

PLAGUE WAR

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Release Date: July 29, 2008

Ace Books/Penguin Group

\$7.99 U.S./\$8.99 CAN

ISBN 978-0-441016174

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Chapter One

Ruth kicked her way through another tangle of bones, stumbling when her boot caught in a fractured chunk of ribs and vertebrae. Interstate 80 was a graveyard. Thousands of cars packed every mile of the wide road, each one full of slumping ghosts – each one pointing east.

Always east, toward the mountains.

Ruth hiked in the same direction, huffing for air against her face mask. Her movements were less like walking than dancing. She lunged and sidestepped through the wreckage, because many people had also continued on foot as far as they were able. Everywhere their skeletons huddled among endless garbage. Some still held boxes and bags and rags and jewelry. Most had gathered in clumps wherever the standstill traffic pinched too closely together, blocking the way.

Each step was made more difficult by her broken left arm. The cast affected her balance. Worse, she never wanted to look down. The skulls were a silent crowd. Ruth tried to avoid their gaping eyes, so she blinked constantly and glanced sideways and up as she walked, letting her gaze move like a pinball. In three days that dizzy feeling had become normal. Ruth barely remembered anything else. It helped that she always had Cam in front of her and Newcombe behind, walking single-file through the ruins. The steady clumping sound of the men's boot steps were markers for her to follow.

Then they came to a clot of vehicles that had burned and exploded, throwing doors and bodies into the confusion. The spaces in between the cars were thick with splintered bones, steel, and glass.

Cam stopped. "We need to try something else," he said, turning his head from the raised Interstate toward the neat, sprawling grid of the city below. All three of them were wrapped in goggles and face masks, so Ruth couldn't tell exactly where he was looking, but the streets were even worse in the downtown areas. The neat lines of the city were deceptive, full of traps and deadends. The carnage was unimaginable. The human debris filled hundreds of square miles

just here in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, mixed with dogs and birds and every other warm-blooded species.

"This way," Newcombe said, pointing past the blackened cars to the downward slope of the shoulder.

Ruth shook her head. "We'd be better off pushing through." Several drivers had tried to escape by ramming the guardrail, only to overturn on the hill below. She didn't want to start an avalanche of cars.

"She's right," Cam said. "We'll just take it slow."

"Then let me and him go first," Newcombe said to Ruth, stepping past her.

Mark Newcombe was twenty-two, the youngest of them, younger than Ruth by more than a decade, and he had trained as an Army Special Forces soldier for two years before the machine plague. The end of the world had only continued to harden him. His assault rifle, pack, and gun belt weighed fifty pounds – and barely slowed him at all.

Cam's stride was more uneven. He was hurt, like Ruth, which she thought made him a better leader. Cam wasn't so sure. He worried about things, and Ruth liked him for it. He was more willing to admit he was wrong, which was why they were still on the Interstate. The road was bad, but at least it went through. Their small trio had tried to hike cross-country more than once, wherever the residential areas or commercial buildings eased back from the highway, but they'd encountered too many fences and creeks and brittle gray thickets crowded with beetles and deadfalls. Even the burned traffic was better.

Newcombe cut his elbow and both knees before they were through. "Let's keep moving," he said, but as soon as they cleared the burn, Cam made him stop and immediately flushed the wounds with a canteen, trying to outrace the plague. Then he bandaged the cuts, wrapping Newcombe's pantlegs with gauze.

Cam stood up before he was done. "Wait," he said, tilting his head to listen to the sky.

It was a clear blue May afternoon, sunny and calm. Goose bumps prickled up the back of Ruth's neck. *I don't hear anything*, she thought, but the cool, vulnerable shiver in her spine made her turn to stare behind them. She glanced through the dead cars, seeking any threat. Nothing.

Cam shoved at her. "Move! Move!"

They ran beneath the twisted metal bulk of a truck rig. Cam and Newcombe had their guns drawn but Ruth needed her good arm to crawl under the wreckage, suddenly half-blind out of the sun. Her glove crunched in a litter of glass and plastic.

"What –" she said, but then she felt it, too, a low, menacing drumbeat. Helicopters. Again. In the vast ruins of what had been Sacramento, California, there were no longer any sounds except the wind and the rivers and sometimes the bugs. It was a small advantage. So far they'd always heard the choppers while they were still tens of miles away.

Closer this time, and coming fast.

"There was a culvert about a quarter-mile behind us," Ruth said, her mind jumping. Twice before they'd gone underground because the enemy had infrared.

Newcombe grunted, *huh*. "I saw it. Too far."

"Oh." Cam lifted one glove to the inhuman shape of his goggles and hood. "Ants," he said.

Ruth turned to see but cracked her head in the tight space. The crumpled bulk of the trailer read SAFEWAY in letters as long as her body and she said, quietly, "It's a grocery truck."

"Christ." Newcombe scuffled back toward the sunlight, moving on his elbows to keep his rifle out of the grit and dust. But his backpack caught on the metal above him and he had to squeeze even lower, pushing his weapon in front of him.

Ruth clenched her teeth. The cutting roar of the helicopters, Newcombe's struggle just to gain a few inches – it set the fear in her spinning and she realized there was another noise all around them, creeping and soft. The dead had begun to live again. The bones and the garbage vibrated in the rising thunder, rattling, sighing. Somewhere a car door wailed as it sagged open.

"Go," Cam said, just as Newcombe hissed, "Stay back."

Ruth shifted urgently. She had to move even if there was nowhere to go. She had seen ant swarms in the heart of the city like impossible black floods, surging over ceilings and walls, stripping entire buildings of carpet glue, rubber, and upholstery. If they were on top of a colony now, it would be a hideous death.

"We need to get out of here," she said.

"Go," Cam agreed.

Ruth tried to ease past him, shoving herself between the broken asphalt and the white-and-red bulk of the trailer. Then she saw two tendrils of ants.

The choppers slammed across their position, overwhelming her pulse and her mind. Everything in her shook. Everything was noise. The trailer overhead echoed with it and Ruth thought to scream – and then the thunder tipped away, sliding by like a falling building or a train – and Newcombe grabbed her arm.

"Goddammit, stay back!" he yelled as the crushing sound continued past. "They might not be sure! They might only be following the highway!"

Ruth made herself nod. She couldn't breathe. She tried to look out, but when the truck rolled it had hit at least one other vehicle. There was a badly dented beige sedan in front of her, and yet the noise was still a solid thing and easy to follow. It hadn't gone far. It was landing.

Suddenly she could see through a gap between the car's torn fender and wheel well. At first there was only sky and trees. Then she saw two helicopters. Maybe there were more. The aircraft dropped smoothly, meeting the ground with almost perfect symmetry. The side doors on both helicopters were open, spilling men in green containment suits – men without faces or shoulders, deformed by long hoods and air tanks.

"They're down," she said.

There were open fields on this side of the highway, an irregular stretch of flat brown earth where the commercial buildings stopped short of the road. Ruth saw a chain-link fence that might slow the soldiers, but it was leaning over in one spot where they could probably shove it down. The sound of the choppers echoed and rapped from the tall face of a warehouse.

Cam pushed in beside her, craning his neck to see. Ants covered his shoulder. "We can't make our stand here," he told Newcombe.

"The bugs," Ruth said. "Get the bugs between us and them."

"Okay, yeah. Move." Newcombe rolled over and began to pull off his pack.

Ruth turned and scrambled away, looking for Cam as soon as she hit daylight. He came out slapping at one sleeve and they ducked into the motionless cars together.

The glinting she had seen, sunlight on air tanks and weaponry, were there ten soldiers? Twenty?

"Here! Stop!" Cam pulled at her and they circled behind a white Mercedes. "If they come up the embankment we can try to force them back toward the truck."

Ruth nodded, dry-mouthed. Where was Newcombe?

Waiting, she became intensely aware of her exhaustion, old bruises, new hurts. Waiting, she drew her pistol. In another life this much pain would have stopped her already, but she was not who she had been. None of them were. And that was both good and bad. In many ways Ruth Goldman was less complicated now, thinking less, feeling more, and there was real strength in her anger and frustration and shame.

She owed it to her friends to fight. She owed it to herself, for every mistake she'd made.

Panting through the bitter taste of her face mask, Ruth kicked aside the small, partially melted ribcage of a child to reach the car's rear bumper, where she brought her pistol up and braced for the assault.

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A lot of survivors called it Plague Year, or Year One, but it wasn't only human history that had crashed in the long fourteen months since the machine plague. The invisible nanotech devoured all warm-blooded life below 10,000 feet elevation. What remained of the ecosystem was badly out of whack, with only fish, frogs, and reptiles left to whittle down the exploding insect populations—and the land suffered for it. Entire forests had been chewed apart by locusts and termites. Riverways were forever changed by erosion.

States and nations had been obliterated, too. The plague left few habitable zones anywhere in the world, the Rockies, the Andes, the Alps and Himalayas and a few scattered high points here and there. New Zealand. Japan. California. Leadville, Colorado was now the U.S. capital and the greatest military force on the planet. Their capabilities had been reduced by several orders of magnitude, but on every other continent the refugee populations were entrenched in savage land wars, devastated by each other and two winters.

The civil war across North America was tame in comparison. The rebels declared independence and claimed possession of the nearest cities below the barrier, and for the most part everyone had been able to recover enough food, fuel, medicine, and tools to get by.

Mammals and birds could dip into the invisible sea for a time, sometimes hours. Without host bodies, the nanotech was inert. Then it got into the lungs or the eyes or any microscopic break in the skin. It multiplied and spread and multiplied again, disintegrating soft tissue, muscle, and bone to build more of itself.

Scientists everywhere had made huge strides during the past year, especially in the consolidated labs in Leadville, using the plague itself to learn and experiment. The *archos* tech was a versatile prototype, meant to target and destroy cancerous cells. It could have been a godsend. Instead it had killed all of its design team except one when it broke loose in the San Francisco Bay Area—a small tragedy inside the global extinction. No one knew where to find their lab. When they died, their computers and their secrets vanished with them. The one man who escaped had been caught on a high island of rock in the California Sierra until just twenty-nine days ago, when he dared to run for another peak with a ski patrolman named Cam Najarro.

He was dead now, but first he'd devised a cure.

Using his ideas, Ruth and other top researchers became sure they could put together a nano capable of protecting the body from within, like a vaccine—and the slow American war turned hot. The Leadville government thought the situation was too far gone to simply share this new technology and trust in any peace. Overseas, starving armies ate each other's dead and kept prisoners like cattle, and there had been atrocities here as well.

Leadville saw an opportunity to control the only way down from the mountains. It was a chance to own the entire planet, ensuring loyalty, establishing new states, leaving every enemy and undesirable to gradually succumb to famine and war unless perhaps they agreed to come down as slaves. The prize was too great, after too much hardship.

But not everyone felt this greed. The strike team that flew out of Colorado to ransack the *archos* lab was full of moles. A few men and women in key positions disagreed with Leadville's plan, sacrificing their own safety and well-being to get the right people on the plane. All three nanotech experts, all three pilots and seven of the twelve soldiers who landed in Sacramento had gone there hoping to grab the new technology and take it north to Canada, spread it freely and end the fighting. Things went badly. The good guys came out on top only to find themselves trapped in the city, more than half their number killed or captured.

In the end they chose to strip off their containment suits and gamble on the vaccine nano, a hurriedly built first-generation construct. It proved not to be absolute protection against the plague. At times the vaccine was overwhelmed, which left them vulnerable to some pain – but they could stay. They could hide. Three days ago, Ruth and Cam and Staff Sergeant Newcombe had set out on foot through the never-ending destruction to carry the nanotech to survivors everywhere. They thought they'd won. But they were still ninety miles from elevation.

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The pounding scream of the helicopters increased again, tilting closer, and Ruth gaped up at the clear May sky for an instant before she turned and shut her eyes, dizzy with new fear and adrenaline. The choppers would come overhead, she realized. They would cover the squads on the ground. The idea took all the strength out of her and she leaned against the Mercedes – the heavy Mercedes, which Cam must have picked because its solid design might stop rifle fire.

Please, God, she thought.

Newcombe came dodging through the wreckage and bones. He was covered in ants. Unfortunately he couldn't slap at them, clutching his pack against his chest with both arms. He twisted and bucked, banging off of a big gray SUV.

Cam tackled him. The two men hit the ground and then they seemed to be fighting. They flailed at each other, frantic to crush as many ants as possible. Bugs weren't only dangerous because of bites or stings. After all this time, the ants would be enshrouded in nanotech. Every tiny puncture wound might also inject the plague directly into Newcombe's blood, but there wasn't time to hunt out every ant hidden in his gear. Newcombe was already scrambling for his rifle, which he'd dropped, and Cam got one hand on Newcombe's pack and dragged it behind the Mercedes.

"Here, over here!" Cam yelled.

The choppers had definitely lifted off now, cutting the air with their thick, pulsing thunder. Any moment they would rise beyond the truck. Ruth looked at the Mercedes, wondering if she and Cam would fit beneath. Not with their packs.

Then her gaze shot back to Newcombe's gear and froze there in sudden understanding. The top flap was unbuckled and Ruth saw their radio inside, a med kit, socks. No food.

The decoys had been Cam's idea, exploiting this strange environment. Struggling to feed themselves, they'd found stores and homes scoured clean, everything in boxes or paper

bags demolished, so Cam and Newcombe had included as many cans of lard and syrup in their packs as they could carry. It was a clever plan. There were no other living heat sources down here, which could have made them comparatively easy to spot. Six times now, Newcombe had run north or gone back west to leave food traps, drawing in huge frenzies of roaches, ants, beetles, and flies. Frenzies of heat and noise. Two days ago he'd rejoined them as a hazy black storm swelled on the horizon, a violent fog of competing species and colonies, and that had been at least a mile away. How many cans had Newcombe just hacked open?

Cam regularly dosed them with a foul mix of bug spray and perfume, yes, perfume, to hide the mammal smell of their sweat and pheromones, but they weren't more than twenty yards from the truck. If there was a swarm, they would be in the middle of it.

Ruth clenched her left fist, a new habit to fight for control – to punish herself. Several days ago, both bones had been snapped at the wrist, and the grind in the break was always a distraction. She wanted to be more like her friends. She wanted to be as relentless. Her own pack was the lightest and she clawed at it now, too clumsy with her arm in its cast. Somehow her filthy mask had pulled down and she gulped clean-tasting air without regret. Dust and hot sun.

Ruth carried the data index from the *archos* lab, a few computer discs and a sample case of nano-structures. She also had a grenade. She believed it was better to destroy the index than to let it be captured. A brutal choice. The design work might be used to truly defeat the machine plague, but it could also lead to advanced new weaponized nanotech and Leadville had already used a crude nano "snowflake" to liquefy sixteen hundred men and women on the White River Plateau, rebels who dared to try to race them to the *archos* lab. If the soldiers overran her, if the bugs tore her apart –

She closed her fingers on the hard, wire pin of the grenade as the choppers ripped into the sky, sunlight flashing from metal and Plexiglas.

There was no way to keep the vaccine itself from them. Even if she and Cam and Newcombe set a hundred cars on fire, consuming themselves, the microscopic nanotech could still be harvested from their remains, and the human race had been pushed too close to the brink to destroy the vaccine outright. It was better to let Leadville have it than no one, but that was a dangerous idea. It felt like failure.

Ruth stared at the roaring aircraft and let her hatred and bitterness fill her. In that instant, she knew she could do it. She tensed her hand on the arming pin.

"Down!" Cam hit her bad shoulder and Ruth fell, gasping. She was vaguely aware of Newcombe behind him. The other man had hidden against a red commuter car and then Cam blinded her, throwing his body over her head and chest.

She fought him, trying to get to her pack again. He didn't understand and kept shouting, "*Down, stay down –*"

Above them, the deafening thunder veered away. The change was abrupt and distinct. At the same time, a blast wave of twitchy black muck spattered across her bare face and goggles. Ants. Shredded ants.

Ruth bent back from it and screamed, trapped between the road and Cam's weight. Then he swiped at the black rain with his entire upper body and she was free.

A huge spout of insects jetted into the sky. They were carpenter ants, well out of their normal reproductive cycle. Maybe they were always breeding now. The nests and passageways of their colony extended fifty yards in every direction beyond the berm of the highway and the ground there had exploded with thousands of winged males and immature queens, although Ruth saw only the after-effect of the swarm's collision with the

helicopters. The billowing hole immediately filled in again, a cloud of small bodies ready for war.

They were protecting the food that Newcombe had left out. The truck formed a crumpled wall near the center of the storm, fortunately. It deflected most of the flying ants as well as the warriors and worker drones that boiled across the earth. Backwash from the helicopters had dragged the upper layers away, too – and on the far side, the bugs also found competition.

Fourteen months ago, in the space of a few weeks, the ants' food supply had skyrocketed and then dropped off again and the tiny scavengers had evolved to meet the change, ravaging every opportunity, surviving by aggression alone. The Leadville troops would have only a residue of human scent on their containment suits, but they were new. They were moving. And they were nearly on top of the colony.

Dark threads swirled together in the air and lashed down out of Ruth's sight, twisting up and back in the cyclone winds. Both helicopters had swung away but one went low as the other climbed, its engines straining, clogged with ants. In some brief gap in the noise Ruth heard the rattle of submachine guns on full auto, the soldiers fighting back any way they could.

Then she recoiled, her cheek and neck burning with half a dozen bites. "Aaaaa –" The wet blast of ants that painted her were not all dead. Not by far. Many had been chewed apart by the rotors and many more were stunned, some of them stuck in the moisture of their own pulverized companions, but some were still free, and confused and enraged.

Ruth fell to the ground, clubbing at her face and neck. One thought stayed with her. *My pack*. She looked for it as she tottered back onto her knees and Cam was there, stumbling through the junk of his own upturned pack. He had a handful of little glass bottles. He fumbled off the caps and made a pitching motion at her. Perfume. Sweet. It scalded her nostrils and Ruth clutched at her face mask, roughly dragging the fabric up to dislodge any ants still on her cheeks.

"Where –" she said, but he caught her arm, shaking the rest of the bottles out over their heads.

Newcombe joined them, bumping hard. He had a squeeze bottle of insect repellent and punched it against her, crushing ants, spraying juice. It was like breathing turpentine.

"I don't think they've seen us!" Newcombe yelled.

But the drumbeat of the choppers changed again, coming back.

"Run for the culvert!" Cam shouted at her.

"Where's my pack?"

"No, stay down!" Newcombe yelled. "If they see –"

"I have more trap food! There!" Cam yanked at Ruth even as he knelt, propelling her toward the Mercedes and her backpack. "If we stay here we'll die!" he shouted.

He was right. The sun was fading as the bugs thickened. In the shifting new pitch of sound, Ruth understood that one of the chopper pilots must be using his aircraft like a powerful fan, blowing the swarm off of the ground troops.

Off of them and onto us.

"Go! Run!" Cam hollered, jamming a knife into a can of milk. But she hesitated.

He threw the dripping can as hard as he could and bent to stab at another, ignoring the haze of ants on his gloves and knees. He was like that, quick to make the best decision. Cam Najarro was neither a soldier nor a scientist, but he had lived through the entire plague year on a barren, isolated peak where eighty people were ultimately reduced to six by starvation and cold and bugs and madness, and that was an education of a kind that few could match.

He was a good man, though profoundly wounded – and maybe not entirely sane, Ruth sometimes worried. He was so single-minded. He had committed himself to her even before she suggested that advances in nanotech might someday rebuild his damaged body, taking on every role available to him. Scout. Bodyguard. Friend. It was wrong that he should stay while she escaped. Wrong to waste his effort.

Go, she told herself, hefting her pack. The two men were puncturing every last jar and can and they'd finish in seconds. They'd be right behind her.

Ruth jogged into the maze of cars and skeletons, trying to keep her head down. The choppers hadn't moved and she angled away from the noise as much as possible, staggering once when her boot caught in a drift of bones. Then she ricocheted off a brown minivan and hunkered down, coughing, sick with exhaustion. Her face and mouth throbbed but she was mostly free of ants. She rose just enough to peer through the dusty windows of a sedan, trying to spot the enemy.

Some of the soldiers had fallen in the low, living fog. They staggered up, but somehow, one man's suit had ripped. Maybe he'd caught it on the fence. Ruth thought his rubberized sleeve was flapping at the elbow, although it was impossible to tell in the leaping black mass of ants.

His ragged arm swung up like a flag, trailing a dark mist of blood and insects. The bugs were inside him. His shape barely looked human anymore, knotting and jerking as he was eaten alive. Two of the other soldiers tried to lift him away but a third soldier rammed himself into the bleeding man and knocked him down, pointing his submachine gun at the man's chest.

No, Ruth thought. The realization left her stunned. *No, he's aiming at his friend's arm.*

The weapon blazed, amputating the furious bulge of ants but leaving the man's body wide open to more. Ruth couldn't watch. She jerked her eyes away, looking for Cam and Newcombe. But there was another horror behind her. New eruptions had come up out of the earth and covered the road like smoke. There was also a reddish streak pushing in from the northeast, beetles or something else. At the same time, another phenomenon stirred through the haze of ants. The machine plague. Even the bugs were not immune, as Ruth had long suspected. In their frenzy, the ants were generating too much heat despite the cool May afternoon – and within the cloud, holes burst open like fireworks as the ants disintegrated.

Ruth stared in mute awe. Then her heart leapt as a human form sprinted between two cars nearby. Cam. He ran with an odd limping motion, swatting at his collar and hood. Newcombe appeared close behind. Ruth waved frantically even as she cut her eyes back to the enemy, trying to see the wounded soldier again.

One glimpse convinced her. Newcombe was right. Leadville had almost certainly detected some trace of her group, but as the helicopters flew in, the larger heat signature of the ant colony had deceived them. Now they were done. It was a spectacular mess. Dense spirals of ants whipped through downdrafts and currents as the last men on the ground fled, hauling the bloodied soldier aboard a crowded flight deck. He was limp now, dead or unconscious, but the writhing shadow of ants remained attached to him even his friends kicked and slapped at his body.

The other chopper was already lifting away and Ruth allowed herself a small, savage smile.

It looked like her luck was holding.