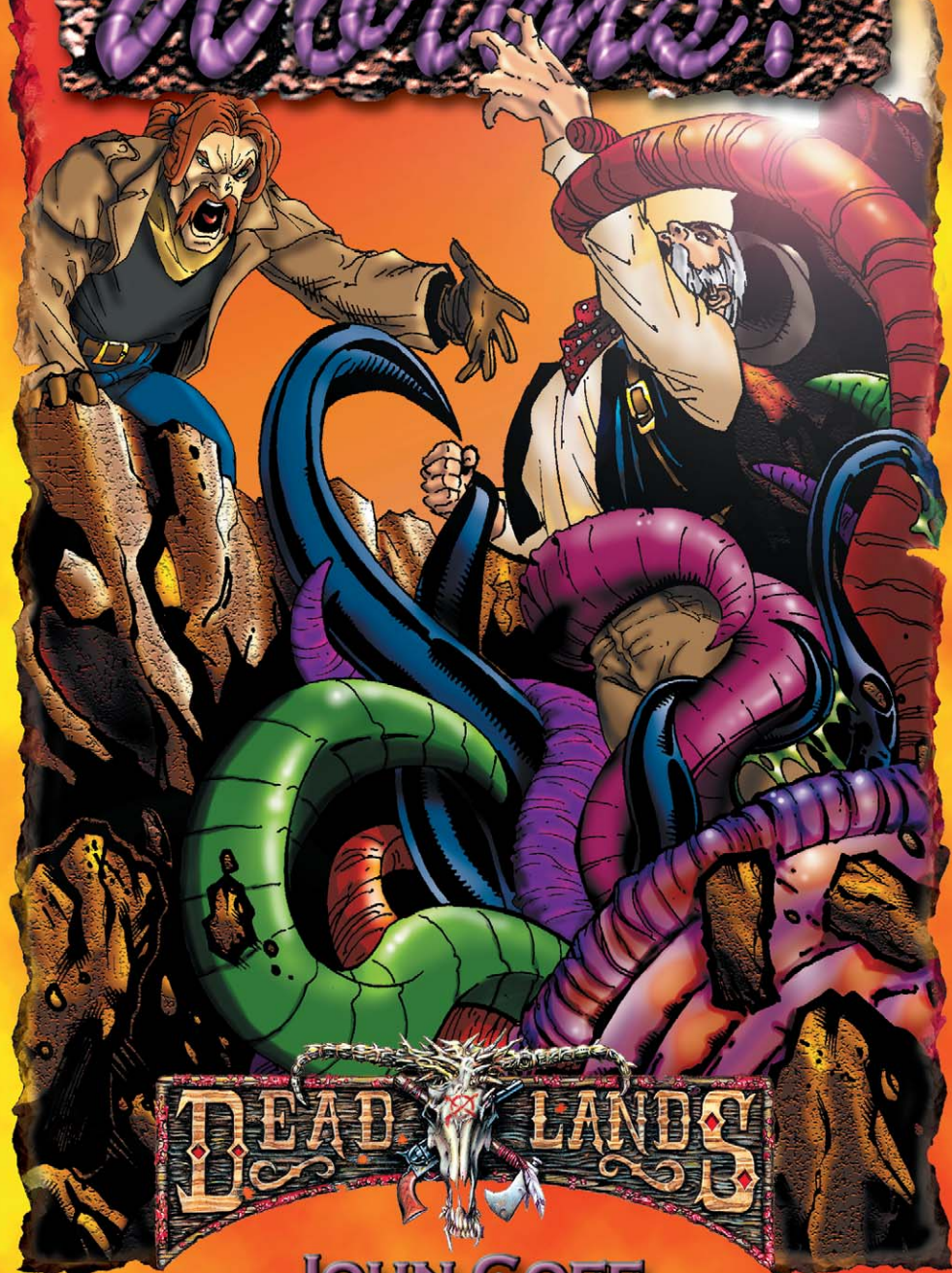


Warms!



DEAD LAND

JOHN GOFF



Fiction & Adventure by: John Goff

Editing & Layout: Barry Doyle, Shane Hensley
& Hal Mangold

Cover Art: Kevin Sharpe with Matthew Tice

Logo: Ron Spencer

Interior Art: Paul Daly

Cover Design: Matthew Tice

Maps: Barry Doyle



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WORMS!



CHAPTER ONE

When he felt the rumbling underfoot, Jonas first thought some fool was trying his hand at mining again. Used to be there was so much dynamiting going on in the area that the ground shook constantly, but the shaking today was something altogether deadlier. Jonas knew this was true when something thick and sinuous snaked up the farmer's left leg and began to squeeze. One look at the snake-like thing sent his mind careening over the edge of panic. His only thoughts became those of escape.

He lurched forward, but the creature's grip was too strong to break. Stumbling, he fell face first onto the hard desert soil. He felt another one of those things wrap itself around his waist. He was fighting to draw a breath as the restraints drew tighter.

Jonas managed to push himself to his hands and knees and tried to crawl. A third creature seized him by the neck. Together, the things began to pull him backward. Jonas fought to resist the drag with all four limbs. The rocky ground tore at his clothing and skin. Blood began to ooze from his hands and he felt at least one of his fingernails snap off as he clawed at the dirt.

The thing around his neck had tightened, cutting off nearly all his air. His struggles weakened as he felt himself losing consciousness. Then he caught sight of his hoe off to his right. If he could just catch hold of it, he could beat these things back. He stretched his right arm toward the handle, but it was out of reach. The old farmer knew the hoe was his last hope, so he took a gamble and lunged forward.

He lost.

The grip on his leg tightened as he moved, pulling him off balance. He collapsed once again to the ground. The strength ebbed from his limbs. As he was dragged backward, Jonas barely felt the hard, rocky soil he'd tilled for years scrape against his face.

As his consciousness faded, he had the strangest sensation of being pulled down.

Into darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

It was like swimming upstream in a flood, but from somewhere he found the strength to keep fighting. He could almost feel the surface, it was so near. If he could shake off the other's grasp, even for only a moment, he knew he could break free and escape. Reaching deep inside himself, he tapped into reserves he doubted he'd touched in years and made one more determined push. This time it was all or nothing.

Suddenly, the resistance broke. The freedom was so profound it felt as though he floated up the last bit, separating him from the outside. Slowly, his surroundings came into focus and Ronan realized he was once again in control of his own body.

Immediately he felt the blasting heat of a desert sun at midday. Squinting against a bright glare, he found himself swaying groggily in a saddle atop a horse he didn't recognize. He was riding through rocky desert hills, but he had no idea exactly which one. There were a lot of deserts in the West—all he knew was that he was in one of them.

His mount was heading for a range of mountains, but Ronan didn't recognize any landmarks. He had no luck looking behind either; a featureless plain of blistering dirt and rock stretched off as far into the distance as he could see. Even the sun was no help. Until later in the day, he wouldn't even know what direction he was riding.

Ronan finally accepted the fact he was lost, and began to take stock of himself. There was a large, dried bloodstain on his shirt. Ronan found no wound on his own body, but that didn't mean the blood wasn't his. His undead body healed far faster than a normal man's, so it was possible he had been wounded and already recovered. However, he found no hole or tears in his shirt, so he suspected the blood belonged to someone else.

A quick check showed his pistol was loaded, but his cartridge belt was nearly empty. He doubted the other had used the rounds for plinking whiskey bottles. The missing bullets, the bloodstain, and the unfamiliar horse seemed to indicate trouble was somewhere out there in the desert behind him. Sure, it was trouble the other thing had started—but that thing wore his face, so it was his trouble now.

As always he had little recollection of what had happened while the other had been in control. Only fragments of memory remained, and those were filled with the sound of screams and the smell of gunpowder. Whatever had happened, Ronan was sure it had been bad. He also knew he'd best keep riding the direction he was headed. His unwanted alter-ego had a strong sense of self-preservation—it wanted to keep his body alive as much as he did.

But, as they say, the Devil is in the details. While the creature inside him cared about Ronan's continued existence, it cared little for those around him. For example, his "borrowed" horse. The animal had been ridden hard without rest—days from the looks of it. He could tell it would be lucky to make it another mile before dropping out from under him.

As he dismounted, he considered that the other might have let him regain control. After all, it looked like a long walk to the next town, and he suspected the creature enjoyed the thought of him stumbling across the rocky hills for days. Digging through the saddlebags on the dying horse, he found another shirt. It was dirty, but at least it wasn't caked in blood. Unfortunately, there was nothing else of value.

Well, Ronan thought as he drew his pistol, *I might as well eat first*. Moments later, a single shot echoed across the low hills.

CHAPTER THREE

It was a good three days later when Ronan walked into the town. Calling it a town was a compliment—there weren't more than a dozen buildings and most of those looked to be private homes. A sign on the outskirts proudly proclaimed "Welcome to Hilton Springs" in peeling letters. Unfortunately, there was no indication of the state. For all Ronan knew, he could be in Texas, California, or Utah.

His feet were sore and his throat dry, but the town had the one building he'd been hoping to find—a saloon. Named simply "Daly's," the saloon was one of the few in the small community that braved the heights above a single story. And, like every other structure in Hilton Springs, it was only a short distance from the edge of the town. At least he wouldn't have to spend too long on the street; a stranger walking into this isolated hamlet from the desert was bound to raise some eyebrows.

Entering the saloon, Ronan fixed his eyes on the bar and tried to ignore the other customers hiding from the heat of the day. He crossed the open floor and pulled up a stool.

"Whiskey," he said and dug into his pockets for the little money he had left.

Whatever else happened, the other had spent most of his money. Ronan had found he was down to less than five dollars.

He barely had enough money left to buy a box of bullets. Still, there were times when whiskey wasn't a luxury, but a necessity. And, after dragging his roasted flesh out of the desert, Ronan knew it was just about that time.

"What state is this?" Ronan asked as the barkeep poured his drink.

"Mister, you're in Nevada." The question didn't seem to faze him, but Ronan wasn't surprised. The lines on a map aren't nearly as clear out in the middle of the Western deserts. He'd probably heard the same question from nearly every traveler to pass through.

Nevada, Ronan thought. His last memories placed him somewhere in California. He'd been riding for days at least. Figuring his demon had raised a little Hell before having to light out for cooler waters, Ronan guessed that at least a few weeks had passed since he was last in control of his flesh—and mind.

"Bartender, let's have the whole bottle for my friend and me," a voice said from behind him, snapping him back to the present. Ronan felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise at the familiar Texas drawl. He cursed himself for ignoring the other customers in the saloon. That voice could only belong to one man—Hank Ketchum.

Ronan fought back the instinctive urge to grab the butt of his Peacemaker. Ketchum was behind him and likely to put a bullet through the back of his head if he so much as tickled his six-gun. Ronan had no doubt he could take the Texas Ranger in a stand-up fight—probably no living man could match his unearthly speed. He also had no doubt the man would never give him the opportunity. Ketchum told him long ago if the time ever came, Ronan would never even hear the shot that ended his unnatural life.

The last time they'd met, they parted neutral if not exactly friendly. Since the Ranger hadn't shot him out of hand, Ronan figured the truce still stood. If Ketchum wanted to talk, so be it. As long as he was buying.

"Fancy meetin' you here, Lynch," Ketchum said as he poured the drinks. "Can't say as how I expected to see your face about these parts. And you guessed right—I ain't looking for your hide. Yet."

"You have no idea how much better I'll sleep knowing that, old man," Ronan emphasized the last two words. "Besides, unless you've changed sides, I don't think the folks hereabouts would be too supportive of a Texas Ranger. Last time I checked, Nevada was still loyal to the Union."

Ketchum leaned forward and whispered, "You're right and I'll make you a deal. You don't tell anyone my favorite song is *Dixie*, and I won't tell anyone you're playing hooky from the boneyard. Fair enough?"

Ronan downed his drink and poured another, ignoring the Ranger's question—and now-empty shot glass.

"I see your hand's lookin' better." Ketchum tapped his glass on the wooden table.

"And I see your eye isn't. Let's cut the small talk, Ketchum. If you aren't looking for me, what brings you to this backwater?"

"Lynch, believe it or not, you ain't the only fish in the sea. In fact, you ain't even a particularly big one. I was up near the Canyon when I got word of folks going missin' 'round here. I figured I'd best get up here and have a look before those Agency types had time to cover it up."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Texas, but isn't that exactly what you do?"

"Yeah, but I'm good at it." The Ranger gave up on Ronan's courtesy and refilled his own glass. "Once those tin horns get in here, there'll be no way to tell what was really going on. 'Course, they'll foul it all up, let word get out, and folks'll be more scared than they were before, too."

"As I recall, Ranger, the *Epitaph* is printed in Tombstone, Arizona, isn't it? Anyway, I don't really care one way or the other. Other than for the snappy table banter, why are you bothering me with any of this? I've got other things to attend to."

Ronan pushed his chair back and prepared to leave. Last time he'd thrown in with Ketchum, he'd ended up on a train with a load of blood-sucking ghouls. The time before that, the two men wound up fighting a scalpel-wielding maniac. Nothing good had ever come of talking to the one-eyed Ranger.

"Like finding a horse? If you look on a map, you'll find this spot about two miles from the place marked 'Middle of Nowhere.' Now, you can walk out of here, but it's a long, hot stroll to the next town. 'Course, there's a stable here that'd be happy to sell you a horse, but from the way you was countin' your change up at the bar, I'm bettin' even a hobby horse is out of your price range right now."

The gunslinger said nothing, but the anger in his eyes was unmistakable. Ketchum had hit the nail on the head, and Ronan didn't like it.

"I've got a roll of nice crisp Yankee greenbacks here—more than enough to buy a man a passable horse. I'd be willin' to part with a portion of them if you saw fit to lend a hand for a couple of days."

"And what exactly would I be lending a hand with?"

"Help me figure out what's goin' on in these parts and put a stop to it. You handled yourself well back in Kansas, and I've got a feelin' I may need another set of eyes on this one—or at least a fast six-gun. Job pays two hundred dollars. You interested?"

"All right, old man. That buys you three days of my time—no more."

"Three days, huh? I reckon that'll do. If we don't get to the bottom of this by then, the Agency will send some tinhorn from Boston out here anyway."

CHAPTER FOUR

"I've spoken to the town marshal. His name's Parsons. From what he told me, I figure this is as good a place as any to start," Ketchum told Ronan as the two approached a white-washed building at the end of town. From the small steeple above the double front doors, Ronan guessed the building was probably the town's church.

"This shanty-town has a marshal? Why doesn't he handle his problems himself?"

"He's a good enough feller, but Parsons is what you'd call a part-time marshal. Mostly, he tends the counter at the general store. He don't know a whole lot about how to handle situations like this."

"What business have you got in the church, Texas? Don't tell me you're so desperate you're turning to prayer."

"You're the funniest thing since God made the armadillo, you know that, Lynch?"

Ketchum pushed open one of the doors and entered the church. Ronan moved to follow him, but hesitated when he felt his stomach tighten and twist.

"I'm sorry, I was so busy laughin' at your joke I forgot to mention sometimes your kind has problems with hallowed ground," Ketchum stopped just inside the threshold. "Your little friend is probably a bit nervous about comin' in here. I reckon it'll squirm around a bit just to let you know it ain't happy. As long as you're in control, though, there's nothin' to really worry about."

Ronan could tell Ketchum had visibly tensed as he spoke, and the Ranger's long duster no longer covered the butt of his pistol.

"You are in control, ain't you Lynch?"

Gritting his teeth, the gunslinger stared at Ketchum and stared a moment before replying, "Always." Ronan stepped across the doorstep and pushed down the momentary nausea and panic he felt rise in his belly.

"That's good, 'cause there's someone here we need to talk to." The Ranger's relaxed manner returned just as quickly as it had vanished. Somehow, without Ronan even noticing, the duster had drifted back into place.

Ketchum walked down the aisle until he was nearly at the front of the room. Ronan saw a small girl curled up on the bench, her legs pulled up tightly beneath her. She was clutching a ragged and dirty doll to her chest. She looked absolutely terrified. The gunslinger knew he and the one-eyed Ranger were

an imposing pair, especially to a small child, but he hadn't realized they were that frightening. When Ketchum spoke, he half-expected the girl to let out a scream.

"Cindy?" the grizzled lawman said in a surprisingly gentle voice. "Marshal Parsons told us you had quite a scare. Me and my partner here want to help. Can you tell us what happened?"

In a voice tight with fear, the little girl whispered, "The worms got my mommy and daddy. They climbed all over them and pulled them down in the ground. If you stay on the dirt too long, the worms will get you, too!"

She jumped off the pew and ran between the two men. A high-pitched squeal peeled from her throat from the time her feet touched the ground until she climbed onto a nearby bench. It was pretty obvious they'd get nothing else out of the little girl.

"Guess we'd best get that horse now—we've got some ridin' to do. You'd better fill that cartridge belt while we're at it. I've got a feelin' you'll need a few bullets before this is over." The Ranger turned and walked out of the church. Following him, Ronan fought back a sigh of relief as he left the building.

CHAPTER FIVE

Later that afternoon the two men rode out toward a small homestead a few miles from Hilton Springs. They'd stopped by the general store after talking to the orphaned girl at the church to get directions from Parsons. Ronan had also taken the opportunity to pick up a box of cartridges for his Peacemaker. He'd been surprised at the selection available in the store until he'd talked to Parsons, the marshal and primary businessman in the town.

"At one time, Hilton Springs looked like it was going to be the next Tombstone," the storeowner explained. "Miners found silver in the hills near here and we were quite the booming community for a while. The mines panned out in less than a year, and, shortly after, so did most of the people. I was left with more goods than I'll probably ever sell. You ever get the urge to start mining yourself, head on back here and I'll make you a deal on picks, shovels, dynamite, and just about anything else you would ever need."

He'd found Parsons to be likeable—probably why he'd been voted into office in the first place. However, Ronan could see Ketchum was right about the man. Faced with anything beyond a peaceful drunk, he'd probably be in over his head. Not that Ronan doubted the man lacked sand; on the contrary, he seemed to have his share of it and then some. He'd defend his family and probably the rest of the town readily enough, but he was no hardened killer. A run-in with a serious outlaw, or even an angry cowboy, would likely make Parsons' wife a widow.

The selection at the local stable wasn't as wide, however, and Ronan had settled for a cantankerous mare that seemed intent on fighting him every step of the way. Since digging his way out of the grave in Derry's Ford, he'd not had much luck with animals anyway, but this particular horse seemed to delight in frustrating him. The worst of it was the mare was the best of the lot available in Hilton Springs.

An hour's ride brought the men to a small homestead south of town. Although not far from the tiny community, the bare hills surrounding the house gave Ronan a profound sense of isolation. Hilton Springs might only have been a few miles away, but it felt as though he and the Ranger were days from civilization of any sort.

The homestead was eerily still. The only sound to reach his ears was the occasional clatter as the door on a tiny barn behind the house moved back and forth in the wind. Ketchum rubbed his chin for a moment, then dismounted.

"Lynch, you take the house and I'll check outside. Yell out if you find anything." The Ranger tied his horse's reins off to the saddle and drew his pistol.

"Expecting trouble, Texas?"

"I'm not sure, but if trouble does show up, I'm gonna be sure it's properly introduced to my shootin' iron."

Ronan took a moment to knock on the door before entering the small house. He didn't expect an answer, but all the same, he didn't want to get a gut full of buckshot from a surprised farmer. When the house remained silent, he opened the door and walked in.

Once he was inside, Ronan drew his Peacemaker. Seeing Ketchum acting a little skittish made him nervous. He'd started to think that man had ice in his veins, and if he was spooked, the gunslinger figured something big was up. But that didn't mean he had to let on he was a bit anxious himself.

A quick search of the three-room building turned up nothing at all. It appeared its owner had simply walked out one day and never returned. He felt the hair on the back of his neck raise—he had come across a disappearance like this before. In fact, it had been the last time he'd seen the Ranger. He didn't recall seeing any sign of nearby tracks though, so he breathed a little easier.

Walking back out onto the tiny front porch, Ronan saw Ketchum near the edge of a row of vegetables that were struggling to survive in the parched heat. The Ranger looked up at him as he stepped off the porch.

"Come here and take a look at this."

"What is it? It looks like somebody was digging there. Is it a grave?"

"No, it's too big. See this patch? It must be a good twenty feet or more across. And take a look at these tracks here at the edge.

Don't it kind of remind you of a bunch of ropes being dragged across the ground?"

"Now that you mention it, it does a little. But maybe not ropes—remember what that little girl said. Something about worms dragging her parents into the ground."

"That's exactly what I'm thinkin'." Ketchum stood up and scanned the hills around them. It'll be gettin' dark soon. I don't think it would be a bad idea to be back in town when that happens."

Echoing from somewhere in the lonely hills surrounding them, the men heard the yipping howl of a coyote.

CHAPTER SIX

Ronan and Ketchum had gone straight to see Parsons when they got back to Hilton Springs. The part-time marshal had just sat down to dinner with his wife and the young girl, Cindy, when the men arrived at his doorstep. The Marshal wore a pained look on his face as they drew him out to the front porch. Ronan and Ketchum probably didn't realize their crime—men who take their meals around a campfire seldom place much importance on table manners.

"Marshal, we had a look around out at that farm," Ketchum began. "I'm pretty sure you may have a bit of a problem on your hands."

"What sort of problem? Apaches? Utes?"

"Well, I'm not ready to say until we've had a little more time to look into it. When was the first disappearance?"

"Let's see. That would have been Wormy Simmons, about two, two and a half weeks ago. Actually, Wormy probably doesn't count."

"Why's that?" Ronan asked.

"I've got a pretty good idea what happened to him, and it wasn't anything particularly mysterious. Wormy was... well, he liked to pull a cork, if you know what I mean. He lost a good friend and went on a bender. While he was sauced, he made the mistake of crossing Mahoney."

"Black River Mahoney?" Ketchum said.

"You fellows heard of him, have you?"

"Yeah, I've heard of him," Ronan said with a look like he'd just bitten into an apple and found half a worm. "He used to pack iron for Mina Devlin, if I remember right. Fast guns and a faster temper. You figure Mahoney did Wormy in?"

"Darn near sure of it, Mr. Lynch. He dragged the poor fool out of town behind his horse."

"Don't sound too mysterious to me, then. You mentioned this Wormy fellow lost a friend. What happened to this friend of his?"

"That was Clark Webster. I don't think there's any connection there. Mr. Webster was a big-game hunter—something of a local celebrity. He hunted some of the most unusual animals. You should see some of the trophies he had! Between us, I sometimes suspected he stretched the truth on some of his stories. He claimed he even hunted monsters!"

"So what happened to Webster?" Ronan asked.

"I couldn't rightly say. He always took long trips. At first nobody worried—sometimes he even left the country—but after the better part of a year it was pretty clear he was gone for good. Anyway, he was pretty much the only person in town that didn't make fun of Wormy, and it broke the old fellow's heart when he finally gave up on him. Tied one on like you'd not believe—I still wonder where he got the money to buy the liquor."

"This Webster feller, where'd he live?" Ketchum said.

"Down near the creek. Say, you don't think Mr. Webster's death is related to the disappearances do you?"

"Probably not, but I wouldn't mind havin' a look at some of them trophies. I like to fancy myself somethin' of a hunter, too. Thank you for your time, Marshal."

Ronan started to follow the Ranger, then turned and said, "Why did you call Simmons 'Wormy'?"

"Oh, that. Well, he had a weakness for any liquor, but tequila was his favorite. And to watch him, you'd think the best part of it was that awful worm at the bottom. He'd often ask Daly over at the saloon if he could have the ones out of the bar bottles. He gobbled those things down like candy."

A momentary look of distaste crossed the gunslinger's face. Then he turned and walked off into the darkness, following after Ketchum.

Parsons watched the men leave, wondering for a moment if he'd missed some important point in the conversation. Then he remembered his rapidly cooling dinner sitting on the table, and turned to get back to his family and a hopefully still luke-warm meal.

* * *

Ronan and Ketchum had no problem finding Webster's house after speaking to Parsons. The building seemed newer than most in Hilton Springs, and, although it was simple in design, it was obviously well-made. Whoever had built it was no poor dirt farmer. They paused for a moment, but then, seeing no signs of movement inside, they mounted the steps to the small front porch. Ronan motioned to the front door. It stood slightly ajar, as if beckoning them to enter.

"It doesn't look forced," Ronan said, examining the frame.

"Probably that Wormy feller left it open when he staggered out the last time. Saves me the trouble of breakin' in."

The two men moved into the house. Ketchum found a lamp on a table near the door and lit it. Everything seemed in order in the first couple of rooms they entered, but in a sitting room near the back, they found the ruins of a decorative liquor cabinet. A small pile of bottles lay in front of it like a sacrificial offering to the God of Alcohol.

"I think this pretty much answers how Wormy was able to come up with the whiskey for his bender," Ronan said, picking up a bottle from the edge of the pile. "Damn shame, too—this is some good stuff. Whatever else, Webster had good taste. No tequila, though—I guess old Wormy's luck just went from bad to worse."

"This must be that trophy room Parson's talked about." Ketchum pointed to an archway leading from the sitting room.

Ronan walked slowly through the room. He could see Parsons hadn't been exaggerating; it looked like Webster had bagged nearly every animal imaginable—and some that most folks wouldn't care to imagine. A large bear stood next to one wall, there was a tiger skin rug, an impressive array of horns and antlers, and a ring of snarling heads mounted on plaques ringing the room. He was so distracted by the menagerie Ronan almost bumped into Ketchum, who was standing by a small shelf on one wall.

"Find something?"

"Uh, no... ah Hell, it don't make much sense to hide it from you, you bein' what you are. It looks like this feller was huntin' more than just run-of-the-mill critters. He's got stuff here I've only heard about—bloodwire, a piece of a scarecrow, even a piece of a Mojave rattler. Well, I don't see the rattler part, but here's the rest. He's even tagged 'em and logged when and where he killed 'em."

"You said something about a Mojave rattler—wasn't that what that tinhorn Washington was heading to Salt Lake to hunt?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it, he did say somethin' to that effect. Let's take a look upstairs. It's gettin' late and I'd like to talk to those boys of Mahoney's before their momma tucks them in for the night. Besides, looking at all these whiskey bottles has made me thirsty."

"Wait a second, Texas. I see something here." Ronan bent over and pulled the object out from under a bookshelf. "Forget it, it just looks like Wormy left one of his empty tequila bottles in here. This one's got the number '3' on it, though. Mean anything to you?"

"That was the number on the rattler piece. You say the bottle's empty?"

"Yeah. What would this 'rattler piece' look like, anyway?"

"I'm guessin' it would be a couple inches long and shaped like a fat man's thumb."

"Kind of like a tequila worm."

"A feller'd have to be mighty short-sighted to mistake it for one."

"Or drunk." Ronan nodded toward the mound of empty bottles in the next room.

Ketchum looked at the liquor cabinet for a moment, then at the empty bottle in Ronan's hand. His one good eye widened as he realized what the gunslinger was getting at. "You think he drank whatever was in that bottle and ate the thing in the bottom?"

"It looks that way to me, Texas. What would happen if he did?"

"I got no idea, Lynch."

CHAPTER SEVEN

It looked like the entire bachelor population of Hilton Springs was in Daly's Saloon by the time Ronan and Ketchum arrived. All five or six of them. Nearly every table was empty in the place, but three young men had cornered one end of the bar for themselves. Each of the three wore a pistol and a look that said they thought they were stone-cold killers.

Ketchum sat down heavily on a barstool to the left of the men and ordered himself a shot of whiskey. The nearest tough gave him a cold stare, but Ketchum simply smiled at the man and hoisted his glass. The man glanced down at the old Ranger's holster, and noting Ketchum had occupied his shooting hand with the whiskey glass, relaxed.

While the men were watching Ketchum's exaggerated display, Ronan had taken the opportunity to move up behind the group. When he spoke in his gravelly voice, two of the men started and jerked around.

"I hear you boys ride with Black River Mahoney. I'm looking for him."

"First of all, mister, we ain't 'boys,'" the young man in the middle said, turning slightly to face Ronan, but remaining on his stool. "Second, I don't know what you're talkin' about. Third, I don't care."

"I'm not usually a patient man. Any other time, I'd just shoot you and ask one of your friends here. But it's been a long day, I'm tired, and I'd rather not have to reload my pistol this late at night. So I'm going to try once more to be polite. Where can I find Mahoney... boy?"

"You talk big, mister," the young bravo said. He looked to his companions on either side and even spared a glance at Ketchum. The one-eyed Ranger still seemed occupied with his whiskey. "But there's three of us—nobody's that good. I'm callin' your bluff."

As the gunman began to rise from his stool, Ronan grabbed the center gunman's wrist with his left hand as he tried to draw, trapping the man's gun in his holster. Then he drew his own pistol and twirled it. Using the butt of the weapon, Ronan smashed the hand of the man to the right against the bar. The wounded man screamed and clutched his throbbing fingers to his chest. The pain in his hand momentarily erased all thoughts of the fight.

The third man reached for his pistol. Ketchum turned slightly, hooked the man's stool with his foot, and jerked. The stool came out from under the gunman. Unbalanced, he stumbled backward and fell against the bar. The Ranger finished him with a hard kick to the head.

Ronan twirled his pistol again. When it stopped, the first young man found the barrel of the Peacemaker under his chin. The sound of the hammer being cocked echoed like a cannon shot. Slowly, he released his grip on his own pistol and spread his hands wide. The undead gunslinger leaned in until he was staring eye-to-eye with his captive.

"Son, there's still a chance I can walk out of this saloon with all six bullets still in my pistol. Where can I find Mahoney?"

"He's out on Red Rock Ridge," the gunman stammered. Ronan was standing close enough for the gangman to catch a whiff of decay. To him, it smelled like Death himself was at his shoulder. "It's about ten miles or so to the southwest, but I think he and the rest might be gone."

* * *

"Relax, boy, have a sip of busthead," Ketchum said. They'd taken the outlaw to a nearby table. Although he was pretty sure they weren't going to put a bullet in him, he still had some serious concerns about the state of his health. Occasionally, he stole a glance over his shoulder at his two friends back at the bar. Both were sullenly nursing their injuries and glaring at the group at the table.

"We're lookouts in town for Mahoney's gang. If an easy mark rides through, we tell the gang out on Red Rock. Most of the time though, we just sit here and wait," the boy said. He'd come to the conclusion they were in over their heads with the two men. He was afraid of Mahoney, but the outlaw leader was miles away and the gunslinger with the dead eyes was just across the table.

"Mahoney hasn't been into town in over two weeks. The last time I seen him was when he dragged ol' Wormy Simmons out of town for throwin' up on his boots." The boy took another hit of whiskey. "Last week, Randy—he used to watch the town with us—rode out to see if Mahoney was still on the ridge, but he never came back. I'm startin' to think the gang lit out, myself."

"Son, your time's up here. You and your friends got until morning to ride out of town. If you're here when I wake up—and I wake up real early—you'll be bedding down in a grave by lunch," Ronan growled. The outlaw stood to go so quickly he almost knocked his chair over.

"And, boy," Ketchum said. "I see your tracks headin' toward Red Rock, you'll be wishin' you was lucky enough to die two days before you ever set eyes on us."

CHAPTER EIGHT

As usual, Ronan got little sleep that night. Apparently, dead men didn't need as much sleep as live ones. All things considered, that was a good thing; what sleep he did get was haunted by horrible nightmares. Every morning he awoke with the feeling he'd been fighting a battle for a piece of his soul. From the blank spots in his memories, he guessed he lost from time to time.

The three outlaws had taken Ronan's threat seriously. There was no sign of the young men when he and Ketchum returned to the saloon the next morning.

"Those boys lit out last night," the bartender told them. "You plan on buying anything while you're here, or you two just want to chase off the rest of my customers?"

After a greasy breakfast, he and Ketchum rode out of Hilton Springs to the southwest. Parsons had been able to give them better directions to Red Rock Ridge.

"So, Ranger, since we've got us a bit of a ride and I don't think I'd fancy your singing voice, why don't you tell me what you think is going on?"

"Okay, Lynch, I can't see the harm in that—especially seein' as how I'm countin' on your guns if it comes to a fight. Everything I've seen so far makes me think there's a rattler crawlin' around here, and I don't mean a snake.

"I'm talkin' about those things they got out in the desert between here and the Maze. I hear tell there's some outside Salt Lake, but I can't testify to that—Rangers ain't exactly welcome up in Deseret."

"I heard some stories in the saloons up there, but I never took them serious," Ronan said. "You mean to tell me you believe these things exist?"

"Believe it? Hell, I seen one myself once. It was just a little cuss, no more than 50 feet long, but I'll tell you I'm not likely to forget that for a long time. It was shaped like a big worm, except the eatin' end had a mass of tentacles around the mouth. I reckon that's how they get a feller—crawl up under him and grab him with those things."

"So, how do you kill one?"

"Shoot it—a lot. 'Course, I don't know how much good that six-gun you're totin' will do against one. Their hide alone might stop a pistol bullet."

The men rode on in silence. Since his first death, Ronan sometimes thought he had lost his fear of dying. After all, short of a lucky shot, it wasn't too likely he *could* be killed. But the thought of being dragged underground and eaten alive was an altogether different matter. Not only was the thought unappealing in itself, but he doubted that even he could survive being turned into rattler droppings.

* * *

A few hours later, the men caught sight of Red Rock Ridge. It was easy to see how it got its name. The 50-foot high ridge of reddish sandstone jutted like a finger out into the desert to the west. Red Rock was probably the last high ground of any size between Hilton Springs and California.

"You figure they've got a lookout posted out somewhere?" Ronan asked.

"Yep—if they're still there. I figure if they're on that rock, we've already been seen. Besides, all that open ground around the ridge makes it damn near impossible to sneak up on. Whatever else he is, Mahoney is canny. We're better off just ridin' straight in, nice and easy like. Since there's only two of us, I'm hopin' they won't start shootin' outright."

Ronan wasn't too comfortable with Ketchum's plan, but he could see his companion's point. Short of turning around and waiting for nightfall, they wouldn't be able to cross the bare ground unseen. Besides, there was always the chance Mahoney's gang had ridden out weeks ago.

They had ridden about halfway up the steep and narrow trail leading to the top of the ridge when a voice called out to them from the rocks above.

"Keep your hands on your reins, and keep moving up the trail if you don't want to get shot."

Ketchum looked back at Ronan as if to say "Told ya," and did as he was told. Less than five minutes later they found themselves on a narrow trail between the rocks on top of the ridge. The lookout, standing among the rocks above the trail, motioned them down the ridgeline to the west.

"We ain't lookin' for trouble," the Ranger said. "We just want a few words with Mahoney."

"Ride that way until you come to the camp. Don't try nothin' funny, neither. There'll be a rifle on you at all times."

The camp lay on a wide spot near the western end of the ridge. Except for the trail leading into it, the site was ringed by rocks and invisible to anyone in the desert below. On one side of the hideout, a corral held a dozen scrawny horses. The men in

the camp didn't look much better. The pistols and rifles they pointed at Ronan and Ketchum, on the other hand, appeared to be in fine working order.

"Who're you?" asked a man standing in the center of the camp. He was tall, with hard eyes and a shaggy, drooping mustache. At his waist he held a Winchester rifle leveled at them. From his looks and confident manner, Ronan guessed he was Black River Mahoney.

"Name's Hank Ketchum, of the Texas Rangers. My partner's name is Ronan Lynch." While he talked, the Ranger casually dismounted as if he'd just ridden up to a hitching post in front of a general store.

"Ketchum... I remember you, you old one-eyed wolf," Mahoney said, never lowering his weapon. "You were with a Dixie Rails crew down near the Arkansas River trestle a couple years ago, weren't you? Reckon I shoulda shot you then."

"Mahoney, I got no fight with you. Today," Ketchum said, tying off his horse's reins to his saddle. "Less, of course, you want one. I was never one to pass up a good shindig, if the opportunity presented itself."

"Big words for a one-eyed old man. I see you've taken to bringin' help along—so much for 'one riot, one Ranger'. And I don't believe that's Lynch, neither. I heard of him—but I also heard DuChamp shot him dead up in Colorado."

"I heal better than most," Ronan said, still on his horse.

"He's not here to help," Ketchum added. "He's just along because I enjoy his clever conversation. You and your boys are lookin' a little ragged, Mahoney. You sure you want a fight? It don't have to be that way. Not today, anyhow. I'm tryin' to track down a feller name of Wormy Simmons. I heard you and him had some hard words."

"Simmons, huh? You're a bit late, Ranger. I put that man in the ground a couple weeks ago."

"I figured that much," Ketchum said. He pushed his hat back, hitched up his gun belt, and looked around the camp. "Looks-and smells like you boys been here a while. Them horses is gettin' a bit thin too. Now, I wonder what would keep a bunch of rattlesnakes like you up here on this rock for weeks."

"It's them crawlers," a younger man called out from behind Mahoney. The bandit leader glared at the man for a moment and then turned back to Ketchum.

"He's right. Folks north a' here call 'em rattlers," Mahoney said. "I reckon there's a nest of 'em near here, but somethin's got those crawlers all riled up. Anyone goes off the rocks gets sucked down."

"And," Ketchum interjected, "that's been goin' on for about two weeks or so, right? Just about the time you brought old Wormy out here?"

"More like a week or so later, but you're close. You sayin' that drunk has somethin' to do with the worms goin' crazy?"

"It sure looks that way," the Ranger answered. "Why don't you show me where you planted him."

"I didn't bury him, One-Eye. I fed him to one a' them worms. Or, at least, I tried."

* * *

Mahoney led the two men to where the ridgeline sloped into the desert. From the rocks, he pointed to an area at the end of Red Rock. There, Ronan could see four stakes with ropes attached to them. A short distance away, a large hole opened in the desert floor.

"That's where I put that stinkin' fool," Mahoney pointed at the stakes. "Somebody really gets my goat, I bring 'em out here and feed 'em to the worms. We use the baiter to draw them when it's meal time. That's it down there."

On the ground below the rocks was an odd contraption. The 'baiter' looked like a sewing machine wheel with a bunch of rocks tied to it with long cords. A crank was attached to the wheel on one side.

"One of the boys turns the wheel when we're ready. The rocks swing around and thump on the ground. I guess the worms can hear it somehow, 'cause it brings 'em runnin'."

"So you stake a person out there on the flats and then call one of those rattlers here to eat them while you watch?" Ronan had done a few things he wasn't proud of in his time, but Mahoney made him feel like a missionary.

"Yep. You got an issue with that 'Mr. Lynch'?" The outlaw looked at the gunslinger with a stare that would have made a lesser man grab for his gun—or just plain run away.

"When this is over, I'll be looking for you, Mahoney," Ronan growled. "I've seen some bad people in my time, but you aren't even human anymore. You're a rabid dog."

"If you feel that strongly about it, why don't we just settle it here and now?"

"Fine by me..." Ronan began, but was cut off when Ketchum stepped between the men.

"When this is settled you two can fill each other with lead to your hearts' content. Hell, I'll even offer to stand off and shoot your corpses a couple times after you drop, if you want. But until then, I think we'd better take care of the rattler problem first."

"What do you care about a bunch of bandits in Nevada, Ranger?" Ronan asked.

"Not diddly-squat. It's them folks in Hilton Springs I'm worried about. Bluebellies or not, nobody deserves to get eaten by oversized fish-bait."

"I could care less about those sod-busters, Ketchum, but if you can get me off this rock, 'Mr. Lynch' can live a little longer."

After a tense pause, Ronan conceded, "I guess I can wait to settle this. But, Mahoney, I can wait a long time."

"Now that everybody's friends again, listen up. I've got a plan."

CHAPTER NINE

Predictably, Ketchum's plan was straight-forward, simple, and dangerous. He had a couple of Mahoney's men carry the baiter to the other end of the ridgeline. They would then use it to attract the attention of the rattlers, allowing the two to climb down into the hole in the desert. The Ranger wouldn't explain to Ronan why he thought it necessary to go underground after the rattlers, but the gunslinger had come to expect the man to be close-mouthed—particularly about important things.

He'd bought a double-barrel shotgun from one of Mahoney's gang and tossed it to Ronan. "You might need a little more firepower than that popgun where we're goin', Lynch." Ketchum retrieved a Winchester rifle from his saddle. "Mahoney, I trust our horses will be here when we get back. I know you'll be gettin' off this rock at the first chance and I don't blame you. But I'd hate to think folks got the idea you took our horses 'cause you was afraid of meetin' your date with Lynch, if you know what I mean."

Mahoney obviously did. "They'll be here, you old coot. You two hurry up and get in that hole before I lose my good mood."

A distant gunshot signaled the outlaws had started the distraction, so Ronan and Ketchum hurried to the hole. The Ranger was also carrying a couple of makeshift torches they'd made at the campsite. Although it started with a steep, nearly sheer, drop of about ten feet, the hole quickly leveled out to a shallow descent. The walls were nearly uniformly round and coated with a hard, shiny substance that reminded Ronan of a slug's trail.

"Them rattler's is sloppy, always drooling that stuff," Ketchum said, answering Ronan's unspoken question. "I've never heard of it coating a tunnel like this, though. This must have become a right regular trail for them."

"That's another couple of bullets for Mahoney. Why'd we have to come in here anyway, Texas? Seems like there's got to be an easier way to get at these things."

"I'm sure there is. But I don't know what it is. Besides, I'm not huntin' the rattlers, I'm lookin' for that Wormy feller. I'm bettin' he's tied into this somehow. I figure maybe he swallowed that piece back at Webster's place and it changed him somehow. Maybe he can talk to these things and he's usin' them to get a little payback."

The tunnel turned out to be longer than either of them had anticipated. Ronan guessed they had walked maybe a mile or even two when the passageway suddenly expanded. They found themselves in a cavern so large the torchlight didn't reach the far wall. The same hard, glistening substance covered the walls, ceiling, and floor of the cavern that was on the tunnel, but the floor was also littered with hundreds of bones—human and animal.

"I think we found the missing townsfolk," Ketchum whispered, bringing his rifle up to his hip.

"Not only that, but I'm pretty sure we've found Wormy as well," Ronan added, pointing off to a solitary column near the middle of the cavern. "And I don't think he's in charge around here."

In the flickering light, the men could see the emaciated and bloody body of a man. His hands and feet appeared to be encased in hardened mud and dozens of wounds covered his bare chest.

"Don't you ever get tired of being wrong, Texas?" Ronan asked in a hushed voice.

"Sometimes."

* * *

When they reached the man, Ronan saw his condition was even worse than he'd first thought. His skin had a jaundiced look and a number of small punctures dotted his torso. In spite of his wounds, the man had the strength to not only look up when they approached, but he actually smiled.

"Wormy Simmons. Pleased to meet 'cha," he said before breaking into a brief coughing fit.

"What the Hell is goin' on, Simmons?" Ketchum asked. He and Ronan set to breaking the mud shackles pinning Wormy to the column.

"Mahoney staked me out for the worms after I upchucked on his boots." He paused to take a drink from the Ranger's canteen. "I thought I was a goner for sure, but when that rattler carried me down here it was as gentle as a momma holdin' a baby, like it didn't want me to come to no harm. Heh, that's a laugh after what they've done to me since..."

"They stuck me here in this mud and then used them snake-tongues a' theirs to suck the blood out of me," Wormy continued. "They never took too much; I guess they didn't want to kill me. They's brought a whole bunch of folks down here since then. They stick them over that hole for a while." He bobbed his head toward a dark pit back near the cavern opening.

"When they're ready, they suck out all of their blood. Then they take a little of mine and mix it with some worm-spit or somethin' and they put it in the dead body. A little while later, it begins to change... I can't describe it, but it comes back to life.

They're like worm-men or something, but I figure we'll see them right soon anyhow—they live in them smaller caves." His hands freed, he pointed to openings to either side of the main cavern. "I reckon they've done made a good dozen or more of those things by now."

"Lynch, I don't like the sound of that. If he's tellin' the truth, those rattlers are a whole lot smarter than anyone thought. You check out one of those caves and I'll see if there are any survivors in the pit."

Ronan moved cautiously across the cavern toward the nearest cave. The bones scattered across the floor made it difficult to move quietly; each step seemed to snap another one. When he finally reached the opening, he could tell the area beyond was empty. A number of smaller holes pocked the floor, but there was no other sign of the creatures Wormy described.

"There's nothing here, Ketchum," he called.

"I got a couple of folks in this hole—let's get 'em and get out before those rattlers come home!" the Ranger answered from the edge of the pit.

Wormy held the torch as Ronan and the Ranger helped the survivors out of the pit. They found a couple of townsfolk and one of Mahoney's men who'd strayed a little far from the safety of the ridge. When everyone was on the rim, Ketchum pulled a small revolver from inside his coat and handed it to the outlaw.

"Mister, we may need all the help we can get," he said, not letting go of the pistol. "You cross me, though, I won't hesitate to put you down. Dead from a bullet might be a cleaner way to go than bein' eaten by a worm, but in the end, dead is still dead. You clear on that?"

The man nodded and Ketchum released the pistol.

"As much a surprise as it may be to you folks, I'd really like to leave now," Wormy said.

"That sounds like a good idea, friend." Ketchum took the lead, with the townsfolk and the outlaw behind him. Wormy was next, carrying the torch, and Ronan brought up the rear of the group. They were still more than a mile from the exit, but they'd not seen so much as one Rattler. Ronan was starting to think the trip was going to go off without a hitch.

Then, some distance from the opening, all Hell broke loose.

CHAPTER TEN

The ground disappeared from under Ketchum's feet. He hurled himself back and managed to hook an arm over the edge of the pit that had opened beneath him. His rifle slipped from his grasp and clattered into the darkness. The Ranger called for help, but the others already had plenty of trouble to worry about themselves.

Out of the ground all around the group came the monsters Wormy had described. Ronan could see why he called them worm-men. Their flesh was pinched and segmented like an earthworm's body. They were similar in shape to a man, but over seven feet tall. Tatters of clothing hung from their yellowish-brown bodies. A mass of tendrils filled a hole in each one's face that he could only guess was a mouth. As disgusting as their appearance was, the gunslinger was more concerned about the long claws on the ends of the monsters' hands. A viscous substance dripped from them; he wasn't sure what it was, but from the hissing sound it made when it splashed on the ground, Ronan knew the goo was probably acid.

As soon as the first monster was fully out of the hole and standing, Ronan emptied both barrels of his borrowed shotgun into it. Against a man, a double blast would have left nothing more than a greasy patch, but the worm-thing was made of sterner stuff. It staggered back and dropped slowly to its knees. For a moment, the gunslinger thought it was going to get back up, but then it toppled forward onto the cave floor.

The outlaw stood his ground against one of the monsters, emptying the little belly-gun Ketchum had loaned him into it. It took all five shots the revolver held, but he managed to kill the thing. His victory was short-lived, however. A second monster burst up almost right under him and dragged him, screaming, back into the ground. The last Ronan saw of him he was clubbing at the creature with the pistol as it pulled him under.

Wormy was trying to hold off a pair of the monsters with the torch. The things didn't seem to like fire, but there were two and Ronan could tell it was only a matter of time before they would overpower him. The gunslinger couldn't spare time to help the man, though as another one of the worm-things rushed him. The shotgun was empty, so he drew his pistol. The monster was on him as his six-shooter cleared the holster.

The monster's claws lashed out toward his chest. Ronan kicked himself backward onto the ground to avoid them, fanning three rounds as he did. All of the bullets found their target, and the creature was momentarily stunned by the impact. The gunslinger swept the monster's legs out from under it and rolled to his stomach. Steadying his arm on the ground, he put two rounds into the head of another of the worm-things as it charged the two townspeople. Two .45 slugs to the head were too much for it and the abomination dropped in its tracks.

From the edge of the pit, Ketchum knew he had to do something. There were too many of the monsters for even Ronan to handle. Letting go with one hand, he drew his pistol. He felt his grip slipping, so the Ranger hooked his gun arm partially over the lip of the hole, but he couldn't get a solid purchase. Ignoring his own danger, Ketchum pumped two rounds into one

of the monsters attacking Wormy. His bullets didn't stop the worm-thing, but they did get the creature's attention. Ketchum wondered if that was a good thing.

It left Wormy to its partner and bolted toward the dangling Ranger. Ketchum waited until it was nearly on top of him and planted another bullet right in its leg. The wound, combined with its own momentum, sent the creature tumbling over him and into the pit. A sickening crunch echoed back up to Ketchum as it struck the bottom. Taking a moment to draw a bead, he put the rest of his bullets into the other worm-thing menacing Wormy.

Ronan regained his feet and used his last bullet on the monster he'd tripped. A clean shot to the head finished it. Looking around, he found all of the monsters either dead or fleeing. Quickly, he retrieved the shotgun and started reloading his weapons.

"Hey, Lynch," a voice called. "How about a hand, here?"

The gunslinger saw Ketchum slowly sliding over the edge of the pit. Wormy had collapsed—his wounds and the fight had drained nearly all his strength. The townsfolk were huddled against the wall of the cave overcome by terror.

"Leave him," an insidious voice whispered in his head. "Let him die. He'll kill you some day. Let them all die—no one will know."

"No!" Ronan said, not sure if he'd spoken aloud or not. He felt the thing inside him rushing to take control of his mind and body.

"If you won't do it, let me," it said. "I'll finish this and get us out of here. I'll make sure we're safe."

Ronan said nothing, but bit his lip to focus his concentration. For what seemed like minutes he wrestled with the thing sharing his head. Then, as suddenly as it had surfaced, it sank back beneath his consciousness. He looked about and saw Ketchum still clutching the edge of the pit; he'd only been out for a moment. His body weak from the struggle, he walked heavily to the edge of the pit.

"Take your time, Lynch. I figure I got another two, maybe three seconds before I fall," Ketchum said. Ronan reached down, took his hand, and pulled the Ranger to his feet.

"Like I said before," Wormy asked as he slowly pushed himself off the ground, "Can we go now?"

* * *

"Lynch, for a minute, I thought you'd gone squirrely on me back there," Ketchum said as he finished reloading his pistol. "Or something."

The two men were walking behind Wormy and the two townsfolk up the slight tunnel incline. They'd decided any more trouble was likely to come from behind and put the old drunk up front with the torch to light the way.

"I was just figuring if your sorry old Reb hide was worth the effort to drag out of that pit or not. You can't have more than one or two good years left in you at best, but, in the end, my good nature won out."

Ronan had already reloaded his own pistol. He'd made sure of it before the group had left the cavern. To a gunslinger like himself, an empty pistol was only a little more useful than a good-sized rock—and only because most rocks didn't fit into a holster.

"My hide might be old, but at least I hope to have the good graces not to be cheatin' the buzzards out of an honest meal when my time comes."

"That's what eventually swayed me—the thought of all those vultures that would be losing out if you were wasting away down in this hole."

"Lynch, you're all heart..." Ketchum stopped in mid-sentence. "You feel that?" he continued, in a whisper. The ground quivered ever so slightly underfoot bringing even more dirt sifting down from above than usual.

"Yeah," Ronan answered. "You think the tunnel's coming down?"

"Nope. I reckon maybe daddy's just got home and found the mess we made. I think we'd best pick up the pace. Wormy, unless you was fond of your accommodations back there, you'd best get a' move on!"

Keeping any pace above a trot was difficult on the hard floor. Whatever coated it made it as almost as slick as polished marble. Still, with Ronan and the Ranger's help, the three townsfolk made good time up the slope. The fact the ground was occasionally rattled by the shaking of something big moving nearby didn't hurt.

After a while, Wormy whispered over his shoulder at the men, "I think the torch is about to go out!" Sure enough, the flame flickered badly.

"You know, just once I'd like to have a little good luck," Ronan looked at Ketchum as he spoke. "How far you reckon we have to go?"

"I'd have thought we would have been there by now. But goin' uphill always takes longer." Moments later, the torch sputtered out.

"Damn! I thought for a minute there we was goin' to get away with it, gunslinger. I just hope I can see well enough to give those monsters a lead appetizer before they get to the main course."

"Tell you what—you stay here and slow them down. I bet your tough old carcass'll choke at least one of those monsters to death," Ronan said. "The rest of us are going to make a run for it. I think I see some light ahead—you folks stick next to me."

"I think you're seein' things, Lynch. But, just in case, I'd better stick close to you. Lord knows what would happen without me around to look after you! Although I hate the fact that I've gotta be your momma."

Minutes later Ketchum and the others could see the light Ronan was talking about. A faint glow ahead told them they were near the end of the tunnel. None too soon, either, because the vibrations in the tunnel floor and walls had become constant and very strong. The abomination was close behind—and getting closer every second!

The group scrambled out of the tunnel and sprinted the short distance to the safety of Red Rock Ridge. None of them had actually seen the thing behind them, but the ground at the edge of the ridge bulged and rolled like water as the gargantuan creature burrowed nearby. Ronan fired a few shots into the ground as the monster passed.

"You're just wastin' lead—that Peacemaker won't get half a foot into the dirt. C'mon, let's get a little altitude on this thing. Some of 'em get big enough to pluck a man out of a second-story window!" Ketchum turned and began scrabbling up the rocks to higher ground. The rest of the group didn't require any more convincing.

* * *

"Looks like Mahoney took me serious," Ketchum said. "He actually left our horses here. That's a good thing. I'd hated to have to waste a bullet on his sorry hide." The animals were exactly as they'd left them—even the saddle bags looked untouched.

"As soon as you're done patting yourself on the back, why don't you do a little math and tell me how we divide five people among two horses?"

"That's simple," the Ranger said, but he didn't answer Ronan's question right away.

"You folks come over here," he called. "We ain't got enough horses to get everyone into Hilton Springs on one go. So me, Lynch, and Wormy here are going to make a break for town. We'll send help back as soon as we do. The problem is I figure that critter out there will try for us as soon as we step foot onto the desert.

"Mister, I need you and your wife to lend a hand," Ketchum said to the two townfolk. "Down at the other end of the ridge, you'll find an odd-lookin' contraption with a crank handle on it. You turn that handle real fast for a few minutes and then high-tail it up the rocks. That thing should bring the worm lickety-split, so keep your eyes and ears peeled for it. When the coast is clear, we'll make a break for it."

"Why are you takin' the drunk?" the man asked.

"You were down in that hole, right?" Ketchum answered. "Them things got a special hankerin' for old Wormy. We take him with us, they're liable to forget about you and the missus, but I reckon if you want, we can leave him here with you."

"Uh... no, you seem to know what you're doin', so you fellers should probably take him." Ketchum nodded, and the two townsfolk headed up the trail to the other end of the ridge.

Ronan and the Ranger took up positions on either side of the crest to watch for the rattler's departure. After about a half-hour, Ronan saw the wave of dirt roll east along the north ridge.

"Are you sure you want to slow us down by bringing the drunk along?" Ronan asked as the men saddled up.

"No, I'd rather cut and run as fast as I can, but those things want that feller right badly. I think it'd be a real mistake to let them get their hands, or tentacles, on him again."

"Besides, your bosses probably want to have a look at him—right, Ranger?" Ronan wondered how much better off Wormy would be in the hands of the Rangers than with the rattlers.

Ketchum seemed to read his mind. "Believe it or not, gunslinger, we're on the same side—in the big picture. You did real good down there in the tunnels, but a stand-up fight's only part of it. Now, we can sit here arguin' philosophies until that critter comes back or we can get while the gettin's good. What'll it be?"

Ronan didn't answer. He stared at the older man for a moment, then turned his horse and spurred it down the hill toward town.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Texas, I have got to hear this story," Ronan said as he followed Ketchum into Parsons' store. The Texas Rangers, like their Northern counterparts, were notorious for concocting tall tales to explain the otherwise unexplainable.

"Marshal," Ketchum began when they entered the store, "You've got a big problem here." For a moment, Ronan thought the crusty old lawman was going to come clean. "There's been so many mine shafts sunk hereabouts the ground's unstable. Folks are fallin' through into the old tunnels. We found a few out there at Red Rock—they'd been wanderin' those old mines so long, I think they're a little touched. Anyway, this area's plumb unsound for human habitation. You folks are goin' to have to pack up and move."

"But... but... but, this is my home!" Parsons finally managed to stutter.

"That may be, but pretty soon your home's goin' to sink into the desert, and you with it if you stick around. I'm goin' to take Simmons here to the nearest doctor—he's had a rough go of it. Mahoney gave him a bad time out there."

The marshal argued some more, but it was clear his heart wasn't in it. After all, Hilton Springs hadn't been much of a town for years. Ronan scratched the back of his neck; the Ranger actually convinced Parsons there was nothing going on but a couple of cave-ins. Most folks wouldn't know the truth if it jumped up and swallowed them whole, he thought.

They walked back out onto the street. Ketchum peeled a couple of bills off his dwindling wad and handed them to Wormy.

"Why don't you head over to the saloon and get yourself a bottle of the good stuff?"

"That's the best idea I've heard in hours!" Wounded as he was, Wormy still managed to trot across the street to Daly's Saloon.

"Lynch, I just want to say thanks," Ketchum said after Wormy left. "I'd have been in deep trouble without you on this one."

"Don't get all doe-eyed on me, old man. You did pay for the work, remember?"

"I know Lynch, but you had a couple a' chances to cut bait and run back there and you didn't. That's why I never came lookin' for you—all things considered, you're on the right side. Things are getting' bad nowadays, if you hadn't noticed, and there ain't too many of us white hats left."

"Well, I.. " Ronan began, but the rumbling beneath their feet stopped him. The shaking grew until the men could barely stand. "Is that what I think it is?"

Ketchum didn't need to answer, because just at that moment an enormous Mojave rattler erupted from the street not far from where they stood. Ronan caught a glimpse of another one attacking the stable. The sound of boards snapping and screams from the saloon told Ronan a third monster had broken into Daly's.

"There goes a perfectly good cover story shot all to Hell," Ketchum said as he sprinted toward the saloon.

* * *

Ronan rushed to his panicked horse to grab the shotgun before the animal could break loose and run. Marshal Parsons, drawn by the commotion, ran out the front of the store carrying a scattergun of his own. The sight of the creature rising from the ground near the church brought him up short, and he stared at it in slack-jawed horror.

Over 100 feet of the monster was out of the ground as it thrashed around, splintering smaller buildings, but from the looks of it, Ronan was sure he was only seeing about half the monster. The tentacles hanging from whatever passed for the abomination's mouth were easily 50 feet or more in length. The gunslinger yelled to Parsons as a mass of the squirming appendages slithered toward him.

The Town Marshal snapped out of his stupor and let loose with both barrels, but the enormous thing hardly flinched. The tentacles snaked up and over the man, covering him until Ronan could only see a hand and part of the man's leg. Parsons was pulled off the porch and dragged toward the rattler's huge, snapping maw. Ronan fired his own shotgun, more as an act of defiance than in any real hope of hurting the monster, and then ran into the general store. He knew what he needed was in the store—he just hoped he had time to find it.

* * *

The saloon was in a shambles, but given there was a 20-foot wide Mojave rattler sticking up through the middle of the floor, Ketchum wasn't really surprised. There was no way to get into the building without being crushed or eaten by the humongous creature. Wormy and the bartender were huddled behind the bar, but it wouldn't be long before the monster's tentacles found them.

Hoping to distract it long enough to come up with a plan, Ketchum fired his pistol at the rattler's mouth. The bullet hit a sensitive spot, and the creature lashed the room with its tentacles. Ketchum had to dive back from the doorway to avoid being struck by one of the flailing whip-like appendages. Its thrashing caused the monster to strike one of the hanging candelabras on the ceiling. Since it was late afternoon, only a few of the candles were lit and no real damage was done, but the monster still recoiled from the heat.

"Simmons!" Ketchum called. "Start tossin' those whiskey bottles on the thing—try to hit it near the mouth!"

"What—you want to try to get this thing drunk?!"

"Just do it!"

The drunk did as told, although it obviously pained him to waste good rotgut. The bartender helped, and within moments, the saloon reeked with the smell of whiskey.

"Daly, I hope you don't water this stuff down too much!" Ketchum yelled and braced himself against the doorframe. The Ranger took aim at the small chain holding the candelabra over the monster's maw. His first shot stuck a little to the left and he overcompensated on the second, missing to the right.

"Damn gunslinger's never around when you need him," he muttered and fired again. The third bullet found its mark and the candelabra crashed down square onto the rattler's beak. The whiskey caught fire, and the monster let loose a high-pitched squeal of pain and surprise. Faster than a creature its size should be able to move, the abomination retreated back into the hole.

"Unless you want to wait around for it to come back, you fellers had better make a run for it!" Ketchum yelled.

Ronan charged back onto the middle of the street, his arms full with a heavy, canvas-covered crate. The gunslinger placed his burden behind him and turned to face the rattler. The monster seemed intent on finishing what was left of Parsons and ignored him. He drew his pistol and fanned all six rounds into the gargantuan worm. The slugs didn't do any real damage to the creature. They did, however, annoy it.

The rattler reared its body off the ground and loomed over Ronan. Its tentacles were still tangled around the marshal's body, but it looked as though it intended to simply swat him with its great bulk. The undead gunfighter stood his ground, almost daring the monster to attack. Suddenly, the thing whipped its body down towards him.

He dived to the side, rolled, and then scrambled on all fours away from the rattler's attack. The monster's weight was too massive for even its great strength to stop its descent, or even alter the direction of its fall, and it landed right on top of the crate Ronan had carried into the street. It shook the ground so hard the gunslinger was bounced upward from the ground. It also detonated the dynamite he found in the general store.

Even muffled by the worm's body, Ronan was thrown a good ten feet across the dirt road. The concussion knocked the wind out of him and left his ears ringing. He felt a stinging sensation in his side as a bone splinter struck him, and then he was covered in a mass of stinking worm innards.

* * *

"When you blew that big one to Kingdom Come, the third one must've decided it was time to go," Ketchum said. Wrinkling his nose, he added, "You know, I didn't think it was possible, but you actually smell worse, now."

"At least I've got an excuse, old man. How are you going to explain this? I don't think anyone's going to believe the mine cave-in story anymore."

"Yeah, and that's a damn shame. I was right proud of that one." Ketchum mounted his horse as he spoke. "Reckon I'll just take Simmons and head back into Arizona. Let them Agency fellers come up with a story—I'm out of my jurisdiction. See you around, Lynch." The Ranger touched his hat in a mock salute.

"Not if I see you first and my gun's loaded, Texas." Ketchum said as he laughed and wheeled his horse toward the saloon. Getting out of town wasn't a bad idea, especially if the Agency was on the way. Ronan looked across the mess of rattler and saw his horse was gone—probably run off in the fight.

Well, he thought, maybe he could at least find a new pair of boots in the general store.





WORMS!

THE ADVENTURE



Howdy folks! Hope you liked our yarn. Now's your opportunity to give your own posse a chance at stopping those devilish underground critters.

A word of warning, though—this is one tough ride! We don't recommend that young guns try to tackle this adventure.

THE STORY SO FAR

Hilton Springs is a tiny town in southern Nevada. There have been a few silver strikes in the rocky hills to the east, and until recently the only notable thing about the town was one of its citizens—Clark Webster.

CLARK WEBSTER

Webster, born to a wealthy New England family, craved excitement. He served as an officer in the U.S. Army during the early years of the war, but resigned his commission when the conflict stagnated. He took a portion of his inheritance and moved west looking for new adventures, finally settling in Hilton Springs.

A few years ago, he learned of the Explorers Society (see *Rascals, Varmints, & Critters*) through friends in Denver. Webster immediately joined the group, gladly paying the \$1,000 initiation fee. He began to travel extensively, discovering exotic new creatures—and, as he'd always been a trophy hunter, killing them.





Last year, Clark Webster went on another hunting expedition. As usual, he left a local handyman, Albert Simmons, to take care of his home. Webster never returned to Hilton Springs.

WORMY SIMMONS

Most people in town questioned leaving Simmons in charge of anything. His parents named him Albert, but folks in Hilton Springs called him "Wormy." Wormy has a craving for tequila, and eating the worm is a sort of trademark for him. Needless to say, he spent much of his time in a drunken haze.

Maybe Webster felt a little sorry for Wormy—he was the butt of many jokes around Hilton Springs—but whatever the reason, he'd always trusted the man to watch his house when he went on an expedition. Wormy saw Webster as his only friend. When he didn't return from his hunting expedition, Albert sunk into a deep despair.

Turning to the only source of comfort he knew, Wormy began a drinking binge of legendary scale. It didn't take him long to spend his meager funds, and shortly afterwards, his smaller amount of credit. Desperate, he turned to the one place left open to him—Webster's house.

THE BOTTLE

Wormy knew Webster had a good-sized liquor cabinet in his house. Many a night, he'd sat in front of it and admired the fine whiskeys, but loyalty to his friend kept him from so much as a sip. Now, he set himself to draining every single bottle within.

But even that didn't quench his thirst.

Webster kept a collection of many trophies—normal and otherwise—in his home. A looming, stuffed polar bear dominated the trophy room, but his prize was a tiny piece of a Mojave rattler tentacle. The monster had come up

beneath him and caught him by surprise near Deadwood. It had snared him in its tentacles and he'd had to cut his way free with his skinning knife.

He'd held on to a portion of the tentacle and placed it in a special solution purchased from a traveling alchemist. Even the alchemist didn't know what was in the liquid—it had been a fluke—but it kept the tentacle fresh and preserved better than formaldehyde.

In his drunken stupor, Wormy found the bottle. He mistook the concoction for tequila and quickly finished it—worm and all.

WOUNDED PRIDE

A few days later Wormy stumbled into "Black River" Mahoney outside of Hilton Spring's one saloon. Mahoney, a former gunman for Mina Devlin's railroad, was head of a local bunch of thugs called the Red Rock Gang. The outlaw, always short-tempered, gut-punched Wormy.

The blow, combined with all the alcohol (and worse) Wormy had consumed, was more than his battered constitution could bear. Mahoney got a good look at what Wormy had eaten for lunch—all over his boots! Some of the more foolhardy patrons in the saloon got a laugh out of the sight, and it was more than Mahoney's sensitive pride could bear.

He dragged the drunken man out of the Saloon and vowed to make an example of Wormy to anyone else who thought to make him look the fool. Everyone knew what he meant—you see, the Red Rock Gang had a special treat for folks that got on their bad side.

LINE BAIT

The Red Rock Gang took its name from a ridge of rock outside of town. On the desert at the end of the ridge, the gang would stake out a captive. Not content to wait on Mother Nature to do their dirty work, the skunks had found a way to lure Mojave rattlers to the victim.

That's where Mahoney took Wormy.

The outlaws staked out the crying man and retreated to the ridgeline to watch the rattlers gobble him up. But, to their surprise, when the first rattler broke through the surface, it did something they'd never seen.

The rattler leaned over Wormy as if to attack, then stopped. Its tentacles went stiff, quivering slightly as they pointed at the man. Ever so gently, it snapped his bonds and gathered him up, retreating gently into the ground.

The outlaws were stumped. They had never seen one of those worms do that, and it was a little disturbing.



THE MISSING LINK

The Rattlers had been trying to create a new form of being by blending humans and rattlers. Since the usual methods of procreation wouldn't work (for pretty obvious reasons), the abominations had been trying all kinds of vile experiments on human captives. Up until that point, all their attempts had met with disaster.

When it arrived, the rattler sensed Wormy was something a little more than human. Unknown to even Wormy himself, a change had begun in his body. The massive amounts

of alcohol, Webster's alchemical concoction, the rattler tentacle, and the Reckoners' dark touch had somehow combined in his system.

Believing him to be the key to creating "worm-men", the rattler dragged Wormy to a nearby nest to study. There the great abominations drained off his body fluids. Then, they mixed some of their secretions and injected them into other humans they'd captured. After a few failures, the infusions proved successful, and the first wormlings were created.

HARVEST TIME

The rattlers have stepped up their "collection" efforts to gather humans. More people are disappearing from the outskirts of town. The townsfolk huddle in Hilton Springs, not knowing how to avoid a seemingly inevitable fate.

Black River Mahoney and his gang have it worse. They're hiding out on Red Rock Ridge, and, so far, the rock has protected them from the worst of the rattlers' attacks. But their supplies have begun to run low. Any man who tries to escape is snatched the minute he leaves the ridge.

It won't be long until the first wormlings crawl out of the ground. Then, even the ridge won't protect them.

THE SETUP

There are a number of ways to throw a posse into **Worms!** We'll list a few here, but we're sure you Marshals can come up with a whole saddlebag of other ideas on how to turn your heroes into worm food!

A representative from the Agency might contact the posse to investigate the reported disappearances in the area. If one of the posse members is already a member of the Explorers Society, that group may request he retrieve an item from Webster's collection. If the posse includes a bounty hunter or law dog, a warrant or reward could be posted for "Black River" Mahoney.

If none of these suggestions work, the posse could always just ride into Hilton Springs. The rattlers are happy to let anyone into town. Getting out is another matter.

CHAPTER ONE: HILTON SPRINGS

Fear Level 3.

A fluke silver strike in 1868 led to the founding of this tiny town in southeastern Nevada. When the mines played out less than a year later, the nearby stream of the same name kept Hilton Springs from becoming a ghost town. The water allowed a few folks to

keep their homesteads workable, and a skeleton of the original town remained to support the scattered populace.

ABOUT TOWN

The main locations in Hilton Springs, along with their occupants, are detailed below.

BUFONT'S BOARDING HOUSE

Description: This two-story wood building serves as the town's hotel—although the owner does not tolerate rowdy or inappropriate behavior! Room and board costs \$3 a week. Nightly rates are 50¢, which includes supper and breakfast. Individual meals are priced at 10 cents.

Occupant: Abigail Bufont (61) is a prudish widow.

CHURCH

Description: The steeple on this building clearly identifies it as a church. A circuit preacher rides through every other week to hold services here. There is seating for a maximum of 50 people, far more than have ever attended a service. The building doubles as a school during the week.

Occupant: The Tuller orphan, Cindy, spends much of her time here. See **Story Hour**, below, if the party attempts to talk to her.

DALY'S SALOON

Description: The first floor of this two-story building is occupied by a bar and drinking tables. This is one of the larger buildings in the town.

The owner, Paul Daly, maintains four rooms on the second floor for rent at a price of \$1 per night. Three of the rooms are currently occupied by members of the Red Rock Gang (see Chapter Two for details).

Occupant: Paul Daly, a tall, slender man with graying hair, is the owner and bartender. He is currently the only occupant in his bar when the posse enters.

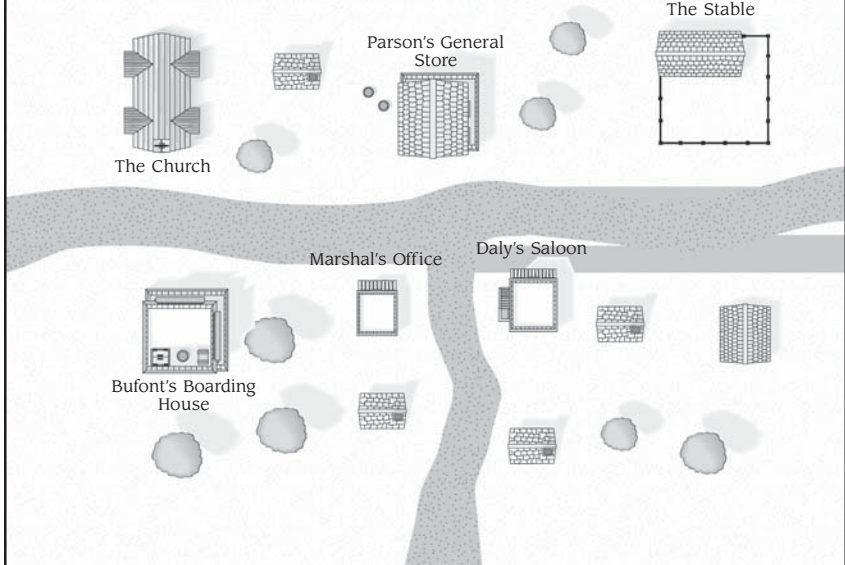
MARSHAL'S OFFICE

Description: This tiny stone building barely has room for the small office and single jail cell it holds. A gun rack next to the door holds three Winchester '73 rifles, a double-barrelled shotgun, and a small assortment of pistols.

Occupant: Hilton Springs can't afford a full-time marshal. Instead, Frank Parson (see **Parson's General Store**) does the job in his spare time. As a result, this building is usually unoccupied. Fortunately for the town, there is very little crime other than the occasional fight with a member of the Red Rock Gang.

HILTON SPRINGS

1" = 100 Feet



PARSON'S GENERAL STORE

Description: This single story building supplies most of the needs of day-to-day life in Hilton Springs. Any standard piece of equipment can be purchased here at 10% less than book price (the local economy, fueled by a small population, won't support higher prices).

There is also an old case of dynamite in a back storeroom. The dynamite is "sweaty," so it detonates on a 1 or 2 on a d6 if it's struck a hard blow.

Occupant: Franklin Parson (34) or his wife, Deborah (29). Frank is also the Town Marshal. However, the townsfolk really don't expect him to put his life on the line for his job—hence, he stays out of Mahoney's way!

PROFILE

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

Fightin': brawlin' 2d6, ridin': horse 2d8, shootin': shotgun 4d8

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

Guts 2d8, scrutinize 3d6

Edges: Lawman 1

Hindrances: Obligation (Marshal)

Pace:

Size:

Wind:

Gear: A double-barrelled shotgun, and 25 shells.

STABLE

Description: Actually, this is more of a barn, but the heroes can put their horses up here for a nickel a day. This is also the stop for the rare stagecoach arriving in Hilton Springs.

Occupant: Harlan Jessup (49), a balding man whose odious personal habits (belching and nose-picking) are obviously the reason he never married.

WEBSTER'S HOUSE

Description: This two-story wooden home is described in detail below (see Chapter Two).

Occupant: Unoccupied.

UNDER SIEGE

Even before they've been in town long, the heroes begin to notice most of the folks in Hilton Springs seem standoffish and jumpy. None of the townspeople are too talkative at first. With all the recent disappearances, strangers aren't exactly welcomed into town with open arms.

PART-TIME MARSHAL

If they haven't already met him, Frank Parsons seeks the posse out a short time after they arrive. Frank is an important source of information for the posse, so it's vital to meet him early on.

He introduces himself to the posse in the following manner:

"Good day to you folks! My name is Frank Parsons and I'm what passes for the law around here. Well, when I'm not tending the store, that is."

Frank laughs at his own little joke. He's a good man, but, like everyone else in town, he's more than a little nervous about the turn of events lately.

"We don't get too many visitors here in Hilton Springs. Let me

be the first to welcome you to our little community!

Since we are a little off the beaten path, I hope you don't mind me asking what brings you to town?"

Frank doesn't give the posse the third degree. He just wants to make sure the posse has nothing to do with the recent abductions. He's no hardened Texas Ranger, so any reasonable answer satisfies him. In fact, even if he did think they were guilty, Frank wouldn't know what to do anyway. His job consists of telling drunks to quiet down or shooting the occasional coyote.

GETTING THE STORY

Provided the posse doesn't scare Frank off with some wild tale, he's quite helpful. He points out the boarding house and saloon to the heroes, and shows them the location of the stable if they haven't found it yet. He also slips in a plug for his own store as well.

After talking to them for a few minutes, Frank looks the heroes over. If any of the heroes are lawmen of any sort or carrying weapons, he asks them to step into his office. If the heroes are all unarmed and unimposing, he appears hesitant, then asks them the same anyway.



Once in the Marshal's Office,
Frank says,

"Look, we've got a problem here. If Mr. Webster were still with us, I'd ask him for help, but... I know it's none of your folk's business, but I'd appreciate any help you could see fit to give.

We've had a bunch of kidnappings lately. Well, that may not be the right word for it. Let's just say folks are starting to disappear.

If I had my way, I'd stick to tendin' my store over there, but I up and got elected marshal. Honestly, I'm over my head here. I need some help—a lot of help really. You folks look like the type to provide it.

I can't offer much, just room and board at Bufont's and a dollar a week. I'd give you more, but all that's comin' out of my own pocket already. I pretty much marshal for free myself. The town doesn't have much of a treasury left."

If the posse accepts, he tells the heroes he doesn't have much information on the disappearances. He doesn't know the first thing about investigating a crime.

WHAT HE DOES KNOW

At the moment, his prime suspects are Mahoney's Red Rock Ridge Gang—a bunch of ruffians camped out of town. Some of the gunmen have been staying over at the saloon lately. He admits he has no skill in tracking, so for all he knows a hoard of Apaches could have taken the posse.

All of the victims were from outlying farms. He can direct the posse to the homesteads if they ask. So far, only one witness has been found, a girl named Cindy Tuller.

"Unfortunately," Frank says, "I think she's a little touched, if you know what I mean. My wife's takin' care of her, but she spends most of her time over at the church if you want to talk to her."

WHO'S WEBSTER?

If the posse asks Frank about Mr. Webster, he says:

"Mr. Webster was something of a local celebrity. He was an officer in the Union Army—a regular war hero, I hear tell. Anyway, he retired and came west to be a hunter.

Let me tell you, he brought back some of the weirdest trophies you ever did see. Kept them up in his house over near the creek. Loved to show them off, he did!

Well, about a while ago, he went off on another hunt—he had friends in Denver who were always arranging these big hunting trips for him. It's been a year since he left. He's never been gone near that long, so, honestly, we've given up on him coming back.

Like to broke old Wormy's heart, it did. That man was just about his only friend.

Anyhow, Mr. Webster would've been a big help. Especially since I don't know the first thing about tracking."

WHAT ABOUT WORMY?

If the posse asks about Wormy, Frank tells them:

"He was a miner who went bust years ago, but never left town. He'd taken a strong liking to liquor—tequila, in particular. Had a real taste for them nasty worms they put in the bottles. He spent most

of his time sleeping off his binges in the town's one jail cell.

Mr. Webster took a liking to him. Maybe he felt sorry for the old coot, I don't know, but he always left Wormy in charge of his house when he went on a trip. I'll say one thing for him, for all his faults, old Wormy took good care of Mr. Webster's house."

Unfortunately, he ran afoul of Black River Mahoney. Smudged his boots or something like that. Whatever the reason, Mahoney dragged him out of town and no one's seen him since."

Frank knows Mahoney was a gunman for Black River Railroad, and he's a bad man. He's ashamed he hasn't stood up to the man, but it's obvious to the heroes he's terrified of Mahoney.

BAUNT

The heroes accept Frank's offer: 1 white chip

The posse learns of Wormy's job with Webster: 1 white chip

Webster: 1 white chip

Ally: As long as the posse is well-behaved, Frank Parson assists them in their investigation.

CHAPTER TWO: START DIGGIN'!

After they've spoken to Frank, it's likely the posse has a number of leads to follow up. In this chapter, we'll detail what the posse finds when they follow up the clues.

If the heroes decide to cut out the middle man and go charging out after Mahoney, go to Chapter Three.

DESERTED HOME- STEADS

There are eight such abandoned farms within a day's ride or so of Hilton Springs. Frank provides the posse with clear directions to any one of these homes. If the posse marks each of these on a map, they find six of the eight are on the south side of town—coincidentally the same side as Red Rock Ridge.

At each of these sites, the rattlers surprised the owners. They struck during the day when the homesteaders were out on open ground working their small farms or tending their animals.

The situation at each home is basically the same. The residents, and any animals larger than a housecat, are simply missing. Investigation shows no evidence of robbery; all the owners' possessions

appear to still be on hand. In fact, a Foolproof (3) *search* roll at any of the homes finds 2d10 dollars of hard currency—not the sort of thing most outlaws would overlook!

If a hero looks for signs of a fight at any of the homes, she must make a Fair (5) *trackin'* roll. On a success, she finds a couple of patches of disturbed earth about 10 to 20 feet in diameter. If she gets a raise on the same roll, she sees evidence of a body being drug into the area of broken earth. No amount of digging turns up the bodies—these areas are the collapsed remains of the rattlers' tunnels.

MEETING CINDY

Cindy Tuller stays in the church during her waking hours. She sits in a pew with her legs curled under her and hugs a dirty rag doll. Each morning, she stands on the Parsons' front porch and stares at the nearby church until she's built up her courage enough to run the short distance. At night, Frank has to carry her back home and she breaks out in screaming fits if he puts her on the ground.

The orphan escaped the worms by hiding in her parents' house when the creatures attacked. However, she saw her mother and father dragged underground by the enormous monsters. Because

of that, she's developed a powerful fear of touching the ground for more than a moment or two—the same monsters might get her!

If the posse tries to talk to Cindy, she at first tries to ignore them. However, if a hero asks her about her parents and makes a Fair (5) *persuasion* roll, she says:

"The wormses got my mommy and daddy. They climbed all over them and pulled them down in the ground. If you stay on the dirt too long, the wormses will get you, too!"



After that, Cindy runs to another pew where she huddles at one end and ignores the posse.

THE RED ROCK GANG

The three members of the Red Rock Gang staying at Daly's Saloon have a pretty good idea what's been stealing the folks around Hilton Springs. Mahoney and his men have long known about the rattlers out in the desert past Red Rock Ridge. They even fed a few unlucky stiff's to the creatures over the years.

The men—Steve Reid, Chris Watkins, and John Boylan—haven't told anyone in town, nor do they intend to. If they did, they'd be admitting to taking part in a particularly gruesome form of murder! However, they're in a bad spot because the rattlers have trapped the rest of the gang on Red Rock Ridge and they can't make it back. The outlaws are on the verge of lighting out and leaving their compadres in Fate's hands.

The three are never far apart, and questioning any of the men on Wormy's fate or the gang is liable to lead to trouble. The only way to get any information out of them without resorting to violence is to win a Test of Wills—either *overawe*, *bluff*, or *persuasion*.

This is a risky proposition, however, because a failure results in a shootout with the gunmen!

However, depending on the hero's success, the following information is learned:

Success. Mahoney did take Wormy out to Red Rock Ridge a couple of weeks ago. His temper snapped after the drunk threw up on him in front of the saloon.

One raise. Mahoney staked Wormy out on the desert and fed him to a Rattler. They'd done this several times before—the gang had a special place at the end of the ridge for just this sort of thing.

Two raises. A few days later, the Rattlers started grabbing anyone who tried to leave the ridge. The three gunmen have been unable to make it back to the ridge since then. If a gunfight breaks out, use the description for Red Rock Gang members found in Chapter Three. The men surrender immediately if any one of them is killed. They also give up if they suffer a Serious wound or worse.

RED ROCK TIGHTS

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

Fightin': brawlin, 3d6, ridin': horse 3d6, shootin': pistol 3d6

Mental: C:2d8, K:2d6, M:2d6, Sm:3d6, Sp:1d6

Overawe 2d6, search 2d8,

Pace: 6

Size: 6

Wind: 6

Gear: Army Pistols, 25 rounds, and \$15 dollars in assorted currency.

WEBSTER'S HOUSE

The front door to Webster's home is unlocked. In fact, it's standing slightly ajar. Wormy was still drunk when he stumbled out the last time, and he never returned to close it. The interior is well-kept; the dust that's accumulated has been during the time since Wormy's kidnapping. The only area that's been disturbed is the once well-stocked liquor cabinet. Its contents are emptied and the bottles lie in a heap in front of it.

The house is nicely furnished; obviously, Mr. Webster was a man of no small wealth. In spite of the other lavishly rich furnishings, the trophy room downstairs immediately catches the posse's attention.

THE TROPHY ROOM

In the trophy room, the largest single item is a stuffed, eight-foot tall polar bear. A number of other stuffed animals adorn the walls and shelves, but one shelf holds a few unusual displays.

Each display on this shelf has a numbered tag on it. The items, along with the corresponding number are: a piece of barbed wire (1); a single enormous claw (2), and a scarecrow head (4).

A Fair (5) *search* roll uncovers a piece of paper on a nearby shelf identifying the items. The descriptions are listed as:

1. Bloodwire—Wyoming Territory.
2. Chinook claw—Montana Territory.
3. Piece of rattler tentacle—Deadwood, SD.
4. Scarecrow—Wichita, KS.



The third item is missing, but an Onerous (7) *search* roll finds an empty tequila bottle tagged "3" under a couch in the room. Although only a few drops of liquid remain, it's obvious whatever was in here wasn't likely to have been tequila!

WEBSTER AND THE EXPLORERS SOCIETY

If you wish, you can use Webster as a link to the Explorer Society for the posse. If so, on a Hard (9) *search* roll, a hero discovers a rare copy of *The 1876 Edition of the Explorers Society's Rascals, Varmints & Critters* on a nightstand in the upstairs bedroom.

Inside the front page is a presentation note to Clark Webster from Alexander Thornton, head of the Denver chapter of the Explorers Society, welcoming him into the chapter. If you don't want to incorporate this group into your campaign, simply leave the book out.

BOUNTY

The posse discovers people are taken underground: 1 white chip

The posse finds out Mahoney gave Wormy to the rattlers: 1 white chip

The posse figures out Wormy drank a rattler tentacle: 1 red chip

CHAPTER THREE: OUT TO RED ROCK

Eventually, the posse is probably going to head out to Red Rock Ridge to confront Mahoney and his gang. Frank, any of the gang members in the saloon, or Daly, the saloon owner, can tell the posse how to find the ridge.

ON THE WAY TO RED ROCK

Red Rock Ridge is about three hours' ride southwest of town. It's one of the last line of hills before it flattens into the western desert.

As the posse nears the ridge, have each member make an Onerous (7) *Cognition* roll. The heroes who succeed see a number of disturbed patches of ground, similar to those at the abandoned homesteads, along the road.

If a cowpoke gets a raise on the roll, she even sees the desiccated remains of a horse's head, half buried in the broken ground. A little digging finds the entire horse—saddled, but without a rider.

The rattlers don't bother the posse as they ride out of town and onto the ridge. After all, once they're on the ridge, they're trapped!



RED ROCK RIDGE

Fear Level 3

The ridge rises about 150 feet above the surrounding land, but slopes steeply down at the desert end. It is a spine of rock with a few trails leading up to the top. Mahoney's gang has set up a camp on the highest point of the ridgeline.

All approaches to the camp are closely guarded. Anyone attempting to *sneak* up one of the trails must win *and* get a raise on a contest of his *sneak* versus the guards *Cognition*. If he fails, he's halted by a guard and the alarm is raised.

The cliffs themselves aren't closely watched. Although it takes a Hard (9) *climb* roll to scale the rocks, the outlaws only notice the hero if he fails a Foolproof (3) *sneak* roll.

WHO GOES THERE?

Unless the posse starts a gunfight, they find the gang remarkably approachable. They're more than a little scared at this point, and it's been a long time since they've seen other humans. They don't open up on the posse right away. Most of them hope the heroes can get them off the sun-blasted ridge at this point.



Mahoney's men don't ask the posse to turn over their guns, but they won't surrender theirs either. The heroes are taken to see Mahoney immediately. Every step of the way, outlaws pester them for a drink of water or a bite of food. The men ran out of food nearly a week ago and the last water was used up yesterday.

"BLACK RIVER"

MAHONEY

"Black River" Mahoney is just about as mean as a fellow can be and still be called human. For over a year, he and his gang have staked folks out and fed them to Rattlers—just for fun. His attitude shows he has no guilty feelings about anything he's done—or he hides it very well. Chances are, though, he's just mean as a rattler—Mojave, that is.

Mahoney did work for Black River Railroad at one time. However, he lit out with Chuckles Ryan years ago. Unfortunately, he lacks the style and intelligence of Chuckles, so Mahoney has ended up little more than a petty thug in a small, dead-end town.

Although he is a wanted man, Mahoney's pretty bitter about his lack of reputation. One of the quickest ways to get him to slap leather is to belittle him in anyway.

PROFILE

Corporeal: D:3d10, N:4d6,
Q:3d12, S:2d8, V:2d6

Fightin': brawlin' 4d6, ridin':
horse 3d6, quickdraw 4d12,
shootin': pistol, 6d10, sneak
3d6

Mental: C:3d8, K:3d6, M:3d10,
Sm:2d8, Sp:2d6

Guts 3d6, overawe 4d10, search
4d8, trackin' 2d8

Edges: Sand 2, Tough as Nails
3, The Voice (threatening).

Hindrances: Mean as a
Rattler, outlaw 4.

Pace: 6

Size: 6

Wind: 18

Gear: A Peacemaker pistol in
a quickdraw holster (+2 to
Quickdraw), 50 rounds of
ammunition, and a horse. On
the saddle, he has a
Winchester '73, 50 rounds of
ammunition, and a Smith &
Robards Rattler Detector.

THE RED ROCK GANG

Mahoney's gang is a bunch
of aspiring outlaws. Anywhere
else, none of these men would
be more than a bully or petty
thief. However, in Hilton
Springs they've been able to
drag themselves to lower
depths than they'd dreamed. Of
course, having a role model
has been a great help.

There are currently nine
members of the gang left on
Red Rock Ridge.

PROFILE

Corporeal: D:1d8, N:1d6, Q:4d8,
S:2d8, V:3d6

Fightin': brawlin', knife 3d6,
ridin': horse 3d6, shootin':
pistol, rifle (shotgun) 3d8

Mental: C:2d8, K:2d6, M:2d6,
Sm:3d6, Sp:1d6

Overawe 2d6, search 2d8,
trackin' 2d8

Pace: 6

Size: 6

Wind: 12

Gear: The gang is equipped
with Army Pistols, knives,
horses, a Winchester '73 on
saddle holster, and 50
rounds of ammunition for
each gun. One man has a
Winchester Lever-Action
Shotgun and 25 shells
instead of a rifle.

MAHONEY SPEAKS

Mahoney's a mean cuss, but
he's also desperate, so as long
as he thinks they can get him
off the ridge, he's more than
willing to talk to the heroes. In
exchange for the posse's
guarantee to help him and his
gang get away from Red Rock,
he answers any questions.

However, if they won't agree
to such an arrangement, he
resorts to threats or even
gunplay. Besides, maybe he can
distract the rattlers with the
posse's dead bodies long
enough to escape. Even if he
loses the shootout, a bullet's a
cleaner death than dragged
underground by a rattler!



Provided Mahoney and the posse reach an agreement, he tells them the following:

"Wormy? Yeah, I aced him. That drunk got vomit on my boots!

I dragged his hide out here and staked him out for the rattlers. When we tied him down there and rang the dinner bell, somethin' strange happened. A rattler came, like normal, but instead of eatin' him, it stood over him for a minute. It's tentacles were a' quiverin', almost like it was sniffin' the old coot.

We all got a laugh out of that at first. But when it bent down and pulled him loose real gentle like—well, then it wasn't so funny anymore. It carried him screamin' back into the tunnels and we never saw him again.

'Bout two days later, them monsters started grabbin' anybody that tried to leave the ridge. Lost four men to 'em before we just gave up."

Mahoney thinks there are several rattlers prowling around the area, but he doesn't know exactly how many.

STAKE OUT

If the posse asks, Mahoney shows them the spot where the gang staked out victims for the rattlers. Even now, Mahoney isn't particularly remorseful about his past deeds—he just doesn't want to end up in a worm himself.

There are four stakes in the ground where the victims' arms and legs were tied with leather thongs. A large hole, nearly 30 feet in diameter, opens into the ground about 15 feet from the stakes. Mahoney explains the rattlers always come up through that hole. The creatures have used it so much, it's become a permanent tunnel into the ground.

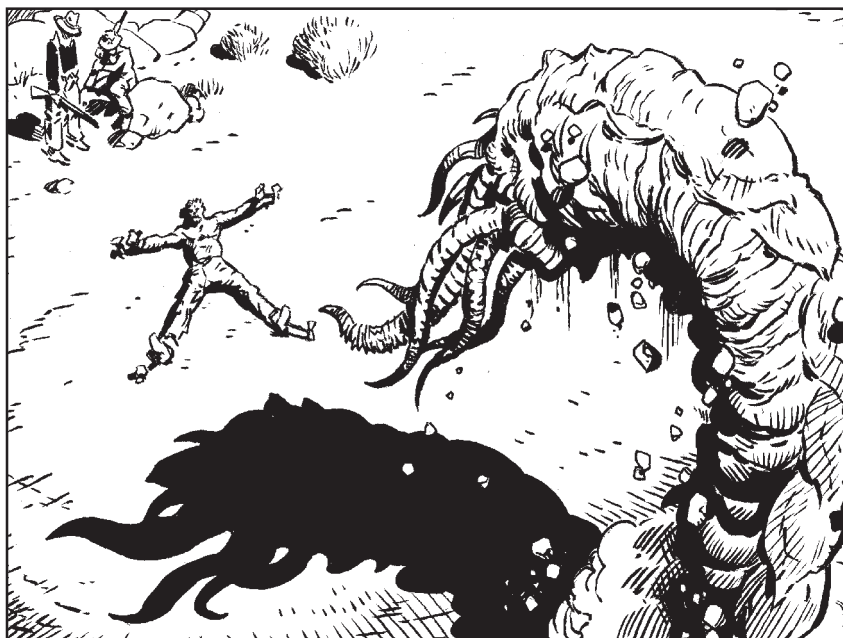
THE RATTLER BAITER

Just off the edge of the rocks rests the rattlers' "dinner bell." It's little more than a wheel mounted on a small frame with a handle attached. Several rocks hang from ropes tied along the rim of the wheel. It's easily portable, weighing only 15 lbs. total.

When the handle is turned quickly, the tethered rocks spin outward and strike the ground as the wheel rotates. The repeated impact of the rocks sets up a rhythmic vibration in the ground that catches the attention of any nearby rattler.

The gang has set the device up on bare ground at the edge of the rock ridge. They use it to draw rattlers to where they've staked down one of their more unfortunate captives. At the first rumbles of an approaching rattler, the gang retreats to the safety of the ridge to watch the feast.

The worms long ago learned the baiter is a "dinner bell" for them and come running when the gang sounds it. Mahoney invested a little of the gang's "earnings" in a Smith & Robards Rattler Detector a while ago as an insurance policy against surprise dinner visits.



YOU'RE GOING DOWN THERE?

After showing the posse the feeding area, Mahoney asks them what their plan is. If they don't suggest it, he says:

"I reckon the solution to those folks' problem lies somewhere down that hole. If you've got the guts, I'm bettin' you'll find your answers in there."

While the posse really does have to enter the hole to solve the mystery of the rattlers, Mahoney could care less. He figures if he can convince the heroes to climb down into the worms' lair, then he's killed two birds without even using one stone.

The worms are sure to be hot on the posse's heels down in the tunnels and likely to ignore his gang's (or at least his) escape. Also, the rattlers should make short work of this bunch of do-gooders and he won't have to worry about them "interfering" anymore.

Mahoney won't go in the hole under any circumstances, no matter what approach the posse takes. If the heroes question his sand, he gets a killing look in his eye for a minute, but then he'll turn to them and say:

"I could care less

about them damn sod-busters from the town. My hide's all I'm worried about, and it don't make no sense for me to go deliverin' it to them rattlers. I'd prefer watchin' 'em eat you.

You want to go in that hole, you go ahead. Me and my men will even try to distract those things long enough for you to get down in there. But not a one of us is goin' with you!"

He suggests moving the rattler-baiter to the other side of the ridge. The sound should draw the monsters away from the area so the posse can enter the pit safely.

Getting out is another matter, of course.

BOUNTY

The heroes defeat the Red Rock Gang in a shoot-out:
1 white chip

The posse negotiates with the Red Rock Gang instead of a shoot-out: 1 white chip

The posse learns of Wormy's capture by the rattlers: 1 red chip

Ally: If the posse plays it easy with Mahoney, the Red Rock Gang may help them against the rattlers.

CHAPTER FOUR: IN WHICH WAY DID IT TO THE DIRT GO?

Before the posse heads into the tunnel, Mahoney tells them:

"I'm not sure what you're gonna find down there, but don't stay too long. There's more than one of those rattlers crawlin' around here and I've got a feeling they're not going to take a likin' to you foolin' around in their home.

Don't expect us to stick around too long after you're gone either. If we get the chance, we're high-tailin' it out of here."

If they ask, he has some of his men haul the rattler baiter to the other end of Red Rock Ridge and try to attract the monsters' attention; if the posse doesn't suggest it, the gang leader raises the idea again himself. After all, it won't do him any good to have the posse gobbled up before they get a good distance from Red Rock Ridge—the rattlers might be still be able to catch the outlaws before they can escape.

Neither Mahoney nor any of his men will enter the tunnels, no matter what the posse offers or threatens.

Following the rattler is easier than one might think. Normally, rattler tunnels cave in behind the monsters, but if the creatures travel a particular route enough, it eventually becomes a semi-permanent tunnel. That's the case all around the base of Red Rock Ridge.

Mahoney and his gang have made that area a frequent stop for the abominations, and a well-traveled burrow leads from there directly to the rattler's den about two miles away. The den is fairly deep underneath the ground, so the tunnel slopes continually downward. The posse should have no trouble following the passage all the way to the lair of the rattlers.

The walls of the tunnel are covered in a hard, transparent substance. If a hero chips at it with a metal tool or rock, she can break a small chunk loose. The posse probably won't know it—although you can allow an Incredible (II) *science: biology* roll to figure it out, if you're feeling generous—but the stuff is actually dried rattler saliva. It takes a lot of trips for it to coat a tunnel wall like it does in this one, so it's obvious the rattlers traverse this passage on a frequent basis.

WORMS

Light filters from the opening for only a short distance into the tunnel. The posse needs some sort of light to see after just a few dozen feet. If they don't have anything handy, they can scrounge a lantern at Mahoney's hideout.

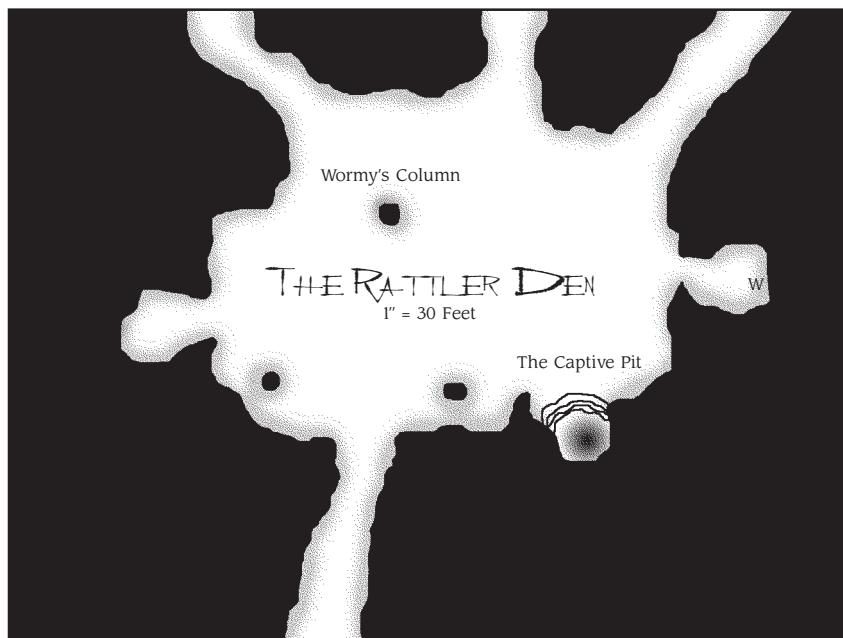
Even though the tunnel is 30 feet across, claustrophobic cowpokes are going to feel a little uncomfortable, and the dirt constantly sifting down through cracks in the dried saliva coating is no help either! Any hero with a fear of closed places suffers a -2 to all Trait and Aptitude checks while in the Rattler tunnels and den.

THE LAIR OF THE WIDE WORMS

Fear Level 5

After half an hour or so of walking, the heroes emerge into a large cavern. The room is over 100 feet across and nearly as tall. Secretions from the worms have hardened the walls and ceiling, making it nearly as sturdy as stone.

This isn't truly a lair for the creatures—it's nowhere near large enough—but it is an intersection for some of their many tunnels. It's also where the crawlers are beginning the creation of a new species of abomination—the wormlings.



Passages enter the room not only at floor level, but from every imaginable angle—some even open in the ceiling! (Underground, rattlers travel in all directions). The floor is littered with bones of previous victims and some vile substance the heroes can only assume is rattler droppings.

Wormy's position is visible from just inside the tunnel entrance if the heroes are using a torch or other makeshift light source. Lanterns and magical sources of light might even allow them to see the shadowy outlines of the opposite wall.

SOMETHING'S STILL HERE!

Hopefully, the posse has arranged for a distraction to draw the rattlers out of the den. Otherwise, there is one of the huge critters here when they arrive! Use the statistics for a standard Mojave rattler (Size 14) in the *Deadlands* rulebook.

The rattlers are tending their “young,” and they immediately attack the posse. Because the creature keeps the majority of its mass hidden in the tunnels, the bonus to hit it due to Size is only +4. Also, don't forget the penalties for poor visibility if the posse's relying on torches or similar sources of light.

Once the fight starts with the rattler, the wormlings (see the end of this chapter for the wormlings description) emerge from their grottoes and attack the posse.

WORMY

Never the picture of health, Wormy has been further weakened by his ordeal. Wormy's skin has become leathery, with a pale yellowish cast. Over a dozen half-healed puncture wounds an inch across dot his distended stomach where the rattlers have siphoned off his blood to use in their hideous experiments.

He doesn't know who the heroes are, but they're human and carrying guns. Anything beats what he's been through recently, and he is really glad to see them!

The rattlers have imprisoned Wormy near the center of the cavern in a column of dirt hardened by their own secretions. Large, dark splotches (from the blood drained from their captives) stain the ground in front of the trapped drunk.

His arms and legs are deeply imbedded in the rock-like mud, and it takes about two minutes of chipping and digging to free him from his bonds. If the posse works together, they should be able to free Wormy before more trouble arrives.

If the posse gives the man first aid or even just a drink of water, he tells them the following as they work to free him:

"I sure am glad to see you folks. I figured I was a goner for sure. Just like them others." He nods to some of the bones and remains around the cavern, showing the posse the horrible carnage the rattlers have caused to the town folks.

"You folks keep an eye out for them other things—them big rattlers and those other things that are runnin' around down here. I don't know what they are, but they sure do move fast!"

When that rattler carried me down here it was as gentle as a mamma holdin' a baby, like it didn't want me to come to no harm. Heh, that's a laugh after what they've done to me since... It's been Hell, I tell ya!

They stuck me here in this mud and then used them snake-tongues a' theirs to suck the blood out of me. They never took too much—I guess they didn't want to kill me.

Them things has brung a whole bunch of folks down here since they caught me—some of 'em I recognized from the town, but others I never even seen before. They stick them over in that hole for a while, until they're ready... there's still a few folks in there right now.

They bring 'em out here in front of me. Then they suck out all of their blood, not a little like they do with me. They suck it all out, then they take a little of mine and mix it with some liquid of their own—maybe it's worm spit, maybe worm blood, I don't know—but they put it in the body.

A little while later, the body begins to change... I can't describe it, but it comes back to life. I reckon they've done made a good dozen or more of those things by now. They're like worm-men or something, but I figure we'll see them right soon anyhow—they live in them smaller caves. Can we leave now?"

Wormy motions to the two caves marked on the map with a "W" at this last remark.

THE CAPTIVE PIT

This is where the rattlers keep their human prisoners until they're ready to convert them to wormlings. Right now, there are two men and one woman in the pit.

One of the men is Robert Altman, a homesteader from near Hilton Springs, and the woman is his wife, Tina. Both were snatched from their farm and carried here a few days ago, and they've been waiting in the pit for whatever fate was in store for them.

Neither one of them has a real sense of how long they've been in the pit because there is no sunrise or sunset underground. Altman and his wife are badly shaken by their ordeal, and they are of little help to the posse. They are capable of walking, however, and gladly follow the heroes out of the tunnels to relative safety.

The other man is Nick Wallace, one of Mahoney's outlaws.

None of the captives has a weapon—the rattlers made sure of that—but if the posse gives Nick a weapon, he helps fight off any attacks on the way to the surface. He's been battered and bruised by his encounter—use the profile for a Red Rock Outlaw in the previous chapter, but give Nick a -1 to all Trait and Aptitude rolls for his wounds.

The pit is about 15 feet deep and steep-walled. There are no handholds on the sides, so the captives can't climb out without assistance from the heroes.

Unless the heroes have a rope or similar item handy, they have to find some more creative method to get the captives to the top. The caves are a little slick, so traveling to the top will be a little difficult. There are ample protrusions around the pit for cowpokes to use for handholds or bracing, so even without a rope, this shouldn't be too difficult a task, unless someone is injured before reaching the top.



THE WORMLINGS

These disgusting creatures are the result of the rattlers' experiments. By mixing Wormy's blood with their own fluids and then injecting the vile mix into captive humans, the rattlers have successfully created "worm-men."

(For those of you familiar with our *Hell on Earth* game, these aren't quite the same creatures. They are *very* similar in abilities and appearance, but they are only the first attempt to create a new race of abominations. Of course, if the posse fails to stop the worms' plan, the rattlers may be successful a whole lot sooner in your campaign than they are in that possible future!)

Wormlings are humanoid in form, but larger than a man. Their yellowish-brown bodies are covered with segmented flesh similar to that of an earthworm. Yellow eyes and a tendril-filled mouth are the only features on their once-human faces. Finally, long, acid-dripping claws sprout from their hands and feet.

When the posse first enters the den, the wormlings are in the two smaller caverns marked with a "W." These rooms serve as living areas for the new monstrosities. Partially dissolved bones—human and animal—are strewn about the floor in the surrounding, smaller caves. Not all of the

rattlers' captives were used for the transformations; some of them were dinner for the wormlings!

If there is a rattler in the den when the posse arrives, the wormlings attack with their larger cousin. However, if the posse drew the crawlers away from the nest, and entered while the tunnels were empty, the wormlings take a stealthier approach.

While the posse works to free Wormy and the other captives, the wormlings burrow under the main chamber and set up an ambush for the characters.

Near the tunnel leading back to Red Rock Ridge, the wormlings dig a couple of pit traps just below the floor (yes, they do dig that quickly!). The hardened rattler spit forms the lid of the traps—it supports its own weight once the dirt beneath it is removed but collapses immediately under the weight of an unsuspecting cowpoke. Then, they wait for the heroes to try to leave the den.

As the heroes exit the main cavern, have each one who looks make a Hard (9) *search* roll. Anyone who makes it detects the traps. If the heroes don't find the pits, have each make a Fair (5) *Nimbleness* roll. Any cowpoke failing the roll falls into a pit, taking 2d6 to a random location.

THE WORMLINGS ATTACK!

As soon as a hero drops into a pit or the entire posse avoids the traps, the wormlings burst from the ground and attack them ruthlessly! Unless the heroes found the trap, or they were somehow expecting the attack, they have to roll surprise against an Incredible (11) TN.

There are currently four of these abominations, plus one for each member of the posse. One of the monsters stays in any pit that trapped an unsuspecting cowpoke, but the others attack the heroes still above ground.

The creatures continue to fight for as long as they outnumber the posse. Once the heroes get the upper hand, the wormlings try to escape. They will protect their hive for as long as necessary, but they won't needlessly sacrifice themselves—they have more work to do later!

WORMLINGS

Corporeal: D:2d6, N:4d10,

Q:3d8, S:4d10, V:4d8

Dodge 4d10, fightin': brawlin' 5d10, sneak 4d10, spittin' 4d6

Mental: C:3d6, K:2d6, M:3d4,

Sm:3d6, Sp:2d8

Search 4d6, trackin' 5d6

Pace: 10

Size: 7

Wind: 16

Terror: 7

Special Abilities:

Acid: Wormlings produce a powerful acid they spray from their mouths. This is normally used when burrowing through rock, but it can be used as a weapon as well. The acid has a Speed of 1, Range Increment of 2, ROF 1, and does 3d10 damage.

Burrowing: Wormlings can move through soil (although not solid rock) at a Pace of 6. They sneak up on prey and grab them from below.

Claws: A wormling's claw does STR+2d10 due to the acid on the claws.



BACK TO THE SURFACE

Once the posse has freed the captives and defeated the wormlings, they've still got a long run through the rattler tunnel back to Red Rock Ridge. As long as they didn't dawdle in the den too long, the trip back should be tense, but uneventful.

Perhaps an occasional rumbling hints at a nearby rattler, or maybe somewhere on the way a minor cave-in slows them down. If the heroes move fast they should make it out without further encounters with rattlers or any of the wormlings.

Mahoney and the rest of the Red Rock Gang lit out shortly after the posse entered the tunnel. Fortunately, the outlaws were grateful enough to leave the heroes' horses and other equipment the posse left alone back at the Red Rock Ridge Gang's camp.

SLOWPOKES

On the other hand, if they fooled around in the main cavern for longer than 30 minutes or so, a small rattler (Size 13) discovers the heroes' handiwork and is soon hot on their trail! The monster tries to overtake the heroes and cut them off while they're still in the tunnel.

If anyone in the posse has less than a Pace 6 (all of the captives have at least a Pace 6), the rattler catches up to the fleeing party. That's bad news—just how bad, we'll leave up to you Marshal, but let's just say there are few places worse to be than in a fragile dirt tunnel and pinned with an angry rattler!

NOT GOING ANYWHERE FOR A WHILE?

If the posse beats the rattler to Red Rock Ridge, they are safe for the moment. After they get things organized, they can lose the monster long enough to make a break for Hilton Springs. Hopefully, the posse learned from Black River Mahoney's experience and doesn't try to hole up on the rocks. If they didn't learn their lesson, and they headed for the ridge, then they're in for a *long* wait!

BOUNTY

The heroes distract the rattlers: 1 white chip
The heroes rescue Wormy and the townsfolk: 1 blue chip

Enemy: You can bet the rattlers are extremely unhappy with the posse for invading their nest and stealing away their precious specimens.

CHAPTER FIVE: A UP FROM THE BAD CASE OF DEPTHS THE WORMS

Once the heroes escape the rattler den and manage to shake any pursuers, they're likely to think they can relax for a bit. Unfortunately for them, the party is just getting started!

The rattlers are relentless around Hilton Springs since they have discovered their secret in combining humans and worms. They will stop at nothing to ensure they have a good supply of specimens.

Once the main group of rattlers has time to regroup, they set off after the heroes. Wormy was very important to the rattlers, and they can't afford to lose him to a few meddling gunslingers.

Assuming the posse headed back to Hilton Springs, the rattlers attack the town in force about 30 minutes after the posse arrives. Three burrow under the town itself, while two others block the road out of town. Any surviving wormlings join the rattlers attacking the town.





WORMS



Have the posse make normal surprise checks at an Incredible (II) TN, unless they have a rattler detector or other method of noting the creatures' approach.

Anyone who succeeds notices a faint shaking of the ground. The vibrations also cause the church bell to chime once just before the attack.

The townsfolk flee at the first sign of attack, but Frank Parson stands and fights beside the posse.

RATTLERS

Corporeal: D:1d4, N:3d6, Q:2d6,
S:6d12+20, V:4d12+20

Fightin': brawlin' 3d6, sneak
2d8 (when underground)

Mental: C:2d10, K:1d4, M:2d10,
Sm:2d8, Sp:1d8
Overawe 2d10

Pace: 10 (see below)

Size: 10-20 (see area
descriptions)

Wind: 40

Terror: 11

Special Abilities:

Armor: 1

Burrowing: Underground
Pace 18 (cannot be
doubled by running).

Damage: Bite (STR+2d10; AP
2)

Surprise: Travelers who
don't recognize the
rumblings of a rattler
beneath them subtract -4
from their surprise
checks.

Tentacles: A rattler seizes

its prey in its tentacles
and drags it into its maw.
While it has many
tentacles, it only attacks
a single target at a time.
The tentacles have 3d12
Strength and are one
quarter the length of the
worm. Once it grapples a
target with a raise on an
opposed *Strength* roll, the
worm begins pulling the
victim toward its mouth.
Every success pulls the
prey 1 yard closer.

The rattler's tentacles
can take 30 hits before
they're useless and the
worm retreats. However,
bullets and other
impaling weapons do
only one point each,
while shotgun blasts and
crushing weapons do 2
points. Cutting weapons
do full damage.

THE SALOON

One of the rattlers (Size 15)
bursts through the floor of
Daly's Saloon and attacks
anyone within the building.
Each round, any character in
the saloon must make an
Onerous (7) *Nimbleness* roll to
avoid being hit by the monster
as it thrashes about. Any
character struck by the rattler's
body takes 1d6 damage to a
random location for each point
he missed the TN. For example,
a hero who rolled a 5 would
take 2d6 damage.

THE STABLE

A second rattler (Size 15) tunnels up into the stable. There it begins to kill any horses it finds. If the heroes don't intervene, the abomination can put down one horse every 5 rounds. Again, due to the confined space, any cowpokes fighting the rattler in the stable must make an Onerous (7) *Nimbleness* roll or take damage as above (**The Saloon**).

MAIN STREET

The largest rattler (Size 18) in the nest erupts from the road right in front of the Marshal's Office. This monstrosity is easily over 80 yards long, although less than half its length ever gets out of the ground.

It's intent on laying waste to the town and any human it finds. The monster uses its tentacles to snare prey in the normal fashion, but it also has a second attack. It attempts to simply crush heroes that are foolish enough to move into open ground with its massive bulk.

To attempt to swat a hero with its body, the rattler must have a clear target. It can't attack characters in buildings and the like—although it can crush most of the buildings, the debris still foils the attack. It must use an Action Card to swat, but if it has another

character in its tentacles, it can continue to draw them into its maw. The monster makes a *fightin': brawlin'* roll with the normal modifiers; if it gets a success and a raise, it slaps its body down on the victim.

If the victim wants to take an active defense against the swat, she must make a *dodge* roll—this sucker's too big to fend off!

Should the rattler actually hit a hero with this attack, the poor sap had better hope she's got a lot of chips to spend! The damage is 6d12+20. Roll the dice and total the result, then determine each wound's location randomly as in an explosion.

Any character caught in the rattler's tentacles takes 1d6 Wind each time it whips itself onto the ground like this—whether or not it's successful!

THE WORMLINGS

If the posse left any of these disgusting hybrids alive, they burst up from the ground near Wormy's location. The wormlings focus on capturing Wormy—the rattlers want him back alive so they can continue producing the wormlings. The man-like abominations aren't so focused on their goal that they ignore any heroes attacking them, but they won't go out of their way to confront one, either.

If Wormy's dead, they join in with their enormous relatives and begin destroying the town and everyone in it. They start their attack at Bufont's Boarding House.

THE ROAD OUT OF TOWN

Two rattlers (Size 15) guard the road out of Hilton Springs. There's one of the critters on either side, about a half mile out of town. The monsters are hiding below the surface and wait until any escapees are directly above them to attack (-4 to Surprise).

RUN AWAY!

The rattlers aren't willing to throw their lives away for the sake of revenge—after all, these monsters live a very long time!

Any individual rattler retreats if its tentacles are cut off. The rules for this are found in the *Deadlands* rulebook. However, the largest monster is older and tougher than the average rattler. Its tentacles take 45 points to sever.

The group as a whole gives up and retreats if the largest rattler is killed or chased away and the other two have at least Serious wounds. If the two smaller rattlers retreat or are killed, the larger rattler fights for one more round and then flees as well.

BUT THEY DIDN'T GO TO TOWN...

It's possible the heroes chose to avoid returning to Hilton Springs altogether. That's okay—it just takes the rattlers longer to find them—make no mistake, though, the rattlers will find them wherever they are. These critters have gotten a good feel for Wormy's scent and are dead-set on bringing him back.

If the posse skirts the town, they've got a whole lot of desert around them—prime real estate for rattlers! There are a few rocky outcrops like Red Rock Ridge, but eventually, they have to move onto open ground. Once they're off the safety of solid rock, they face all five—yes, five!—rattlers, and any surviving wormlings.

In this case, the abominations retreat if the heroes manage to drop three or more of their number. The rattlers also run away when four or more of them have taken Serious wounds and all the wormlings fighting with them are dead.

WHAT TO DO WITH WORMY?

If Wormy lives through his rescue and the final battle with the rattlers, the heroes face a difficult choice. What do they do with Wormy?

WORMS!

The poor man is slowly turning into a wormling himself. He's obviously valuable to the rattlers, and the heroes may have a good idea what the crawlers want with him.

If the monsters get their tentacles on him again, it could mean dire consequences for humanity. They will be able to pursue their evil transformations and create a race of worm-men.

On the other hand, Wormy is an innocent victim. Turning him over to the Agency or the Rangers might not be the ideal solution, since his fate will then be in their hands.

Guess what? There is no "right" answer to this problem. The posse has to work it out, but the solution should provide plenty of opportunities for some Disadvantages like *heroic* and *law o' the West* to come into play!

BOUNTY

The posse helps defend Hilton Springs: 1 red chip.
The posse defeats the rattlers: 1 blue chip.

Bonus: If the posse stays to defend the town, award a point of Grit to any cowpoke tough enough to thwart the rattlers and live.



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Tom
Foster
88