

# Shark Nibbles #5

THE UNOFFICIAL MONTHLY SAVAGE WORLDS NEWSLETTER



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# The Message...

**Written by Neal Hyde and Savaged by Jason Young**

**Special Thanks to Ed Wetterman of 12-to-Midnight for this submission!**

## History and Overview

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In the millennia before the ascendancy of humanity, aliens visited the Earth. However, a shifting in climate forced them to cease their visits. They left behind a specifically designed fungus that would survive on the changing world and alert them when the conditions were once again right for them to return. That time is now.

As the fungus grows and prepares to send its message, Professor Jeffery Douglas of East Texas University happened upon it and was infected. The fungus destroys him and any evidence of its existence, but in doing so, it brings the intrepid heroes into the picture.

Professor Douglas was not the only one to discover the fungus and its unique nature. Agents of a secret government agency, identified only as the Rangers, have become aware of the fungus and hope to use it to contact alien civilizations while at the same time avoiding any public scrutiny.

The fungus is now in its final stage, preparing to send its message. It has consumed a large portion of a substantial grove of trees just outside of Pinebox, Texas, and infected the occupants of a nearby town. It hopes to avoid detection long enough to send its message. Then its work will be complete.

## Scene 1: A Fiery Death

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The campus of the East Texas University is filled with hundreds of students on their lunch break as you navigate your way to the second floor of the Biology building. A display of comparative anatomy near the office of your friend, Professor Douglas, doesn't encourage your appetite, but the man had promised to buy you lunch.

It's to be a celebration, Professor Jeffery Douglas said yesterday over the phone. He has something big to show you, something that he says is "the discovery of the year, possibly the decade."

But as you approach the office at the end of the hall, you are suddenly assaulted with the overpowering reek of gasoline. A cold ball of ice forms in the pit of your stomach as you watch a pool of blood spread from beneath the door. You hear sobbing and a strange, repeated "shnikt" sound.

The pool of blood continues to grow until it forms a puddle that fills the width of the doorway out to several feet beyond the door. The heroes continue to hear the odd "shnikt" sound every few seconds.

The door of Professor Douglas' office is unlocked and open, but just barely. When the door is opened, read the following:

The office is littered with papers and parts of a smashed laptop computer. On the floor lies the mangled body of a young woman. Blood flows from several large open wounds. An open gasoline can lies on its side on the desk, a trickle of gas still pouring from the open spout.

Professor Douglas sits in his chair in the center of the office. His clothes are soaked with blood and gasoline. Tears run down his gore-spattered face. He holds a lighter in his shaking right hand and strikes it, making the "schnikt" sound, but it fails to spark.

Observant heroes (Notice roll) may observe that patches of tiny, thin, white filaments are on Professor Douglas' skin and clothes. Attempts to reach the professor will be physically resisted by him.

Professor Douglas looks into your eyes and speaks, but still continues to strike the lighter.

“Stay back...I can't stop...<shnikt>...it won't...let me...<shnikt>...tell Jennifer's family...tell them I'm sorry...<shnikt>...I didn't want to hurt anyone ...<shnikt>...so sorry...<shnikt>...its stronger than I am...<shnikt>...than any of us...<shnikt>...you've got to stop it...<shnikt>...the message has to be stopped...<shnikt>...I'm so sorry...<shnikt>”

On the last strike, a small yellow flame appears at lighter's head and the gasoline fumes ignite in a fiery explosion. The heroes must make Agility rolls to avoid taking 3d6 damage from the explosion. If the team did not choose to open the door, they may hear (on a Notice roll) Professor Douglas sobbing and speaking to himself. He repeats over and over again that “the message must be stopped” and continues to strike the lighter. After the team has heard the man speak, the lighter ignites and the explosion occurs.

Moments after the explosion the building's sprinklers turn on, sending a cold shower of water onto the team and the office. However, the damage has already been done; Professor Douglas is dead and his office is a total loss.

After the explosion, students and professors rush into the hall and offer their assistance, but they will not enter the burning office. Within minutes, campus security, Pinebox police and the Pinebox Fire Department arrive. Anyone that has been burned is treated at the scene unless his or her burns are severe. Both campus security and a detective from the Pinebox police question the team to discover what happened.

## Scene 2: A Visit from the Texas Rangers

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While the team is being interviewed and treated by emergency personnel, several men in suits arrive and declare that the scene is under the jurisdiction of the Texas Rangers. The local cops angrily withdraw to the edge of the scene.

A muscular man who identifies himself as Ranger Albert Baker interviews the heroes. He asks much the same questions as the local cops, except he is much more interested in what the Professor told them over the phone, particularly if there were any details about what the Professor found. He also wants to know if they had any physical contact with the Professor or if they went into the office before the fire.

A few minutes later, men and women in full-body biohazard suits arrive with a large, sealed, clear plastic container. Team members with Knowledge (Science) or similar skills recognize these suits as self-contained biohazard suits and the container as an emergency containment vessel. Other characters may make Common Knowledge rolls with appropriate background modifiers (typically -2 or -4) to reach the same conclusion. The Professor's body is placed in the containment vessel and then removed to a waiting vehicle. The people in biohazard suits then seal the office in sheets of plastic.

If the team admits to having had physical contact with the Professor or going into the office before the fire, a woman in a biohazard suit passes an ultraviolet light over them, seemingly searching for something. If the heroes ask her what she is looking for, she ignores them. After several passes with the light, she says “You're clean,” and leaves.

Some heroes may resist the questioning or attempt to escape from the area after the “Rangers” arrives. A “Ranger” is at every exit and those who resist are forcibly sedated.

After several hours, the heroes are allowed to go. Read the following:

Finally, after several hours under the scrutiny of the FBI agents and the biohazard team, you're allowed to go. Special Agent Baker apologizes for the treatment you received at the hands of the team.

"I'm afraid it was necessary for your own safety," Baker says. "We have reason to believe the Professor Douglas stumbled upon a lost container of nerve gas while conducting research in the field, near an old testing range. The residual effects of the gas drove him into a homicidal rage and culminated in his own suicide. I'd tell you more, but I'm afraid it's a matter of national security."

If the team questions his explanation, Ranger Baker suggests that paranoia and aggression are symptoms of the nerve agent and that perhaps the team should be re-examined. If the heroes become physically aggressive, they are arrested and spend the night in the Pinebox jail.

**Note:** The heroes' phones are tapped and their homes are bugged. If the team communicates over the phone they may hear strange clicking noises. Also, they are under surveillance (Notice at -2 to detect).

## Scene 3: Information gathering

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The team may wish to find out why Professor Douglas became so deranged and what he meant when he said, "the message had to be stopped." However, conducting an investigation is difficult as the Rangers are in the process of removing any evidence pointing to Cavalas, Texas.

If the heroes begin asking around the ETU campus (a Streetwise check), they find that Professor Douglas was well liked by the Biology department staff and his students. All are at a loss to explain his actions, but no one seems to know what he was researching. Most of his previous work had been centered around the ecology of the Pinebox area, with an emphasis on fungus. Some of Douglas' colleagues remember him saying he was going to be doing some field research, but don't recall where or what he was looking for. Speaking to the Dean of Biology, Dr. Bethany Moore, is impossible as she is attending a conference in New York City and won't be back for several days.

Attempts to get information from the ETU computer network are hampered by a sudden viral infection that is causing corruption within several databases, including the Biology department.

The administrative head of the Biology department, Suneet Sindu, is the only person who can provide much of a clue for the team. If the heroes attempt to speak to the Dean, or ask for assistance in the Biology department, they are directed to him. Sindu, an immigrant from India, is a short, wiry man who speaks with a heavy accent. If asked about Professor Douglas, he expresses his sorrow and surprise at what happened, but he doesn't know what the Professor was doing. With the computers down, he can't even pull the Professor's personnel file. However, he does have something of value; Douglas submitted an expense report that he has not had time to enter into the system yet. In the report is a receipt for gasoline from a station in Cavalas, Texas from two days ago.

Research on Cavalas, Texas (successful Investigation roll) finds that it is not located on most maps but is located in the Texas state registry. It is a small town, population 74, located approximately 23 miles to the northwest of Pinebox. According to the map, the only access to Cavalas is via a one-lane road that branches off of Highway 96.

## Scene 4: Cavalas

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Cavalas is a small town of 7 houses, a general store and post office, and a gas station and garage. There are another 10 houses scattered around the area. There is no school, and the few children are home taught or taken to Pinebox high. Most of the families that live in Cavalas are farmers or ranchers with land outside the town.



### *Arriving in Cavalas*

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After riding on a lonely one-lane road for nearly half an hour, you pull into what you assume is Cavalas. There is no sign announcing the name of the half-dozen houses scattered around the dirt road junction. A dingy general store sits opposite a greasy gas station and mechanic shop, and neither appears to be occupied, despite the “Open” signs.

A warm wind blows from the west, sending dust and grit across the road in small waves. An unseen radio quietly plays country-western tunes, but otherwise there is no sound besides a squeaky screen door blowing in the wind.

As described above, there are really only two locations where the heroes can inquire about Douglas: the store and the gas station. If the team attempts to knock on the doors of any of the houses in town, they appear to be unoccupied. In reality, the fungus has infected every person in the town and put them in a kind of hibernation. If the heroes look through windows (Notice at -2) or enter a house, they discover family members unconscious and coated in the white filaments. The family members awaken and attack the team.

## ***The General Store***

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If the heroes enter the General Store, read the following:

A bell rings overhead as you enter the General Store. The place is exactly as it bills itself—hardware, farming supplies, tack and harness, clothing, and groceries all sit side-by-side in the narrow aisles. A chalkboard sign at the front advertises the daily special as “10% off seed, shirts, and olives.”

A few moments after you enter the store, an obese woman comes out of a storeroom with a case of canned creamed corn in her arms.

“Hello folks,” she says, smiling. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you come in. What can I do for you?”

The woman is Gretta Ashe and she is the owner of the General Store. Like the other residents of Cavalas, she is a fungi zombie, although the filaments have retracted into her body and she appears normal. However, like all zombies, her reaction time is slow and she appears somewhat groggy. She acts friendly, and answers general questions, but denies ever seeing Professor Douglas or that anything unusual is happening in the area. If the team persists, she asks them to leave. If they continue, she pretends to call the “county sheriff” and report them for harassing her.

If the heroes look around the store, they may notice: The shelves and their contents are dusty (normal success) or that the few magazines in the racks are weeks old and the expiration dates on the milk products are several days overdue (with a Raise).

If they get into the storeroom from which Gretta emerged, they find it coated with filaments. Gretta will attack them at that time.

## ***The Gas Station/Auto Shop***

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If the team enters the Gas Station read the following:

The gas station is visibly empty. Once inside, you see the auto shop is empty as well, although a pickup truck has been raised up on the lift and tools are scattered around it. A cheap AM radio on the shelf plays the country-western tunes you heard outside.

Moments after you enter the gas station, you hear a flushing of a toilet and a skinny man in a dirty undershirt emerges from the bathroom on the side of the building. He is just zipping up his pants when he sees you.

“Oh, hey, um, howdy!” he says. “I’m Zeek. You need some gas?”

The man is Ezekiel ‘Zeek’ Funk and he is the gas station owner and the only mechanic in town. Like the other residents of Cavalas, he is a fungi zombie, although the filaments have retracted into his body and he appears normal. However, like all zombies, his reaction time is slow and he appears somewhat groggy. He acts friendly, and answers general questions, but denies ever seeing Professor Douglas or that anything unusual is happening in the area. If the team persists, he asks them to leave. If they continue, he attempts to force them to leave, pushing them out of the store. Zeek also refuses to sell gasoline to the heroes, which can be a real problem, as the gas station is the only one within 30 miles.

There are fewer signs that something is wrong at the gas station, but there is one tale-tell clue; the gas meter outside is set to \$20.18 (observed with a Raise on Notice roll), the exact same as on Professor Douglas’ receipt. No one has purchased gas since Professor Douglas passed through.

There are three directions the team can explore from Cavalas; west, north, and east. Each direction is accessible from Cavalas’ only crossroad.

To the east is a road that meanders between ranches and farms. The area is rolling hills with dry grass and occasional scrub bushes. The road terminates after approximately 16 miles. The fungus has infected none of the people living on the farms or ranches and none have seen Professor Douglas. However, some of them have heard helicopters to the west in the night.

To the north, the road goes approximately three miles and ends at a defunct gravel pit. Aside from empty beer bottles (the local teens come here to drink), nothing of interest is here.

To the west, the road goes for approximately five miles through rolling hills before it meets a large grove of pine trees.

After a mile through the grove, the team comes upon a tree that has been felled across the road. Examination of the tree reveals that it has been cut with a chainsaw and intentionally dropped to block the road. They can attempt to move the tree, a difficult task, or, if they possess an axe, saw, or chainsaw, they can attempt to cut the tree apart. The most likely course puts them on foot beyond the tree, but if they drive, it won't impact the adventure.

The road cuts back and forth through the grove for another three-quarter mile and ends in an extremely lush and thick stand of grass five feet tall. This is the edge of the fungal circle.

### ***Under Observation***

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The town of Cavalas, the grove of trees, and the fungal circle are all under intense covert Ranger surveillance. Two-man camouflaged surveillance teams are scattered around the area, reporting to a command center located deep in the heart of the grove, not far from the fungal circle. The team has been under observation since they came within five miles of Cavalas and their progress has been monitored throughout their journey. The surveillance teams are under orders to leave the heroes alone, so long as they don't come within sight of the command post or make some other discovery that reveals the Ranger presence.

The heroes may feel like they are being watched, but spotting the surveillance teams is very difficult (a Notice check at -6).

The Rangers know of the fungus' extraterrestrial origins but do not consider it a threat, despite its tendency to infect people and drive them homicidally insane. The Rangers are under orders to observe and report for now, but they hope to use the fungus to contact extraterrestrials. They are aware that the residents of Cavalas are infected and consider them casualties, albeit acceptable ones. They do not interfere if the heroes are infected, but observe them and attempt to bring them into custody for study once signs of infection are apparent.

## **Scene 5: The Fungal Circle**

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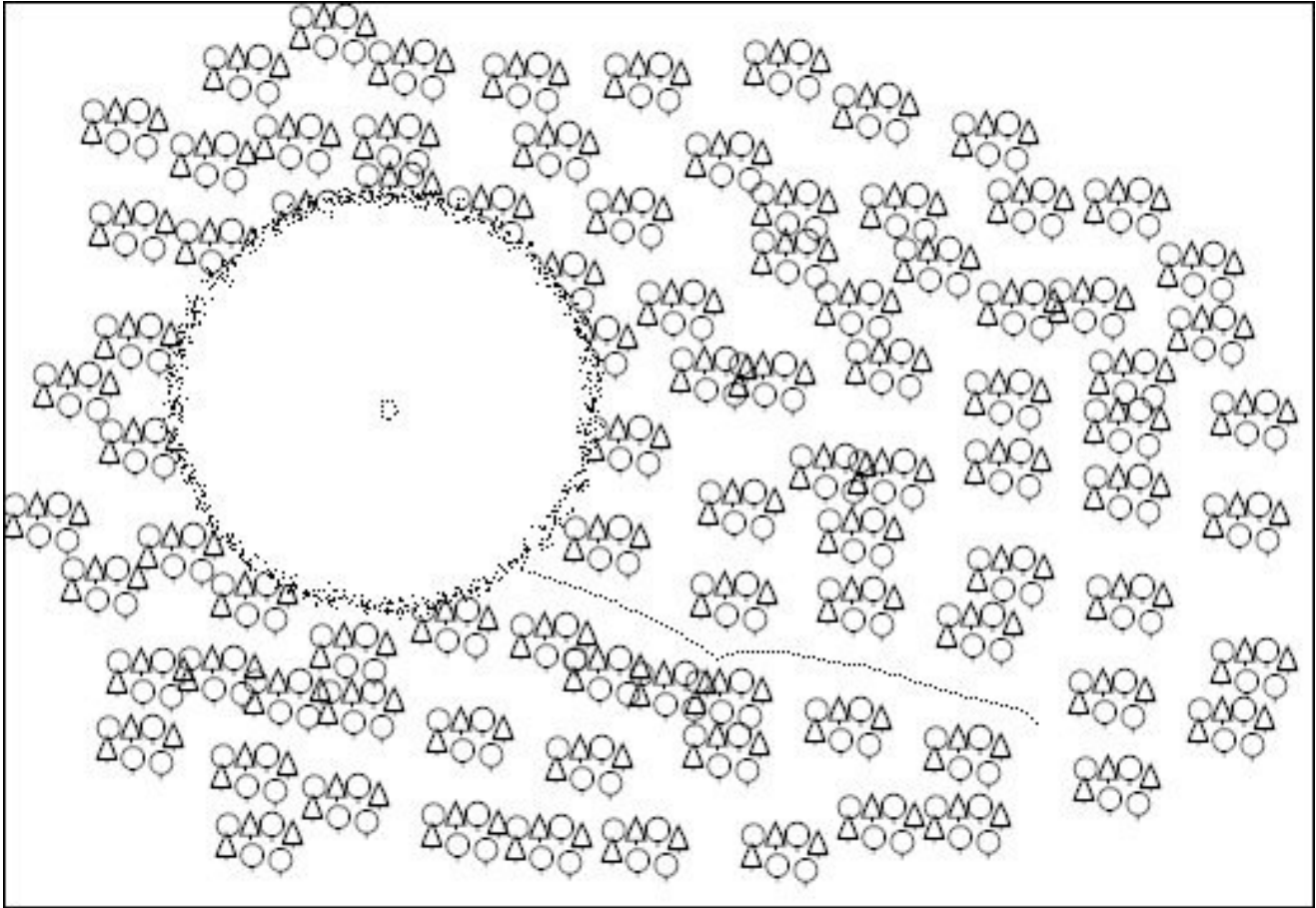
This scene works best at twilight or just after dark. When the heroes reach the end of the trail, read the following:

The dirt road becomes more and more rough and eventually turns into a trail passable only on foot. Ahead of you, there appears to be an open field in the midst of the grove, but a wall of unnaturally lush grass five feet tall obscures what you can see.

The heroes have reached the outer edge of the fungal circle. This edge is approximately 40 yards wide before it ends abruptly at the edge of the circle. If the team makes their way through the outer edge to the actual fungal circle, read the following.

After slogging your way through the dense grass and weeds, you are shocked when the blades suddenly stop and you find yourself at the edge of a large, circular open space approximately 300 yards across. All the grass and trees in the bowl-shaped depression are a withered brown and gray, completely dead. In the center, a patch of ivory-colored tufts sprout from the ground like bizarre cotton candy.

As you look at the dark and unpleasant sight, something moves in the grass behind you.



If the heroes reach into the circle, they find the grass is completely desiccated and turns to powder in their hands. This powder covers the ground and obscures the earth beneath. If they push aside the powder and examine the ground beneath, they discover that the white filaments are enmeshed in a tight weave just below the surface.

The powder is unnaturally warm, as is the whole circle. The heat they feel is the action of the fungus' acid eating away at everything. After half an hour, if they do not wash their hands, they discover an uncomfortable rash. After an hour, the rash blisters and the heroes must succeed at a Vigor check at  $-2$  or take a single Fatigue level from the distracting pain and itch. The Fatigue can cause incapacitation, but not death. This Fatigue disappears after the rash and blistering clear up a full week later. Note that this does not indicate infection, merely contact with the fungus' powerful acids. Also, if they stick anything in the ground, such as a shovel or knife, they find it corroded after an hour.

If they venture into the circle, the heroes soon feel the heat through their shoes. After half an hour, the bottoms of their shoes become corroded to the point that they fall apart. The heroes then must make a Vigor check at  $-2$  every 10 minutes or until they leave the circle. Failing this check gives the character one Fatigue level, as outlined above.



If the heroes examine a topographical map of the area (Smarts roll, if they have a map), they find no bowl-shaped depression. The fungus is eating away at the ground, creating a parabolic dish shape to better send its message.

If it is dark, the heroes notice that the fungal circle has a slight phosphorescent glow to it. Some parts are stronger than others, including the growth of filaments in the circle, and vein-like tendrils extending outward from the center.

The sound the team hears behind them is not a Ranger surveillance team. It is a trio of completely infected fungi zombies, now perfectly camouflaged in a covering of green fungus. Attempts to see (Notice at -4) the zombies in the dense growth are difficult.

The fungi does not want to actually hurt the heroes, merely herd them toward a spore trap, located about 50 feet away, where it can infect them as it did Professor Douglas. Consequently, the zombies attempt to scare them, making noises and threatening sounds, but attempt to avoid actual contact.

### ***The Spore Trap***

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The spore trap is a large (4" x 4") fleshy green ball containing billions of fungal spores and pressurized with a noxious gas. When the heroes are within 10 feet of the ball, it “pops,” sending a cloud of the noxious gas (similar to tear gas) and spores everywhere within 15 feet of the ball (the area of a Medium Burst Template). Once the team comes in contact with the spores, unless they are wearing a biohazard suit or other biological protection, they are infected. There is no roll to resist.

### ***Black Helicopters***

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The Rangers decide that its time for the heroes to leave. A pair of black helicopters is dispatched from a disguised heliport nearby. Within minutes of the team’s encounter with the spore trap, the pair of helicopters emerges over the treetops of the grove and swoop down low over the heroes. They are not attempting to hurt them, merely force them to leave the area. The helicopters chase the team away from the area and follow them until they reach the felled tree, then they vanish as quickly as they arrived.

## **Scene 6: Infection**

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The team likely wants to leave the area now. If they attempt to get help in Cavalas, no one comes to their aid. If they need gas, they can fill up at the gas station, but Zeek won’t come out to collect any payment.

Unless a member of the team stayed behind to watch the vehicle(s), the Rangers have placed bugs and tracking devices on it.

If the team attempts to get any assistance from local authorities, such as the sheriff or police in Pinebox, they find themselves in trouble. Their names have been given to the police by the “FBI” as being “Persons of Interest” in the death of Professor Douglas, meaning that the police have the right to hold them, but they are not charged with anything.

The fungal infection is relatively rapid, and the onset of symptoms is sudden.

At infection + 1 hour, the heroes begin to experience headaches and dizziness. This causes one level of Fatigue. This likely occurs while the team is driving or escaping the fungal circle. This Fatigue can cause incapacitation (sleep), but not death.

























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