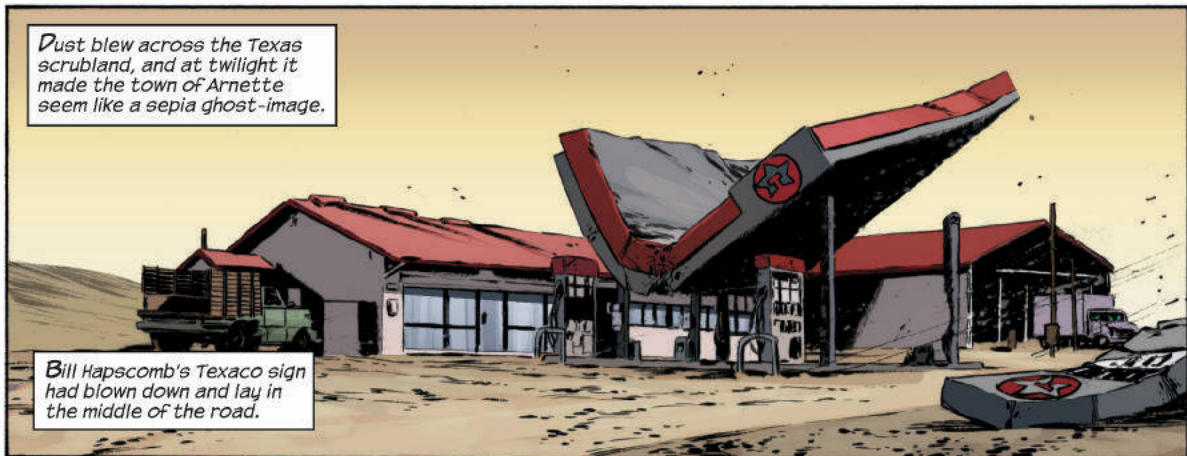


PROLOGUE.
ARNETTE, TEXAS.



Dust blew across the Texas scrubland, and at twilight it made the town of Arnette seem like a sepia ghost-image.



Bill Hapscomb's Texaco sign had blown down and lay in the middle of the road.



On Main Street, soldiers lay dead in the gutter.



Cats were immune to the superflu, and dozens of them wove in and out of the stillness like smoky shades.



A faded and rusty wagon stood in the middle of Purgin Street in front of The Indian Head Tavern.



Someone had left the gas on in Norm Bruett's house, and a spark from the air-conditioner had blown the whole place sky-high.

Charred lumber and shingles and Fisher-Price toys lay scattered all over Laurel Street.



On Logan Lane, in Arnette's best neighborhood, Tony Leominster's Scout stood in front of his house, its windows open.



A family of squirrels was nesting in its back seat.



The entire town was, except for the whisper and chirr of small animals and the tinkle of Tony Leominster's wind chimes, silent.

And silent.

And silent.

END PROLOGUE.

**SHOYO, ARKANSAS.
THE LATE SHERIFF BAKER'S JAIL.**



He's dead, ya friggin' mutie, are you satisfied? You feel revenged yet? He's dead, too!

Mike Childress was pointing at Billy Warner, but the corpse wasn't news to Nick.

He knew what he had to do, too, but he wanted to finish his lunch first.



I'm on a hunger strike! Friggin' hunger strike! I won't eat nothing till I'm out! You'll eat my dingle before I eat anything you bring me, you friggin' deaf-mute retard ass--



Lunch was a mistake. The sick smell coming off Billy's body was making Nick's stomach do cartwheels and handstands.

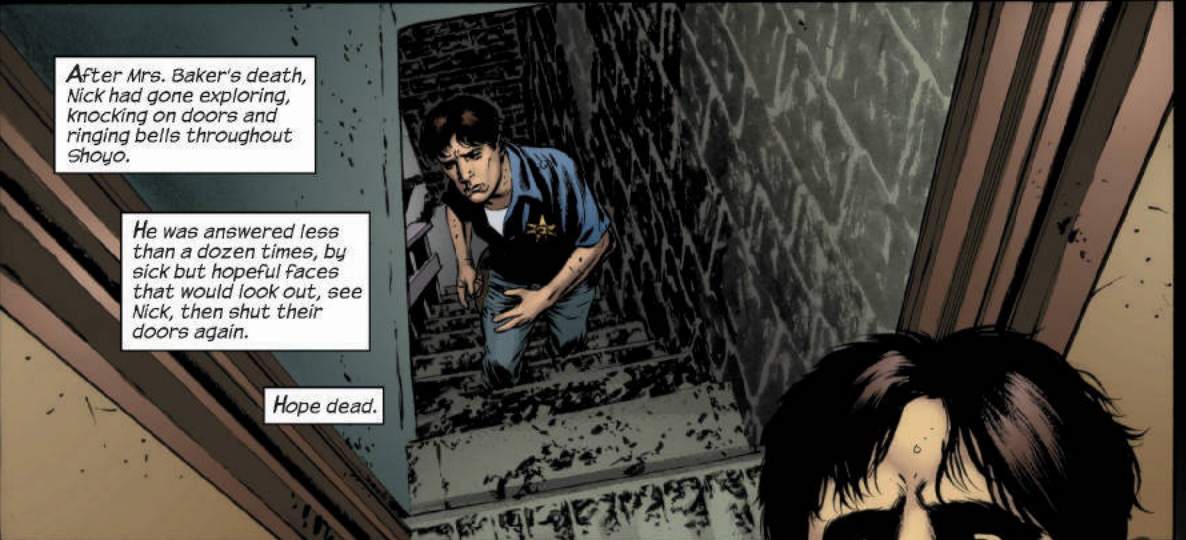
Let me out! You keep me in here, it's murder! That's all it is, cold-blooded murder!

It took Nick ten minutes to get the big man's remains down the steep stairs to the prison's cellar.





Panting, Nick laid what was left of Billy Warner next to Vince Hogan's corpse, on the concrete, under the fluorescents.



After Mrs. Baker's death, Nick had gone exploring, knocking on doors and ringing bells throughout Shoyo.

He was answered less than a dozen times, by sick but hopeful faces that would look out, see Nick, then shut their doors again.

Hope dead.



Nick had the feeling that the normal world was skewing into a place where babies were sacrificed behind closed blinds and stupendous black machines roared on and on in locked basements...

