



RAID ON THE BARTER DIAMOND

THE VARIANT EFFECT: **ZONE BETWEEN SERIES BOOK ONE**

G. WELLS TAYLOR

RAID ON THE BARTER DIAMOND

The Variant Effect

ZONE BETWEEN SERIES

G. Wells Taylor

(eBook Sample)

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Sample the **ZONE BETWEEN**

SERIES Book Two - Treasure of the Barter Diamond

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Acknowledgments:

This book is for the readers who have followed The Variant Effect since day one.

And many thanks again to editor Katherine Tomlinson for her exceptional work on this installment and the complete series.

PART ONE: PROSPECTORS

Chapter 1

Freddie-boy set another chunk of wood on the coals, and moved back from the fire pit, taking care to avoid stepping on the sleepers gathered around it on their bedrolls.

It was something he could have managed blindfolded, thanks to all their snoring and snuffling. Freddie didn't think much of the racket his companions made but it went along with the rotgut most had consumed before sleep.

The drink hadn't come with a party either. They were a grim lot at the best of times—all business—but then, most travelers in these lands were gripped

with somber dread before going off to sleep on an open patch of ground.

If you were going to die in the Zone Between, then it was likely to happen after dark—even in early July, when the nights were still shorter than the days.

Freddie pulled his blanket tight over his shoulders as he moved into the shadows to hunker down with his back set against a dead tree, and a shotgun balanced on his skinny knees.

It was bad enough having to watch for blood mad and starving dogs, coyotes, and wolf packs—even if they were getting harder to come by. But to also have to guard against raiders and the lawless men and women that reaved

over the Zone ... It was an unsettling prospect for a young survivor like Freddie-boy.

And that wasn't even including the poison folk or *kinderkind* that were said to wander the night. They went by different names depending who you talked to, but he'd heard them called wens, blisters, and phantoms, all of them lurking about hungry or vengeful.

Freddie-boy cursed himself at the first thought of *creepers*—what he considered to be the worst of the breed. He'd never seen one of them in full bloom himself, thank God, but at their worst, they supposedly went about disguised as any old settler or trader that you might have seen before, until the

shadows dropped and their skins burst out with teeth and tentacles.

He grumbled. Freddie would have no trouble staying awake now that he had the jitters. It was his own fault for listening to Pop Dawson with his stories of the days gone by when folks were changed by toxins into snippers, snappers, biters, and burners, well, that talk could ruin anyone's sleep.

He glanced up at the stars past the twisted tree boughs. Freddie always got first watch because he was youngest, and was denied any rotgut.

He didn't mind the time alone so much, despite its looming horrors.

A few hours watching over the others gave him a feeling of importance, and

his rangy young body would never sleep the night through if he went to bed with the sun.

Not even after a long day of travel.

No. First watch gave him time to reflect and ponder the choices and chances that set him in that dangerous place.

Freddie-boy was three years old when the world ended. His parents died soon after and left him wandering the ruins until he was “adopted” by other sad survivors who found him scavenging candies at a burned-out dollar store.

They’d taken him to an encampment in the greener lands bordering the city’s smoldering wreckage, where he lived

hard and grew up as a refugee, wandering from this camp or settlement to the next, until his seventh birthday when he was sold by his adoptive “family” to apprentice for a trader named Dealer Bang.

Since Freddie had fled the fires without firm knowledge of his last name, he’d taken his employer’s out of respect, and to keep it sorted in buyers’ minds and with other traders at the barter tables.

It was clear they weren’t father and son by blood, since Bang called himself *Asian*, and referred to the boy as “likely African.”

Dealer Bang was a trader or prospector, depending on whom you

talked to, since others in his line of work also called themselves merchants, vendors, and sellers—before the classifications tuned into finer details and services like tooth pulling, carpentry, and blacksmithing.

Traders of the *prospecting* variety specialized in the recovery of preserved goods, precious metals, and lost valuables.

Freddie's employer was a generous fellow when a good day's work had been put in, and the liquor was being passed around the fire—and you were old enough.

Dealer Bang's wife and daughter had died of infection a month after the city stopped burning, or so old Pop had said

just between him and Freddie.

For that reason, the trader was not keen to have his heart broken in wedlock again, so had focused on his business aspirations instead.

Pop said Bang had arranged to leave his barter goods to Freddie-boy if the end came on him unexpected, but the apprentice avoided thinking of such loss in a world already full of it.

Being the youngest and most nimble often meant Freddie was the first to be sent down a played-out well to look for water, or into a collapsed building in search of swag. It was always something tricky, but his successes had given him a reputation of having good luck.

Dealer Bang's group was a small one this time out. He'd hired the experienced but inexpensive freelancers to help recover a trove of bottled water that a one-eyed prospector had claimed to find buried near some ruins on the way to the Q-Line.

Freddie-boy was told the Q-Line had been a last line of defense when the world was ending, but it was now just a string of rusty metal poles with scraps of wire hanging off here and there. It had been scavenged along its length for components used to construct the settlements.

The one-eyed man had left the swag in place while he went to hire a

recovery crew and would have returned to claim his buried water if some bad liquor hadn't left him blind in the remaining orb, and babbling the treasure's whereabouts before he died of fever.

Bang had acquired the information in exchange for five large chocolate bars donated to the Brothers of Christ mission at the Bunker Hill settlement where the poor fellow spent his final days.

The brothers had jotted down the prospector's ravings before he passed, so Freddie's employer confirmed those details by consulting his old highway maps. That took a keen eye and memory, since most of the roads were overgrown now with cars all but extinct, and the

remaining fuel being hoarded to use for light and heat in emergency situations, or as a devastating weapon of war.

Bang had learned enough to confidently draw up his own treasure map from that research, and had kept it in his vest ever since.

Freddie-boy straightened up when he heard their mounts fussing where they were staked on the other side of the tree against which he leaned.

Pigs made for slow riding, but they were smart, and quick to nose out threats.

When they quieted down again, Freddie-boy's attention switched back to the fire.

Chapter 2

Freddie-boy was awake with the sun to rouse the fire up and set water to boil, before opening a sack of corn to feed the pigs. He staggered sleepily over to relieve himself behind the tree a few strides past where the animals ate, leaving his older companions to hack and spit as they went about their own morning business in the dim, portioning out dried coffee crystals, or chewing gnarly strips of jerky.

The riding pigs were bred less ornery than the porkers raised as food because of their close working relationship with people. That made them tolerable

company for Freddie to pass the wee hours, or like now as the crew complained about poor sleep while stamping blood back into their cold feet.

Travel had become difficult after the fuel dried up. Pop Dawson had laughed off the threat of the Zone's nocturnal dangers, since the distances alone were enough to kill people who were used to *driving* cars everywhere.

Survivors had fought over whatever fuel they could find until it was mostly used up after the first few years.

Electric vehicles became useless without a power grid to recharge them, though Freddie-boy had only a vague idea of what that entailed.

That left bicycles and other push-

powered rigs for transport while the vegetation smothered the roads that crisscrossed the Zone Between.

A few petting zoos, hobby farms, and riding stables had horses, donkeys, and other large animals that were put to work. At least, any that hadn't been eaten along with all the cows during the first period when people were still crazy with toxins, and unable to believe that the world had changed forever.

During that time, some sharp trader from far off must have relieved a factory farm of its tallest pigs and started breeding them for strength, size, and speed. The rapid reproduction of swine allowed for two litters of up to ten piglets a year, with a profitable market

for the flesh of any runts or stillborn waiting.

Freddie had heard it told that the venture had been in operation for years before rumors started circulating about such goings on, and it inspired other sharp operators to do the same with their pigs, or sheep, and any sturdy creature that wasn't needed for the table.

Some said scientists had already been breeding a hardy pig that would hold up to climate change—and that these had been bred in with the riding stock, too.

There was talk of people raising horses in distant places, and some of the animals had shown up in the Zone Between; but, such mounts were coveted, and if they couldn't be

purchased by all, then they were shot on sight.

People who rode pigs knew they could not compete with horsemen, so until those prancers were common, they were not welcome.

Only a fool would ride one of the beasts now, with every gun owner in the Zone drawing a bead on them.

Feeding swine was little trouble, since there was plenty to eat outside the city ruins by way of feral game, ample vegetation, and garbage pits—and the harsh new world provided lots of dead things to dig up and scarf down.

When the first riding pigs were brought to the settlements, they came

with longer legs and narrower torsos, while also having leaner, more muscular bodies.

The porkers were fairly comfortable mounts that were fast in a jostling sprint, but still slow and steady cross-country with their general body shape keeping them from much sustained speed, despite the longer legs that kept their bellies two feet off the ground.

They were constant travelers though, and could dawdle on forever with their great appetites and resulting reserves of calories—powered as they were by an ability to eat almost anything organic, and a willingness to walk to any food or water they could smell.

The breed had a long way to go, as

any pig rider would tell you, but Pop said that with only eleven or twelve years passing since the end, it was likely that they'd have a show jumper before long.

If things didn't get worse, and starvation didn't drive people to eat them all.

In the meantime, pigs, sheep, and other beasts of a larger size were drafted to pull carts, carry loads, and power winches and water pumps.

Pop Dawson said it would never do for the Mercedes set, a joke that went over Freddie-boy's head the way many of the old man's references did.

Pop had a lot of history, but he kept its true nature to himself.

Dealer Bang had arranged to send the old fellow a confidential invitation to work through a mutual friend at the Zone Express Mail a week before, and Pop replied that he'd meet them at Homestead on the date they departed.

When the group started riding east at dawn, Pop joined them on the trail in sight of the settlement, and they traveled until sunset when they made camp just west of the Lost Highway.

And here it was, dawn again.

Pop Dawson was said to be at least seventy, and his movements attested to that—especially after a night on a bedroll.

He stood five and a half feet tall, and

had a rounded back and shoulders that made him look even shorter. He limped with a slow gait on slightly crooked legs, and there was a *thick* look to him, likely exaggerated by his long torso, and short limbs.

Freddie knew he was dangerous in a fight though, and had heard he'd do anything for coin if he were thirsty enough.

When he showed up this time, Bang had declared that Pop must have been doing well, since he hadn't eaten his riding pig.

The big boar was gray with black tufts over its body. It also had a pair of stumpy yellow tusks curling off its lower jaw.

Pop called him Sam, short for *Samwich*, because “that pig’s gotta know that if he fails as a mount, I’ll see he succeeds at lunch!”

Freddie-boy was sure he was joking, since the old man was never cruel to the pig and even spoke kindly of Sam in comparison to thieves that vexed the population in the Zone.

Pop’s tanned face was lined by age, and scarred by experience. He wore a thick handlebar moustache that was mostly white with a dense core of dark threads winding through it. His gray hair was thick and shoulder-length with stark white at the temples.

The old man had bits of vinyl and

metal armor sewn onto the shoulders of his worn leather jacket and overcoat. He wore a heavily patched canvas coverall underneath with knee-high pigskin riding boots.

Pop's look was topped off by an antique cowboy hat that was sand-colored at the brim and crown, but sweat-stained nearly black where it pressed against his brow.

“Hurry and ready those porkers,” Bang wandered up to say. “I'd like to get there in time to dig for the swag!”

Chapter 3

Freddie-boy slowed where a stretch of asphalt was clear of plants and recognizable, though its wrinkled surface had been deformed by the elements.

The trail was like that east of Homestead, twisting and turning past overgrown ruins, through mounds of older vegetation, and into choking stands of new plants and trees.

He pulled his mount's reins to halt the beast, before looking north where the cracked blacktop disappeared beneath the long grass and skinny saplings a hundred yards on.

Ungroomed older trees sagged to either side, framing the Lost Highway, and forming a broad ‘V’ shape overflowing with pink and blue sky, and clouds.

Freddie-boy had only flashes of memory from his time in the ruined city, but those were dark and carried no splash of color—except for fire—so the brilliant sky was like a dream to him.

The vision of the soaring arrowhead held him in place. Thrusting down from the heavens, it promised wonders to a young mind bored by chores and grass and pigs.

A great snort came from behind, and he turned to see Pop Dawson stop his

own mount at the edge of the open space.

“Charlie balking?” he grated, scowling through his whiskers. The pink light from above glimmered in his old eyes.

Charlie was the brown boar that Freddie rode—a young swine with a good disposition and a taste for hot peppers.

“No!” Freddie-boy said, gesturing at the northern sky. “We’re taking it all in.”

“Don’t let it fool you, kid!” The old man nudged his pig forward. “Anything that city could have been was burned long ago. Burned, and poisoned!”

“Whatcha mean?” Freddie was wary of Pop’s simmering rage.

“Stay clear of it is what I mean!” the

old man warned. “The Zone Between will kill you dead, but it won’t leave you stained like the city will.”

He kicked the sides of his pig and started past the lad.

“I never been north of the Trading Post—*since* ...” Freddie-boy said, nudging Charlie after him. “Since I left ...”

“Lucky boy!” Pop sneered, with a sidelong glare. “Buy a lottery ticket!”

Pop whipped Sam with his reins and the startled pig sprinted south.

Freddie goaded Charlie on, trying to keep up.

The teen was pondering the Trading Post, a small collection of tents and

wooden cabins two-day's ride north if he were to turn his pig around and keep to the Lost Highway. The outpost formed the northernmost point of the Barter Diamond Road—a trail that traders and travelers used to move between the settlements in the south, east, and west of the Zone.

The Trading Post hosted prospectors and their teams when they dared visit to sell goods, and trade for swag recovered from the burned-out city in the north. However, most were cautious bringing such products back into the settlements since things dug up close to the city were often defiled by disease, toxins, and fires of the old world.

It was near the Trading Post that

Freddie had first seen a *wen*, one of the *polk* that grew up in the leavings. He'd been told by Bang to wait with their mounts in a stand of trees hidden from the outpost, while his boss hiked in to barter afoot. Rumors had said that a business tax on visitors sometimes amounted to a riding pig's flesh and harness.

Polk was short for *poison folk*, and the one Freddie saw hadn't lived up to the stories, since it was nothing more than a young girl with a twisted mass of rough pimples on most of her face, and one hand that was shaped like a fish's fin.

She was going by in a hurry, likely having been turned out by her family

before she changed worse, and they'd have had to put her down with a bullet.

Riding after Pop, Freddie-boy wondered whether the old man had ever been on one of Dealer Bang's rare trips to the Trading Post, and if that was where he started harboring his anger for it and the city ruins. Freddie hadn't been to trade there himself more than a couple times—and was always left a ways off to tend the mounts.

As he understood it, prospectors did most of their trading in the lower parts of the Diamond, and travelers avoided the Trading Post unless the Devil himself was at their heels. Beyond commerce, there was no reason to visit the outpost or the burned city it served.

Freddie-boy caught up to Dealer Bang and the others in time to be handed the leads for the two pack pigs. The massive hogs were draped with harness and netting that Bang would use for hauling the swag back to Homestead.

The beasts had been under the care of Raz and Dolly. Raz was thirty-years old, a lean and lanky scrapper with a long beard, who was up to doing all the digging and climbing that Freddie could do, but who also specialized in fighting. He carried a six-shooter and a flintlock rifle as well as a machete and several sharp knives on his belt.

Raz bragged about the bullets he still had for the handgun, since he'd prided

himself on facing most threats with his blades. His flintlock was a ball and powder set up that the scarcity of ammunition had forced on most people in the Zone.

Bullets weren't scarce so much as they were hoarded with the remaining fuel.

Raz was a rascal who liked to gamble at cards and drink whisky. He also hinted at other things he liked, but held back due to Freddie's "delicate" age. He wore a broad-brimmed hat, and rugged denim and canvas clothing with pieces of handmade armor strapped over it.

Raz rode a blue-gray hog that he called *Blue*.

Dolly was a black woman of “thirtysomething” years as Raz told it. She was pretty in a stern way, with a crooked nose and scars on the left side of her face.

She'd said those came from the men she killed leaving the city when the world ended. Freddie-boy had taken a shine to her when they first met, and she'd been sweet enough in her way.

Her body was compact and powerfully built, with “all the right curves,” as Raz had whispered over cards. She wore a padded leather jacket with armored joints, tight denim pants, and high boots.

Dolly carried an axe on a sling over her shoulder, and a short army sword at

her waist opposite a ball and powder pistol. A side-by-side shotgun hung from the saddle of her mount *Pinky*.

They rode after Pop, leaving Freddie-boy with Dealer Bang.

Freddie was slow to start a conversation with his adoptive parent and employer, though he was eager to talk whenever Bang encouraged it.

“Careful of Dawson,” Dealer advised, suddenly, where he rode to Freddie’s left. “He’s a misanthrope.”

“What’s that?” Freddie-boy asked, tugging at the pack-pig leads.

“*Misanthrope?*” Bang’s narrow eyes disappeared as his smile tightened.

“Means he hates people.”

“Really?” Freddie looked down, puzzled. “He’s nice enough to me.”

“You aren’t a full-grown man!” Dealer said, coaxing his pig forward. “Pop spaces these jobs so he only gets us adult folks in drips and drops.”

“Oh,” Freddie-boy said, quietly. He had always enjoyed the old prospector’s company.

“Why else you think he lives up in those hills?” Bang’s expression hardened as he rose in his stirrups, pulling a rolled-up paper from his vest, and gauging the landscape.

“Dead Tree Forest straight west of us,” he grunted, eyeing the map. “We’re getting close.”

Chapter 4

Around noon, they reached a spot where the trail's edges were lost beneath brush and tall grasses, but a general shape of the original highway remained when viewed from a distance.

They'd noticed several trees down and torn up, too.

Dealer Bang grumbled something about "twisters" as he surveyed the area from his saddle with map in hand.

"*That way, Raz!*" he said, pointing to their left where a hump in the landscape suggested something buried. "Look for cinderblocks."

Raz offered a dash of smile, and

gestured for Dolly to accompany him. She had her shotgun ready as she coaxed Pinky forward.

Off to Freddie-boy's right, Pop growled, drew his black revolver, and followed.

"Hold back, lad," Dealer Bang said, raising a hand to check Freddie's movement. "I pay *them* for this."

Freddie-boy nodded, frustrated. He could see where the swag likely lay, just by the drift of the land. Such things came easy for him, and Bang knew it.

The teen tugged at the pig-lead line with one hand slipping toward his own pistol. It was a single-shot ball and powder affair, but he could hit anything in range that he pointed it at.

Dealer Bang had drawn his own handgun, a big, nickel-plated “Magnum” as he called it, referring to the weapon as a *dangerous indulgence*, since the piece *with* ammunition would draw the envious eye of any bandit in the Zone Between.

Bang was comforted to know that the Magnum outperformed most killing hardware in those parts, and any thief that coveted the gun would go to final judgment with a fist-sized hole in him.

Dealer carried it for his own protection because he was risk averse in the profit sense, and so his choice of the relatively small group of freelancers to undertake the recovery of the rumored water. Some swag was windfall, and

some could attract a lethal amount of attention if rumors carried far.

Potable water was highly prized, so he had hired a couple guns for protection. Had it been a whisky find, he'd have sprung for a dozen gunmen.

Dealer Bang had dark-brown skin, well weathered from his time on the Barter Diamond. He had *Asian* features as he called them, with heavy eyelids, dark irises, and full lips. His flat face was divided by a long handlebar moustache that trailed down well past his pointed chin.

He was Pop's height, but appeared taller in his riding boots, bulletproof vest, and thick overcoat. Additionally,

he favored a tall, felt top hat that he'd traded out of a big haul of *theater* goods pulled from the ruins up north.

He kept his small accounting book tucked up in the hat, along with a receipt pad, and a small cache of coin.

On cold nights, Bang wore it to bed with his scarf looped over the top and under his chin.

“Pop’s waving us over!” Freddie-boy said, as Bang prodded his old boar Cannibal on. The big black pig grunted its displeasure, before lunging suddenly, sideswiping Freddie’s mount in the process.

No one in the group liked Cannibal, especially the other pigs.

The riders followed their companions' path through the tall grass to arrive finally at a four-foot mound that Raz and Dolly had cleared of plants and vines to show a tumbled wall.

Dealer Bang dismounted and went to work, running his hand over the gray brick, glancing at his map, and peering up at the sky.

“We have it, by God,” he muttered, stepping back and casting his half-closed eyes around, orienting the overgrown debris with the obscured highway's shape, and the brown line of the Tangled Hills to the west. “This wall runs parallel ...”

He looked down, placing his heels close to the ruin.

“Twenty paces,” he said, referencing the notes on his map, before striding farther east into the field.

Raz and Dolly dismounted and followed him to either side, as their mounts started chewing the grass with the other pigs.

A short way north of them, Pop sat astride Sam on what could have been a natural rise, or something buried. The old prospector held his chunky-looking handgun level, watching the land around the site.

“*Here!*” Bang said, suddenly halting knee-deep in the rough grasses where he bent to pull foliage away from a smaller mound.

Raz and Dolly started yanking at a

dead sapling that stuck out of the hump.

Freddie-boy dismounted and staked out a line to bind the pigs, then grabbed a shovel that was tied to Charlie and headed over to the digging. They'd already pulled aside a mat of grassy refuse to show cracked gray asphalt beneath. This led them to more crumbled stone and brick.

“Hey!” Dealer cried, having stamped a few paces away from them. He heaved a rotten board up, and with it a clump of dried brown grass.

“One-eye dug under *here!*” He looked over, beaming at his companions.

They soon exposed stairs in a cleft of dirt and rock that led down into

darkness.

Raz drew his machete and clambered in, pausing below ground to light a candle.

“Here we go!” he said, descending cautiously. Freddie saw the stained concrete floor in the amber light, no more than ten feet down. A damp and musty breath of air billowed up. “Door’s warped in the frame.” There was a sudden sharp squeak! “*Got it!*”

“Well?” Bang shouted.

“Water!” Raz bellowed. “Packs of twenty-four—ten of them on a shelf. More below—and some look like cola bottles!”

“Good, good!” Dealer Bang said, rising to look at Freddie. “Get your thin

ass down there to give a hand heaving it out!”

He turned to Dolly.

“You go south of us, and keep a watch,” he said. “It’s time we start worrying.”

“How did the one-eyed prospector find that stuff, I wonder?” Freddie-boy said, biting at a hunk of jerky. His shirt was soaked through with sweat from three hours of toil. They were taking a break after recovering the swag. “Seems anyone would just ride by these humps of grass.”

“He might have worked here before the end, or lived nearby. It’s a storeroom behind a gas station I’ll bet,” Pop said,

squatting by the fire to get some coffee. “Seems forever ago to you kid, but the world hasn’t been gone that long for some of us.”

“So, there’s houses and such buried around here?” Dolly wondered, aloud.

“And grown-over ruins ...” Pop hunkered down with his coffee, using his saddle as a stool. “People were full of toxins and crazy. They raped and burned everything the first two years.” He waved a scarred hand at the grassy landscape’s rolling contours. “It’s mostly basements and bones under all the green.”

“*Bones?*” Freddie-boy blurted.

“People went berserk!” Pop gestured around them again. “This was all *houses*

and streets—the suburbs.”

“I want to ride until dark,” Dealer Bang said, approaching to grab some coffee for himself with an eye on the pile of swag’s long shadow. “Water’s worth killing for.”

Chapter 5

Freddie-boy finished feeding the crew their beans, while full night came on without a star in the sky thanks to clouds that had crept in over their last miles. They'd pushed hard north from one-eye's claim to reach a campsite near sunset well west of the Lost Highway.

Dealer Bang had picked an open space atop a low rise to camp, where a couple dead trees and a dense grove of cedars would break the wind, and hide their little fire.

The site overlooked a dry streambed that angled past, traveling from the southwest before disappearing under the

trail, and rising again to continue on a northeast course.

The dusty channel looked hopeless at first glance, though most thirsty travelers knew that the crossing still offered relief. Early explorers of the Zone had discovered a trickle there coming from an underground spring that had once fed a well by an old farmhouse that lay in ruins.

It became the Lower Diamond Road's first official water stop, one of many that were later mapped and maintained by travelers and settlements alike. Later, stone cisterns were built to collect the water, and protect the springs.

Like all water holes, they attracted predators, though strict settlement

agreements punished the human variety with summary execution.

Individuals rarely camped near them, while armed groups like Bang's could protect themselves from the desperate and feral.

Freddie wiped out the cooking pot and dishes while his companions placed their bedrolls around the fire, checked their guns and weapons, and settled in.

He was taking first watch again, but had been told that the last two would be covered in pairs. Dolly and Bang would guard second, and Raz and Pop third.

The plan was to get some rest in the darkest hours before starting the day-long ride to Homestead.

Dealer Bang had considered pushing on all night, but they'd have to travel slowly, and be surrounded by pitch black the whole while.

Easy to get ambushed that way.

Lighting a cookfire was another, but at least they'd be settled in and ready, with the flames at their backs should anyone come for the swag.

Freddie-boy would mark the time with Bang's wind-up watch, before turning the device over to the next guards that he'd wake in two hours.

Freddie had asked Pop on the way to his bedroll, if he'd noticed any sign or track that indicated trouble, but the prospector shook his head and grunted:

“Too dark to tell!”

The teen had already been stymied by shadows.

He perched himself on a pile of firewood that he'd chopped from a big, fallen branch, and watched over the sleepers from there, where sidelong glances showed the pigs on a line to his left. The big net bags of swag had been pulled off the pack porkers and set between the beasts and the blaze.

Bang had tallied their find at five-hundred plastic bottles of water, one hundred bottles of cola, and the same of ginger ale.

They'd broken down some of the vacuum-wrapped cartons to split the swag into the net bags for loading on the

pack pigs. Those beasts had the water, while the bottles of cola and ginger ale were shared between the other mounts in smaller bags.

Dealer Bang was unsure how much the pack pigs could transport, but splitting the load made sense, since the crew might need speed if there was trouble.

Bang had offered each crewmember a cola or ginger ale to celebrate the find, though only Freddie-boy and Dolly had taken him up on it.

She'd had her cola with jerky and biscuits before rolling into her blankets.

Freddie was still working on his.

It was warm, so a little stale tasting, and there was no fizz to speak of. He had

a sweet tooth though, so he savored small sips.

His companions quickly fell asleep, and the night filled with the rhythmic sound of their breathing. They were tired, so no rotgut was shared.

Freddie-boy sat on the firewood, thinking back on the day, and ahead to the morrow, wondering if that pretty girl Annie Gamble would be at the Homestead barter where she traveled with her parents to sell the clothing they made.

The Gambles visited from their home at Rifle Roundup settlement, and usually depended on traders to distribute their goods. It was why they offered them the

wholesale price, but when the barter there was not well attended, they sometimes acted as traders themselves.

Freddie would have to be patient if Annie wasn't at Homestead, and hope to see her the next time Dealer Bang arranged a trip to her settlement.

There was no set way of traveling the Barter Diamond, other than to visit its stops with company, since there was safety in numbers. And, then it was more about product, and a trader's patience.

But something like this water? He knew Bang would want to sell it quickly. The lot of it represented too large a valuable to possess, and people were suspicious about perishable goods ...

However, there was always a market

for clean water on the Diamond.

It was precious.

Freddie glanced around uncertainly then, his ears honing in on the rush of wind through the grass.

Water would be precious out here, too!

There were lots of things living beyond the settlement walls. That was why they'd recovered the water so quickly, and started for the Homestead barter.

He sat a while longer, eyes glazing over as the fire died down to small flickers on the coals. Freddie-boy was thinking about Annie Gamble. She was tall, and well shaped. He remembered their fingertips brushing one time when

she'd handed him a shirt that caught his fancy ...

He gasped, and sat straight up! For a second, he thought he'd fallen asleep. The memory of Annie's eyes echoed, and the flowery smell of her hair was sharp about him.

Freddie tried to focus on the fire pit. His companions around it were silent, but the flames were dead. He paced over and set another piece of wood on the coals, then headed back to his seat.

And he froze.

There was a sound on the wind. It was almost as if his dream was continuing. It was a woman's voice. *Annie?* They were soft cooing sounds

that he thought was singing.

Or maybe tears and crying. Was that it?

The grassy stalks moved again, the wind slipping through like secrets off the east side of the camp, and he couldn't help but glance that way—even as small flames burst up from the dry wood he'd just set on the coals.

A young woman was kneeling ten yards away with the tall grass waving at her hips. Shadows danced across the faded print dress.

Her face was lost to him, bent forward as she was. The features were draped by long black hair. Her shuddering shoulders were narrow.

And she was crying.

Wake the crew!

But why was she crying?

This was no Annie Gamble, whose hair was curly and shiny red. But he guessed her age to be the same.

Close to Freddie-boy's.

He hefted his shotgun, cocking both barrels as he moved toward the trampled edge of their small camp.

Long grass swayed in the amber light.

He kept to the girl's left, so the glow from the fire stayed on her.

“Are you okay?” he whispered, mouth dry.

She straightened, and her hair fell back with her mask.

A pig squealed behind him.

Chapter 6

As the mask came off, a surge of beans and bile roiled Freddie-boy's guts.

There were few facial features left, just crimson eyes blazing in a patchwork of scars, yellow bone, and shiny blisters.

She shrieked and rushed at him through the grass.

In his nervous state, Freddie fired both barrels clumsily, and missed, which brought another hungry cry from the girl.

Her dress fell away as she moved on all fours to show the body beneath wrapped in filthy cloth and fur—with flesh showing red and greasy in the gaps.

Pop Dawson's gun gave one loud *CRACK*, and something screeched.

Then a *BOOM* sounded from Dealer Bang's big revolver, which brought an ungodly squealing from the pigs.

When the girl closed with Freddie, he whacked her head with his shotgun, and pulled his knife with his other hand.

She struck him in the belly and knocked him back to wrestle in the dirt.

Freddie dropped the shotgun to wrap those fingers around her throat, as he tried to stick her with his knife.

But her ravaged hands were throttling that wrist.

Another *BOOM* came from Bang's gun, and the pigs squealed in terror

again.

Rapid *thudding* followed close, as other things ran toward them from the dark.

Bang shouted orders!

Freddie-boy kept his grip on the girl's neck as she snapped her jagged teeth at him, her lidless eyes gleaming in the firelight.

The girl was nimble and strong, and cunning as she subtly reversed direction, pulling and wrenching as he thrust with the blade, and almost sticking his leg with it.

When they rolled over, Freddie was sickened by the stench of rot that came from her. His hand slipped on the pus

that oozed from sores on her throat. Spatters of it struck his face as they tumbled.

She gave a scream, and scrambled atop him. The girl stamped a leather-bound foot on Freddie's face, and wrenched his knife away.

She flung the weapon aside to glare down on him with foaming mouth wide and teeth champing. Hissing, the girl lunged for his face.

But, Pop's gun fired again, and her skull exploded, showering Freddie with gore as he pushed the twitching corpse aside, and rolled away.

“Load *that!*” Pop staggered into the firelight to kick Freddie's shotgun

closer. “And get your back to the flames.”

Freddie twisted into a sitting position, lifting his shotgun, and wiping the gore from his eyes.

“Hurry, boy!” Dealer Bang called, as he moved over by Pop. Opposite them, Dolly and Raz had their backs to the fire pit.

Pop shot at a glossy, scarlet shape that sprinted out of the long grass. A dying man stripped of flesh and skin fell screaming on the ground nearby.

Freddie-boy got to his feet in time to see another speeding creature go for Raz, but the gunman’s machete flashed and the thing’s head bounced over the ground and into the fire.

Freddie stumbled closer, grabbing for the shells in his pocket as Pop reached out and yanked him near.

“Wake up, *damn you!*” the old man snarled.

“Watch the porkers!” Dealer Bang roared, firing his gun again, as something wailed over by the line of mounts.

“They’re after the pigs!” Pop said.
“For food and *skin!*”

“Well, they aren’t having them!” Bang answered, and the fire kicked up when Dolly threw more wood on.

In moments, the blaze rose enough to show their attackers. Most lay dying or wounded, while others popped up in the grass, creeping near the pigs.

Freddie-boy was worried about them

hiding on the other side of the trees, but doubted any could take a porker now that the crew was up and watching with the fire blazing.

He held his reloaded shotgun level with his eyes, sweeping the double barrels over the grass.

Three sibilant cries echoed across the night, and the remaining creatures slipped back into the shadows.

“Reckon it’s over?” Dealer Bang eyed Pop, hoping for an answer.

“Yeah, the *alpha* ... their *leader* called it off,” the old prospector said. “They weren’t expecting us to wake that quick.”

“Let’s check the pigs,” Bang said.

“Raz you come with me. Dolly stay at the fire with Pop and Freddie. Keep an eye!”

They started toward the line of porkers.

“Think they were after the water, too?” Freddie-boy asked. “Or just the pigs!”

“They’d prefer *us* if not for the guns,” Pop growled, giving Freddie a withering stare. “Stalked us, hoping someone fell asleep on watch! We were lucky, I guess!”

Then the old prospector told Dolly to stay by the fire while he led Freddie to where Dealer Bang and Raz inspected the pigs.

“They took one sack of bottles, but

didn't get far," Raz said, standing about ten feet from the animals. He tugged on the bundle in the grass. "Two dead over here. Good shot, boss!"

"So they was polk?" Freddie-boy said, shyly. He was still smarting from Pop's scornful remark

"Yeah—*creepers*. They go through stages, *see ...*" Pop said, scowling down at the dead things. "That one on Freddie looked like she was here for meat."

"Jesus ..." Freddie-boy sighed.

"Old Cannibal's got the right idea," Bang said, suddenly, stepping aside to let the firelight fall on the big boar. A female polk lay dead on her back, shot through the chest. The gory stump of her right arm was pointed at Cannibal. The

limb was missing at the elbow, and the pig was chewing.

“An eye for an eye, I reckon!” Dealer cracked.

Everyone in the group laughed except Pop, who hefted his ugly black revolver and pointed it at the surrounding dark.

“I’d clean the blood and bits off your face, Freddie,” he said, with a scowl. “*Everybody* ... keep it clear of your eyes and mouths!”

“Yeah,” Raz said. “We ain’t immune like pigs.”

Chapter 7

The sky was still dark. There wasn't a hint of light in the east. The crew was set on running for safety, so there'd be no more rest.

As Freddie-boy passed the wind-up watch back, Dealer Bang mentioned that they'd at least had some brief shuteye, but his apprentice kept quiet, knowing that the only sleep *he* had managed was nodding off and giving the polk time to get killing close.

“We'd get to Homestead in no time if not for these damn pigs!” Raz complained, slurping his black coffee down. He had bragged that he rode

horses before the world ended so he knew the difference.

“My *Pinky’s* bristling to be brisk,” Dolly joked, slapping Raz on the shoulder as they returned to loading the water on the pack pigs. “And it still beats walking.”

They’d spent the better part of an hour gathering their gear and then searching out any water bottles that had fallen from the net sack the polk had tried carting off.

And in the bustle, Freddie-boy had discovered old Cannibal’s reasons for murdering and dining on the female polk.

She had ripped a foot-wide patch of skin off his right rump.

“Them poison folk have a hellish bite on them,” the teen said, rubbing ointment into the ugly wound to keep it from festering. Superstition surrounded polk bites and infection.

“*Creepers* are the worst,” Pop Dawson said, frowning at the lad as he saddled Samwich. “Crazy cravings with razor-sharp claws!”

“Don’t get him started!” Dealer Bang said. It wasn’t the first time Pop had gone on a rant about the polk.

“What happened to them?” Freddie-boy asked, moving to harness his employer’s pig. He knew the poison folk weren’t born that way. The six creeper bodies they’d found around the camp were still human-like, but with a range

of deformities.

He felt sick just looking at them.

“*That’s* what happens when you mix toxic chemicals and mutagenic compounds with faulty brain medication!” Pop said, pointing at the closest misshapen corpse. “Doctors in space suits developed a blocker for it, but *these* ... well, survivors who stayed in the city wouldn’t take the treatment because it infringed on their rights!”

“Their rights?” Freddie-boy was repulsed by the grotesque things that lay around the camp, but had taken some comfort from finding the scatter of creeper tracks headed away after the fight.

“This is freedom mixed with stupid!”

Pop laughed dryly. “They refused the needle that would have saved them because it came from a drug company that had accidentally created the polk poison outbreak. But without the needle there’s no protection from infection, so then it’s insanity, deformity, and tumorous mutation!”

“That’s enough, Dawson,” Bang interjected, helping the teenager position his saddle. “It’s too dark for talk like that!”

“And *these* idiots killed the doctors, and burned them along with the treatment,” the old man continued. “They damned us all with their stupidity!”

“How come you know so much about it, Pop?” Freddie-boy said, buckling

Cannibal's bridle.

He had heard the old man go off about the space-suit doctors before, but had never gained a clear understanding of it, let alone believed it was more than tall tales. Raz and Dolly had met similar ravings nervously in the past, and tried to laugh them off as harmless.

Dealer Bang always got angry at the talk.

“I been around the block with my eyes open,” Pop said, starkly, as he limped over and untied Samwich from the string line. “So, I’ve seen a few things.”

“Dolly, Raz! You two take the lead,” Dealer Bang ordered, drawing the pack pigs over to his mount and handing one

line to Freddie. “Me and the boy will steer the cargo.”

He climbed onto Cannibal.

“Pop can bring up the rear!” he added, with a humorless grin.

“Oh, can he?” Pop answered, mounting up and yanking Sam’s reins.

“Then, I’ll ask you to pick up your pace.” He kicked his mount and the big pig snorted. “You’re taking your sweet time for people with death marks on them!”

“We did all right!” Bang said, adjusting his Magnum in its holster.

“Yeah, against *polk*,” Pop sneered, peering into the darkness to their west, and the direction they were headed. “But firing our guns in the Zone Between at

night? You know every bandit from here to the Q-Line will be racing like vultures to pick over any bones.”

“I wouldn’t pick *these* bones,” Raz said, scowling down at a dead polk by his pig’s hooves.

“Not everyone’s as finicky as you, Raz,” Pop said, the rough humor leaving his tone. “But they’ll be coming for our guns and swag—*so let’s ride!*”

“I wish we had motorbikes!” Freddie-boy said, as he mounted Charlie. He’d once seen a couple riders flying along the trail heading north toward the Trading Post.

“Dream on, boy,” Pop said. “Bang, your apprentice needs his reins *yanked*—to keep his mind from wandering

greener pastures!”

The crew headed out with Raz and Dolly in the lead, followed by Dealer Bang, and then Freddie-boy.

Pop rode in the shadows twenty yards behind them.

They were headed for Homestead.

From their current position, Bang reckoned that in daylight, they'd make the seven-hour journey in six—riding hard, and throwing caution to the wind. So, they'd push their pace until sunup, and then he'd beat their hogs bloody to cover the remaining miles in five!

They just wouldn't stop until they got to the settlement gates.

Homestead held up to three-hundred inhabitants with more living in tents and wagons outside the wall.

It wasn't the nearest piece of civilization in the Zone. In truth, the Bunker Hill settlement to the east would be an hour closer, but that would mean crossing the Lost Highway at night. That piece of property was dangerous at any time with things going in and out of the ruins to the north or coming from down south past the mysterious Q-Line.

There were too many unknowns in that scenario.

Additionally, the Bunker Hill settlement was home to the descendants of American patriots who had tried to escape the quarantined lands, declaring

war against the authorities of the day, and forcing them to drag the original Q-Line south by thirty miles to form the *New Line*.

The disastrous result had brought trouble for everyone in the Zone Between, breaking up alliances among the newly founded settlements, and drastically reducing the number of American patriots.

Dealer Bang had been to Bunker Hill barter in the past, but remembered its often-oppressive environment and hostile taxation on sales, and non-citizens.

So, west to Homestead it was!

Chapter 8

“I don’t like being out here with all this swag,” Pop grumbled, from the rear, after a couple hours’ ride. He goaded Sam forward close enough to talk to Dealer Bang who rode on Freddie-boy’s left.

The rising sun threw their long shadows over the flat land ahead of them.

“So, you’re not stupid,” Bang said, matter-of-factly. “Any other pearls you want to polish?”

“The sun’s up, anyway!” Freddie-boy yawned. His spirits had risen with it, since its rays would highlight any track

or trouble that might lie ahead.

“I been thinking about those polk back there,” Pop said. “The way Freddie talked about the first one ... disguising herself like a normal person.”

“Not the first time I heard of it,” Dealer Bang countered.

“I know they do it when their deformities get bad enough,” Pop said, keeping his boar in check with a pull of the reins. “But, this one was doing it to distract the boy as part of a plan!”

“What’s the difference?” Bang said.

“From what I hear, they lose control so close to food ... They go wild!” Pop shook his head. “It’s why they’ve never been as much trouble as they could be.” He gestured ahead. “If they can

coordinate their efforts ... To places like Homestead ... that little trick might get them through the gates.”

“They aren’t all the same,” Bang said. “Remember those government radio ads in the first years. The effects were out of control—and *unpredictable!*”

“Sure. We all had *some* double-hybrid symptoms, but this is different—” Pop said, voice wavering. “A psychotic break is a psychotic break! There’s no coming back from that. Here, Freddie’s polk fooled him into believing she was a regular woman so her friends could get into position. That’s planning ...”

“He’s not fifteen yet,” Dealer Bang said. “You could fool a boy that age into

believing anything if you wrapped it in a dress and put lipstick on it.”

“She wasn’t *my* polk!” Freddie-boy muttered, loud enough for the men to hear. His childhood memories were of sheer terror in the early days of contamination.

“No,” Pop said. “But you were thinking about *poking* her!”

“Was *not!*” Freddie-boy snapped, crossing his arms over his chest and wrapping Charlie’s reins and the pack pig’s lead together in the action.

His face warmed. The truth was he’d been thinking about Annie Gamble at the time—and in exactly the way the old prospector was saying. He was glad the sun in back hid his shame in shadow.

“I’ll check around at barter,” Pop said. “Ask if anyone’s seen behavior like that. These settlements are barely making headway, and it wouldn’t take much to push us back into caves. If the Zone Between is too dangerous to live in—well, where would you sell your swag?”

“Good point,” Dealer Bang said, as Freddie nodded slowly. Pop was right. That polk attack had disturbed them all.

It was bad enough if creepers came singly or in pairs out of mad cravings and hunger. They’d be predictable enough in their random natures, then.

But working together? They weren’t like bandits coming for swag, who could be scared off with the right amount of

gunfire.

Poison folk were coming for blood, flesh, and skin as if they had nothing else to live for. Such madness could not be countered easily by fear or violence.

And rumors had been passing around the Diamond: talk of missing people, and bloodshed—usually in the northern miles where lone prospectors risked the most in search of highly valued swag: tech, medicine, and science.

Word blamed it on raiders coming out of the city ruins with more than taxation on their minds. These ones were said to come in search of cleaner edibles as well as swag—*cleaner* than what they found in the poisoned ruins. And they sometimes came out after wandering

prospectors to reclaim valuable loot, to take food from others scratching a living, or to kill polk.

It was why the Barter Diamond stopped at the Trading Post in the north. Sane traders would go no closer to the city ruins. Early days, raiders from up there would demand a percentage of swag from anyone they met ... *and now they wanted it all?*

Freddie-boy wondered if the raiders might have forced the polk to change—whether murdering them wholesale made the survivors smarter. Pop Dawson talked about such a thing—some *science* as he called it.

Then again, travelers also told tales at the barter beer tables that spoke of

survivors down past the Q-Line, sick with the polk poison but still living like people. Probably no more than ghost stories, since it stood to reason that a polk who could think would get help for its sickness.

“Polk hunt in groups sometimes—and, that group was big, I’ll grant it,” Dealer Bang said. “But it was dark. Easy to see something that isn’t there.” He sighed. “Don’t be so pessimistic, Dawson. There’s good times, too—it’s not like the settlements haven’t been improving. They’ve got riders protecting water stops, travelers, and trails, and there’s medicine. Hell, they’re the ones trading in ball-and-powder muskets. And there’s talk of them soon making

cartridges for *any* caliber gun—at least, they’re learning how.”

“Competition will get worse,” Pop said. “There’s only so much swag in these parts. With little trade from outside, it’s just a matter of time until we’re dog eat dog.”

“As usual, you paint a pretty picture ...” Bang chuckled. “One that would even rob my sleepy apprentice of any true rest.” He turned in the saddle, and his smile dropped off. “But, I’ll make a point of encouraging discussion on this topic with others I meet on the Diamond ...”

He pulled off his top hat to glance inside, before putting it back on, and yanking his scarf from his neck. He

looped it over the headgear and tied it under his chin.

“You catching cold, Dealer Bang?” Freddie-boy squinted over at his employer.

“No,” he said, gesturing back the way they’d come. “I’m just trying to remember ever seeing that many pigs out for a morning run.”

Freddie glanced at Pop who was already twisted around in his saddle.

Sure enough, Freddie-boy saw a clutch of some twelve pig riders coming after them full tilt. They’d broken from the trees a mile back.

“Bandits?” The teen gawked.

“Not in daylight!” Pop said, riding closer.

“And risk the whole Diamond rising up to hang them?” Bang growled, glaring east. “They wouldn’t dare!”

“Maybe they’re Homestead riders!” Freddie-boy said.

“Any red scarves?” Pop breathed, staring into the sunrise.

Freddie gasped, and Dealer Bang shook his head.

“They have the sun at their backs,” Pop pointed out. “One of them might be military trained!”

“The hell with *this* ...” Bang barked, rising in his stirrups to shout at Raz and Dolly who rode out front. “We ride for Homestead. *Now!*”

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G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to complete Canadore College's Journalism program before receiving a degree in English from Nipissing University. Taylor worked as a freelance writer for small market newspapers and later wrote, designed and edited for several Canadian niche magazines.

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Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include additions to his Vampires of the Kind books, the Wildclown Mysteries, and sequels to the popular Variant Effect series.