken land—the temptation was always strong to cozy up to people, to confuse the wonder they felt at his stories with true friendship, genuine bonds. Such ties were traps these days, knives in one's back easily twisted by the unforgiving gods that ruled the wastes. He'd left that sort of closeness behind him 13 years ago, when a skull-shaped mushroom cloud carried the vaporized particles of everything he held close into the stratosphere.

As they approached, swarms of black flies clouded and buzzed, the bodies epicenters of their activity. Ahead, Green cursed quietly as he swatted at his neck; Teller too found himself brushing the hungry insects away.

"Look at all this stuff," he said as they reached the truck. "Sure didn't take much, did they?"

Green shook his head, eyeing the scattered merchandise as Reno checked out the bodies. There was a lot of valuable loot here. A big cardboard box full of shell casings was spilled out over the ancient asphalt; several other crates were scattered around, opened but not emptied. More boxes and 55-gallon drums were stacked in the truck's bed.

"Nope," said Reno, backing off from one of the corpses as he waved away the flies. "But that ain't the real stumper. Dude, check out this waster."

Teller approached, grimacing. The body was black with rot, stomach-turningly slimy, and writhing with maggots. "I don't get it," he said, turning back toward the truck. "That engine's still on

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fire—the ambush couldn't have been more than a few hours ago. This guy's been rotting for days."

"Maybe the ambushers left the body here as a decoy, to get the truck to stop or slow down," Green growled.

But Reno shook his head. "No way. Homey over there's in the same shape. And check the ride—the wheelman's like that too."

Teller swatted another fly that had taken a liking to his arm. "Well, you two can stay here to figure it out if you like. I'm going to have a look around and see what I can learn about these ambushers."

He turned and headed up into the forest opposite the truck, to where the heavy tree had been felled across the road. It was clear enough how the ambush had unfolded: the stump had been chopped halfway through, then a stick of dynamite strapped to what was left. That let the ambushers blow the tree just as the truck got there. Ballsy choice of tools, dynamite. Teller wouldn't want to mess around with any 13-year-old scavenger special like that. But the splintered trunk attested to its success this time around.

A little further up he found the ambushers' hiding place. Looked like they'd hidden themselves with good cover, then opened up on the truck when it skidded to a stop. Several dozen brass shell casings lay strewn about. He crouched, looking for tracks, but his inexperienced eyes found nothing.

Glancing up, Teller's eyes caught a glint of dewy cobweb, a perfect unbroken net shining in the morning sun. The spider was descending on one of the little black flies struggling in the sticky strands. Whatever the war had done to humanity—whatever evils it had unleashed upon a hapless Earth—for these two tiny creatures at least the natural order had not been disturbed. Predator and prey, locked in a timeless battle. The war—and the horrors that followed it—had drawn mankind into that battle, Teller reflected. And not always on the winning side.

There was a rustle in the underbrush, and he whirled about, his 10mm Beretta in hand. A gray form emerged to glance up at him—the dog. It fixed him in its pale eyes for a moment, and Teller reached out to give it a pat on the head. The big animal accepted the affection for a moment, then turned its attention to the ground, snuffing about in the weeds.

"What've you got there, pooch?" Teller asked, talking more to himself than the dog. The critter ignored him, pushing its snout deeper into the bushes with increasing interest. Teller leaned over and parted the bracken.

Blood, and lots of it. One of the ambushers must have been hit in the return fire. The fluid was sprinkled liberally about, still red and tacky, with spatters and drops decorating the bed of pine needles in a trail leading up the hill.

"Hey, Green," Teller called out. "I got something here!"

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They made their way through the dense underbrush, Teller and Reno cautiously following the spattered trail while Green flanked them, 10 or 15 yards off to the side. Suddenly a flash of color caught Teller's eye through the pine branches. He froze, pointing. Reno nodded, then shot a quick signal in Green's direction. They moved forward, even more carefully now.

"What do you think?" Reno whispered, when they got to where they could see the encampment.

Teller paused for a moment, scanning through his binoculars. There were several tents of various types and quality. "Could be mutants, or just regular scavvies." The camp wasn't large—perhaps two dozen people. Dirty dishes and clothing were strewn about, left where they had been dropped. This was the wasted west, of course, and good housekeeping was as rare as any other vestige of civilization—but even so, there was an abandoned, forlorn quality to this scene.

"Nomads of some sort," Reno said. "Check it—there's a couple of Harleys on the other side of those tents."

"These definitely our ambushers?"

"No doubt," Reno nodded grimly. "Blood trail leads right down into the camp."

The bikers hadn't done much to hide it. They were only—what—200 yards from the site of the ambush? "You'd think they'd be more careful," Teller responded, scanning the camp. One man was sitting near the cold remains of a fire; Teller could see some vague motion in one of the tents. "Not much activity. Or any guards, so far as I can see."

"So what's the plan?" Reno asked. "How you dudes want to handle this?"

"You head down there to the right, try to get around the end there," Green started. "I'll move over here on the left. On my signal, Teller here'll take out that guy in the middle, then we'll—"

Teller raised a hand. "Wait a minute. I don't think we should head in guns blazing—shouldn't we try and talk to these guys?"

"S'pose they tried talking to those wasters in the truck?" Green responded sternly.

"I gotta go with the tale-teller on this one," Reno stepped in. "Could be more to this than meets the eye—we oughtta find out before we start poppin' caps."

Green was silent for a moment, then nodded. "Fair enough. So who goes in?"

"I think you all do," another voice stated. Teller wheeled. The first thing that caught his eye was the bald pate, a cryptic symbol tattooed dead-center in the forehead. He might have caught the gun next, if his sight wasn't arrested by the fierce green eyes beneath the furrowed brow. The syker stepped out from around the tree, her rifle steady on them the entire while.



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The colonel didn't miss a beat. "Hold yer fire, soldier," he boomed, his voice seeming to echo after the hushed tones of their whispered conversation. "Who's your CO here?"

His voice might have given others pause, but not this woman. "I'm asking the questions here. Who the hell are you?"

## Chapter Two

"The name's Teller. This here's Reno, that's Colonel Green, and they call the dog Snakebite. We're not looking for trouble, but we came upon your handiwork back on the road."

They were down in the camp now. The inhabitants had come out to see their captives—or some of them had, anyway. Only a half-dozen appeared, far fewer than the number of tents pitched about, or motorcycles and dunebuggies parked at the camp's periphery. They seemed sort of—well, listless: marked with the dark bags of fatigue under their eyes and the slow-moving walk of aching joints. All, that is, except the syker.

The one by the extinguished fire stepped up to Teller. He was a mutant, though it seemed most of his companions were norms. His fingers were rubbery and writhed like snakes, and his eyes and nostrils seeped mucus. Couldn't have been a pretty sight, even without the puss-filled sores on his arms and neck. "So you think you come in here, shoot us up?" he slurred.

Another of the band—a short, tough-looking woman—grasped his arm. "Simmer down, there, chief," she said, then stepped up to Teller. "We didn't want to kill anyone, mister. We set up the ambush, sure, just in case. When we saw the army truck we figured it was Combine, so we let 'em have it. Turned out we was wrong, and I'm sorry about that. But we're pretty hard up, and we gotta do what it takes to save our people."

"What's going on here?" Teller asked.

"We got some folks down—some sorta sickness. We were hopin' we might flag someone down on the road that could help us. Unfortunately, that truck was the only thing through here in the last three days. There weren't no medicines or nothin' like that on it, so now we're kind of stuck."

"Can you help us?" another man stepped up. He was holding a kid, unconscious and moaning, perhaps six years old. Lumps and blisters covered the child's skin, some of them open and weeping puss like those on the mutant's arms.

The image of another child slipped through Teller's mind, but he quickly pushed it away. That was a long time ago, back before the bombs. Back when he had more in his life than a pistol and a few days' worth of milrats.

Reno spoke up. "Dude, let me have a look." He took a step forward, but the syker leveled her rifle. "Whoa. Cool your jets,

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sugar-britches." He raised his hands, wagging his fingers. "I got the touch."

The syker glanced over at the short woman, who gave a brief nod. "All right," she said, lowering the rifle an iota. Reno followed the man toward the largest tent, Snakebite on his heels.

"Look, sorry about all this," the short woman said, then held out her hand towards Teller. "I'm Pepper McGraw." Teller shook her hand, followed by Green.

"So you reckon this thing's contagious?" the Colonel asked, unconsciously wiping his hand on his pants.

Pepper only shrugged. "I think we've all got it, whatever it is. Some of us worse than others—we've lost seven people already." She jabbed a thumb toward the syker. "Clarity here came along two days ago, and she seems okay so far."

The syker slapped a fly from the back of her bald head, then added, "Doesn't mean it isn't catching. We've got ways of keeping clean." Teller had met a few sykers in his days. The telepaths had all sorts of odd mental powers—he didn't doubt that purging a virus from one's body was one of them.

"Seven people," Teller shook his head, glancing around at the disheveled gathering. Despair ruled here; to a one they looked like convicts facing the gallows. "Is no one getting better? How long has this been going on?"

"Not long," Pepper answered. She motioned over toward one of the smoldering campfires, where there were several logs, crates, and portable camp seats to sit on. "We were comin' down from Oregon a week or so ago, heading for Eureka. I guess the first of us started feelin' poorly five or six days back. Paul and Joanna lost their little girl three days ago—she was the first. Seems to take the kids faster than the grown-ups."

"We've just come up from Eureka." Green stated, "We'll head back and get you all some help."

The syker shook her head. "I made the same offer," she said. She glanced sidelong at Pepper, then looked around to see if any of the other nomads were within earshot.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, mister," Pepper picked up the thread, her voice a bit lower than before. "I think—well, I think this is something that maybe shouldn't be gettin' back to civilization."

"But—at the rate this is going..." Teller said.

Pepper nodded grimly. "Yeah, it doesn't look good for us." She stared casually at her fingernails for a moment, as if considering a manicure. Then she held them out. They were pale blue, all of them. "The first symptom."

Green immediately checked his nails, and even Teller couldn't help but take a surreptitious peak. All pink, just as they should be. He waved a fly away from his face. "So what now?"

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Clare stood and stepped over to a nearby tent. She returned with a white box about the size of a small briefcase. "Well, maybe you guys can figure this thing out," she answered. "We don't know what it is, but it looks like it could be useful."

Teller took the case from her. It was made of ruggedized plastic. A red cross was emblazoned on the side. Green leaned over to look as Teller set it on his lap and opened it up. "What is it?" the colonel asked.

Teller could only shrug. There was a monitor, a bunch of buttons, and a little hole about an inch across. A plastic flap under the lid contained a packet of tiny syringe needles, some tubing, and a few other medical odds and ends. "At a guess, I'd say some sort of blood analysis device."

It was suspiciously sophisticated equipment to just stumble on out in the woods—especially woods infested with a weird new disease. He turned to the leader of the nomads. "Where did you get it?"

"Creepy Weepy and a couple of the others found it, about a week ago. There were some bodies—a couple of scavvies. Looked like they'd been attacked by a mountain lion or somethin'. We took their rifles and ammo, of course. This was the only other thing on 'em that looked like it could be worth something."

"This was a week ago—before anyone got sick?"

"That's right," Pepper nodded. Then she looked at the case. "You don't think that thing gave it to us?"

Teller looked again at the medical equipment. It was clean, spotless in fact. Looked like it had just been shot out the factory door. It was hard to imagine that this sterile case might be coated with a film of germs, but who knew where it had been?

Still: "I don't know, but somehow I doubt it." He closed the case. "The bodies—well, they're another matter..."

\* \* \*

They set out the next morning at dawn. Teller had spent several hours playing around with the medical case, and even used it on a few of the nomads, but the results were difficult to interpret. The words "Unknown Pathogen" showed up in every analysis report.

Reno had had a bit more luck, it seemed. His "touch," as he had put it, looked to be something more than a little first-aid training, and his efforts got a few of the nomads back on their feet. But it was clear that he wasn't curing them—even the healthiest were still sluggish, and they all seemed to relapse nearly as fast as he could help them. By the end of the day, the inevitable had become obvious: These people were going to die if some real cure wasn't discovered, and fast.

"This ain't the latest strain of Asian flu," Reno had commented, when there wasn't anyone around to overhear.



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Teller was no stranger to the wastes, and to the many bizarre and deadly occurrences that had become commonplace since the war. "I'm betting it's cause isn't exactly natural," he'd agreed.

He had been thinking some sort of man-made agent, the result of humanity's ever-more-insane scramble towards self-annihilation in those last years before Judgement Day, but Green went in another direction. "A servitor of Pestilence at work here?"

That had taken Teller aback. So Green and Reno were more than mere travelers of the wastes—they knew a thing or two about the greater evils that really drove the world these days. Teller had once taken on—and defeated—a servitor of Famine, one of the other apocalyptic Horsemen that had ravaged the world after the bombs fell. He sure hoped he'd never have to face another.

So he was somewhat relieved that when he announced his intention to seek out the source of the disease—"It's got to be local—maybe if we find it we can find a clue to the cure," he'd said—Green and Reno had offered to go along. He was somewhat more surprised when the syker said that she was in as well.

They had left camp at dawn. When Green had pulled out his ratty old road atlas, Creepy Weepy pointed to the spot where they'd found the bodies: the convergence of two unpaved back roads some 10 or 15 miles from the nomads' campsite. With a promise to return, and a forlorn hope that they might actually have some aid when they did, the four of them set out.

## **Chapter Three**

The NorCal hills were steep and rocky, the forests thick with heavy pines, and it was mid-afternoon before Teller and his trailmates had covered the twelve miles to their destination. It didn't take them long to find the bodies—or what was left of them. They simply followed the buzz of the flies.

"Whoa, dude, check it," Reno commented in surprised revulsion as they approached. Tatters of clothing were scattered among the pines. The remnants of a backpack hung in a roadside bush. The bodies themselves were almost disintegrated—slimy near-skeletons, their remaining tatters of dark flesh crawling with maggots. At least with so much rotted or dragged off by scavengers, the stench wasn't as bad as it might have been.

Green started sifting through the few remaining items, looking, presumably, for some clue to the scavvies' identity, while Reno faded back to keep an eye out about them, Snakebite at his side. Teller sat down at the edge of the road with the syker, tired after a long march through the forests.

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"So if you don't mind my asking," he said after a moment, "what made you choose to come along with us?"

The woman turned to fix him in her green eyes, so arrestingly bright, silently studious, and undeniable. She said nothing for a moment, then she held out her left hand. She wore the fingerless gloves favored by bikers and gunslingers. Her short nails were pale blue. "Guess I could only purge so much of it," she said flatly.

Teller looked away, then down at his own hands. Finally, he held one of them up in silent response. Clare's eyes softened for a moment, then she nodded a grim acknowledgment. His too had taken on a bluish tinge.

They sat there in silence for a moment. Then Green's voice boomed out behind them: "Yo! Have a look at this."

Teller and the syker got to their feet and crossed through the trees to where Green was holding a small object. Part of a broken bottle or jar, they could see as they approached—two or three large glass splinters held together by a paper label. One of the scavvies' backpacks was at his feet; presumably Green had found the glass within.

"What've you got?" Teller asked.

"Don't know," Green answered, pushing his insignia-encrusted cowboy hat back a bit to scratch his near-bald head. "E. Chrysopa Chervila," he read, working his way through the syllables.

"'Biological Samples.' Mean anything to you?"

"'Biological' sure does," Teller answered, taking the label from Green. "Looks like this jar or whatever contained some sort of organism. Chrysopa—I don't recognize that one. But E. Pustule, that's a..." He strained his memory—pre-vet biology was a long time ago. "It's a microorganism—a genera of livestock disease affecting mostly sheep and cows. Fairly rare. Bacterial." It was coming back a little faster now, a flood of memories from a whole different career. "Transmissible through fecal matter and direct contact, but easy to control with a regimen of sulphuric antibiotics."

Green was just staring at him; there was a look of puzzled respect on Clare's face. Teller shrugged. Then added: "Completely noninfectious to humans."

"So, dude, what's that mean?" Reno asked. He'd come up behind them to listen in on the conversation. "That what those bikers got?"

Teller frowned at the label, unconsciously waving away a fly. "Not unless it's some radical new strain. What's more important is where this jar came from." He pointed at the label. "'Renslin Laboratories.' This has gotta be prewar—so where did these guys find it?"

"Answer that," Clare said, "and I'm sure we'll—"

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She was cut off by a shrill cry.

They all spun toward the sound, and Teller's Beretta was in his hand before his eyes had found the source. There—the bushes were alive with movement. Snakebite barked, Green was drawing a bead, and Teller's sights were already lining up on the movement when the undergrowth burst open. A young man was running toward them down the slope, yelling as he came.

"Help!"

He was already framed in the blue-green dots of the 10mm's tritium sights, but Teller held off on the trigger. The guy wasn't so much wielding his submachine-gun as dragging it desperately, like the backpack that bounced along behind him. Teller eased his sights up just a bit, but kept to his ready stance as the man closed.

"Look out!" the stranger yelled.

And then the bushes behind him broke as he scrambled into their midst, turning and struggling with his errant weapon. Teller's sights shifted almost of their own volition as a huge shape gathered itself from the bracken. Instinct cut in before conscious thought, the familiar buck of the Beretta's recoil snapping at his wrists as his finger squeezed off three shots. There was another blast of gunfire, Green's fire erupting only a split-second behind his. Half a dozen rounds struck the creature midbody, but it simply shrugged through them. It was some sort of bear—not like any bear Teller had seen in 13 years of wandering the wilds, but huge, hideously deformed, its skin hanging in thickly furred tatters, its face a distorted mass of flesh and glassy eyes.

With a roar the creature charged them. Teller squeezed off two more shots, backpedaling in the face of the bear's rapid advance. Green's rifle chattered now—he'd flipped over to automatic—but the bear's advance wasn't even slowed. Teller ducked and dove as the beast launched itself at them, crashing through the brush and into their midst. A massive claw found the turf by Teller's head, but he rolled away before it swiped again. There was a bright flash and an energetic crackle from the syker's direction, followed by a howl of pain, but Teller wasn't pausing to look. He rolled up and brought his pistol to bear once again, squeezing off two more shots as the creature turned toward the others. The bullets found flesh with a wet thud, but if they concerned the massive beast it showed no sign.

The monster took a swipe at the stranger, sending him flying, then closed on Clare. The syker furrowed her brow and a glow of energy swirled about her head, but she wasn't fast enough. The bear gathered her in its festering embrace, eclipsing her from Teller's view behind its mountainous shoulder.

He scrambled to his feet, charging the creature and putting round after round into its back. The clip ran dry and he popped



it as he closed, pulling another magazine from his belt. There was a cry of pain from Clare as the bear gripped her in its crushing clutch. It bared its teeth, roaring a threat to its other attackers before bringing its crushing jaws down upon her, but at that moment one of Green's rounds found the beast's bony noggin, jerking its head back in a splash of gristle and blood. Reno was there then, a sword in hand, and his rapid slash tore through the creature's meaty shoulder.

One of the many running welts on the monster burst at that moment, and a sickening mass of maggots erupted from it. Reno staggered back, gagging, and even Teller found himself hesitating, his clip halfway into the magazine catch.

The bear spun on Reno, but Snakebite snarled and snapped. The beast roared in threatened rage before turning back to the syker that still struggled in its powerful grip. Once again it bared its bloody teeth and drove them at Clare.

Teller lunged at the creature's back. His left hand sunk into the thing's stinking fur, finding a grip as his sneakered feet struggled for traction against its sloughing pelt.

Teller vaulted upward as the beast whirled, releasing Clare as it struggled to shrug him off, but Teller clung as it spun, gripping the matted fur like iron, digging the Beretta's muzzle into the thick folds of its neck and squeezing the trigger again and again. Blood sprayed, thick with hunks of bone and brain, and the creature howled and thrashed. Teller got five quick shots off, maybe six, before the beast's thrashing threw him from its back.

It roared and flailed, but its fight was over; its lifeless body responded only to its pain. The others backed away from its struggles, Reno grabbing Clare to drag her away from its faltering but still lethal limbs.

"Jesus!" Reno exclaimed, when the creature finally collapsed into a twitching mass.

They were all silent for a moment, and then Green turned toward the stranger. "What the hell is that thing, son?" he boomed.

The newcomer had struggled to his feet, clutching an arm in a grip that seeped blood. This was no seasoned traveler of the wastes. He lacked the scruffy beard and wild hair of someone who'd been living in the bush for long; his top-of-the-line military fatigues were clean—maybe even recently pressed—and his gear looked like it had just been ordered from an L.L. Bean catalog. His skin was dark, with cleanly chiseled features that betrayed Indian—probably Sioux—ancestry. A Ravenite, Teller guessed—certainly no Old Wayer.

"How should I know?" the stranger answered. "I was just walking along that road over there. This thing came out of nowhere!"

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Teller crouched down by Reno and Clare as Green continued his interrogation. The syker's back was badly shredded where the creature had torn at her. Reno was starting to peel away the tattered, bloody cloth to get at the wounds, but she pushed him away.

"I'll take care of it," she snapped. Reno shrugged.

"Are you all right?" Teller asked.

She turned her fiery eyes toward him, scowling. "I'll be fine. You worry about him," she said, shooting a glance at the stranger.

"They call me Walks Far," the Indian was saying to Green. "I'm—not from around here. I was just, well, passing through. I've never seen anything like that before."

"Wastes are full of dangerous things, son," Green admonished. "You might want to figger out how to use that fancy gun of yours."

Walks Far glanced away, lips pursed.

Green turned toward the others. "Well, let's get back on the road," he said. "Maybe we can figure out where these fellas were coming from." He stepped over to the scavvies' bodies, waving away the biting black flies, and picked up the broken bottle from where Teller had dropped it. Reno and Walks Far followed; Teller waited behind with Clare.

"What've you got there?" Walks Far was asking. Green showed him the label.

"We're looking for wherever these guys came from," Reno added. "Hey, maybe you could, like, pick up a trail or something."

Walks Far scowled. "I'm not that kind of Injun."

Clare was finished with whatever she was doing. She rose stiffly, hissing from some lingering pain, but her wounds had closed. She and Teller joined the others.

"Look, I'm no tracker," Clare said as they approached. "But I can guess which way those guys came. We came up the road from the south. He came from the northeast," she pointed in the direction that Walks Far had indicated. "That leaves only one road: there."

## Chapter Four

They hiked for another hour, the overgrown gravel road winding over and around the stony, forested hills. It soon became clear that Clare's guess was right: even Teller's unpracticed eye could pick out the occasional footprint on the otherwise untraveled track.

It was Reno who picked out something else.

"Check it," he said pointing. There, perhaps a mile or so away, a thin line of smoke rose from the dense trees into the late afternoon sky.

"A campfire?" Teller asked. "With that medical case and the label on the broken jar—well, I was kind of picturing something a little more sophisticated..."

Walks Far glanced at him quizzically.

"Could be anything," Green stated. "Won't know till we get there."

"Look at that," Reno pointed, digging into his bag for a pair of binocs. "Weather's on its way."

Sure enough, the western horizon was dark with clouds, ominous despite their distance. As Teller watched, the brief flicker of lightning frosted one of the thunderheads. Might be a natural front, a few thunderstorms to give these hills a good soaking. Or it might be something worse—the acidic black rain or manitou-filled Hellstorms that occasionally ravaged the wastes since the ghost-rock bombs fell.

"We'd better find cover," he said, "and soon."

\* \* \*

They trudged down the slope, following the road toward the lazy column of smoke. About half a mile further on, a path broke from the gravel road. Densely overgrown, it might have once been clear enough for an automobile, but now only a narrow footpath wound its way through the bracken.

"Look," Clare pointed. There in a clear, sandy spot was the clean impression of a heavy-soled boot.

"They must have come this way," Teller agreed.

They moved more cautiously now, Green and Reno flanking the path ahead (with Snakebite following), Teller and Clare a bit behind with Walks Far bringing up the rear. Teller was keeping an eye on the syker—she looked drawn, the fatigue of the long march wearing her step down to a stumble. But she hadn't said a word, and Teller had been quick not to let Clare catch his watchful eye on her. He had to admire her ruggedness, her pride—would he be as strong when the illness started to drag at his feet?

They hadn't gone much more than a quarter-mile before they held up, Reno signalling something ahead. They closed to see a rusted chainlink fence bisecting the forest.

"This is more like it," Teller whispered.

The dirt track passed through a large gate, which stood ajar. Beside it, a sign warned flatly: "Private Property—Keep Out."

Green moved forward, cautiously, and slipped through the gate. After a moment he signaled back to the others. One by one they made their way through, warily watching the woods for any sign that their trespass was noted. The forest was silent.

"No sign of any activity," Green said quietly, "but that campfire can't be much further."

They set out again, moving slowly. After another couple hundred yards, the forest ahead cleared.



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"Look—a house!" Walks Far said.

Sure enough, there stood some sort of home or cabin. It was two stories tall, of the "rustic" log construction favored by upscale vacation-home builders in the years before the war. Looked like it was in good shape, as far as Teller could see through the intervening foliage. As they approached, he could make out the thin line of smoke issuing from the large chimney. There was a Land Rover parked out front, trailworn but seemingly well-maintained, while a hundred yards beyond the house he could make out some barns or sheds. Looked like there might be a garden or field back there as well.

"I think someone's home," Clare commented, crouching in the treeline before the open, weedy lawn.

"Yeah—look," Reno said, pointing at an upstairs window. A curtain swayed; a small face, half-hidden, peered out.

"So who gets the honor?" Walks Far asked.

"I'll give it a try," Teller said, getting to his feet.

He stepped from the bush and made his way up the path, slowly, keeping a relaxed posture but making sure his hands were visible all the way up. Even in the remotest reaches of the wastes, most regular folks could be counted on not to shoot a man down without so much as a word—but then he doubted these people had maintained their peace and prosperity by being careless around strangers. His hands might be where they could see them, but the flap on his holster was open.

He was only a few paces from the wide front porch when the door cracked.

"That's far enough, mister," a man's voice proclaimed. The business end of a shotgun emerged. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

Teller flashed his most winningly sincere smile. "The name's Teller, and I'm just passing through. I've got a couple friends with me—we're not looking for trouble. Some pals of ours passed through this area recently. We saw your fire and thought maybe they stopped in." Teller studied the dark crack of the door, watching the cant of the shotgun for any clues as to the wielder's disposition. After a moment of silence, the barrel dropped a hair. Teller released a silent breath.

"Tell your friends to come on out of the woods there," the voice said. Teller turned and shouted for the others. One by one they emerged from the treeline to congregate at the base of the trail.

"C'mon up here," the voice commanded. "Let's see those weapons."

They raised their rifles as they started up the hill. They hadn't taken more than a few steps, though, before the syker faltered. Reno turned as she staggered, grasping for her as she fell to the stony path.

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"What's wrong with her?" the man asked.

"I'm not sure," Teller said, wincing inside. If this guy was paranoid enough, he might be tempted to shoot them for bringing a plague to his front door. Teller wasn't sure he'd blame the guy. "She might be ill," he admitted reluctantly.

"Well why the Hell didn't you say so?" the man responded, emerging from the door. "Get her up here—I'm a doctor."

## Chapter Five

Reno and Teller carried Clare through the front door, into a wide foyer that overlooked a spacious living room. Opposite, beyond a cluster of modular sofas and easy chairs, a fire burned in a stone hearth framed by huge picture windows. The walls were hung with antlers and fine oil paintings; oriental carpets decorated the floors. On an end table a reading lamp burned—that meant electricity.

The man was crouched over Clare now, feeling the pulse at her throat as he peeled back an eyelid to have a look at her pupils. He was dressed in khakis and a plaid flannel shirt, with a pair of penny-loafers on his feet. Penny-loafers! This guy was a prewar throwback, that much was sure. But somehow he seemed to have maintained a fairly comfortable existence out here in the mountains.

"Hey, Mason, give me a hand in here," the man called out. Instantly, two men appeared at a door opposite, each armed with a rifle. When they saw their friend at work they relaxed a bit, though they kept a wary eye towards Teller's group.

"What's going on?" the gray-haired man—presumably Mason—asked as he crossed the living room.

"Get the kit from my office—I need some smelling salts," the man answered, then turned toward Teller. "Looks like she's just passed out. She's a little feverish. I can take a closer look to see if it's anything serious. My name's Michael, by the way. Michael Lacosta. Those other fellas are Mason and Fred." He extended his hand and Teller shook it, and then introduced the others.

Mason reappeared after a moment, ascending to the foyer with a black bag in his hand. Michael withdrew a capsule of smelling salts and broke it beneath Clare's nose. After a second she blinked into a surprised and hazy consciousness.

"Let's get her into my office," Michael said as Teller helped Clare to her feet.

Snakebite shifted suddenly, and Teller turned in reaction to the dog's stare. There, at the top of the staircase, was a forth denizen of this place: a little girl, perhaps seven or eight. Blonde-haired, just like his Jillian had been. Teller blinked at her for a moment, trying to see only the face that was really there, struggling not to compare those little dark eyes, that tiny

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uncertain smile, to those that had haunted his dreams for the past 13 years.

"My daughter Chervil," Michael explained. "You can come on down now, dear."

But the little girl simply stared from the safety of the upper floor.

Teller and Michael guided Clare down the steps into the living room, then right through a side door. Beyond was an office, one half fairly conventional, the other, beyond a set of partitions, almost resembling a hospital examining room. The room was spacious, but not so much that eight people didn't crowd it.

"Why don't the rest of you wait outside?" Michael asked. "Fred and Mason can get you anything you need. We've got a little homebrew beer—"

"Don't suppose you've got a Pepsi?" Teller asked, but Michael shook his head with an grim smile.

"I only wish. We're pretty self-sufficient here, but we ran out of those sorts of luxuries years ago."

The others were filing out of the room. Michael nodded toward the door. "We're going to need a little privacy."

Clare was still somewhat groggy, but she glanced over at that line. "Look, I'll be fine," she said, pushing unsteadily away from the examination table. "Thanks, really, but I don't need—"

"Nonsense," Michael said, gently taking her shoulder to push her back. "We'll just have a quick look, and you'll be back on your feet in no time. I should probably have a look at the rest of you afterward," he said, turning toward Teller.

Teller looked from Michael to Clare. She was haggard, flushed and baggy eyed. He wondered if he looked the same—fatigue was heavy in his bones, though surely that was just the 15-mile hike talking. But Clare—well, that was the same look he'd seen in the faces of the nomads. If the illness was running its inevitable course through her system, their stumbling on this doctor was a real stroke of luck.

But Clare's eyes betrayed a habitual mistrust; Teller could see that she wouldn't stay if that meant being left alone with this stranger. They needed Michael's aid, but they could hardly expect it if they insulted him with suspicion. Teller had to secure Clare's trust.

Finally he nodded. "It's okay, honey," he said, catching her bright green eyes with a steady look. "The doc just wants to have a look. I'll be right here, just outside the partition."

She stared at him for a moment, then ran with it, nodding. "Thanks, babe."

Teller nodded again, taking a seat in the den. That little exchange had given him a reasonable excuse for proximity that didn't seem to alarm the doctor. Michael pulled the partition halfway closed, blocking Teller's direct view but not his perception of events beyond.

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There was quiet stirring, the clink of cabinets and instruments, and a few friendly questions answered in clipped grunts by the reluctant syker. Michael commented on the injuries to Clare's back, made a few remarks on her general health, and after a few moments pulled back the partition.

"Well, something's got a hold of her, that's for sure," Michael said to the both of them. "And I'll be straight with you: I think it's pretty serious. Beyond that," he shrugged, "it'll take some observation to know more."

Michael turned toward a nearby cabinet. "Judging by the lesions, it's almost certainly bacterial. A little aspirin should bring the fever down a notch. I'd also like to give you a regimen of antibiotics with a prescribed period of bed rest." He turned back to them, a bottle and syringe in hand. "We'll know more in a day or two."

But Clare balked at the needle. "Uh, no. I don't think I need—" She pushed herself off the examining table, but Michael cut her off.

"This is serious, Clarity. Whatever it is, it's set in. These things don't get better on their own."

The syker looked past him toward Teller. What could he say? The guy seemed legit, but then he wasn't waving a needle at Teller. He gave a mild shrug, then a slight nod. "I think the doc's right. This illness could be a one-way trip." His thoughts were going back to the bodies laid out near the nomad camp, dark and slimy with rot, left unburied by companions too weak to dig their graves. "Take what help we can get."

Clare nodded reluctantly, then settled back onto the examining table, pulling up her sleeve. Michael swabbed her arm, then administered the injection with a practiced hand.

\* \* \*

They joined the others in the living room. Walks Far and Reno were conversing with Mason, while the little girl lavished her attention on Snakebite. Reno looked up as they entered.

"Dude, they've got hot showers here!"

Mason nodded an agreement. "Your friend Colonel Green is up there now. It looks like there's a storm coming, so you're welcome to stay the night. If anyone else wants a shower, there's plenty of hot water."

Chervil tossed her ball, and Snakebite went skittering across the polished floor after it.

"I think perhaps Ms. Clarity might want to retire early," Michael said. "We've got several spare rooms. I can take you up now if you like."

Clare had settled on the arm of a nearby chair. Her eyes were closed. After a second she glanced up.

"Yes, please," she said. She was looking a little bleary-eyed.

Michael led the way upstairs, Clare and Teller in tow.

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"This is quite a place you've got here," Teller commented. "How have you managed to keep safe here all these years?"

Michael nodded as he ascended the stair. "We've been lucky, that's for sure. Lucky from day one. My wife and I were from Shan Fan—she was a doctor too. This was our vacation home, and we happened to be here with some friends when the bombs fell. We're out of the way, so we don't get much trouble, and we've got a garden and a greenhouse, and even our own generator. Desimone died when Chervil was born, about seven years back, and Mason's fiancée was killed in an accident. Even so, I guess we've done a lot better than most folks." He'd reached the upper floor at this point, and stopped at one of several doors along the corridor. The sound of a running shower could be heard from across the hall, along with a Johnny Cash ballad sung deep-voiced and nearly on tune. "You two can bunk down here. I think Fred'll have dinner on in an hour or so, but if you want to sleep, Clare, that's fine."

Teller thanked him, and Michael disappeared down the hall.

The room was nicely appointed, if simple. Clare threw a glance at the door, then approached Teller with a sly if weary smile. As her body settled close to the surprised tale-teller, she ran her hand down the outside of his leg. All the way down to the cuff of his pants. Then she rose, smiling again at Teller's expression, holding the knife he kept strapped to his ankle. She turned toward the door.

"Old syker's trick," she whispered, running her fingers along the door frame and jamb. Satisfied that there was only the one bolt, she marked its position with a notch in the door's edge before closing it tight. She turned back towards Reno. "Never close yourself into a room without knowing exactly what it'll take to blast your way out."

Teller nodded appreciatively. "Good thinking—but are you always so suspicious?"

The syker stepped past him to throw herself wearily on the bed. Teller sat down beside her. "Usually," she said in a low voice, casting another glance at the door. "And I've got good reason. I don't trust these namby-pambies. And that was no antibiotic that asshole shot me up with—it was a sedative."

Teller blinked. "Are you sure?"

"Certain. I could feel it right off, so I purged it out of my system, down there in the living room. Fortunately it wasn't too strong. I'll be all right, but it might be a good idea to play out the ruse. I want to know what's up with these bozos."

There was a gentle knock at the door, and Clare sat up like a shot. Hiding Teller's knife under her leg, she grasped him in a quick embrace.

"Come in," she called over his shoulder, her voice heavy with false fatigue.



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The door parted and Mason glanced in. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said sheepishly, as Clare disengaged from Teller. The embarrassment on the tale-teller's face wasn't entirely faked.

"I've brought up some aspirin and a glass of water," Mason said, setting a small tray on the table by the door. "If you need anything else, just ask."

Teller nodded as Clare settled back on the bed, feigning half-sleep. "I think she's all set here," he said. "I'll be down in a sec."

Mason nodded and closed the door behind him.

Clare snapped back into wakefulness. "Go on down," she whispered, "but be careful. If anything happens, I'm our ace in the hole. Oh, and check in with me every so often." She smiled. "I think we've given ourselves plenty of excuse."

Teller nodded as he rose. "Will do."

\* \* \*

Downstairs it was a different world. Suspicion seemed completely out of place—a relaxed atmosphere permeated the friendly conversation as Teller's companions lounged about the living room with their hosts. The fire crackled cheerfully, and bright electric lights filled the room with a warm glow that set off the gloom of the gathering storm outside. Reno was telling some sort of story about a band of muties down in SoCal—he didn't have Teller's panache, but he seemed to be holding everyone's attention well enough. The little girl's arms were wrapped around the dog, who kept snuffling after the jerky she was feeding it. Teller's dog had been an Alsatian, way back before the war, but his little girl would wrap her arms around it in much the same way. He caught himself smiling, then pushed the memory from his mind.

Fred was quite the cook, it turned out. They had a huge dinner of venison, potatoes, fresh vegetables, beer—a veritable cornucopia of the foods a waster living on old milrats craved, all served warm and fresh with friendly company and lively conversation. They'd enjoyed hot showers, complete with prewar soap and shampoo, and had brushed their teeth under the clean running water of a working tap. Michael had examined each of them for signs of the illness, concluding that their cases were borderline. Somehow Teller had talked his way out of the "antibiotic" shot; he'd tried to signal a warning to the others as well, but his opportunities were limited and he wasn't sure they'd caught his whispers.

He was in a strange mood when he climbed the stairs to the bedroom, bearing a dinner tray for Clare. Little Chervil had been taken by his story of Sancho Del Marta and the used ammunition scam, had crawled up beside him on the couch afterward to query him about his travels, to examine the scars on his hands, and to stare at his face as he spoke. His urge to push her away—not far, just enough to keep her from touching

him—was at battle with a desire to wrap this child up in his arms, to fend her from the horrors that were such a part of his every day, to stroke her hair, wipe her face, read her bedtime stories. The closeness of a child was so perfectly familiar, even after 13 years—13 years of holding such comforts at arm's length.

"Do you have children of your own?" Michael had asked, smiling.

Teller was silent for a moment, thinking of that skull-shaped mushroom cloud as it rose into its fiery heights. Why hadn't he been there, at that particular moment? What had compelled him to ride the plains that day, to leave his wife and his little Jillian unprotected for even a single moment in a world faced with so many gathering evils?

"No," he answered, glancing away from Chervil's gaze. "I have no family."

Upstairs, he found that Clare preferred her milrats to the steaming chow he'd delivered. "They're all eating from the same table," Teller had commented, "so I think it's safe." But she wouldn't have any of it.

His return at bedtime heralded a moment of awkwardness. Clare cracked her eyes from her feigned sleep as he closed the door.

"Um, well, I guess I'll take the floor," Teller offered.

"Oh, no," Clare responded, smoothing the sheets beside her as she sat up. "We can share the bed."

Hey, that was okay, too. Despite himself, Teller couldn't help but like this woman—her abrupt frankness, those intense eyes that seemed to take in everything. And the way that, beneath the harsh exterior, beneath the sharp words and rugged military clothes, there was a certain womanly grace. A vulnerability she could not show the world, but which he had just glimpsed through their pretended intimacy.

"Here, you take it first," Clare went on, rising, completely oblivious to her half-dressed state, "while I stand watch. We can swap up in a few hours."

Teller's inward smile fell. Had it dropped from his face as well? If so, Clare didn't seem to notice. "Yeah, sounds good," he replied. "I mean, if you're up to it."

She reached for her pants. "Feel like crap," she said, tugging them on, "but I've sat watch through worse."

Teller pulled off his shoes while Clare extracted her rifle from the baggage piled by the door. Watching the syker as she settled into a wary crouch, he wondered how he might find sleep after such a troubled day. But the bed was soft and he was bathed in the scent of a clean down comforter and the gentle tapping of rain on the window. Before he could even complete the thought, sleep's grip dragged him into its deep and profound clutch.

## Chapter Six

"Shh!" Clare's hand clamped down over his mouth as Teller mumbled a response to her insistent shaking. He blinked into awareness, trying to place the dark ceiling overhead, the clean smells and warm bed.

"Something's going on," Clare whispered into his ear. Teller sat up as she crossed quietly to the bedroom door. He slipped on his sneakers as Clare gently tried the handle. "It's locked," she reported back.

She raised her rifle, muzzle to the notch she'd marked with his knife earlier. "Wait!" Teller whispered back, crossing towards her. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a plastic card: Confederate Express. Used to be good for 3,000 bucks worth of credit; now it was good for jimmying cheap locks. "Old tale-teller trick," he whispered as he went to work. "Never blast your way out when there's a quieter option." After a few seconds he tripped the latch, then slowly opened the door. The hallway beyond was dark and empty. He shut the door again, this time holding it unlocked.

"Nothing out there."

"I didn't lock the door, Teller. I heard someone outside, and then the latch clicked. I don't trust these people—something's going on."

Teller nodded grimly. He had to agree, though there had been no sign of it downstairs. Michael and his friends hadn't revealed the slightest hint of insincerity, even as his practiced eyes searched for it. They'd given them a tour of the house and answered every question with good-natured candor. Yet Clare could hardly be lying about the sedative. And Michael would admit no knowledge of the scavies they had tracked to his very door.

"You're right. Tell you what—I'm going to scout around a bit, see what I can find."

"I'm going with you," Clare answered. And then, when he didn't answer, "I feel all right. I'm up to it."

Teller nodded in the darkness, then cracked the door again to peer out into the hallway. No one. Slipping carefully through, he crept to the top of the staircase, then turned to signal to Clare.

They made their way carefully down the stairs. "Start with the office?" Clare whispered.

Teller shook his head. "Let's come back to it. There might be clues there, but I think we're looking for something bigger." He scanned the living room. Their tour earlier had included every room on this floor and most of those above.

"Maybe there's a basement," Clare whispered.

Teller nodded. "There was a door in the kitchen." He stepped out into the foyer.

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And then the world fell apart.

Teller didn't know which hit him first: the hideous shriek that filled the air, the sudden darkness even murkier than the dim house, or the bright flash and echoed report of gunfire from the blackness ahead. The house had transformed—a blackened ruin surrounded them now, wet with rain that seeped down from the half-crumbled floor above with an acidic hiss and crackle. And the stench—it permeated the place, drifting not just from the surroundings but from his own skin, his own hair. The rancid taste in his mouth was enough to make him gag and spit—it was as if he'd been gargling raw sewage.

"What the Hell's going on?" Clare was asking.

"I don't know," Teller spat, "but look!"

Across the ruined living room, a shape scrambled from the kitchen door. There were two more lightning-bright gunshots as Walks Far staggered back, blasting pursuers as he came. Teller's Beretta was in his hand in a heartbeat, and he quickly drew a bead on the shambling shape that emerged from the door. He let loose two quick shots, and the creature flinched, then faltered.

"Look out!" Clare yelled, and Teller turned in time to see another dark shape emerge from the office.

"Michael!" Teller called out. The creature grinned in response, its bone-white teeth shining against the slimy, blackened flesh of its face.

"What, not sleepy?" it said, lurching forward.

Teller and Clare fired almost in unison, their muzzle blasts illuminating the charred corpse as it staggered under their bullets. Where chunks of meat flew off, maggots writhed and crawled under the flesh.

The creature grinned again, its yellow eyes wide with delight as it held up a syringe. "I've got a little something here for you, tale-teller," it shrieked as it closed the gap between them. Teller ducked its lunge, then spun to put two more rounds into it. But this was nothing like the brain-dead zombies he'd fought before—it quickly sidestepped as Teller fired, bringing its hand crashing down on his wrist. Pain shot through his arm, and the Beretta flew spinning along the floor.

Teller staggered back into a crouch. Michael grinned again, brandishing his syringe, and then lunged. But Teller wasn't without his own tricks. As the creature charged him, he surged forward. His hand went to the knife hidden on his ankle—

And found nothing.

The abomination was on him now, one arm wrapping around Teller's neck as it swung the hypodermic at his face.

And then Teller's knife flashed past his eyes, driven by Clare's furious grip deep into the creature's neck. The thing howled as she ripped through its slimy flesh, pulling wet tendrils of rotten sinew and vein along the arc of her outstroke. Teller grasped

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the syringe-bearing arm in both hands, fingers sinking into the mushy flesh, and snapped with all the might he could muster. There was a crack of bone, and another howl as Clare's knife hit home again. The creature slumped.

Clare staggered back, dropping the knife. "Are you all right?" she gasped.

Teller flexed his gun wrist. The pain was intense, but it seemed to be working. He nodded, gathering up his weapons.

Walks Far scrambled up to them. "That—that thing—" he stammered, pointing back to a dark pile on the floor that smoked from the impact of two dozen submachine-gun rounds. Before Teller could answer, though, there was a scramble at the top of the stairs. He spun in time to see Snakebite come running down the steps, barking and panting at Green. The colonel half-dragged Reno, who staggered deliriously.

"What in the name of Sam Adams is going on here?" Green boomed, lowering his friend to a seat on the steps.

"You tell me, man," Teller answered. "What happened to Reno?"

"Screw him," Walks Far shouted. "There was one more of those guys—there's gotta be another one of those things around here!"

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, son," Green commanded. He turned toward Teller. "Took care of that Fred upstairs. Reno's having a hard time keeping to his feet. I think the doc slipped him a mickey."

"I'll be all right in a minute," Reno grunted with a grimace, his hands to his temples. After a few seconds he shook his head and rose wearily to his feet.

Green nodded. "First we better take cover."

He was right—drops of black rain were hissing and sizzling around them like angry snakes, seeping through from the floor above.

"I think this house has a basement," Walks Far said. "We can go there."

Teller led the way across the ruined living room and into the kitchen. Opposite, the suspected cellar door stood ajar, blackened but intact. He negotiated the charred remnants of countertops and tables as rainwater sizzled and hissed angrily about him. Opening the door, he found the staircase he was looking for. It led down, into silent darkness.

## Chapter Seven

Teller stepped down the narrow stairs. Green produced a flashlight, and they scanned the room from the bottom step. It looked empty but for the occasional rotten box or crate. It didn't seem so badly charred, and little of the rain was seeping



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through. Green stepped past to explore the room while the others took weary seats on the steps.

"Okay, somebody explain to me what's happening here," Clare demanded, wrapping her arms around her knees as if warding off feverish chills.

For a moment no one said a word. Then Teller summarized it as best he could guess: "Illusion: the showers, the beds, the food we ate—the whole house. God knows why. Guess it fell apart when we started snoopin' around."

No one responded. Then Reno made a face. "Does everyone else's mouth taste as bad as mine?"

"I'd hate to think what we were really eating," Teller commented flatly. Reno's hair was matted and slimy, as was his own. "Or what we showered in," he added.

"What about the scavies?" Clare said. "We know they were here—what's the connection?"

"Renslin Laboratories," Walks Far stated.

Everyone turned toward him. "What?" said Teller.

"When you guys found me, I was looking for a facility that was supposedly in this area. Some sort of secret laboratory that was owned by a company called Renslin Labs."

"Whoa," Reno said, turning to dig through his backpack. He extracted the shards of glass they'd found on the scavies. "Renslin Labs. That's what it says on this label."

Walks Far nodded his head. "I'm pretty sure this is the place. If it was a secret lab, they probably disguised it as a house. But if it's all been burned down, the lab must have been destroyed."

"Don't think so," Colonel Green shouted from across the basement. "This is probably it right here."

\* \* \*

It was a door Green had found—and not some regular household door. It was wide, made of stainless steel embedded firmly in dense concrete. To the right, the lights of an electronic lock blinked in the darkness.

"Can we get it open?" Teller asked.

"I can," Walks Far stated. He set to work.

A few moments later the blinking red light flashed to a steady green, and with of hiss of trapped air the door slipped open. A short concrete passageway led to a second door illuminated by the pale flicker of fluorescent ceiling lights.

Walks Far started forward, but Teller held out an arm. "Hold on a minute." He popped the clip on his Beretta and checked the ammo count. Four rounds. With the five in his pocket, that was all he had left. He clipped the last five into the magazine, turning toward the others. "We don't know what's in there."

"Guess it's time to stop foolin' around, then," Reno said, reaching into his bag. He pulled out a bundle of cloth and shook

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it free: a dusty white tabard, emblazoned with a crimson Maltese cross. He shrugged it over his head.

"A Templar. I might have guessed," Teller said.

"I thought you guys were all stony and severe," Clare said. She wasn't far off—the few that Teller had met or heard of were Reno's dispositional opposites.

"No way, toots—and we don't all wear those stupid-ass thigh pads you see in all the pictures, either." He tucked the tabard under his belt, then loosened his sword in its sheath.

"Okay, let's go," Green said.

Teller turned and opened the inner door.

\* \* \*

"Oh, thank God," the woman said, turning as they entered the room. She was wearing a white lab coat; beyond her and throughout the large, brightly lit room, tables and shelves were crammed with scientific equipment. There were two more people in the room, a bit further back: a man and a woman, both in lab coats. All three of them had turned in surprise when Teller came through the door.

"Who the Hell are you?" Teller demanded.

The woman took a step forward, but Teller hadn't lowered his pistol. She glanced at it, the relief fading just a bit from her face, and raised her hands in an entreaty of innocence.

"You can't imagine how happy we are to see someone after all this time! I'm Desimone Lacosta, and—"

"Lacosta!" Clare said, stepping out into the room with her rifle leveled. "We ran into your husband upstairs."

"That—thing—was not my husband," Desimone spat. "Whatever that evil abomination is, it killed Michael. We tried to burn it, but the house caught fire. The three of us fled down here, but the creature somehow survived the blaze and locked us in."

"So, like, you've been hiding down here ever since?" Reno asked.

"Not so much hiding," one of the assistants said, walking up to Desimone, "as trapped. The creature has been making us work. It brings us food and water if we do, and starves us if we don't. It's been two years."

"I'm a genetic engineer," Desimone said, lowering her hands. "I worked mainly on agricultural products, but I was once involved in a biological warfare program. The creature wants me to reconstruct my work. I've been trying to stall it, but—"

"This is a load of crap," Clare cut in. "Two years you've been cooped up down here? I don't think so."

The three scientists glanced nervously at each other. "Please," Desimone said, stepping toward Teller, "you've got to help us."

Teller raised his gun to Desimone's face, stopping the researcher in her tracks. "What do you know about E. Pustule?" he demanded.

## Infestations

Desimone looked briefly confused. "Pustule Renslin? It's—"

Suddenly Green shouted, "Look out!" There was a blast of gunfire, but Clare threw herself into Teller, knocking him away as the concrete behind them erupted into fragments. Desimone lunged after them, pulling a scalpel from her pocket, but her swing found only air. The tale-teller rolled as he hit the ground, bringing his 10mm around in a wild arc that sent his first shot into the ceiling.

One of the assistants had produced a .357—it was his gunfire that echoed in Teller's ears. Now the labbie was staggering under Green's fire, but that wasn't what stopped Teller's glance. It was his flesh, now blackened and writhing with maggots like Michael's upstairs. He still wore the clean white coat; he was still lit by the bright fluorescent ceiling lamps of the intact, uncharred lab.

And it wasn't just him: Desimone too had transformed. She was lunging again, scalpel in hand. Still on his back, Teller caught her with a foot, kicking away as she drove the scalpel into his thigh. She stumbled back, and just then a blast of brilliant energy flashed from Clare's forehead, striking the abomination in the midsection. Rotten intestines burst forth, spilling slime and masses of wriggling larvae. Teller didn't let the sight give him pause—he brought the 10mm down and put three rounds into the staggering horror. Desimone stumbled for a second or two, then fell to the floor with a wet thud.

There was a moment of silence, then Walks Far muttered, "Are they dead? I mean, for real this time?" He was plastered against the wall by the door where he came in, his submachine-gun clutched between white knuckles.

"I got the chick," Reno answered, his sword dripping with bile and thick, rancid blood.

"Two more down here," Green added, nudging Desimone's lifeless corpse with a booted toe.

Teller got to his feet, clutching his bleeding leg. "Thanks," he said to Clare, helping her up as well. He turned back to the vile corpse. A handful of black flies had squirmed from the ropy strands of rotten gut spilled out over the laboratory floor, to scurry along the concrete or take to the air. "Jesus!" Teller exclaimed, staring for a moment as even more insects emerged. He lowered the Beretta and put two more rounds into the corpse's head.

The others just stared for a moment. "Well, what now?" Reno asked after a moment.

"Now you die," Walks Far answered, raising his submachine-gun. His first round took Green in the back, knocking the colonel to the ground and filling the room with thunder as Teller and the others dove for cover.

# Infestations

Teller scrambled behind a stainless-steel workbench, equipment above and behind him exploding into shards as the Ravenite fired. "Are you nuts?" he shouted.

"I've been looking for this lab for weeks!" Walks Far shouted back, sending several more rounds into the bench. "You think I'm going to share this wealth with you fools?"

Clare in tow, Teller scurried along the workbench to the far end of the room. He reached the limit of its cover and paused to glance out. Reno was crouching behind some massive piece of lab gear opposite, his dog under a nearby table. The Templar flashed back a quick shrug that said: "what next?" His sword was in hand—he'd dropped his rifle in the fight with the zombies.

Teller quickly popped the clip from his Beretta as two more shots clanged off the table above him. Just as he feared: only three rounds left. He slapped the magazine back in, gave Reno a brief nod, and then whirled out around the end of the table.

But he didn't fire. Walks Far was turning on him, raising his submachine-gun, but Teller could only gasp in horror. Beyond, Desimone's body had dissolved into a dense black mass, and this formless terror was raising itself up in a rippling sheet of darkness.

"Look out," Teller tried to yell, but the words never left his throat. Walks Far grinned as he sighted his SMG on the tale-teller, but before he could fire the mass descended, blanketing him in a thick and writhing blackness. It stirred and boiled as the Ravenite struggled in its smothering embrace, gagging, dropping his submachine-gun to flail blindly. Tiny bits of the horror broke off to swirl and cloud about the diminishing form. It was not some mass of goo—it was a swarm of flies!

"Whoa!" Reno exclaimed.

Teller could only stare in horror as the flailing within the cloud slowly diminished. The Indian's choked cries fell to silence, and as the swarm began to dissipate the remnants of his body collapsed into a damp, meaty mass.

The flies began to swirl and reform. Teller glanced at the laboratory door, but the swarm blocked that escape. It began to move their way.

"Here!" Clare cried, grabbing Teller's collar. She scrambled toward another door set into the wall, grasping the handle to pull it open.

The black mass was now a dense and angry cloud, buzzing and whirling. Reno reached for Green's unconscious form, struggling to drag him as the buzz of the flies rose to a furious tenor. Loose tendrils of the swarm were reaching Teller now, the flies darting at his face, landing to bite and sting. He glanced at the safety of the door, then stepped out to extend a hand to the stumbling Templar.

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They dragged Green's body through the door, Snakebite darting in behind them. Clare slammed it shut as the vanguard tendrils of the swarm chased them in.

"God, it's cold in here," she said, waving away the few insects that had made it in.

Teller looked about. They were in a freezer of some sort, nearly room-sized. That was good—the flies they didn't swat would quickly succumb to the cold. The room was cluttered with boxes, shelves, and a large chest-like apparatus of some sort, all coated in a sheen of frost. A large window looked out into the main laboratory. Teller stepped up to it.

"I don't see the swarm any more." The lab was empty, but for the blackened corpses of Desimone's assistants and the runny pile of meat and bone that had been Walks Far. Teller glanced at the freezer door. It was tightly sealed—the flies would not be able to get in. "Good call, Clare."

But the syker didn't answer. She had settled to the floor, wrapping her arms around her. She raised her fierce eyes to Teller's, shivering. "I'm not feeling so hot, Teller," she said, her breath fogging. "I don't know how long I can take this cold."

Teller pulled off his jacket, crouching down beside her. He draped it over her shoulders, then put a hand to her forehead. The fever had returned with a vengeance. Snakebite came over and tried to lick her face, but she pushed him away.

"No," Teller said. "Let him cozy up to you. He'll keep you warm."

Reno was at work on Green—it looked like the Colonel was still alive. "I'll have him on his feet in a few moments," the Templar said, glancing up, "but he's badly injured. I couldn't grab his rifle. Mine's outside too."

"I'm down to three rounds," Teller answered. "What's in your rifle, Clare?"

"Should be almost a full mag," the syker grunted.

Teller turned back to the window. "Damn!" Desimone was standing right there, staring at him through the glass. The scientist—for that's how she looked again, a normal, uninjured 40-year-old woman—raised her hand in a sarcastic wave, a ferocious grin on her face. With her other hand she held up a broom, then turned toward the door.

"Dammit!" Teller scrambled for the freezer door, grabbing the latch. But it was too late—she'd jammed the handle from the outside.

Teller spun about. "We're locked in," he said.

Green was conscious now, staggering to his feet with a groan. Reno was up as well. He scooped up Clare's rifle and with a mighty swing drove its butt into the glass. The window didn't so much as crack. He reversed the rifle, aiming it at the glass. Outside, Desimone smiled in wry amusement.



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"Wait!" Teller said. "If you break the glass, she'll send her flies in here. We need some sort of plan first." He glanced about the room. "We don't have enough weapons. There's got to be something here that we can use."

They set to work, Teller searching the shelves while Green ripped open boxes and Reno dug into the boxy console. The air bit at Teller's lungs. His fingers were burning; he had to pull down his sleeves to touch the frozen jars, boxes, and canisters on the shelves. "She must have turned down the temperature," he commented.

"Dude, check this," Reno said. He shook a large glass jar, the supercold surface gripped between clothbound hands. Something clunked within: the frozen corpse of a lab rat. Through the frosted glass Teller could see the same welts and sores that had decorated the nomads' skin.

"If we needed any more proof that this lab is the source of the disease, I guess this is it," he said. "Look at this label: 'Infected, E. Pustule Renslin-A-340. Onset: 11 hours; Death: 97 hours; Vector: F. Chrysopa Chervila.' I'm guessing Chrysopa are these damn bugs—genetically-engineered flies carrying a genetically-engineered germ."

Reno produced another bottle from within the console. This one was full of flies, frozen black dots in the icy jar. The label matched exactly the one they'd found on the scavvyies.

"Let me guess: one of those bottles is missing," Teller said. Reno nodded.

"Anything else in there?"

"Bout 30 of the rats, a couple dozen of those bugmeisters, and 20 of these," Reno replied, pulling out another jar. It was similar, but:

"Those aren't flies—what are they?" Teller took the jar from Reno, holding it up to peer through the frosted glass. Insects, but bigger than the flies. The label listed a species they hadn't yet seen: "W. Vespa Des."

Teller thought of the spider he'd seen the morning before, wrapping its prey in a silver sarcophagus. "This is it," Teller said. "This is the weapon we need."

\* \* \*

The plan was simple. They'd bust out of the freezer. A volley of gunfire ought to put Desimone down, but she'd transform into her swarm of flies quickly, so they'd have to act fast. A can of Raid would have been nice, but that was a pipe dream, so they were going to make due with some smoky torches. That wouldn't kill the flies, of course, but if they could just keep Desimone at bay for 20 or 30 minutes, the rest of the plan should work.

"Let's do it," Teller nodded to Green. The colonel shouldered Clare's rifle and pulled the trigger, the blast of the gunfire

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spiderwebbing the large window. Without hesitation Teller threw himself into the glass, hunching his shoulders as he crashed into it, praying that the ruggedized lucite would give. With a crash and a spray of fragments he was through, tumbling to the floor amid a shower of broken glass. He rolled, bringing up the Beretta.

Desimone was there—hiding behind the door, out of sight from the freezer window. But Teller was ready for her. He dodged as she swung a fire ax in a high overhead arc, burying the blade in the concrete floor inches from his shoulder.

He wheeled, brought up the 10mm, and squeezed off two shots. The first found her shoulder, but with an insane fury she knocked his hand away to send the second shot wide. She yanked the ax from the floor.

And then the top half of her head flew free, sent sailing by the blurred silver of Reno's sword. She half-turned her shocked face toward the Templar before slumping to the ground, dumping the sundered contents of her cranium onto the cold concrete floor.

"Hurry!" Green shouted, hefting the half-conscious Clare through the shattered window. "Get those torches going!"

His urgency was valid—Desimone's body was already beginning to dissolve, hundreds of tiny black flies taking wing from her corpse. Reno grabbed the broom from the door latch while Teller fumbled in his pocket for his lighter.

"C'mon, c'mon, light, damn you!" he muttered as he set the flame to the reluctant bristles. The flies were becoming a cloud now, buzzing insistently around his face and ear. In a few seconds, they'd be thick enough to envelope him the way they'd finished Walks Far. But the broom wouldn't light; the flame wouldn't take.

"Stand back."

Teller turned to see Clare pulling herself painfully to her feet. She lowered her head, eyelids fluttering with strain, and the broom began to smolder.

Reno whipped it around at the gathering mass of flies.

It didn't do much, but the flies seemed repelled by the smoke. Reno waved the broom back and forth, breaking up the swarm wherever it seemed to coalesce.

"C'mon," Teller said to Green, swatting away the biting flies. "More torches!" They set to work gathering anything that might burn: the zombies' clothes, the papers and notebooks scattered about the lab, the remnants of Walks Far's backpack.

Within a few moments they had several torches, and the room was filled with a light haze of smoke. The flies still buzzed and bit, but the smoke kept the swarm from coming together.

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"Look!" Teller pointed. The flies were retreating, the last cohesive tendrils of the swarm flying out through the vents in the ceiling.

"That's what I'm talkin' 'bout!" Reno exclaimed. "Let's get to it!"

\* \* \*

It was 20 minutes before Desimone put in another appearance. By that time they had all of the jars out of the freezer. They'd closed the air vents too. "That should leave her only one way in," Teller had commented.

And he was right. She threw open the door, once again in her human form, a rusty rifle in hand. Teller and Reno whirled as she stormed in, and Desimone paused for a short gloating smile as they scrambled for their weapons. She raised her rifle, and in that second Teller and the Templar threw themselves to the ground. The blast of her gunfire was answered by a spray of broken glass over their heads as her rounds shattered the jars they'd stacked on the counter behind them.

At that moment, Green threw himself from his hiding place. Desimone wheeled on him as he reached the lab door to slam it shut and throw the latch. Her rifle came to bear as the colonel dove for behind the workbench, her shriek of delight drowned by the roar of her muzzle. Green scrambled to bring his own weapon up as she stalked around the table, flushing him from his cover.

It was all taking too long!

Desimone shouldered the rifle again, grinning as her finger clamped the trigger.

Suddenly a flash of gray struck her, knocking her backward and sending her shot ricocheting off the floor. Snakebite snarled as his jaws tore at her arm, but she dropped the rifle and landed a heavy fist to the side of the dog's head. For a long moment they wrestled, her face contorting into an ever-more-twisted mass of loathing, but finally she grasped his thick fur in both hands and flung him aside. She turned again on Green.

And then she paused, just long enough to slap at her neck. For a second she didn't move, and then her leer of delight turned to one of confusion, and then horror. She spun in Teller's direction. From the shattered jars behind him hundreds of insects were taking to wing, slowly at first but unerringly making their way toward her.

"No!" she cried, scrambling for the door. The insects were descending on her in droves now, covering her head and shoulders in a black shroud that wriggled and stung. She fumbled with the latch, struggling furiously as the growing cloud enveloped her. The latch tripped, the door opened halfway, but by then her struggles were reduced to blind flailing, all efforts at escape forgotten as she flogged at the blanket of

insects that consumed her. Slowly her arms and hands began to dissolve into clouds of flies, but the attacking insects fell as mercilessly on them as they did on the diminishing body. The air was filled with angry buzzing, a growing, clouding maelstrom of fury.

It was over in moments. The floor and tables in the lab were dusted in a layer of tiny fly husks, the air abuzz with the last patrols of the predatory wasps. Teller and Reno got to their feet; Green was picking himself up as well. Snakebite limped over toward the unconscious Clare, nuzzling her face.

Teller picked up one of the shattered bottles. A few of the little wasps, slower than their brethren to wake from their icy hibernation, still crawled drunkenly about the bottom.

"Predators and prey," he muttered. "This disease was supposed to have been a weapon. I guess the military would have been crazy not to have engineered some means of controlling it."

\* \* \*

They staggered from the lab into the darkness of the cellar. The rain seemed to have stopped—the pitter-patter from above was reduced to the occasional drip or drop. Teller led the way up the staircase, his arm supporting the still-sluggish syker. It was over—not just the fight, but the entire ordeal. Reno had found a box of vials in a storeroom refrigerator: they had the serum. Teller administered it to each of them—within a few hours they should all be on the road to good health.

Teller was feeling pretty good about himself, despite his aching wrist and the gash in thigh. It was all over. So his guard was down when he hit the top of the staircase.

A shape resolved itself in the far corner. It was small, its yellowed eyes wide in a cursed parody of a child's smile. It grinned like its undead father had, as it teetered under the weight of a rusted shotgun that dwarfed the tiny arms that clasped it.

Teller watched the child raise the gun, but he couldn't react. He could only wonder: *Is that what she looks like?* He'd never returned to his home after the bomb obliterated it, never searched those stony ruins the way he'd picked through so many fear-soaked places since. Every charred corpse, every lurching skeleton, every slimy zombie had been someone before the war—someone with a life, someone loved. The charred flesh, the yellowed teeth shining in the darkness—*is that what the bomb did to my Jillian?*

There was a metallic click as the hammer fell, but the shotgun didn't fire. The zombie's eyes shifted from laughter to surprise, then to demonic fury, and another memory flashed through Teller's mind. His Jillian—a different Jillian—clinging to the back of a bay mare at the base stables, laughing against a

# Infestations

sunny sky. A Jillian that was dead, was gone, had left for a better place no matter what the howling manitous might have done with the flesh she left behind.

The creature was charging now, but Teller's Beretta was already in his hand. "You are not my daughter," he whispered. The pistol bucked; the room flashed brilliant for a moment; his last round creased the air. The tiny zombie seized up as its head flew back, and then it crumpled to the floor.

## Epilogue

They took twelve jars of the wasps with them. Five were for the woods around the scavvies' bodies, with five more for the area around the nomads' camp and ambush site. Each time they opened the jars the reconstituted insects buzzed purposefully away, intent on their errand of predation.

"Think that'll get them all?" Green had asked.

Teller could only shrug. "I hope so. They made pretty short work of Desimone."

The little boy at the nomad camp hadn't made it, but that was thankfully their only loss. Teller and Clare moved quickly from tent to tent on their return, administering the serum to the 16 bedridden survivors. Within a few hours all of the nomads were out of danger; the worst were on their feet within two days.

So, eventually, they parted ways. Green and Reno headed back west toward Eureka with the last two jars of wasps. "Just in case," Reno had said. They set out with their characteristic teamwork, flanking the road, rifles at the ready, Snakebite shooting back one last blue-eyed glance as they rounded the bend. Clare was going to stay with the nomads for a while, but Teller's business was northward.

He wondered, later, if he might see them again. For 13 years he'd warded his ghosts with the armor of distance, but those spirits were exorcised now. He found himself thinking back not to his wife, not to his little Jillian, but to all the people he'd pushed away over the last decade. To those fierce green eyes and the arm around his neck.

Had she even noticed the way he looked at her that night, or later, when he left? No, it didn't seem so. And perhaps that was for the best—she had her own trail ahead of her; Teller could hardly expect that to change just to suit his epiphany.

He didn't find the note, dropped into a pocket of his backpack, for several days. It was a scrap of dirty notebook paper folded into a square. Inside there were just three words—but they were enough.

"Maybe next time."

He smiled. Fair enough. Maybe next time.



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Marshal: 36



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## The Adventure



Genes. Funny things, ain't they? Seems they practically control our destiny. Master them, and you might control the world—at least that's what a lot of folks thought back before the war. Desimone Lacosta was one of them, and now her legacy's brought a new horror to the postwar world. Read on, waster, and think twice the next time you bite into one of them juicy red genetically-engineered apples...

### The Story So Far


Before the bombs fell, Desimone Lacosta was a well-known genetic engineer. Remember those six-legged beef cattle that were making the news back before the war?

Yep, those were her work. Same with those 40-eggs-a-day chickens, and the tobacco plant that oozed anticancer proteins. Okay, you might never have heard of that last one—it wasn't splashy enough for cable news—but it was just one of many bizarre products of genetic engineering that Desimone pioneered.

Fact is, she did a lot of stuff that you never heard of—and it wasn't all quite as beneficial to humanity as her giant seedless tomatoes. It was the six-legged cattle that made her a Nobel prize candidate, but one of her biggest breakthroughs was in disease warfare—inventing new forms of pestilence along with controllable means of distributing them. As you



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might have gathered from the story you just read, she engineered a fly to carry and propagate a particularly nasty bug she came up with, and a wasp to kill the flies once they'd done their work.

Fortunately for humanity, that one didn't quite make it into circulation by the end of the war. Desimone, like most weapons developers in those last few desperate years, was working hard on it. In fact, that crush of work saved her life when the bombs fell. You see, she'd made herself quite a bit of money over the years, enough to build a big vacation home in NorCal and, later, to add a small lab secure and

well-equipped enough for her sensitive work. She was there with her family, a couple of assistants, and some friends when her regular home, her office, and the entire world was vaporized in a blast of atomic ghost-rock fury.

It took them a few weeks to come to terms with all they had lost—and with their great fortune in being alive, together, and safe in their mountain cabin. It was a few more weeks before Desimone began to realize how she might have contributed to the cataclysm had she been just a little further along in her work. Suddenly her research, her accomplishments, her lifelong passion were all repugnant to her, and she sealed the airtight door to her laboratory, locking her old life within.

## A Fateful Phone Call

A week later, the phone rang. It hadn't been working since Judgement Day, so Desimone answered it hesitantly. The voice on the other end was raspy and backed by static. At first it seemed reasonable, but then it began to talk about her work. It made her offers—odd offers, disturbing offers.

Repulsed and horrified, Desimone slammed down the handset. Who would make a call like that, with such base and repellent overtures? Who knew about her lab, out here



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in the mountains? The telephone offered no answers—it was as dead as it had been since the Apocalypse, and it would be evermore.

Nevertheless, Desimone was oddly revitalized. Her lab was calling her again—not to finish the old work but to begin anew. There was a lot of good she could do to make up for her errant ways. She could synthesize antibiotics, proteins, and antigens for the treatment of radiation sickness and disease. There were crop plants that might be made resistant to fallout and the destructive weather that now drifted through the mountains. She had great resources—she could help rebuild the world! She rallied her two assistants and returned to her lab.

Two weeks later she was progressing nicely. Within a month or two, she'd have quite a supply of antibiotics, and her husband Michael was planning a sortie to deliver them to nearby communities that might still be intact. All was going well. Then one day Desimone went out for one of her frequent walks through the surrounding hills. It was when she came back that things changed.

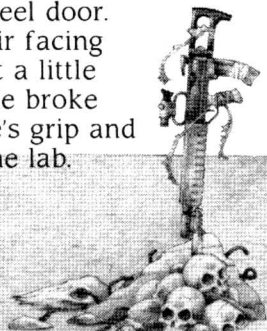
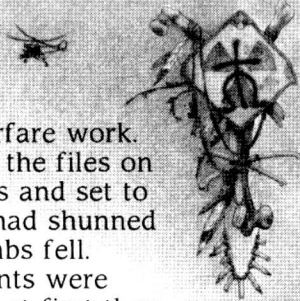
## New Objectives

She returned to the lab and quietly pulled out the genetic samples relating to her

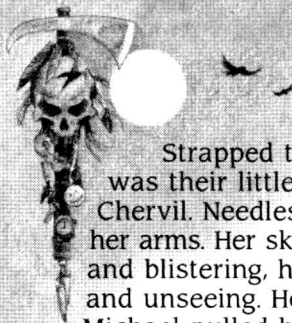
biological warfare work. She called up the files on her computers and set to the task she had shunned since the bombs fell.

Her assistants were confused, but at first they thought she was on to some new idea, some new and beneficial concept spun out of the deadly military work. They followed her instructions for a while, but after a few days they began to question their goal. Desimone was surly, mean, and short-tempered. At first few dared to disobey her, but soon no one would come near. The assistants wouldn't reenter the lab, and even Michael couldn't fathom this change in his wife. A week went by, and then another, as Desimone became increasingly secretive and mean. By the end of a month, she was all but barricaded in her laboratory, emerging only for tense meals and short naps.

It came to a head a few weeks later. Michael was dogging her, demanding answers as she headed down into the lab. He tried to follow, and she resisted. As they struggled briefly, his eyes passed over the lab beyond the stainless-steel door. There, in a chair facing away—was that a little blonde head? He broke from Desimone's grip and stormed into the lab.



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Strapped to the chair was their little daughter Chervil. Needles penetrated her arms. Her skin was swollen and blistering, her eyes glassy and unseeing. Horrified, Michael pulled her from the chair while Desimone shrieked and threatened him. He fled the lab with his daughter in his arms, the insane and malicious woman who was his wife slamming and locking the door behind him.

Like Desimone, Michael loved to hike the surrounding hills to settle his thoughts, so after putting his sick daughter to bed he went for a good walk. A few miles out on a trail he rarely hiked, something caught his attention. A body! Lying a few feet off the path, it was hidden by the low-lying bracken. He approached and cautiously rolled the decaying corpse over. His eyes fell upon its face. It was Desimone.

## Stick a Fork in 'Em

Michael should have been surprised, but in a way he was simply relieved. He spent the afternoon burying the body, then headed home. By the time he got there, he had a plan. He didn't know who the woman that looked like Desimone was or where she had come from, but it wouldn't be enough to just stop her. Desimone's work was the focus of that

horror's existence, and he had to destroy both it and her.

Downstairs, the laboratory door was still locked. There was no other exit, so he knew she was trapped when he barricaded it with a heavy timber. Silently he poured out his gasoline, dousing old rags and scrapwood and splashing the walls and floor. He called up a warning to his guests, then set a match to his tinder. The house would go down, but it would also bury and suffocate the underground lab, putting an end to that abomination's work. Michael turned and fled up the stairs.

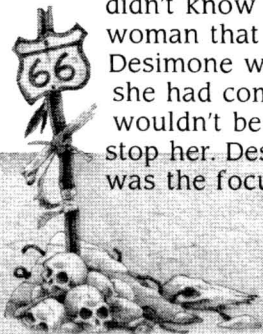
And right into Desimone—or the horror that had usurped her.

"Did you think it would end so easily?" the creature smirked. And then it reached for him. It was the last thing Michael Lacosta ever saw.

## No Way Out

Desimone—that's what we'll call her, for the abomination that plays her part in this story has no name of its own—survived the fire. Not so Michael, nor the others, who were roasted like franks on a Fourth-of-July grill.

But though he didn't succeed in killing the horror, Michael did slow her plans. Without him or some other dupe, Desimone had no means to distribute her work. Her plague-bearing insects



# Infestations

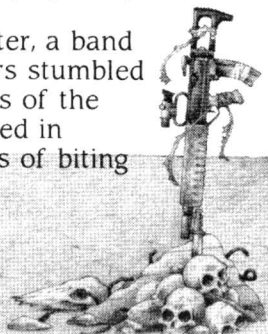
perfected, she was ready to set them upon a fear-ravaged world. But the isolation of the lab, which had made its survival possible, now worked against her. Simply set loose, the flies might not survive long enough to spread to inhabited lands before the chill of winter killed them off. She herself suffered the same limitation, as well as a serious loss of power if she strayed too far from her lair. So she had to wait for some helpful scavenger to come along—surely someone would discover the cabin sooner or later. In the mean while, she had half-a-dozen walkin' dead to keep her company, risen from the charred corpses of her friends and family.

It took twelve years, but Desimone's dream finally came true just a week and a half ago. A couple of enterprising travelers stumbled upon the road leading to the vacation house. After facing a masquerade not unlike that which is about to unfold, the pair of adventurers left the house for Eureka carrying (along with a couple other items) a flask of disease-bearing flies. What Desimone had talked them into doing with it is anybody's guess—perhaps they had no idea of what they were really carrying. Either way, their plans were cut dramatically short.



Not five miles down the road, they were set upon by a monster grizzly, a mutated bear of incredible ferocity. There was the crash of broken glass when the first scavvie's backpack was ripped from his shoulders, and moments later black flies began to crawl from beneath the bag's nylon flaps. By this time the scavvies didn't care, of course—they were already bear food—but the grizzly swatted and nipped as the flies hungrily sought its flesh.

Two days later, a band of nomad bikers stumbled upon the bodies of the scavvies, covered in hovering clouds of biting





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flies. They poked through the scavvies' belongings, swatting at the flies all the while, and took what suited them. And more: a good dose of E. Pustule Rens.-A-340, Desimone's creation. The bikers were finishing what the scavvies could not. They were headed for Eureka.

## The Setup

If your players are the sort who look for the workings of the Four Horsemen, this adventure needs little setup. The story takes place out in the wilderness, and any rationale that brings such characters to the lonely

roads of NorCal's rolling, pine-covered forests (just traveling from place to place between regularly scheduled adventures, for example) can get them into the first chapter. The mystery and horror at that point should motivate the heroes to seek out the source of Desimone's disease, but if they're traveling, make sure they're not so eager to move on that they ignore the hooks that involve them in the story. If they simply leave after finding the looted truck in Chapter One, they'll exit this adventure with nothing to show for it but a quick and gruesome death in the throws of E. Pustule Rens.-A-340.

If your heroes are of a more mercenary breed, a better option is to nudge them towards Desimone's lab, a lost El Dorado of prewar tech. Slip them a copy of the Renslin Labs memo (in the Appendix). It's a document some scavvie found in a briefcase in a rusted Audi outside of Shan Fan. Since it hints at a site of some value, it was kept and perhaps even bartered through a chain of owners. Your players might win it in a poker game, gain it as partial payment for a previous job, or find it on the body of some biker or mutant. Whatever works for you.

The Fear Level throughout the region of this adventure is a healthy 4, except at

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Desimone's house (covered in Chapters Three and Four), where it climbs to a 5.

## Chapter One: Truck Stop

The heroes have set out to look for Desimone's lab, or are simply passing through. Whatever the reason, they're heading north from Eureka, about 30 miles out of town on State Route 96, a two-lane highway that winds its way through heavily wooded hills. Those looking for a Firebreak Road (as per the memo) may be a little frustrated. There are dozens of old trails and overgrown dirt roads, but no street signs marking a Firebreak Road.

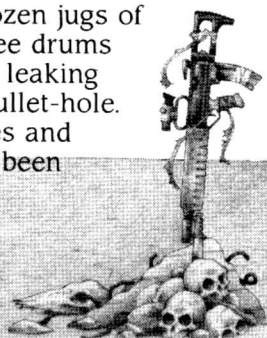
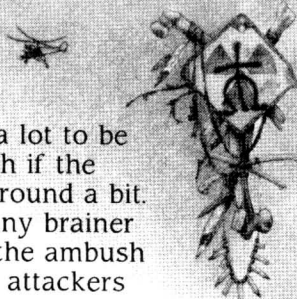
While passing around a gentle curve, the heroes come upon an old military truck (a Fair (5) *Cognition* check spots the smoke rising from the wreck beforehand). The truck was ambushed. A heavy tree has crushed its hood, starting a smoldering fire that still burns. Its sides are marred with bullet holes, and the results of looting are evident in the crates and packaging scattered over the road. Two or three bodies lie on the pavement.

Careful players may approach cautiously, but there is no longer any real danger

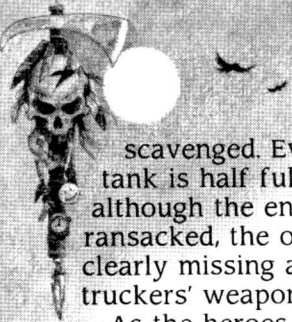
here. There's a lot to be learned though if the heroes look around a bit. For starters, any brainer can see how the ambush unfolded. The attackers felled a tree onto the truck, then shot up the passengers when the vehicle crunched to a halt. An Onerous (7) *trackin'* roll determines that the truckers fought back with vigor, and shot or killed at least one of the attackers. It also reveals the path taken by the attackers when their work was through.

There are a few more items of interest in or near the truck. Though the attack was clearly recent—perhaps just a few hours ago, as evidenced by the still-burning engine—the bodies are badly decayed. There are four of them—dark, slimy, and writhing with tiny maggots. In fact, clouds of little black flies buzz around each body, with hundreds more swarming up when the bodies are disturbed. (Require a Foolproof (3) *guts* check here.)

Aside from the bodies and the flies, the truck's cargo is also of interest. It's mostly still there: a big box of brass shell casings, two dozen bolts of cloth, half-a-dozen jugs of rotgut, and three drums of fuel oil, one leaking from a stray bullet-hole. The truck's tires and engine haven't been



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scavenged. Even the fuel tank is half full. In fact, although the entire cargo is ransacked, the only thing clearly missing are the truckers' weapons.

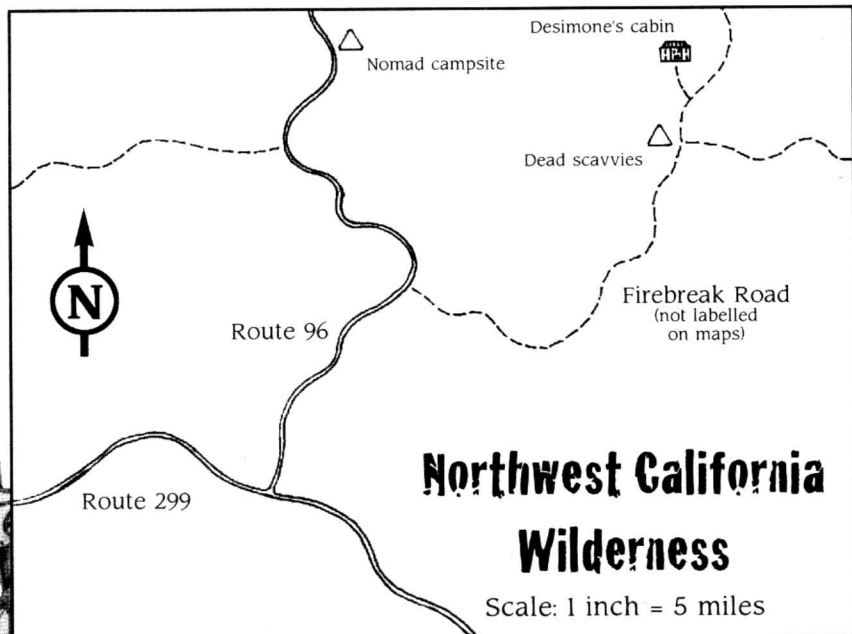
As the heroes check the truck and surrounding area, they're plagued by the biting flies. Those with unprotected skin are in for a miserable time; those heavily dressed suffer only a few bites. Characters sealed inside vehicles are pretty safe for a while, but the flies do find their way through ventilation systems if the vehicles stick around for more than 20 minutes or so. Insect repellent deters most of the little

buggers, but not all. The heroes'll be scratchin' tonight!

The flies transmit Desimone's disease, so the heroes will need to make Vigor rolls to see if the get it. See page 47 for the details.

## Easy Riders

Enterprising characters may want to follow the attackers' tracks. A Fair (5) *trackin'* roll leads the heroes to the nomads' camp, which is set in a clearing off the road about a quarter mile beyond the ambush. If the heroes don't go looking for it, they might still spot the camp from the road with an Hard (9) *Cognition* roll.



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What happens here is up to the heroes. Some may want to attack, to avenge the ambush on the truck. More thoughtful wasters might prefer to sneak in or to approach openly.

The camp consists of a half-dozen tents, varying in quality from heavy military jobs to cheap S-Mart specials. The place has a rundown look, even for the wastes. Clothes and debris are strewn about, and half-eaten food lies rotting near the dead campfires. There's little activity—one grungy biker sits listlessly on the ground, while a woman emerges briefly from one tent to enter another. Twelve bikes of various types and one beat-up dune buggy are parked at the camp's edge.

Heroes making appropriate *sneak* and *search* rolls (call 'em as you see 'em, Marshal) might spot the camp's single guard, posted just inside the treeline at the end of camp nearest the road.

If the characters attack, this biker responds quickly, and six additional nomads emerge from the tents to contribute to the defense. Use the stats on page 49, but give them -2 modifiers to all rolls due to their illness.

All told, there are 17 nomads still alive at the camp: nine men, six women, and two kids. Those who don't aid in the defense are just too weak to fight.

## Under the Weather

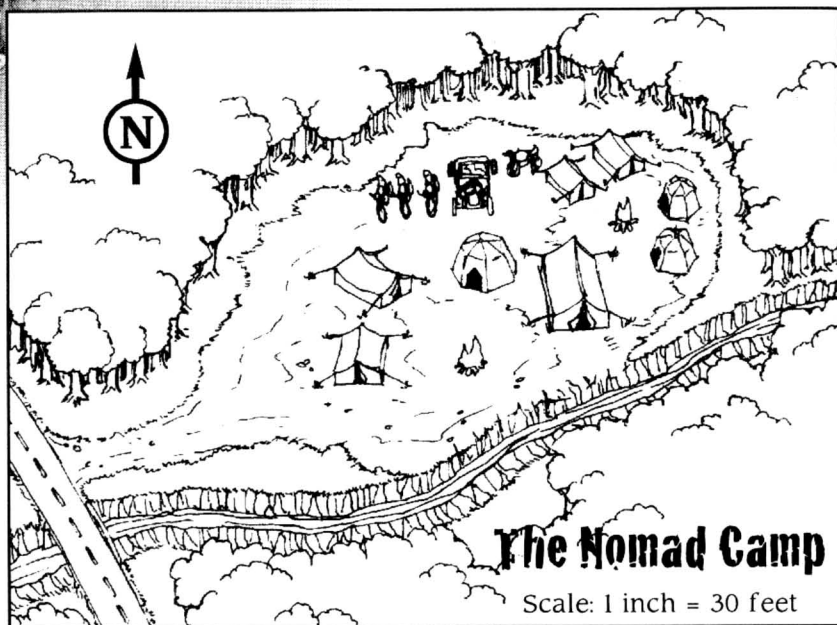
Unless they're a bunch of homicidal maniacs, it's unlikely the heroes will kill everyone in the camp, even if they attack outright. Assuming they don't, when the dust settles (from the attack or a more peaceful approach) the heroes find the camp in a pretty pathetic state. Everyone is sick (see page 47 for the gruesome symptoms), and most seem to be dying. In fact, the nomads have already lost four children and three adults to the mysterious illness. Their bodies lie in the woods a few dozen yards off—no-one has had the strength to give them a proper burial.

Although they did ambush the truck, the nomads aren't marauders. The ambush was a desperate resort—they hoped to flag down a passerby, but when the only vehicle to come along in three days was a military truck they thought it might be Combine, and fell back on their prepared ambush. Unfortunately, it wasn't Throckmorton's, and even worse, it wasn't carrying anything that might help them. Now they're too weak to try and stop another vehicle or even to go for help.

Well, not entirely. Pepper McGraw (the nomad leader) could make such a trip, but she's



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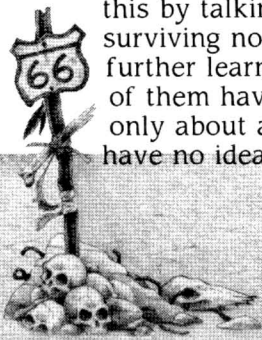


convinced the others that it's unwise for her to leave them unprotected. In reality, she knows they've been hit by something nasty and that spreading it to population centers—no matter how innocently—could be disastrous. Though relatively healthy, she's begun to see the symptoms in herself, and she is willing to die—and see her friends die—rather than spread this plague further.

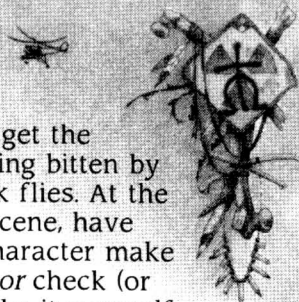
The heroes can learn all of this by talking with the surviving nomads. They can further learn that the worst of them have been sick for only about a week. They have no idea how they

might have contracted the illness. Any help the heroes can offer is gratefully accepted, though if they talk about going for help, Pepper pulls them aside to share her concerns about spreading the disease. The heroes should be showing no symptoms themselves yet, though they may be wondering about contagion.

There's one other thing at the camp that might catch the heroes' eyes: a white plastic box about the size of a small attache, marked with the red cross of medical gear—the Field Antigen Analysis Unit (described on the next page). One of the nomads, a mutant



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called Creepy Weepy (probably due to his writhing, tentacle-like fingers and mucous-draining eyes and nose) found it on the bodies of some scavvies, and he recognized that it might be of use—but none of the nomads can figure it out. A character with *medicine* skill could make a Fair (5) *Smarts* roll to do so, though it's not much immediate help against the disease. The FAAU is fully charged and seems in near-mint condition.

The flies that pestered the heroes in the previous scene pervade the camp as well, though there aren't quite as many of them. Repeat the *Vigor* check described just below for each character not already infected.

## The Disease

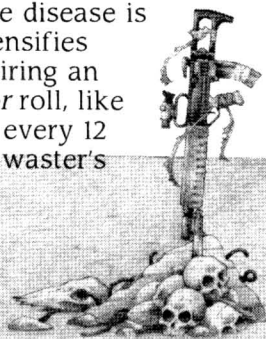
Between the time spent at the biker camp and the events to follow, your heroes are going to get pretty cozy with Desimone's little creation. They'll learn about the symptoms from talking with and perhaps treating the bikers—then later on start to see the same symptoms in themselves. It's practically a given that all or most of them are infected by the end of this chapter. E. Pustule Rens.-A-340 does its work fast, so the heroes better get a move on—the clock is ticking.

Characters get the disease by being bitten by the little black flies. At the end of each scene, have each bitten character make a Hard (9) *Vigor* check (or better yet, make it yourself, secretly). Those who fail are infected with Desimone's little gift to the world.

The disease has several visible symptoms. The first is the most subtle and may go unnoticed at first. It's the fingernails: they begin to take on a bluish tinge as the victim's blood chemistry changes. This generally occurs six hours or so after infection.

The next relates to the flies' bites, which rise into small, itchy welts within an hour or two (like any common mosquito or fly bite). After about 12 hours, though, many of the welts turn into puss-filled sores, which continue to grow larger (and nastier) over the course of the disease.

About that time, the malaise sets in. The victim must make an Onerous (7) *Vigor* check. If he fails, he loses 2d6 Wind and suffers a -1 penalty to all actions. What's worse, half the lost Wind cannot be recovered, except by supernatural means, until the disease is cured. This intensifies over time, requiring an additional *Vigor* roll, like the one above, every 12 hours. When a waster's





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Wind gets to 0, he falls unconscious. Every time it reaches a negative multiple of the hero's Wind, he takes a wound to the guts. That's how the disease kills its victims.

The fourth and most repulsive symptom of the disease is the sloughing of skin and hair. It usually starts on the third or fourth day. The connective tissue beneath the skin rots away, and the sticky flesh peels off easily on contact. Have a character at this stage make a Hard (9) Vigor check any time she is jostled, attacked, or roughly handled. On a failure, a patch of skin simply sloughs off, doing 1d8 damage. Eeyuch.

The disease can only be cured supernaturally or by administration of the serum found at Desimone's lab (in Chapter Four). The TN for supernatural healing is 11, and like all ailments, only one attempt may be made to cure it. Successful Hard (9) *medicine: general* rolls (or supernatural efforts that heal wounds or Wind) do delay the advancement of symptoms by 12 hours per success, but they cannot actually cure the disease. Cures (supernatural or otherwise) do not make the victim immune to reinfection from additional fly bites.

The disease is not contagious from person to person; it can only be transmitted by the flies. The flies lay their eggs on dead victims, which rot at an accelerated pace, and the maggots grow into new flies (bearing the disease) within 48 hours. This method was designed in by Desimone so that the vector and the disease would spread (and could be contained) together.

## The FAAU

The Field Antigen Analysis Unit is an electronic device that analyzes blood samples for disease or poisons—in particular the nasty chemical and biological weapons of the late 21<sup>st</sup> century. To operate it, the testee sticks a finger in a

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slot, where a disposable needle extracts a blood sample ("you may feel a little prick"). The machine mulls over the sample for about two minutes, then gives the operator a detailed analysis of the blood's chemical state. In game terms, that gives a doctor or medic a +2 to the treatment of poison or disease.

When used on characters infected by E. Pustule Rens.-A-340, the device lists a long litany of chemical and biological blood components—all (presumably) pretty normal. At the end of the list, however, appears the item: "Unknown Pathogen: Bacterial."

## The Nomads

The nomad gang is a pretty typical assortment of wasters traveling the wilderness from town to town. They don't want trouble, but they do defend themselves as necessary.

### Profile

**Corporeal:** D:2d8, N:3d6, S:2d8, Q:2d6, V:3d6

Fightin': brawl in' 3d6, shootin' 3d8

**Mental:** C:3d6, K:2d6, M:2d8, Sm:4d6, Sp:3d8

Guts 2d8, scrutinize 2d6, search 3d6

**Pace:** 6

**Size:** 6

**Wind:** NA

**Gear:** Rifles and large knives.

## Bounty

**Avoiding bloodshed with the nomads:** 1 white chip.

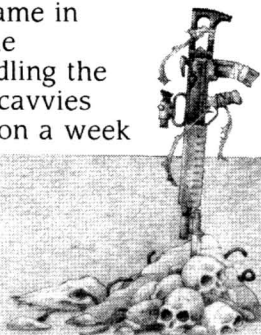
**Figuring out the FAAU:** 1 white chip.

**Helping the sick nomads:** 1 red chip.


## Chapter Two: Not Your Average Bear

By this time smart players may suspect that they too have contracted the disease. The countdown is on—the bikers are succumbing at an alarming rate, and efforts to cure them probably seem pretty hopeless. What's worse is that the fly population in the area seems to be getting denser—if they're the carriers, this plague could spread a long way, and soon. It may be wise to hunt down the source, perhaps that could provide some clues to the disease's nature, or even a cure. Heck, it might even be connected with the mystery lab.

With a few questions and a little deduction, the players can probably guess how the nomads first came in contact with the pestilence: handling the bodies of the scavies they stumbled on a week ago.



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Creepy Weepy can describe the location to the heroes. With that description the characters should have little trouble finding the place. Otherwise they can try to backtrack the nomads' path—an Onerous (7) *trackin'* roll. It's at the intersection of two old firebreaks or logging roads (see the map on page 44).

## Gruesome Findings

Once in the vicinity, spotting the bodies requires a Fair (5) *search* roll. They've been chewed on by the bear and every other scavenger that's passed through in the last week, so they and their belongings are scattered out over quite an area. And then there are the flies—twice as many as at the biker camp, and twice as hungry at that. Squeamish or bug-shy heroes might want to hold back while their more iron-stomached companions search the area.

For those that brave the gore and the bugs, there's not much to be learned from the site. Apparently two men were mauled and eaten by a wild animal. A Fair (5) *trackin'* roll indicates they were traveling on foot down the road from the north. An Easy (3) *search* roll turns up something a bit more interesting: the broken shards of a glass vial in the remains of one of the

backpacks. The laser-printed label is legible—see the page 64 for the handout.

A character with *medicine* or *science: biology* might take a shot at the mumbo-jumbo on the label. A Fair (5) roll indicates that "F. Chrysopa" is a family of fly species.

A second Onerous (7) roll identifies "E. Pustule" as a family of bacteria associated with several types of cattle diseases. With a raise, the character is fairly certain that these specific breeds never appeared in any textbook or medical journal. As for the rest of the label, the heroes can make of it what they will.

The characters continue to be attacked by the biting black flies throughout this chapter. Make the necessary *Vigor* rolls (see page 47) for any character not yet infected.

## Grizzly Work

Before the heroes have time to digest their findings, a shot rings out. It's followed by a throaty growl and the crash of broken underbrush.

Suddenly the bracken parts as a man (Walks Far, described below) comes running pell-mell toward the heroes, the huge, brown bulk of a lumbering bear hot on his heels. The creature hefts itself upright and bellows when it spots the heroes, then charges them.

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This fella might come as a surprise to even heroes used to the great outdoors. It's something of a mutant. In fact, it's the trog of bears. It stands a good nine feet tall on its hind legs, and its claws are vicious, hooked barbs. One of its eyes has melted down its face, and its warped mouth drools a constant, viscous slime. But its most horrifying feature, perhaps, is the way its fur and skin seem to be sloughing away—perhaps that's due to mutation, or to the dozens of dripping, abscess-like sores all over its body.

And that ain't all. As it takes its first wound, several of the boils on the bear's flesh burst open. Tiny, writhing maggots pour out to wriggle in the draining pus. Anyone witnessing this must make another Fair (5) *guts* check.

## The Bear

If it weren't for the disease, the mutated bear would be just one of the many random terrors of the NorCal forests. It is as powerful as it is ferocious, and it has survived its illness even as the flies have begun reproducing in its rotting flesh.

### Profile

**Corporeal:** D:2d4, N:2d10,  
S:4d12, Q:3d8, V:2d6  
Fightin': brawlin' 4d10

**Mental:** C:3d8, K:1d6,  
M:3d10, Sm:2d6, Sp:2d6  
Guts 4d6, overawe 3d10

**Pace:** 10

**Size:** 10

**Wind:** NA

**Terror:** 5

**Special Abilities:**

**Armor:** -2

**Damage:** Claw (STR+1d8)  
and bite (STR+1d4).

**Fearless.**

**Description:** see above.

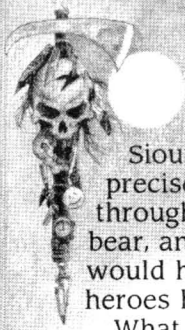
## At the Gate

In the aftermath of the bear's attack, the stranger introduces himself and thanks the heroes for their help. His name is Walks Far, and he's



**Marshal:** 51

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Sioux—a Ravenite, to be precise. He was wandering through the area, ran into the bear, and almost certainly would have been killed if the heroes hadn't been there.

What Walks Far doesn't tell the characters is that he too is looking for Renslin Labs. While his gratitude (for the moment) is genuine, he keeps a close eye on the heroes through the remainder of the adventure

The players are probably eager to move on. It seems clear that the hapless scavvies were either at or looking for the same lab the characters are. If the former, all the heroes need do is backtrack

the scavvies' trail. It can be followed along the road with a Hard (9) *trackin'* roll.

Two or three miles up the road, the heroes can spot a thin line of smoke rising into the sky (a Fair (5) *Cognition* check at this point). Another two miles along, they crest a ridge, giving them a wide view of the land ahead. Call for another *Cognition* check at this point; there are two important sights before them.

A Fair (5) result spots the smoke again (its source still hidden), this time only a mile or so away. Half a mile down the road from the heroes, a trail diverges, leading toward the source of the smoke.

An Onerous (7) result also spots something a bit more troubling: a line of heavy black clouds on the horizon. Lightning flickers dully in their upper reaches, while beneath them the landscape is shrouded in darkness. An Easy (3) *survival* check sees black rain in those clouds, but failing that the players just have to wonder. Fortunately, the storms are some hours away. See *The Wasted West* for details on black rain.

Continuing down the gravel road brings the characters to the diverging trail: a dirt road that at one time might have been wide enough for a vehicle. The scavvies came down that trail—a Fair (5)



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*trackin'* roll makes that clear. It leads a few hundred yards before coming to a chainlink fence. The gate stands open.

Another 200 yards up the drive, the forest clears. Before the heroes sits a large house—a luxury log-built home in remarkable condition. Within, lights can be seen burning. The trail of smoke the heroes have been following drifts lazily from the large chimney. A Land Rover is parked in front.

A shape moves behind a curtain, and the front door cracks open cautiously.

## Walks Far

Walks Far is a Ravenite in search of the secret lab and the riches it contains. Though he's glad to have the heroes nearby (especially after the bear's attack), he has no intention of sharing the find. He's a competent fighter, but slow to put his life on the line unless absolutely necessary.

### Profile

**Corporeal:** D:2d10, N:3d6, S:4d4, Q:3d8, V:3d6

Dodge 3d6, fightin' brawlin' 3d6, shootin': SMG 3d10, sneak 4d6

**Mental:** C:4d8, K:3d6, M:2d4, Sm:1d10, Sp:2d6

Guts 3d6, scrutinize 2d8, search 3d8, tinkerin' 2d10

**Edges:** Level-headed 5, mechanically inclined 1

**Hindrances:** Greedy -2

**Gear:** An NA Commando and two loaded magazines, a large knife, a backpack, a Kevlar vest, a flashlight, a compass, and binoculars.

**Description:** Walks Far is tall, handsome, and self-confident. He's dressed well in new-looking clothes, and all of his gear is first-rate and well-maintained.

## Bounty

**Killing the bear:** 1 red chip.

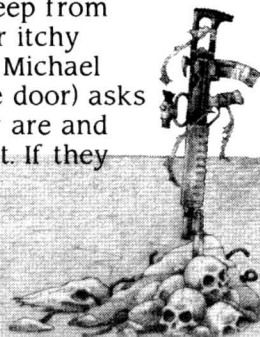
**Spotting the storm:** 1 white chip.

## Chapter Three:

### Home on the Range


Wise heroes ask questions first and shoot later—but yours might not be that clever. If not, what happens is up to you, but the occupants of the house don't want a fight. A good idea might be to have Chervil appear shortly after a firefight begins. Most folks don't really care to fire up an innocent 5-year-old girl.

Assuming that your brainers can keep from scratching their itchy trigger fingers, Michael (the man at the door) asks them who they are and what they want. If they





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seem peaceable enough, he invites them in. He claims no knowledge of any secret lab in the area, and no one there has suffered any illness. He is a doctor, however, and is willing to have a look at any sick characters.

Aside from Michael ("Williams" is the last name he gives, though it's really, of course, Lacosta), there are three other people at the house: his daughter Chervil, and two friends—Mason Gavel and Fred Barnes.

## Michael's Story

*We were lucky—darn lucky. This was our vacation home. My wife and I were both doctors before the war, in Shan Fan. When the bombs fell, we just happened to be up here—Desimone and I, Fred, and Mason and his fiancée. We're practically self-sufficient—there's a garden and greenhouse, and we hunt for meat. We've got a well, a generator, and the tools and parts to keep things up and running. We don't hear much from the outside world, but I gather we're a lot better off than most.*

*Desimone died during childbirth, when Chervil came along, and Mason's*

*fiancée was thrown from by her horse and broke her neck a couple years back. So it hasn't all been a bed of roses, but I guess we can't complain.*

That's Michael's tale, if the heroes ask. He's happy to elaborate on the details. They have a small hydroelectric turbine on a creek running down the mountain, a half-mile away. They've been unmolested by marauders or scavvies. They never travel to any of the local settlements—in fact, they didn't even know there were survivor settlements anywhere nearby—but they've managed to maintain their home, clothing, and equipment fairly well, though they're just about out of stockpiled supplies. Michael and the others ask with interest about the world outside and are willing to barter goods if the characters have anything to trade.

Nosy characters can ask all the questions they want, so long as they don't get downright rude. Michael doesn't mind if they want to look around a bit. In fact, he happily gives them a tour. The only point at which he becomes the least bit cagey is the kitchen. There's a cellar door there (Fair (5) *Cognition* check to notice it), but Michael doesn't include the basement

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in the tour, and he waves off any question about it with, "Oh, that's just an old wine cellar. Unfortunately, we emptied it years ago." Fred is cooking dinner, and throughout the evening the kitchen is always under the watchful eyes of the household members.

As mentioned above, Michael is willing (he says) to help heroes who are sick. In fact, he makes it a priority if they're visibly ill. He takes each character individually into his office for an examination. He claims never to have seen anything quite like this illness, but he takes a few steps to, as he puts it, "alleviate and maybe even set back the symptoms a bit, until we can get a handle on the cause."

In reality Michael's efforts, while apparently legitimate, have no effect on the illness. Furthermore, he carefully tests the limits of what the heroes will let him do—whether they'll let him give them a shot, for instance (a *scrutinize* check might pick up these little tests). If he can get away with it, he doses them each with a mild sedative before bed. However, he's more interested in maintaining his facade than in sedating the characters.

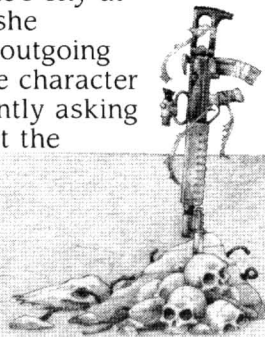
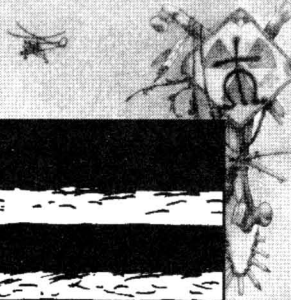
## Eat, Drink, and Be Merry

Assuming all goes well, Michael invites the heroes to stay the night. "Looks like a




storm's coming," he correctly points out. "You don't want to get caught out in one of those things." If they agree to stay, Fred throws down a pretty nice spread for dinner. In the mean time, any hero that wants to can take a nice hot shower or bunk down in one of the three available guest rooms.

Little Chervil is fascinated with the heroes, especially whichever character seems the most exotic. She's shy at first, but later she becomes quite outgoing and follows the character around, constantly asking questions about the posse's travels.



# Infestations



The chow's good, the showers are hot, and the company is friendly. For a few hours at least, the heroes might be able to forget that the entire world has gone to Hell.

Outside, black rain begins to fall.

## Checkin' Things Out

Some heroes may not be satisfied with all this hospitality. Some heroes—believe it or not—might suspect that there's something going on under all this pleasantness. They're right, of course.

The characters may attempt to sneak around the house after bedtime, or to spy on their hosts. That's fine. Have them make the usual batch of *sneak* and *search* rolls as they go about whatever business interests them. Heading outside is problematic—black rain falls intensely. Indoors, most of the house has few clues to offer.

The only points of interest are Michael and his gang. Being undead (see page 58), they don't sleep. Instead, once the lights go out, they split up to keep an eye on things. Mason and Chervil go to the kitchen, Michael to his office, and Fred to his room upstairs.

If the heroes run into any of these guys, the other shoe drops and combat ensues (see below).

If not, or if the heroes don't bother to check the place out, Walks Far does—and he runs into Mason in the kitchen. The characters awaken (require Hard (9) *Cognition* checks from those who were sedated) to gunshots downstairs.

## It Hits the Fan

Whether it's the players that start things off, or Walks Far, the moment the first gunshot rings out, the illusion falters. Everything goes dark. The beautiful house and all it contains—indeed, the food the heroes shared and showers they enjoyed—were all illusion.

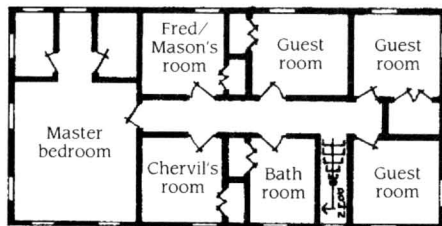
In reality, the house burned some 12 years ago, and has been a cindered frame ever since. The characters' kind hosts are actually charred corpses—even the cute little Chervil (and that's good for an extra Fair (5) *guts* check). The food was maggoty garbage, the bathwater sewage. All heroes that ate, bathed, or brushed their teeth now find a new taste in their mouths, and need to succeed at Hard (9) *Vigor* rolls or spend a couple actions chucking their guts. Yuck! It doesn't taste any better the second time around.

Michael and his buddies don't stand politely around while the heroes heave. As soon as their cover is blown, they go for the kill. How the battle unfolds depends, of course, on

# Infestations

## The Cabin

Scale: 1 inch = 25 feet



Upper Floor

Ground Floor

the heroes' actions. If Walks Far initiated the combat, he's in the thick of it. If not, he hurries to the cellar.

As the battle nears its end, another effect of the illusion becomes apparent. The roof that protected the heroes is gone; the black rain is now starting to drizzle through the many holes in the burned-out ceiling. The house seems to have protected the heroes so far, but it now looks like they will suffer the full effects of the black rain if they don't find better cover.

If the heroes don't think of it first, Walks Far cuts a beeline for the cellar door in the kitchen.

## The House

Desimone's house is a two-story log home, large and luxurious for a vacation house, but not overly ostentatious. The first floor is dominated by a large living room with a stone fireplace flanked by picture windows overlooking the rolling NorCal hills, and it also features a small library, Michael's office, and the kitchen and dining room with its attached solarium.

Upstairs, there are six bedrooms: Michael's (the master bedroom), young Chervil's, and one shared by Mason and Fred) and two baths.

# Infestations

Neither floor has anything noteworthy. The only important feature is the entrance to the lab, from the otherwise-empty cellar.

## Desimone's Servants

The creatures that serve Desimone are a unique form of undead, clever enough to carry out Desimone's ruse at least until their cover is blown. While the illusion works, these creatures are indistinguishable from normal, living people.

Mason is armed with a rusty shotgun and Scott has a .357. Fred attacks with a syringe loaded with a strong sedative that does 4d6 Wind.

## Profile

**Corporeal:** D:3d8, N:3d10, S:4d8, Q:2d10, V:3d6

Dodge 3d10, fightin': brawlin' d10

**Mental:** C:3d8, K:3d6, M:2d8, Sm:3d8, Sp:2d4

Overawe 4d8, search 2d8, scrutinize 3d8

**Pace:** 10

**Size:** 6 (Chervil: 4)

**Wind:** NA

**Terror:** 9

## Special Abilities:

**Damage:** Bite (STR)

**Fearless.**

**Undead.**

**Description:** Aside from their unexpected intelligence, these creatures look like typical walkin' dead. Well-charred walkin' dead.

## Bounty

**Investigating the house:** 1 white chip.

**Defeating Michael:** 1 red chip

## Chapter Four: The Lab

Faced with the black rain sizzling through the ruined house, the only shelter available is the cellar.

Cautious characters may be trepidatious, but there's really nothing to fear. The cellar looks like the rest of the house: a blackened, charred wreck, though the floor above thankfully keeps out the bulk



# Infestations

of the rain. The entrance to the lab is down here, though it's not immediately obvious. Heroes might notice it from the far end of the cellar on a Onerous (7) *Cognition* check, or a Foolproof (3) *search* roll if they're actively looking.

The door is a stainless-steel vault with a functioning electronic lock (though there is no power to the rest of the ruined house). A charred but sturdy timber is propped under the handle. Opening the door requires a Hard (9) *lockpickin'* or an Incredible (11) *tinkerin'* roll, or more creative (and probably destructive) means.

Beyond is a short, airlock-like passageway leading to another door. Fluorescent lights illuminate the passage. The door at the far end is not locked, though it can't open until the outer door is closed and sealed.

The heroes open the door to reveal a brightly lit room beyond: the mythical Renslin laboratory.

## Rescued at Last!

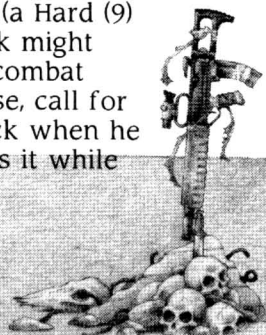
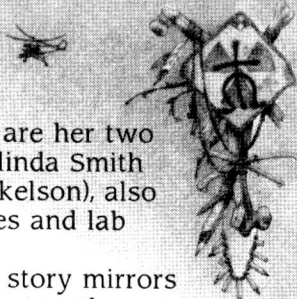
"Oh, thank God!" is Desimone's reaction as she turns to see the heroes enter. She appears exactly as she did the day she was slain: a normal woman of about 40, dressed in frayed casual clothing under a worn white lab coat. She looks truly relieved to see the heroes.

Behind her are her two assistants (Belinda Smith and Scott Mickelson), also in plain clothes and lab coats.

Desimone's story mirrors Michael's almost to the letter—at least up to two years ago. She claims that at that point her husband was replaced by an evil replicant that tried to force her to work in her lab, making biological weapons. When her friends resisted, the terrible fight resulted in the house burning down. She and her assistants survived by fleeing to the lab. Unfortunately, the horror survived as well, and it locked them in, only providing them with food and water if they worked on the plague. They've been working—as slowly as possible—for two years now.

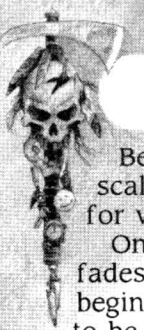
It's not much of a story, but it's the best Desimone can think of to stall the heroes. Players attempting to see through it can try *scrutinize* rolls against her *bluff*. If it appears that the characters aren't going for it, or if the heroes attempt to tie up or detain the lab denizens, the monsters initiate a fight.

Scott has a .357 revolver under his coat (a Hard (9) *Cognition* check might spot it before combat starts; otherwise, call for a surprise check when he draws). He pulls it while





# Infestations



Belinda and Desimone grab scalpels or smash glassware for weapons.


Once again, the illusion fades as soon as combat begins, revealing the scientists to be monsters. The lab itself, however, is entirely real.

Scott and Belinda are walking dead, with the same stats as those for Mason and Fred above. Desimone's profile is on page 62.

## Walks Far, Shoots Fast

Faced with the same horrors as the heroes, Walks Far at first draws his SMG and shoots Desimone and the others. But he never leaves his position near the door or forgets his objective: this lab. When the fight seems nearly over, he shifts tactics and begins to fire upon the heroes. He's a crafty fellow, and he waits for a moment when the heroes' backs are to him. He doesn't give a hoot about abominations or plagues. He's here to loot the lab, and he doesn't want to share. He fights to the death, only giving up if seriously wounded.

## The Lab



The main room of the lab is a large chamber about 30 feet on a side. The walls are lined with exotic scientific equipment and stainless-steel shelves and

cabinets. In the center of the room is a long workbench covered with experimental equipment and computer workstations. Everything appears to be functional and in good shape.

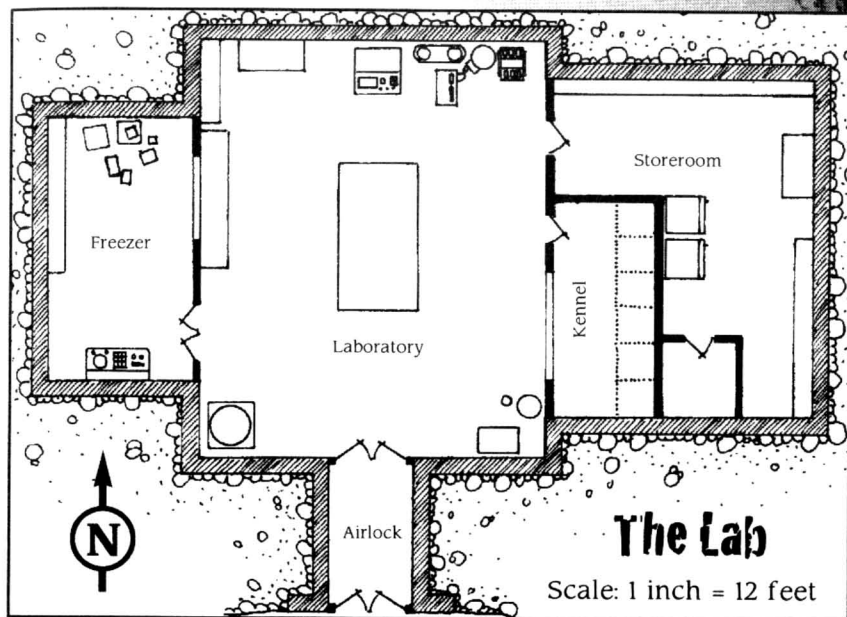
The players may try to escape the lab during the fight. The airlock door is unlocked, but it requires two actions to open; the inner door must then be closed before the outer door can open.

There are three rooms in addition to the lab: a storage room, a walk-in freezer, and a kennel for lab animals.

The animal kennel is on the right, visible through a large window. Its walls are covered with empty cages, but is otherwise featureless. It is not airtight and thus is not a particularly good refuge from Desimone's flies (see page 62).

The storeroom is next to the kennel. It contains numerous additional pieces of equipment, several cabinets, and two refrigerators. In addition, a small bathroom occupies one corner. As in the main lab, there's a ton of gear that might be potentially valuable, but nothing of immediate note. Well, almost nothing—in one of the refrigerators, alongside a long-moldered sandwich, are two boxes marked: "Human Blood Serum/Reagent—E. Pustule Rens.-A-340, R487-83731." That's the cure to the disease, though the heroes

# Infestations



don't have time to administer it during the fight. The storeroom is not airtight.

On the opposite side of the main room is the freezer. It's fairly large, with a wide stainless-steel door and an insulated window looking out into the main lab. It's filled with boxes and shelves, but the only item of note is a cryogenic console about the size of a household deep-freeze. Within are three racks of bottles, barely visible in the mist that forms within as the cabinet is opened.

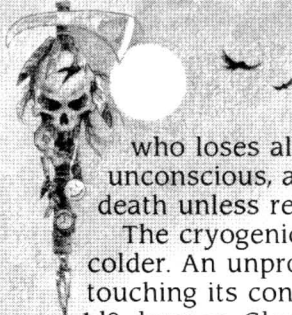
The first rack holds large jars containing the bodies of lab rats bearing familiar boils and sloughing skin. The

second rack holds smaller vials with labels identical to the one found on the scavvies (see page 64). Each vial contains hundreds of the tiny black flies. One slot on the rack is conspicuously empty.

The third rack holds similar vials, but these contain some sort of larger insect: small bees or wasps. The label is similar to that on the vials of flies, except that only one specie is listed: "W. Vespa Des.-A-1199, R496-45218."

The freezer is airtight but cold. For every five minutes spent within, a character must make a Fair (5) *Vigor* check or lose 1d4 Wind. Any hero

# Infestations



who loses all Wind falls unconscious, and freezes to death unless rescued.

The cryogenic unit is even colder. An unprotected hero touching its contents suffers 1d8 damage. Gloves or cloth protect against that damage.

## End Game

Creative players may come up with ways to destroy the flies en masse, but Desimone flees into the woods around the house (escaping the lab via the air ducts) before they can completely destroy her. The only solution is the wasps.

These predatory insects were genetically engineered by

the real Desimone (before the apocalypse) to counteract the flies—a means to control the spread of this biological weapon. The wasps unerringly home in on the flies and sting them dead. That's the sole reason for their existence, and they're good at it.

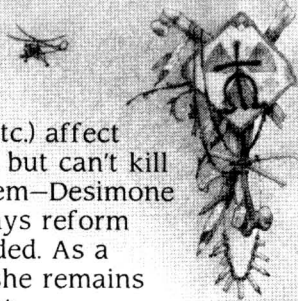
Removed from the freezer, the wasps thaw and revive in about half an hour. If released, they take off after the flies, chasing them out of the lab if necessary. Of course, in the time it takes for the wasps to thaw, Desimone does her best to foil the heroes.

## Desimone

Desimone is literally made up of the biting flies. In human form, Desimone makes a standard brawling attack, using a scalpel or broken glassware. But her more terrifying attack is in the form of a swarm of insects. She descends upon her target in a massed biting attack that almost seems to dissolve the victim. She makes a *fighting*: *swarm* attack, doing 1d8 damage the first round. On each additional round, the swarm adds one body area and an additional d8 to its damage, until the victim is dead or the swarm is driven off. Once she has connected, this damage is automatic—she does not need to make an attack roll each turn. Bad day to be that waster!



# Infestations



The swarm uses the air vents to hide or even flee the lab. When Desimone does reform, she can choose to appear as the woman the heroes first met, or as a slimy, badly-charred corpse (another *guts* check, this time Fair (5)).

## Profile

**Corporeal:** D:3d6, N:3d10, S:2d6, Q:3d10, V:4d12

Dodge 4d10, fightin': brawlin' 3d10, fightin': swarm 6d10

**Mental:** C:3d12, K:4d10, M:4d8, Sm:3d12, Sp:4d12

Bluff: 3d12, overawe 5d8, search 3d12, scrutinize 4d12

**Pace:** 8

**Size:** 6

**Wind:** NA

**Terror:** 9

## Special Abilities:

**Damage:** Bite (STR) and swarm (d8 per turn).

**Fearless.**

**Illusion:** Desimone can disguise the nature of her lair and servants, but this illusion falters if she or her servants are attacked.

**Regeneration:** Any time Desimone reforms from a swarm (see just below), she appears unwounded.

**Swarm:** In one action Desimone can dissipate into a cloud of flies. Witnessing this requires a Hard (9) *guts* check. She can reform in two actions.

Normal means of pest control (bug spray, fire,

smoke, etc.) affect the flies, but can't kill all of them—Desimone can always reform unwounded. As a swarm, she remains intelligent.

**Weakness:** The genetically-engineered wasps attack Desimone in either swarm or human form, doing 1d6 damage per vial per round.

## Wrappin' Things Up

A few vials full of wasps take care of Desimone, and another dozen released throughout the countryside around the house, the scavvie site, and the nomad camp finish off the remaining population of plague-bearing flies. In addition, characters who search the lab find the counteragent that cures E. Pustule Rens.-A-340 (mentioned on page 60). It doesn't provide immunity from future infection, so characters may be reinfected if the flies are not already destroyed, but there's more than enough to treat the heroes, the nomads, and anyone else the characters come across in the region.

## Bounty

**Avoiding Walks Far's ambush:** 1 white chip.

**Figuring out the wasps:** 1 red chip.

**Defeating Desimone:** 1 blue chip.



# Handouts

## The Renslin Memo

Dt: January 11, 2081  
To: Dr. Desimone Lacosta, Research Unit 11  
Fm: Vincent Progue, Corporate  
Re: Equipment for off-site lab

After consultation with Jim Cornish, I've arranged for the additional cryogenic units, nucleotide separators, and RVN units to be shipped out to your lab next week. As you know, I'm opposed to your stockpiling these quantities of expensive equipment at such a remote site, but Jim backed you on this all the way. You'd better get results up there, or I'm pulling the plug on this entire thing.

As usual, you'll have to meet the truck at the intersection of Rte. 96 and Firebreak Road northeast of Eureka to lead it in—the driver will never find the place on all those unmarked dirt roads. Call procurement next week to arrange a time.

## The Label

### Sample

*F. Chrysopa Chervila*, N308-49550 L.V.O. HOT, 500 count  
*E. Pustule Rens.-A-340*, R487-83731 H.C.A., agent

This vessel contains biological samples. If found, please  
return to:

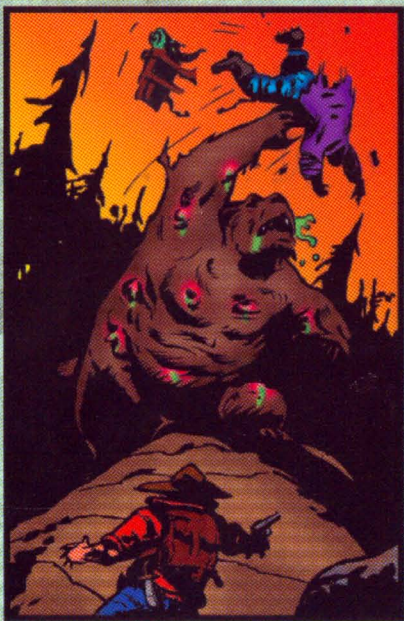
Renslin Laboratories  
3400 Parkland Avenue  
Shan Fan, NorCal 90808

**Caution: Potential Biohazard**  
**Do Not Open**





# I'm Gonna Be Sick!

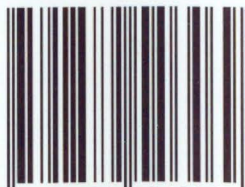


This Dime Novel™ includes a full-length novella and an adventure for Deadlands™: Hell on Earth™.

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When Teller stumbles upon an encampment of survivors, all suffering from open sores on their skin, he recognizes biological warfare agents at work. Even in 2094, this is one nasty epidemic, the kind that could swallow the entire Wasted West™. But why is this happening now, 13 years after the Last War?

The answer to this ravaging riddle lies somewhere high in the hills of NorCal, and it's up to this tale-teller and his friends to discover it or die trying. You see, Teller and his friends have caught the awful illness themselves, and if they don't find a cure soon, this is bound to be Teller's terminal tale!



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