The background of the cover is a detailed blue-toned illustration. It depicts a garden or park setting. In the foreground, there are several large, dark, angular rocks scattered across a light-colored, textured path. The path leads from the bottom center towards the upper middle of the image. On the left side of the path, there are various plants and flowers, including some with small white blossoms. On the right side, there are more rocks and some leafy plants. In the background, there are more rocks and what appears to be a fence or a structure partially obscured by foliage. The overall style is that of a classic children's book illustration, with fine lines and cross-hatching for shading.

Fountain of Dreams

Clue Book

FOUNTAIN OF DREAMS

Clue Book

Item #646729-W

Nuevo Tejas Reliquarium

Find Date: 7/8/2490

Nature: Folklore

Cross Indexing: World War IV, The Change, Mutation, Mythological Place Names (spec. "Florida")

Notes: Fragmentary longhand manuscript in Old Style Roman alphabet, found buried in fortress-like structure. Accompanied by numerous volumes in various states of decomposition (cataloguing in process) and archaic weapons. Thought to be folklore-derivative heroic story concerning mythical "Island of Florida" incorporating "nuclear weapons" motif with echoes of prehistoric "Fountain of Youth" myth. No reputable historical documentation discovered on site. Document presently archived.

*pity this monster manunkind not
progress is a comfortable disease*

—e.e. cummings

Prologue

My name's Darwin, a survivalist by necessity, an adventurer by choice, and a storyteller by default. This is about how I ran away from home and changed everything on the island of Florida. Forgive me if I remember some things incorrectly or leave anything out or confuse some places or people. As every storyteller knows, the past always changes.

Heat of the Moment



Dawn swelled on the horizon like a radiation burn, pink, livid, and mottled with gray. The high, dry clouds looked like loose skin peeling away from the sky. The mutant wolves had stopped calling and howling soon after the first threat of daylight; they'd known the day was going to be hot and headed for shelter in the palm groves and undergrowth. The air had already begun to shimmer nervously before I'd eaten my last poached breakfast root. But I had too much on my mind to mind the heat. I'd learned all the lessons I could about survival, I'd practiced all my fighting moves until they were programmed into muscular memory. Today, I thought, today I'll go, today...my last day at Home.

I stuck the ammo I'd saved into my gunny sack, hung my machete and my pistol from my belt, and walked outside. Retribeauty and Scarlotti were sharpening their machetes over by Doc deMedici's shack. They had wandered in out of the grasslands tired, tattered, and greasy with sweat, but I took their arrival here as the cue for my departure. They had the strength necessary to get through the face-to-face combat, and the dexterity to strike first more often than not. Plus they had an air of luck about them, which might be the most important attribute of all. "If a dude ain't got no luck, his weapons don't just jam, they s___," as Ignatz always says. Scarlotti called himself a medic, but he liked to cause three wounds for every one he sewed up. He talked sweeter to his best machete, Lucille, than I did to my favorite snake before we ate it. Retribeauty—Ret for short—had the strength, quickness, and interpersonal

skills of a marsh panther with an abscessed fang. I'd heard that vigilantes never forgive the past, but Ret seemed ticked off about things that *might* happen. "It pays to be pro-active," she'd growl. Whatever that means. Anyway, it was good to know they were both ready and willing.

Ignatz was already outside doing his calisthenics, coughing and wheezing from the exertion. Even though it had been a long time since he'd been adventuring, Ignatz still liked to stay in shape. But now, for some reason, he was working out harder than ever. Maybe he was just worried about getting old and soft, something he'd talked about ever since he took me and Junior in; or maybe he suspected something was up. I always respected his hunches—when he'd tell me about them, that is.

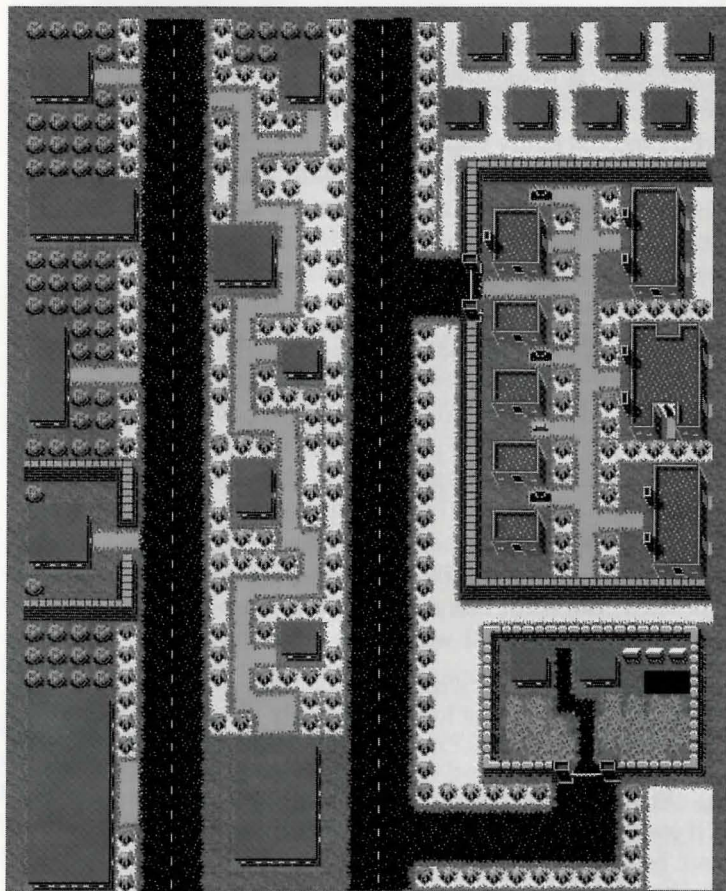
"I got a feeling you're gonna make tracks down the long and winding soon, Darwin old spud," he said after a set of deep knee bends. He sucked some smoke into his lungs from one of his little smoldering paper tubes (he grew this smelly weed he called "tobacco" that he dried in the sun and...forget it, it's too complicated and strange to try to explain). After he stopped coughing, he gave me the same warnings as always: Choose your battles carefully, don't pick on harmless folk, and try to read every book you find. Ignatz was always big on books; since most of the old craftsmen are gone, there's no way to learn most skills now except through literacy. We slapped each other's hands (another thing he does I've never understood) and I held up three fingers. "One too many, man," he said, and showed me how to do it right. "Come and get me if things get too hairy."

Saying goodbye to Ignatz had been hard; I was afraid that saying goodbye to my little brother Junior might be impossible. I'd been telling him about my plans since before he was old enough to understand them; ever since he's been old enough to imitate me, he's taken my plans as his own. He was playing out in the open, pointing his unloaded (I hoped) .22 pistol out into the perimeter of well tended palm trees at imaginary (I *really* hoped) Clowns. He was wearing the "SWOMP WARRIUR" shirt he'd lettered himself, and was pretending to shoot the ears off wicked old Kermit Eli, the head Clown himself. When he saw me coming toward him with Ret and Scarlotti, all of us packing our hardware, he knew immediately what was going on.

"Are we...uh, you goin' now, Darwin?" the kid asked. I nodded as Ret looked anxious to go and Scarlotti just looked lovingly at his machete. "Boy, I wish I was goin', too! Hey, maybe if...I mean, when you come back, and you think I'm ready, maybe I can come along when you go back out." I just nodded my head, and said. "Sure, kid, first thing." I didn't know if I was lying or not; I didn't know if I'd ever even see this place again. Retribeauty, Scarlotti, and I walked slowly out, heading southeast toward what remained of the legendary city of Miami. The Clowns, northwest of us, would have their turn later.

There's not much I can tell you about our first battle; I was drooling in the dirt during most of it. I saw the snakes rear up in the grass, hoods flared as they prepared to strike. I sent one of their scaly little heads flying, but Ret and Scarlotti each missed theirs by a meter or more. The three reptiles who were left seemed to take my recent action very personally so they all struck at me. I was snorting a bit to myself inwardly, thinking that even three savage sets of fangs could not prevail against a lean, mean, surviving machine like myself. I but then snorted outwardly as they all three serpents struck me cleanly. I crumpled like a grass shack in a hail storm.

Why Tourism Is Down In Miami



"Fine medic you got there, son," said Doc when both of his eyes finally managed to focus on me simultaneously. "Maybe I'll teach him to cure mutations if we have the time. A dying specialty, mutosuction is; I might even be the last specialist left, you never know. He's wrong about the mud, by the way." As Doc sauntered off, Scarlotti tied off the last bandage. "Nobody cures mutations that I know of, only the Fountain works," he muttered, and walked off buffing Lucille distractedly.

Being flat on my back in the mud had never been a source of inspiration for me before. But I was officially a warrior now, if a winless one, so things had changed. It dawned upon me that: (A) We had to maximize our forces, and take the strongest and /or most skillful people available to us, and (B) We should try to concentrate our fire on one opponent during a battle, trying to go for at least one sure kill.

"Good thing for you those were just snakes and not mutant vipers," snarled Ret, breaking my reverie. "You'd be dead and we'd still be running." I told Ret about my plan; I found her reaction hard to read since she almost never stops snarling. "You want to take the old man and the kid, fine," she snarled (see?), "as long as they pull their own weight. But they might as well have big glowing purple targets between their shoulder blades if you ask me." The five of us left as soon as my wounds had closed and crusted over.

The miles passed slowly. Dusk fell like an uncured hide, heavy, suffocating, and pretty smelly. The stench of settlement betrayed Miami's proximity to us. We had been travelling for a long time, but we all thought that it would be better to spend the night in the city than out in the marshy grasslands, so we kept trudging south even after it got dark. The distant dim lights of the decayed city were hard to distinguish from the closer, colder glint of Rad Rat eyes in the undergrowth and up in the trees. "Watch out for those little buggers, man," said Ignatz. "Their eyes glow like that 'cause of the radiation in 'em, and they can pass it on to you when they bite." Scarlotti smiled to himself, but I didn't know why...yet.

The streets were empty when we got to Miami, but the night was full of ominous music. We heard pounding, moodily celebratory drums from the south, while weird harmonies from the west sung in strident falsettos made us shiver. "The OhOhs would be down there," said Ignatz, pointing down the rutted street, "and those are the Beachcombers over to the left. You can deal with the OhOh leaders, at least. But the 'Combers got no leaders to deal with." Ret, Scarlotti, and me kept our machetes out; Scarlotti babbled at his in a breathless whisper, and I could swear the thing looked excited, while Ret kept looking west and grinning. Ignatz clutched his antique .38 firmly, but the .22 Junior held out at arm's length twitched and trembled like a dowsing rod passing over a dark, hidden river.

There were shops on our right as we walked south. The first one had a sign hanging in the front that said "Dr. Sandino Marino. Office Hours 10 am - 4 pm". Even I knew combat doesn't keep hours that regular, so I hoped there were other sawbones in town. Scarlotti could bring us back from being knocked out, but anything more serious was beyond his skill, at least for now. The next store was Bilk's Haberdashery (whatever that means). "Armorporium," said Ignatz.

I think he was about to say more (such as what the word he'd just used meant) but he stopped when five black figures seemed to just condense out of the thick, moist air. Their slicked hair and filed teeth glinted like the spikes on their dirty leather clothing. "Bahia Mafia punks," Ignatz spat, "they think they're tough guys." They tried to circle behind us, but we spread out in a wedge, making sure our best fighters were in the front. Scarlotti skipped Lucille like she was a jump rope. Ret locked eyes with the roughest-looking one. "Got a problem?" the punk asked. Retribeauty caught a fat bloodfly out of midair between her thumb and forefinger, squeezed, waited for the pop, flicked the remains at the punk, and shook her head "no". The punk pulled a polished .38 from his stained, cracked leather jacket and said, "Wrong."

It was their guns against our machetes, with Ignatz and Junior providing backup. It was a good thing they were right in front of us; if we'd had to close with them or change weapons, they'd have had the chance to blast away at us and there'd have been nothing we could've done about it. Even with our superior dexterity, it was a tough fight, and Junior and Ignatz both went down before it was over. The look on Scarlotti's face was a mixture of concern for his newfound comrades and pleasure over a chance to practice his healing arts. We took the punks' weapons and ammo.

Beyond the armor store were two old stone buildings; one with bars over the windows and doors, the other "protected" by an ancient crumbling cinderblock wall. The wall was filigreed with scrawled writing, all of it nasty. Most were obscene taunts against the police, but the rest was violent threats *from* the police, whose favorite target seemed to be the Bahia Mafia. "These law dogs sound like real sweethearts," Ret snickered, "let's see if anybody's home." I was going to try to hold her back, but Ignatz caught my arm. "Might as well check in with the county mounties," he said. "At least we're both ticked off at the Bahias."

Ret pounded hard on the police station door; the thudding sound that this produced told us the door was pretty solid. She tried not to let us see her wince or massage her hand after the last dull-sounding knock. A tiny slot-like window in the door opened. A rough voice asked us what we wanted, and if we wanted to know about Florida or Miami. "Ask about Miami first," whispered Ignatz. "We probably know as much about Florida as they do." We got an earful, including directions for thwarting a Bahia Mafia gunrunning

scheme run out of the BM headquarters. When we said we'd be more than happy to help break it up, a bag came flying out the door. Scarlotti used Lucille to flick it open, and he grinned like a doberman eating chicken through a wire fence when he saw the assault rifle and plastic explosives inside. He divided the plastex between Junior and Ignatz, and threw the rifle to me. "See if you can do some good with this later," he grinned. It was then I saw a trickle of blood leaking from his ear; I pointed it out, but he just wiped it away and kept on grinning. We headed south, looking for the General Store.

The Admiral Who Couldn't Go To See

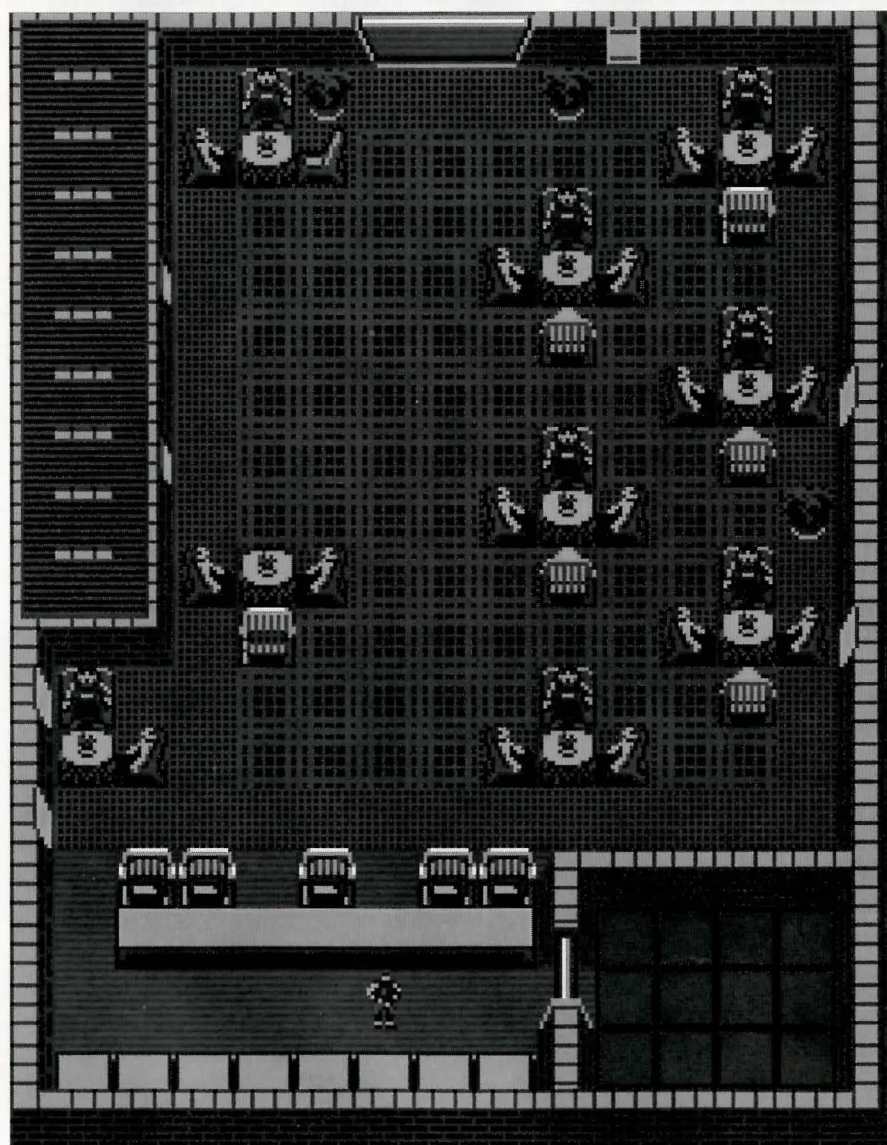
We were searching the south end of Miami when a weatherbeaten old man burst out of an even more weatherbeaten shack. He carried a bizarre-looking rifle with a barrel that looked like it could fire a bullet the size of a mutarantula's egg. He waved the weapon in the air like he was shooing away sweat bees but he never really pointed it *at* us, and he threatened us in a way that sounded half-hearted. Ret and Scarlotti grinned at each other, and took one exaggerated giant step toward him. He squinted and issued another unenthusiastic threat. "Go easy on him," said Ignatz, "I don't think he can see us very well."

We all moved a step closer, and the old man seemed relieved his attitude turned cheerful. He was glad to answer some questions on a variety of subjects (although later it turned he out he was dead wrong about some things). He got downright angry when we asked about the Bahia Mafia, which cemented his reputation as far as we were concerned. With his help we set up a "practical joke": We agree to kill the Admiral, bring the Bahias his rifle to prove we'd offed him, and collect a nice little bounty.

We found the Bhaia clubhouse, but couldn't get in at first when we didn't know the appropriate knock. It took us quite a while, but we finally got it right. It was an obscure number, but it made sense when you consider what the Bahias' weapon of choice is.

We came out pretty well in the transaction: Some cash, a good weapon, and the location of the Bahia HQ (just east of the police HQ). The Admiral wanted to come along after we told him the joke worked, but we just didn't have room; we did promise to come back, though. Travelling due south from Bahias HQ and the Admiral's place, we found the front door of the General Store.

Retribeauty Goes Shopping



The way the General Store smelled stunned us almost as much as the glare of the lights when we opened the door. Wobbly tables were ringed by rickety chairs whose occupants didn't look too stable, either. The air in the big room reeked of grain gone bad and hard work on a hot day. There was a window in the wall on the western side of the room with two signs above it. One said "No Checks", while the other was a long list of items and prices. There was no way we could afford most of that stuff (yet), but Ignatz and Junior needed more ammo. ("Maybe if you have more, you'll finally hit something," Scarlotti sneered.)

We sauntered over to the window as nonchalantly as people carrying blood-stained machetes can. Ret rang the bell on the counter by the window and almost reached for the attendant's windpipe when he finally appeared: He looked like a Bahia punk! Ignatz (and, surprisingly enough, Scarlotti) calmed her down. "We need access to this place, to sell and to buy," said Ignatz. "We can't go strangling the shop clerks, or even break into this place, and expect to do business as usual." Ret's face had turned the color of an exposed muscle. "We need him...now," she hissed, "but not later." She stood glowering while Ignatz and Junior made their purchases.

The police had mentioned a "back room" here. Even though the Miami PD told us to check it after closing hours, we thought we should get a clear idea of the layout of the place beforehand. Junior spotted a door behind the bar, and we decided it was as good a possibility as any. Nobody pestered us until we rounded the bar, where the bartender pulled a shotgun from behind the bar and began to blast away! Luckily, we didn't have our plastic explosive equipped (it would have been a waste to use it on just one psycho); our machetes were tough enough to take him out. Since no one interfered in the fight, or even seemed to notice it, Scarlotti was able to pick the buckshot out of our behinds unmolested. Ignatz picked up the now-ownerless shotgun, some shells, and a good-looking armor vest (he said it was made out of something called Shagreen) as we walked up to the door.

Scarlotti did the knocking this time. There was no response, no sound at all from beyond the door, so our medic checked the latch; the door was locked. Ignatz stepped forward and picked it; again, no one in the store noticed what we were doing. The door swung open, and we were assaulted by the smell of rum, rotting leather, and greasy kid's stuff—the signature bouquet of the Bahia Punks. Otherwise the room was empty. We decided to take a stroll outside and do some exploring; we'd deal with the Bahias after closing time, just like the cops advised us.

We passed the time killing everything in sight (mostly snakes, which seem to outnumber the people in Miami), checking the door occasionally. Finally,

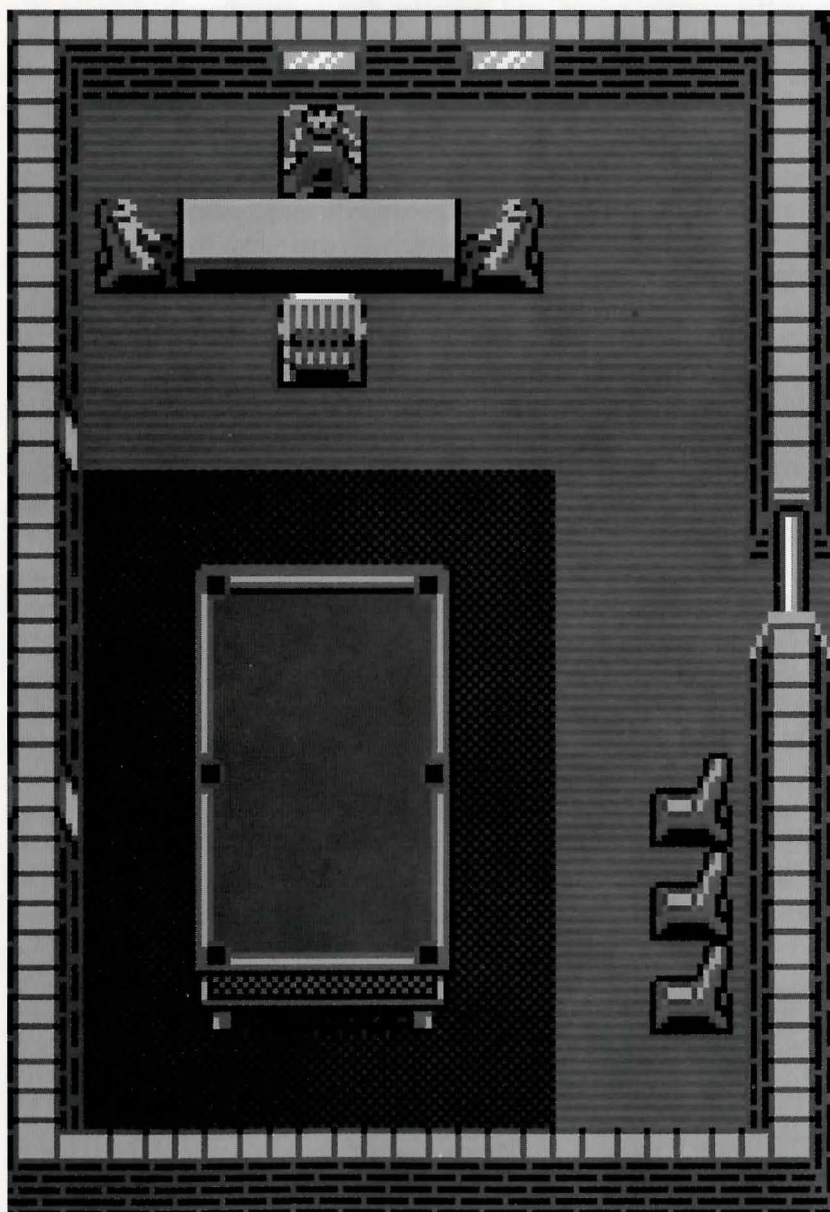
when it was almost dawn, the lights went out and we heard a key turn in the lock. Ignatz slipped the lock after a couple of tries and we went in, straight to the door behind the bar. There was a continual din of voices behind it. One especially gruff voice bellowed, "Go fish," followed by an avalanche of gravelly laughter. "Pre-Change gambling term," Ignatz said, while picking the lock yet again.

No empty room this time. Four Bahia punks were playing cards around a table and taking noisy swigs from a bottle marked "DeSoto Rum." Distracted by our unannounced entrance, they pointed their pistols at our sternums in a gesture of surprise. "Who sent you?" one of them queried. There was an awkward interlude in the conversation while we all tried to remember the correct name. "Diz?" Ignatz offered shakily. The lack of confidence in Ignatz's voice didn't seem to disturb the punks, who accepted us as fellow scum. They were quite blithe to tell us the time and date of the arms shipment, probably so they could get rid of us and concentrate on the game. "Tuesday between midnight and four," said Ret, "it's a date." Her smile was so cold I wouldn't have wanted to put my tongue on it. We left the store again to immerse ourselves in the sultry heat of day.

We had a few more fights before night fell (Junior got creamed in every one of them) which we thought were all low impact encounters; we found out differently later on. On the positive side, we picked up some cash and a few weapons, and learned that OhOh cultists are good to fight if you really like to collect empty bottles. We had one peculiar encounter with a tipsy blond woman who stumbled out of the General Store with a rifle over her shoulder. She winked flirtatiously, but I make it a policy never to come on to inebriated women who are better armed than I am. She indicated she might be willing to come along with us on our adventures, but then changed her mind and asked for something that "smelled nice".

We thought about that for awhile. But mostly, we just waited.

Escape to Tuesday



My first full night in Miami wasn't what I thought it was going to be. I'm not sure what I expected, but I know I didn't expect murk. I thought night wouldn't be this dark in an actual town. Maybe it was different before The Change. The windows of the nearby buildings were shuttered and blank. The only light came from the crescent moon, and it was as dim as an unbrushed smile. We crouched among the scraggly palms south of the Bahia Mafia hangout waiting for midnight to come. I wished there was something, anything, I could do to make time pass faster, some way to escape to Tuesday.

We saw several bands of Combers and OhOh cultists skulk past, but we let them go on. If you can curse at someone with your eyes, that's what Ret was doing to me; she hated to let opponents get away for any reason. Scarlotti and his machete dealt with their frustration doing a weird silent battle pantomime in the gloom. Ignatz, of course, remained cool; he even managed to not cough. Junior was almost whirling around in a panic, eyes wide as impact craters as he peered into the night, making sure that no one was sneaking up on us. He was getting everybody jumpy; I thought Ret was going to smack him a good one. It turned out she didn't have to. Junior tripped over a root, stumbled hard into a palm tree, and ripe coconuts hailed down on us like bombs. Three of them landed right on Junior's head; it only took the first one to knock him cold. These sickly city palms could be dangerous as any trap. Scarlotti brought Junior to in a couple of minutes; Ret looked like she wanted to put him back to sleep.

Ignatz pointed at the moon, it's crescent tips now pointed downward in a broad frown almost directly above us. "12 o'clock high," he whispered. "Take out the fireworks, dudes." Ret and Junior pulled the plastic explosives from their packs. As we crept up to the Bahia's door, a Mutarantula leapt out of a ditch right by Scarlotti. We expected him to smear it with one swipe from Lucille...but he let it sink its fangs in his leg instead! Ret eradicated the irradiated arachnid with one punch and looked at Scarlotti like he was a few giant mutant ants short of a picnic. Scarlotti shrugged. "Oops," he said, "must be tired or something."

But we had more important things to deal with than our crazy medic saying "Bite me!" to the mutants. We got out best weapons and the plastex ready. We knocked at the Bahia's door in the correct patten (5, 5, and 6, also their favorite flavor of ammo) and walked on in. The punks didn't seem as personable as they had been the last time, so we chastised them for their ill manners by hurling malleable plastic wads of death in their general direction. This softened them up enough that they were all gone in a couple of rounds of gunfire and machete sweeps. Our wounds were minor (except for Junior's, of course, who needed Scarlotti's immediate professional attention). The payoff was enough to make Ret try to smile: Ammo, weapons, money, and bottles of DeSoto rum.

We thought about keeping the Remingtons, but none of us were good enough with them to make it worth our while; the heat and dirt they're exposed to would make them jam, and none of us was a good enough gunsmith to successfully unjam them. So we took them back to the Miami PD, where we got a badge for doing the job right, and we were allowed to keep the ammo and everything else we'd found. We were also able to rest at the police station from now on if we needed to; if one of us was tired, he could just hang out at the cop shop while the rest of us went about our business.

We decided it was time for a rest so we headed back for Home. We had also decided, without telling him so, that Junior wasn't pulling his weight. When we left Home again, we would be leaving him behind.

Voodoo Unto Others

During the long walk back Home, we noticed that our wounds weren't healing and we were feeling weaker and weaker. Ignatz and Scarlotti seemed grim, but said very little; they just pushed us to keep on going. All of us were practically crawling on our hands and knees when we got back Home; we collapsed into Doc deMedici's office, where he spent long hours working on all of us. His diagnoses were rabies, radiation sickness, exposure to mutagens, and venom poisoning. Many of the things we were fighting could do worse than wound us, Ignatz and Scarlotti knew that but didn't want us to panic on the way Home. None of us noticed then that Scarlotti refused one type of treatment.

After Doc deMedici treated out assorted afflictions, we broke the bad news to Junior and left as quickly as we could. I could never stand to see the kid cry. Even though Junior had proved pretty useless in a fight, I still missed him all the way back to Miami. Even killing my first mutant viper couldn't cheer me up. We went back for Admiral Ochoa; he'd mentioned before that he made his own guns, so he was probably a pretty adept gunsmith. He seemed happy to join us and gave us the grand tour of the ruined city.

Our first stop was at Madame Lupe Garoo's just north of the Admiral's hacienda. Having grown up in a bachelor household, I'm usually not on to complain about other people housekeeping, but the Madame Lupe's tumbledown shack smelled like she had a very big dog she didn't walk very often. She ignored everyone but me, which seems to happen a lot. I'm pretty good looking even if I do say so myself; on a scale of 1 to 20, I'm near the top. And she wasn't much of a conversationalist (her prominent canines gave her a sibilance I think she was embarrassed about). but she did tell me to say "Lukos" to Doc Brewho. We had no idea what any of that meant at the time, but we'd find out soon enough.

The Admiral directed us to Doc Brewho's house north of Madame Lupe's and across the street. It smelled even worse than her "kennel" had, and we hadn't even opened the door yet. We all mumbled something about maybe meeting him later, but the Admiral knocked on the door and insisted that we make his acquaintance. The door opened and we were confronted with a wizened man with huge eyes who had skulls perched on either shoulder. He asked if we wanted help or just to talk. "Perhaps help first," said the Admiral, who winked at me. It turned out that they didn't call the strange old man Doc for nothing; he was healer of great skill. His prices seemed a little steep after the free healing I'd received from Doc deMedici all my life, but I guess they did things differently in the city.

We didn't need any of his services at that moment, so we decided to see if he had any information. He clued us in a bit on the OhOh's, who he was pretty chummy with. His brother even ran those looneys! But his eyes really lit up when we mentioned Madame Lupe. He asked if she had a message for him. "Lukos" didn't sound like much of a message to me, but I passed it on anyway. The Doc grinned broadly and quoted us a price list for exotic-sounding substances: Voodoo Elixir, Voodoo Cologne, Voodoo Tonic, and Brewhoe Nostrum. Even the Admiral didn't know what any of this stuff was. I think he was a little surprised when Doc Brewho brought it up, None of it was really important now, but it would be later.

"This place may be of greater interest to you than the other places were, beautiful senorita," the Admiral smiled, pointing to Guns & Clutter. Ret offered to dry shave him with a rusty cane knife in both hands. She never could take a compliment well. I defused the situation by reminding Ret that the Admiral couldn't see well, so if he thought she was pretty, it was just his imagination. Ret accepted the excuse, although I'm glad she didn't think about it too hard.

G&C was the best equipped weapons store I'd ever seen, and their prices were comparable with the General Store's. We just browsed at our next stop, Bilk's Haberdashery. "This greedy one never has much in stock," said the Admiral, "but much of what he has you can buy nowhere else. You can only pull it off your dead enemies." Still, we memorized his prices, since we knew we would be coming back.

Then the Admiral took us to the other town doctor, a more conventional angel of mercy than Doc Brewho. Not only did he look like a doctor, he also looked like he could whip his weight in dobermutants. "This one has also campaigned against the Clowns and the Combers," the Admiral whispered to me behind his hand. "He may join you in your fights if you approach him

correctly. One hears he loves the beautiful señoritas." I kept that, as well his more reasonable pricelist, in mind.

Something struck me; I usually strike things back, but this was too important. Neither Doc Marino nor Doc Brewho claimed to cure mutations the way Doc deMedici said he could. Maybe my old country doc was better than these two city slickers.

Now the Admiral led us toward the north end of town and pointed to another shack. "This is the home of TomTom Mahoute," he said, "one of the leaders of the Obeah Orders. He can be talked to and reasoned with, even though he is deep in grief now. His only son, Wilfred, has disappeared, and he fears he has been taken by the 'Combers and will be lynched. He can tell you more about it, and the Obeahs, if you talk to him yourselves. Perhaps if his son was returned to him, the current wildness of the Obeah cultists would cease. He does not control them as resolutely as he once did."

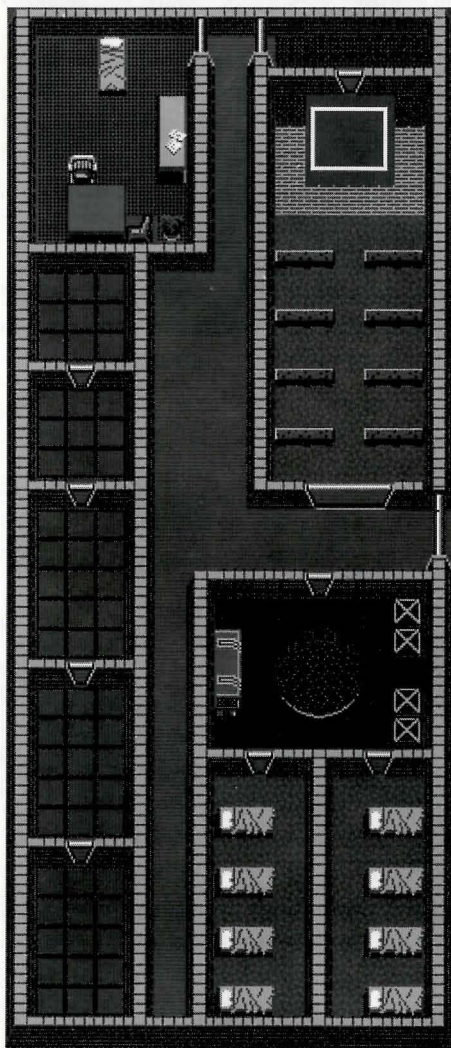
Ignatz asked about the residential area in the northeast area of town. "Up in the corner are the 'Combers," said the Admiral. "I stay away from their neighborhood. If they even think you are looking in their windows, they will attack you. The worst thing is, if you are involved in a fight with them in their own area, even one you did not start, the police will arrest you and take half of your money! I think there is some crooked arrangement between them.

"Just below the 'Combers is where the merchants live. Diz Astor, who owns Guns & Clutter lives there with his wife B.L. Ah, there is a beautiful one; the face of an angel, the heart of a dove, and the eye of a sharpshooter. I grieve she is so unhappy with that no account Diz that she drowns her sorrows in the General Store; she would love to leave him behind if someone would only help her. Diz' father lives there, too. If only Diz was more like him! Full of wisdom is that one, well worth talking to. But, alas, he is full of woe since his wife of many decades disappeared. Who knows if she is alive or dead on this island of peril? Perhaps you will meet him some day."

Perhaps. But first things first. We made a return visit to Bilk's and bulked up on armor (what there was of it). And that OhOh temple was looking more and more interesting.

We did have a couple of fights with Mutarantulas on the way over, And sure enough, Scarlotti tried to entice them satisfy their palates with his calf. I could've sworn that the guy was trying to get himself mutated on purpose. In fact, I *should* have sworn, loudly.

Sects, Flies, and Hideous Traps



The murk was so thick in the temple you could have shaped it into bricks. The unmoving air was laced with drifting smoke that had a pungent, resinous smell and texture, as if every resinous flower in the Glades had been brought here, crushed, and set to smouldering. Oily torches clutched by holders on the walls seemed to whisper as they flickered. You could have hacked the silence with a machete. I was glad Junior was safe at home; this place would have made him blow chow for distance.

We crept up to the door on the right. A sign said "Next Service 1500 hours." I tested the door; it was locked. "Por favor, let me try," said the Admiral. I figured his lockpicking days were long over, but out of respect I stepped aside so he could try it. The delicate touch his gnarled hands still held surprised me; he picked the rusty lock easily, and the door swung open with a drawn out creak. Having him along was just as good as having a Hood in the party, maybe better. The overpowering florid smell was even stronger in here, wafting along the low benches and the stone platform at the north end of the room. "Nothing in here,"

Ret rasped. "Let's go south through the other door; I think I heard something down there." I hadn't heard a thing, but I didn't want to argue with Ret; lack of mayhem makes her irritable.

The south door was locked, too, but the Admiral seemed to open it even

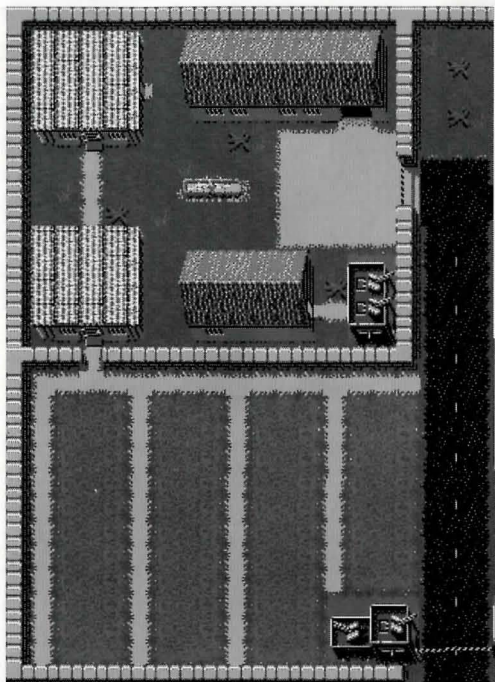
more easily than he had the last one. The smell in here was less suggestive of a flower garden than it was of mulch. Empty crates were stacked along the east wall, and there was some kind of altar against the west wall. A pit with crumbling, unsafe-looking edges sank into the room's center; there was barely enough space on the ledge around it to get past. We startled a Cultist standing over by the altar taking a deep draw off a bottle of dark amber liquid. He swallowed hard when he first saw us, but then seemed relieved for some reason, and smiled drunkenly. Patting the altar, he said, "Praise the Conqueroo you ain't TomTom! Here's to beauty, mon!" Then he took a thirsty pull from his bottle, staggered left, and fell directly into the pit. He screamed "Dreamsnake!" before he even cleared the rim of the pit, but he didn't scream it for long. We kept as far away from the edge of the abyss as we could when we moved south; we decided it was a dangerous place to get close to if you'd been drinking.

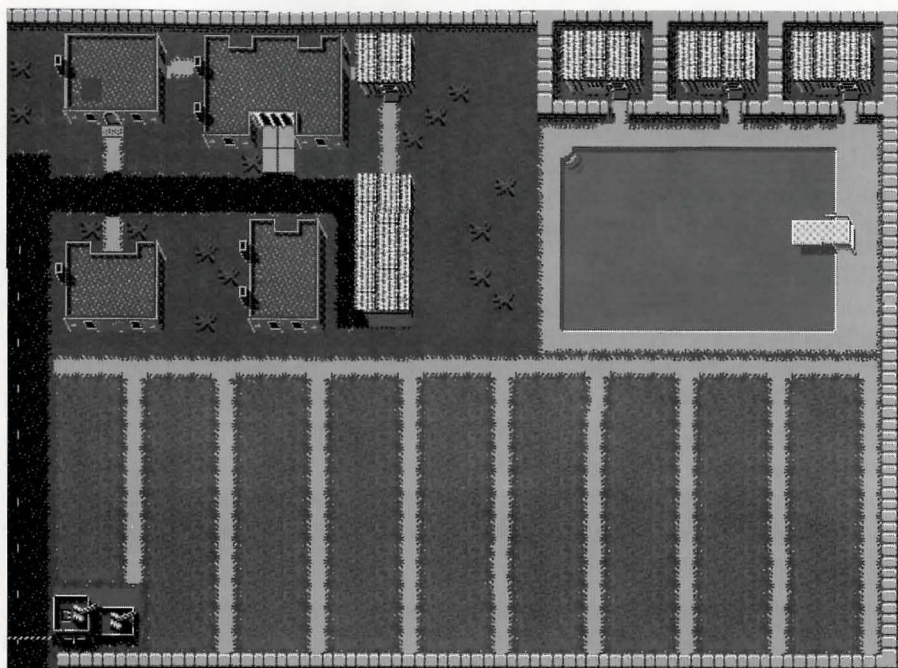
We didn't even breathe as we edged south along the lip of the pit; even our shadows falling on the eroded edge seemed to make it crumble. We were at the southwestern door before we realized how heavily we were sweating. Scarlotti tested the door, which was locked, of course, so the Admiral picked the lock without trouble. He swung it open with a flourish, bowed deeply, and with a courtly sweep of his hand bade mi'lady Retribeauty to enter first. Ret looked like she wanted to shoot him. "Careful you don't wake up the fanatics," she hissed, and pointed to the stacks of slumbering OhOh cultists in the room beyond.

We crept into the room, on the watch for loose treasure lying around. We should have been watching the cultists instead. I'm not sure if they were playing opossumute or they were just light sleepers, but when we were halfway into the room, the sprung from their beds, bare feet slapping the packed earth floor.

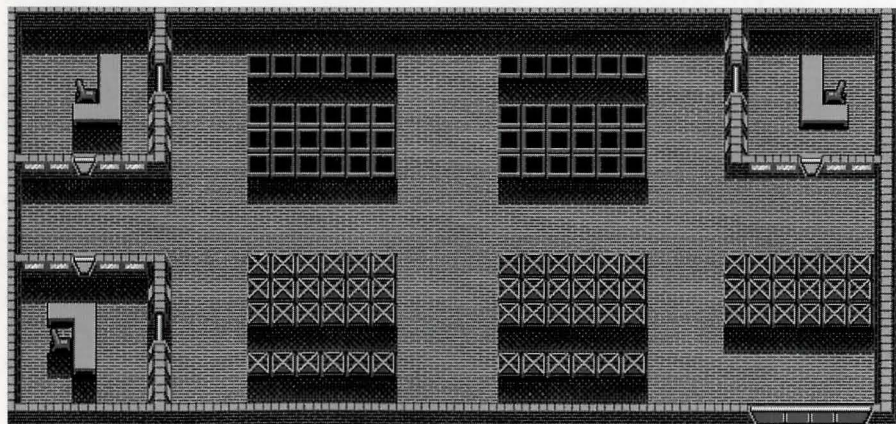
The battle was a savage one. To our shock and surprise, Ret went down in repeated barrages of pistol fire and arcing machetes. In fact we were all close to unconsciousness before the last cultists fell. Scarlotti patched up Ret while the rest of collapsed to the floor and rested. In my haze of fatigue and pain, I thought I saw Ret kiss Scarlotti when she came to, but I decided that couldn't have happened. A quick search of the cultists' bodies yielded weapons, cash, and the usual empty bottles. We searched a few of the beds, too, but found nothing but cooties until we got to the southern end of the room, where we encountered more cultists who had been waiting for us the whole time. We were in no shape for another battle like the last one, so we scampered around them over one of the rickety beds, and ran fast as we could for the door. We made it, promising ourselves to come back later. We did. We won.

But first we took care of the DeSotos.





Demon Rum



The easiest thing about the DeSoto compound was getting in; the pass word was completely obvious, and pretty egocentric. The guards waved us in when we said their bosses' name, and seemed to forget about us once we were inside. There were lush fields of sugar cane to our right and left. I used to chew on the raw stalks of the wild cane that grew near Home when I was a sprat, but the scuttling and growling coming from within the almost opaque growth made me want to keep my hands away from it.

When the fields ended, we saw another walled compound to our left, while opulent homes, a garage, and a strange pond (The Admiral contemptuously referred to it as a "swimming pool") rose to our right. The houses looked inviting, but to "put the DeSotos out of business" the way the Miami PD told us to, the secondary walled compound was probably the place to go. It looked like that's where the "business" happened. We got through the gate unmolested, even though there was a guard house to our left. All the buildings here were nondescript one-story structures; choosing which one to go into would be sheer guesswork. We decided to leave the guardhouse for later and entered the building on our right.

The door was unlocked and the building was silent so we walked in. We entered a large room filled half-way to the ceiling with stacked crates of rum and empty bottles. A mutarantula octopedaled out of the shadows and Scarlotti scampered forward to meet it. He took so much time killing it he could have formally introduced himself. Again, being bitten didn't seem to bother him. I planned to confront him as soon as we were back on neutral ground.

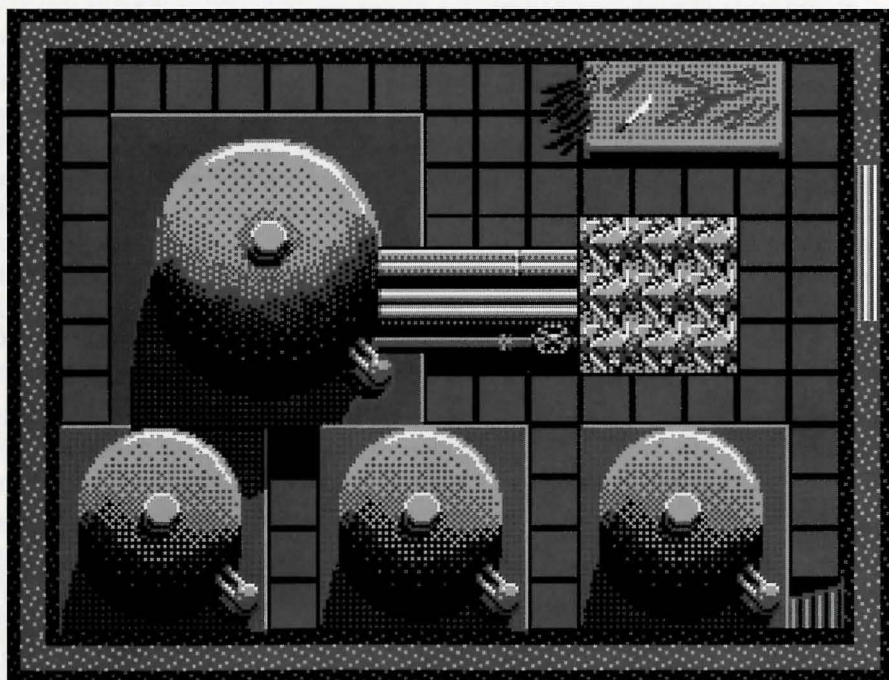
We moved north between the stacked crates. Before long, we saw a door in an eastern wall ahead of us. We got to it without being molested and without Ol' Spiderchow Scarlotti passing out any free lunches to his eight-legged friends. We breezed in the door and entered the room, which was empty except for a desk and chair. The formidable-looking lock in the only desk drawer made the Admiral swallow hard. He squinted more than ever as he concentrated on picking it, and it took him more than one try to do the job. The drawers contents didn't seem to be very important or useful, but at least the Admiral got in some lockpicking practice and increased his skill.

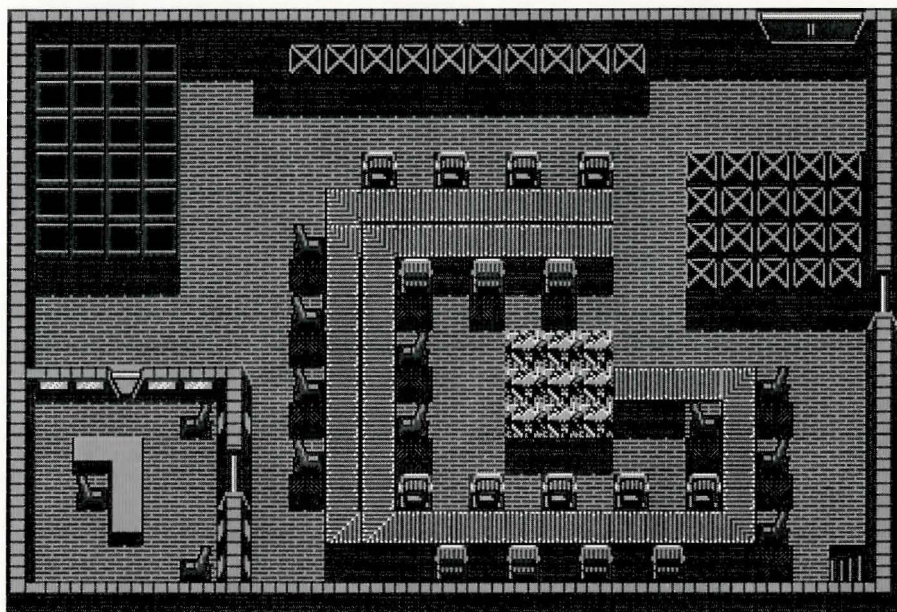
We left the way we came and slunk headed west. There was door a in the west wall identical to the one we had just opened, and it opened into an identical room with identical furnishings. One important difference was the combination lock set in the desk drawer. Try as he might, the Admiral could not get past the safe's sullen dial. We decided to come back wither when the Admiral's skills were more honed, when we found the combination, or when we recruited a more skillful lockpicker into the party.

We headed south to complete the circuit. We came to another door, which we assumed would contain another lock none of us could open. A little humility is good for the character, so we decided to go on in, completely fail at picking the lock, and feel completely humiliated. Congratulating each other on our worthlessness, we opened the door. The guard in the room seemed surprised to see us, and he intensified the social awkwardness of the situation by asking us the password. We tried the one we knew. Wrong. He called in some of his colleagues to further explain our error. To save ourselves further embarrassment by the surging cloud of guards that was swirling into the room, we withdrew from the room and ran outdoors as fast as we could.

We weren't followed, so we had time to consider our next move carefully. Going in the guardhouse seemed like a bad idea to everyone except Ret and Scarlotti, who thought no idea that led to violence could be a bad one.

Crime In A Bottle





Since the vote went against going into the guard house, we went into squat building right beside it. We breezed through the door unhindered and came upon a long series tables connected by what Ignatz called a “conveyor belt,” and more stacks of crates, most of which contained empty bottles. Other than that the room was empty. We waited to check the stairs going down until we searched what looked like an office in corner opposite. There were no guards to contend with here, just the customary desk-with-a-locked-drawer. Admiral Ochoa picked the lock easily. We found a cache of DeSoto family letters, apparently from mother to son. They were a little weird, and the less said about them, the better. But we still took them along with us, the same way we do everything. The strangest, most esoteric items can come in handy.

We were on our way to the stairs in the corner when Scarlotti decided to take a shortcut across the conveyor belt. He leapt onto it expecting to just hop off on the other side. But apparently the DeSotos kept their equipment finely tuned, even if it was strangely silent at the moment. Just as our feet touched the belt, a hidden engine kicked in and the belt took off lickety-split. Before we could hop off, we were propelled along the full length of the belt and headlong into a stack of crates. No one was hurt badly, but we still just sat there for a few moments, contemplating the passing of the Industrial Age, and concluding how it hasn't been an entirely bad thing. Ret was also contemplating demolishing the conveyor belt. “Maybe on the way out,” I told her.

We went down the stairs in a dark, warm, humid room full of strong odor like burnt sugar. This area was full of large vats, boilers, and a table covered by chopped sugar cane. Admiral Ochoa began to explain the process of fermentation to me, but Doc deMedici had filled me in on that long ago. I know a distillery when I see one.

The main boiler in the center of the room was turned off and there was a sign in an unfamiliar language was hanging from the main valve. "It says, more or less, to leave it alone," said the Admiral. I didn't know whether that was a warning or a con; we survivalists aren't the most trusting people on the island, so I decided it was a con. I gave the wheel a quick turn, and heard what may have been the loudest noise in Florida since it separated from the mainland. Everyone had taken damage, but no one was dead. That was comforting. The main boiler was also a wreck. We had carried out the main part of the Miami PD's order to put the DeSotos out of business entirely by accident.

Our medic tended to our wounds as best he could, and we continued poking around. As we were exploring among the vats, a young boy ran out from between two of them and looked at us fearfully. I tried to call him over, but he ran out as soon as I opened my mouth. I thought about stopping him before he warned the others we were here, but they probably knew that already. Even Ret didn't move to stop him. "Only a 5 pointer," she grinned mirthlessly.

We went to the northern part of the room to check out the area where the boy had been sneaking around. Under the cane cutting table we found a very secure looking vault. The Admiral had to work hard to open it, and could not indulge in one of his customary flourishes. He got it open though, and we all thought it was a little odd that anyone would go to so much trouble to guard nothing but water. And as soon as we got the safe open, somebody popped out from behind one of the vats and ran out screaming something about, "They've found it, they've found it!"

We decided there were too many people popping out of the woodwork in this place, so we decided to leave. While we were on the way out, I decided to finally ask Scarlotti why he was turning himself into arachnid h'ors d'oeuvres.

"You just don't see the advantages to being a mutant," he said, daubing at his eyes with his sleeve. (They were tearing heavily for some reason.) "People fear mutation because they don't understand it. I do understand it, and I know how to manage it. The DeSoto rum contains something, perhaps the 'Water of Dreams' we've heard spoken about, that suppresses the harmful effects of mutation but leaves the power it brings intact. I've been able to collect quiet a bit of the rum in our recent encounters, and I have all I'll need. There are only a few useful mutations now, but later there will be more, and more. Technology ruined the world and almost killed all humankind. But when mutation

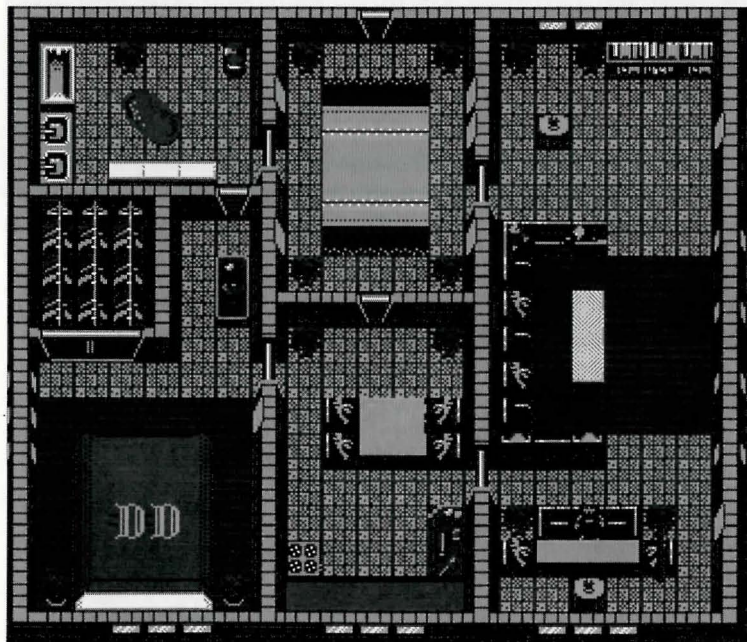
reaches its full fruition, we will rebuild the world with the power of mutants, not of machines, and a new human race will arise on the desolation left by Homo Sapiens. Homo Proteus, The Changing Man, is about to be born, and he shall be baptized with the Water of Dreams!"

Pretty high flown talk for a guy who held conversations with a gardening tool. Scarlotti wanted to be a Homely Baptist Platypus, that was up to him. He had no idea then how sorry he'd be later.

Exploring the barracks to the west, we learned the combination to the safe in the bottling plant (092089) and a new password, "murcielago." We also got into the worst fights we had yet experienced (we made the mistake of asking a sergeant a question about sergeants, so he knew we didn't belong there) but as a result we found the best weapons we had yet come across. Having cleared out the "working class" section of the compound, we decided to explore the luxurious mansions to the west. To neutralize the DeSotos, we would have to face them.

We went to the first house to the south.

The Right Stuffed



I've never felt so cold on a hot day as I did when I entered Mario's house. I still feel cold whenever I think about it. I felt the cold even before I saw the "corpses," if you want to call them that. There was a combination of odd smells, too, one like something rotten, the other sort of like medicine. The place was even creepier than the OhOh temple.

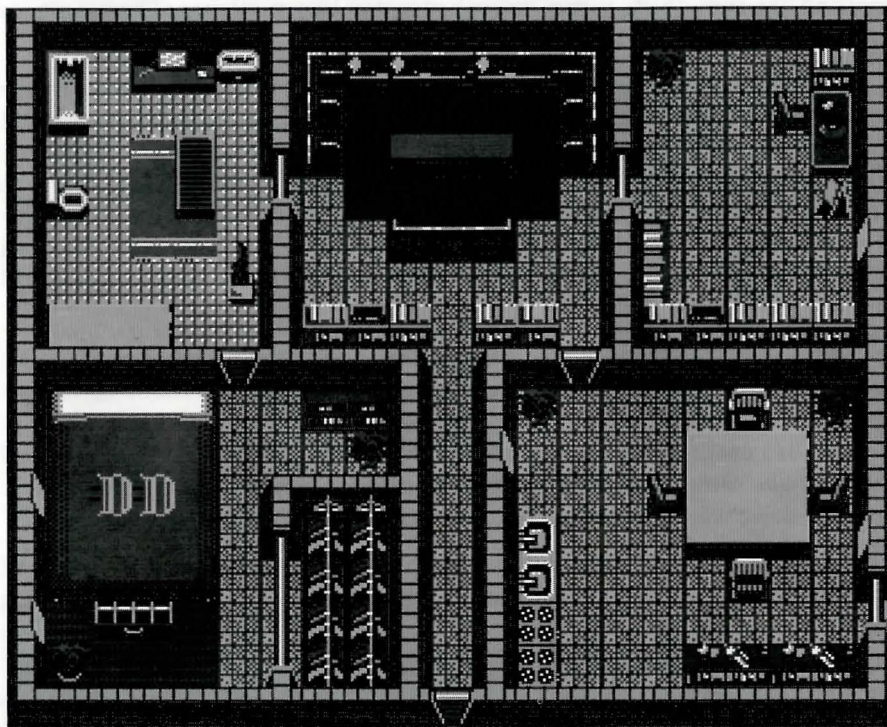
We turned left off the entry hallway into a large room. The books in the corner attracted my attention, of course, but so did the people on the couch. I thought we might have yet another battle to fight, but it had been a long time since these poor bastards had raised a hand against anybody. Their skin was dry and drawn as jerky, and their eyes were sewn shut. They sat there like they were waiting for something. I tried not to wonder what it might be. Scarlotti added pharmacy to his healing skills while we were in the room, but we still left in a hurry.

We went across the hall into a bathroom, one of the nicest ones I've ever seen. It had the usual porcelain appointments,, plus an an odd cabinet with five spigots colored blue, amber, red, green, and violet. I was glad I kept some of the OhOh's empty vials (they were finally good for something!), and I used them to take samples of fluid from each spigot. I skipped the red and amber spigots; there was something about them I just didn't trust.

We took a turn south through the master bedroom. We found five pairs of rubber boots (and a serious varmint problem) in the closet. Rubber boots are highly prized in The Glades, so we divvied them up between us. I'm glad we kept them, because we never would have survived without them later. What we found under the pillow on the big bed sounded like what Ignatz calls science fiction; it purported to be the diary of one of the DeSotos, Mario detailed how his mother had kept him in a childlike state by using "Water of Dreams," and how he planned to take his revenge by tainting the rum as it was made. The only pure water left was kept in a vault in the distillery, and Mario made the mistake of writing down where he hid the key. We looked later and it was right where he said it would be. We'd already found the water in the distillery, so we didn't bother going back.

We all decided that this was a good place to get out of, so we headed for a door we'd seen in the southeastern part of the house. And for the first time, I looked closely at a strange wall hanging near the door. It was an an animal skin, stretched and cured, but relatively hairless, like a human being's. Exactly like a human being's. Even Ret went pale when she saw it. We left in a hurry, before we became decorations, too.

A Woman's Touch



We came out on a cracked paved surface painted green which the Admiral called a tennis court. Looking north in the lowering dusk, we could see heavily armed guards marching a tough-looking bunch of adventurers away at gunpoint from the house just north of Mario's. We waited until they were around the corner and out of sight before we dashed across the grounds to the door they'd come out of. There might still be guards in there, but their numbers would be reduced for now. That was the theory, anyway.

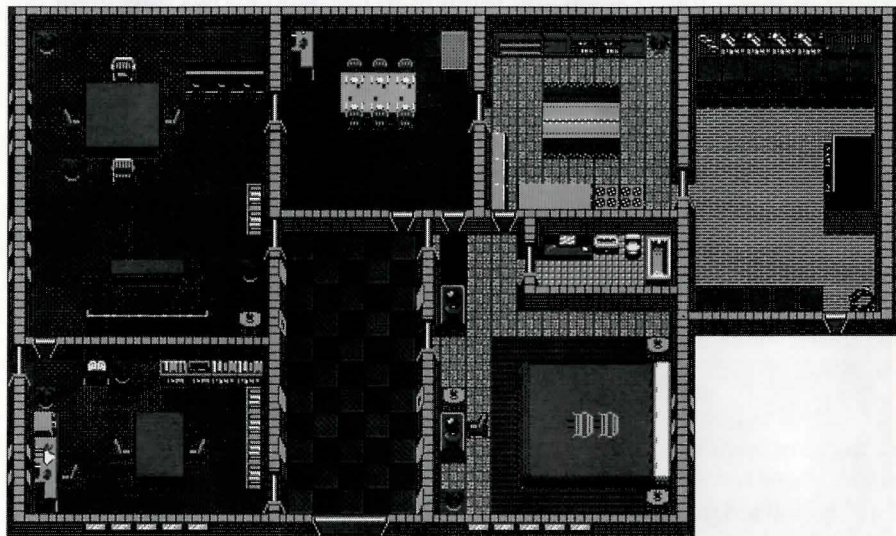
This place was a lot different than the house Mario haunted. It had a definite feminine look, which of course made Ret want to burn it to its foundations. "This must be the home of the radiant Senorita Imelda," said the Admiral. "What I know of her is only hearsay. She is said to be unhappy with the business her family is in. Drinking the alcohol seems evil to her. This unhappiness has made her untrusting, especially of men. I have heard also that she

longs for a more adventurous life, but at the same time she loves the luxury she was raised in, especially the fine jewelry she has always had. There are stories of her great anger about losing a valuable brooch somewhere in the compound. If it was found again and brought to her, who knows how great her gratitude might be?" (BL found it later in a weed patch in front of Imelda's house. I'll tell you more about BL later.)

We went up the hallway and entered a room lined with books. There was a lot of boring feminine frou-frou stuff on the shelves, but we found some useful instructions about demolitions, gunsmithing, and semiautomatic rifles sandwiched among the corny century-old best sellers. We also found five ancient electronic devices; we didn't know what they were, but we took them along anyway. I was glad I'd used my experience to benefit my brainpower and not just my biceps; the gunsmithing knowledge I picked up would come in handy, although I still hand over any complicated unjamming jobs to the Admiral.

In the southwest corner of the house, we found a very feminine bedroom. A dreamy look came over Ret's face; I assumed she was contemplating arson. There was little here but a leather vest in the closet and a locked chest. The bed looked inviting, and I almost laid down to take a rest, but Ret grabbed my arm and asked, "You getting soft, Darwin?" I resented her implication, but I recognized the truth it contained. We had too much to do to rest now, and we were in a dangerous area. If I laid down on such a soft surface now, I might sleep for a long time, perhaps even too long. We explored the rest of the house, found nothing but some books even I had no use for, and went to explore the next house.

Father Glows Best



Everyone's face lit up when we entered the house through what appeared to be the library. It was gratifying that my companions were starting to pick up my bibliophilia and had begun to exercise their minds more and more. The literary rewards on these shelved were particularly suitable to our purposes; you can't have too many well educated lockpickers and bomb/alarm disarmers in the adventuring business. The fact that we found \$500 in cash and a cache of ammunition nearby only reaffirmed the fact that literacy often reaps unexpected rewards.

We went through the door just north of the locked cabinet and entered a room with very lush carpeting and many tables and chairs. At the north end of the room was counter stacked with tables, bottles, and glasses. Scarlotti's legs were twitching and gnarled from mutation, but he still managed to scamper toward the twinkling crystalline stacks. After rummaging behind the counter, he vaulted over the bar laughing and held aloft several bottles marked "DeSoto." He introduced them to Lucille and stuffed them into his backpack.

We never heard Irwin, the patriarch of the DeSoto clan, come in behind us. We expected him to be followed by a troop of his Soldados, but he actually seemed happy to see us. He gave us what he called a "DeSoto medallion," and effusively thanked us for finding the usable water and saving his business.

This presented us with a moral dilemma. We had saved the DeSoto business, at least in part, and yet we had been ordered to put the DeSotos out of business by the Miami PD. While I pondered this dichotomy, Ret was pondering a lobotomy, which she attempted to give Irwin manually. Scarlotti joined in, and although Irwin was able to fire a few rounds into both of them before he went down, they took him out quickly. I began to protest their rash action, but when Ret gave me Irwin's truly buff armor and truly fine popgun, my conscience was eased and my outrage defused.

We searched the rest of the house and found some more goodies. We became art lovers out in the hallway, and were surprised when we found out later that we could discuss the techniques of the old masters with the OhOh's. The Admiral was puzzled, however, by the absence of Irwin's famous gun collection. "I cannot believe he would ever let it go," said the old salt. "It is said he loves to hunt rad rats and snakes in the cane fields with his antique weapons. They may still be there, but that would be most odd." But, as it turned out, not all that odd.

Our business here seemed done, so we left the DeSotos behind for good.

Scarlotti's Green Thumb

When we left the compound, the OhOh's were running as wild as ever, if not moreso. We decided that it might be time to look for TomTom's son, Wilfred, in the hope that the old witch doctor might be able to concentrate on controlling his congregation if his son was returned. The Admiral, who wasn't looking very well, wished us luck but said he was staying behind at Miami PD headquarters. The exertion of our mission against the DeSotos had been too much for his old bones. So reduced in number, we left Miami and went out onto the grasslands.

But we weren't sure where to search. We asked ourselves where we'd hide under similar circumstances. Scarlotti said he'd hide in plain sight. Ret found the question insulting. I decided that I'd hide in the Glades southwest of Miami.

The Glades sawgrass couldn't have been any denser or more impenetrable if it had been woven on a loom. Scarlotti was ready to plunge right into the serrated shrubbery until we saw a young mutant wolf chase a bush rat toward it; the rodent cut sharply left at the last second, but the overgrown cub couldn't stop and skidded into the undergrowth. Immediately, a rich purple plume of blood billowed from the tangled thicket; the wolf lived long enough for one strangled, confused yelp. The beads of gore on the dark green leaves made me

think of the red ornaments on the Christmas trees of long ago that Ignatz had described to Junior and me. But nobody believed in holidays like that anymore.

We spent hours walking around the perimeter of the Glades looking for a path; the Combers had to have hacked out at least one, but sawgrass grows so fast it could have filled it back in within hours. There were no tracks, none of the wreckage that Combers customarily leave in their wake, nothing. We would just have to hack our way through. "Let'th try to approath thith rathionally," Scarlotti slobbered, his mutated tongue lolling around in his mouth. "We know the Comberth don't take care of anything; if thomthing breakth, they just thcavength another one. Tho anything they have ith likely to be real trath. I theorithe that they're holding Wilfred thomewhere near edge of the Gladth tho they won't have to hack too far to get in and out."

Nobody had a better idea, so we decided to cut shallow trails on the north, west, south, and eastern edges of the Glades. In some places, the foliage was so sinewy that even Lucille couldn't so much as nick it. We didn't waste out time chopping away at those places, we just macheted around them. Then over on the western side of the leafy miasma we found a roughly square area we could not hack through. Scarlotti refused to believe there was anything Lucille couldn't hack through, so he swung his blade at the thorny wall with all his strength. There was a metallic "snap" and Scarlotti shrieked "Luthille! The'th buthted!"

I tried to sympathize with Scarlotti over the demise of his favorite weapon, but we had more immediate problems to face. There was no guarantee that Wilfred would be within this perimeter of cruel chlorophyll, but it was the best place we had to look. And to penetrate it, we'd have to plunge right through. The depth of the sawgrass we'd have to penetrate certainly wouldn't kill us; our armor would absorb some of the damage, and we'd make sure we'd go through only when we were entirely fit. But I was worried about Wilfred. What shape would he be in? And could he survive coming back out?

After waiting an appropriate length of time for Scarlotti to complete his mourning process, we held a simple little funeral service. Ret held Scarlotti's hand throughout the ceremony to comfort him. It was quite poignant for being as sick as it was. He picked a machete out of the vast number of them he carried and named it Lucille II, but it would never be the same for him. Too bad. We got back to business.

Holding our breath and covering our faces, we plunged through the sawgrass. I often feel lucky that the mind can't clearly remember pain, and this was one such interest. Our wounds were relatively minor, but we all left a fair amount of skin fluttering from the savage silage. I don't who was more surprised, the huge rat we saw reading newspaper or us. But it was the rat who

ran, far too fast for us to chase him. Then an emaciated young with all the hallmarks of OhOh cultism came stumbling out of the shack. He was clever enough to realize that we had come to rescue him and take him back the bosom of his sect. He barely survived the plunge through the sawgrass, but barely was good enough. Scarlotti patched us up yet again and we returned to Miami.

The Right To A Speedy Trial By A Jury Of Your Fears

The cracked, trash strewn, filthy, bloodstained avenues of Miami looked good compared to the marshy, snake infested, stinking bogs of the Glades. Well, maybe not good, but at least better. Dusk was oozing in from the east when we arrived, but we decided to brave the darkness in order to get Wilfred home once and for all. When TomTom saw his offspring, he did Wilfred described as "The Obeah Dance Of Continual Rapturous Cavorting With A Reverse Triple Toe Loop." Wilfred began to weep. Ret wiped a tear from her eye and smashed it against the wall. Scarlotti just drooled a little.

We thought we were just going to leave Wilfred there so we could get back to business, but TomTom had something else in mind. He told us we should take Wilfred to the OhOh temple so Big Daddy could share in the joy of the moment. We were all set to refuse the honor, but Wilfred's enthusiasm for the idea changed our minds. Besides, as long we were carting Wilfred around, the OhOh yoyos would probably leave us alone.

So we strode (or in Scarlotti's case, flowed) over to the OhOh temple. When Big Daddy saw Wilfred, he performed an undulating gavotte not unlike TomTom's. Familiarity had lessened the emotional impact of such dancing, however, and we did nothing more than applaud politely when he was done. What happened next is a blur. Did he ask us to kiss his ring? It was something weird like that. Whatever happened, we were knocked cold, and woke up on a scorchingly hot beach. And who was there to meet us but some Beachcombers, who didn't look like they wanted to build sandcastles.

But there was something wrong. We were on a beach, all right, and it was hot, but we were in a room, too. Where was the heat coming from? After I wasted my first 'Comber, I looked around the beach...I mean the room...whatever it was, I looked around it. In the corner, I saw a whisp of smoke coming from a clump of pumice weeds, but I didn't see any fire. Ignatz had taught me that everything unusual must be important. That isn't in the least bit true, of course, but I was willing to bet my Shagreen vest that the whisps of smoke had something to do with the weirdness of this room. I headed to the corner before another 'Comber tried to part my hair with a cane knife. I reached in my pack and pulled out the first bottle. It was full of DeSoto rum, which I hated to use,

but I was in a big hurry. I pulled the cork with my teeth and doused the plant. There was a hiss and cloud of steam as the beach and the Combers And the beach began to fade from sight, and there was nothing left but grey walls, and a door out. I didn't understand then how it happened, and I still don't, but we had been the victims of some sort of illusion. I learned a new respect for the power of the OhOh's.

Our new knowledge should have made getting through the next room easy. It didn't. Sawgrass is still sharp whether its illusionary or not. Were lucky to get to the hidden brazier and put it out. We waited for a while before we tried the next room, but it turned out to be relatively easy. We were able to race across the "grasslands" evade the mutant vipers, and douse the brazier in the corner without suffering any real distress. We didn't know it, but the easy part was over.

The next room's illusion was the most dangerous of all. Every step we took in the room seemed to propel to a different area within the room. It took us an hour to find the correct pattern of flagstones to step; as soon as we were directly beside where we thought the flame would be, we doused the area with rum. Not only was the illusion dispelled, but we suddenly found ourselves in another part of town. Don't ask me how. Everything seemed as it had been before, except for the amulet I found in my hand. It was identical to the ones we had seen on some of the cultists and their leaders. And the cultists never bothered us again, and we could now use their temple as a rest stop.

It occurred to us all that we had more or less used Miami up, except for the occasional shopping spree. (We were wrong about that.) Leaving Wilfred in the ample bosom of his family, and picking up the admiral on our way out of town, we decided to head for Home and some well earned rest. Besides, I missed Junior and Doc deMedici, and it would be good to see them again.

But as it turned out, I never did.

Vow

The crickets knew. Even the crickets, and their silence kept their secret. Ret knew something was wrong, too, since she was the closest of any of us to being a wild animal. She'd avert her eyes when I looked at her. All I knew for sure at that moment was that the wind seemed cold. Then the wind shifted, and I could smell the smoke. It was coming from Home. It smelled like something dearer than wood and grass was burning.

I saw Clowns close-up for the first time just beyond the charred palm trunks. They'd been burning smokey holes in my dreams for years. There were three

of them, three of us. They had fantastic firearms, glowing and flashing and pulsing guns like I'd never seen before. I put my AK47 aside, Scarlotti spun Lucille II like a pinwheel, and Ret made fists so hard and taut that the seams of her gloves burst.

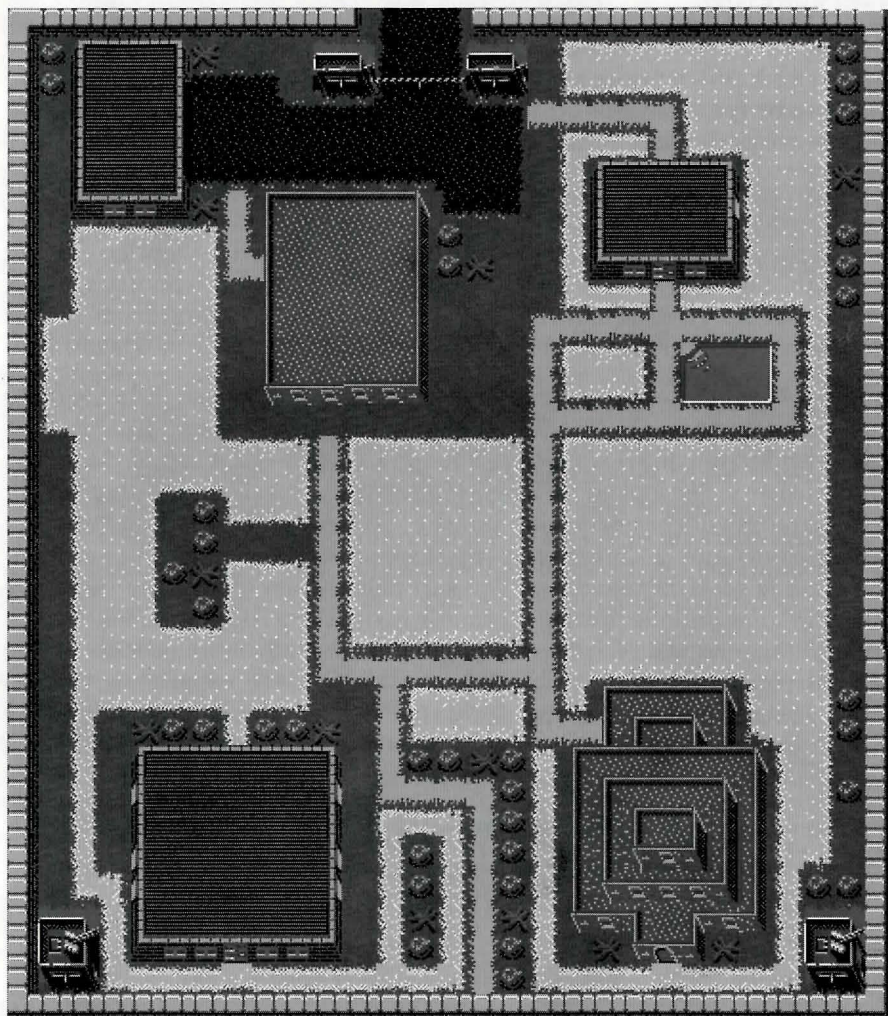
The Clowns were faster than us, better equipped than us, probably more experienced, and certainly more ruthless. They probably never expected to be taken out by four banged up ragged-looking "plainfaces." Part of the reason we won was sheer luck. Another part was pure rage.

When we were sure they were really dead, we warily picked up their weapons that non-Clowns called megaUzis. Two of them were just standard Assault rifles with lights, bells, and whistles attached to make them look higher tech than they really were. But the third one had a deadly modification: A barrel mounted grenade launcher. As soon as we found some grenades, I was gonna make the Clowns sorry for being innovative.

Junior being gone was more than Ignatz could take; he just didn't want to adventure any more. We took him back to Miami and recruited BL. All she'd really wanted to join us was some Voodoo Cologne and a trip to the OhOh temple to use it. She looked pretty good afterwards, too. But recruiting her got us into trouble with her estranged spouse badly enough that we found we were banned from Guns & Clutter when we stopped there to restock our ammunition. Getting past Diz' resentment was surprisingly easy to overcome when we gave him some antique firearms formerly owned by a late if unlamented rum runner. (I'm glad we'd kept on looking for them until we found them in the southeast corner of his cane fields.) But when we tested BL in a couple of battles before going to face the Clowns, she wasn't as tough as we'd thought. In the end, BL just decided to stay behind and help Ignatz overcome his grief. Did she ever.

Then we set off northwest to destroy the Clowns once and for all.

Perilous Path to the Predatory Pantomimists



The Clown compound looked like nothing nice. The high, steep outer walls were painted in abstract murals painted in clashed of bright color that were painful to look at in the midday glare. They had a dull texture that made them

look like the flat sides of a canvas tent, but Ignatz said he'd heard that they were actually rubberized concrete.

We crunched down in the tall grass, planning our next move. Ret and Scarlotti wanted to just charge the edifice, which had an emotional appeal to me, too, but I pointed out to them all the craters in the nearby landscape. "Those aren't sinkholes," I said, "those were made by explosions. And those battlements on the corners of the wall weren't built just so the Clowns can have an uninterrupted view of pastel sunsets."

Scarlotti, now completely inarticulate from the effects of mutation, pointed excitedly at the southwest and southeast corners of the gaudy citadel. Concealed in the maelstrom of colors were camouflaged clowns, scanning the blasted wastes south of their stronghold, and tending what looked like small cannons. Looking at the semi-circle of the craters in front of us, it was easy to determine the range of the Clowns' diminutive artillery. We decided the best way to neutralize their firepower was to use a few noisemakers of our own.

Ret and I broke out some plastic explosive. We crept up a few clicks to the edge of the craters, just close enough to see the walls of the fortress clearly. Our throws were dead bang on the sweet spot, and the artillerist Clowns said an informal goodbye to living. We neutralized the other tower just as smoothly.

Even so, I had a uneasy feeling as we moved north toward the main gate. There might be more "howitzers" (as the Admiral called them) we couldn't see, and we seemed to be moving toward the gate too easily. I had a bad feeling about this. I had an even worse one when a shell exploded 5 yards behind me. The concussion didn't knock anyone unconscious, but the Admiral was staggering and it was obvious he couldn't take another impact and keep standing. We had only one plastex charge left, and I was going to make it count for as much as possible. I hurled it at the gate tower nearest us, and the ferocity of the explosion told me that one howitzer was down. But the other was probably still manned and drawing a bead on us right now. I motioned to the others and charged the gate. I thought about how oddly like a wolf whistle the next shell sounded when it landed behind us, but I didn't think about it for long.

The Clowns Check Your Oil



The last explosion sent us rolling through the open gate into the Clown compound like pumpkins tumbling along a flooded ditch. I was back on my feet in an instant and Ret tumbled into a crouch and released the safety on her Clown megaUzi all in one fluid motion. Scarlotti, his feet now the size of orange crates, struggled to a standing position, while Admiral Ochoa lay face down

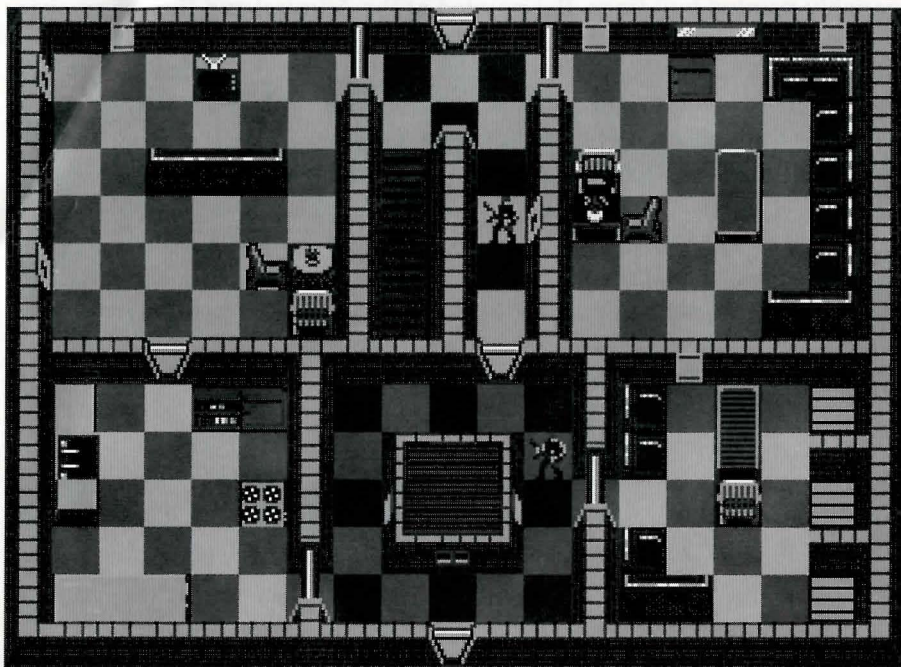
in a puddle, gurgling and blowing muddy bubbles. We expected to have to fight for our skins against a grease-painted mob, but there was no one in sight. The compound looked empty, as dissonant reedy music echoed off the garishly painted buildings. Ret pointed at the Admiral and then at an abandoned-looking garage to the west. I snagged the old sailor by the collar of his turtleneck and dragged him to the boarded up building. Ret yanked open the battered sliding door with surprising ease and we all dashed in. After Ret slammed it shut again, we could hear raucous, hooting laughter from outside. It was the Clowns; they'd been watching us the whole time.

As Scarlotti went to work on the Admiral, Ret and I quickly surveyed the place. Ignatz had told me about the old museums where the Changemakers kept weapons and vehicles even more ancient than their own. The interior of the garage reminded me of that kind of place. Highly polished and well-maintained cars, trucks, and motorcycles out of the shadows of antiquity glistened everywhere. If gasoline had still existed, I could have driven any of them away. If I'd known how to drive.

An old clown in coveralls pinto-marked by grease stepped out of the shadows, and gibbered with panic when he saw our unpainted faces. Babbling something that sounded like a warning, he scampered through a door in the southwest. He didn't look worth our trouble so we let him go.

It took the Admiral a long time to regain consciousness, but we were unmolested the whole time. I made a mental note that this would be a good place to come when several of us were down and we needed a place to mend. When the Admiral seemed strong enough, we went back outside. Directly across the compound we saw what appeared to be an oversized child's playhouse. It looked completely out of place here, but it was the smallest building in the compound, so we made a beeline for it.

Kiwi Doesn't Play Nice



The sign above the threshold that said "Kiwi's Playhouse" was like a bad joke. The OhOh"s wouldn't have liked what we found hanging just inside: Numerous small slender dolls with chopped and hacked blond hair, limbs melted to rounded stumps, and faces sliced and burned into a variety of grotesque expressions. They dangled from the ceiling by pink ribbons, seeming to twirl and dance in time to the childish music that echoed throughout the house. Ret made a face and fired a burst at one of the toys, blasting it to shreds. "I hate this femme crap," she muttered.

We saved the stairs on our right for later; always better to check your present level first, as Ignatz always told me. Then we froze as we heard what sounded like gruesome torture from behind the door on the west. Before any of the rest of us could react, Ret had booted the door open and charged into the room; we had no choice but to follow.

The room was unoccupied; the cries of pain we heard were coming from an ominous high tech device against the north wall. This mysterious cube had a

window in the front that flickered with an eerie bluish light. I looked warily into the box and saw the images of three men, a fat one with short hair, another one with frizzy hair, and a mean-looking one with the short of haircut Ignatz gave me as a kid when he put a bowl over my head. The bowlhead was hitting and slapping the other two. Ret thought this was pretty funny, and Scarlotti made this wet grunting sound that could mean that either he was amused, too, or else he was about to be sick.

The Admiral looked stern as he said, "That thing is a television, the infernal invention of a mind control cult. Watch it too much and your brain turns to silt and starts to flow downhill. Let's go." Then he walked back into the hall. We couldn't do anything but follow.

We walked across the hallway into a sunny room full of toys and child-sized furniture. It would have been a cheerful place except for grotesque qualities of many of the playthings and the horrific murals on the walls. If this was a child's room, it would have to be a very sick child. There was nothing of value out in the open, so we checked a locked toybox against the north wall. The Admiral by now was doing things like picking locks behind his back, which impressed no one. The best thing in the chest was a sturdy but light helmet; Ret's armor was the worst in the group so the helmet was given to her. Everyone agreed that this room was the most disturbing place we'd seen since Mario's, so we quickly went to explore the rest of the house.

We travelled south down the hallway and past the stairs. The room at the end of the hall contained nothing but a tiny house that was perfectly detailed to replicate the one we were in. "Too bad whoever owns this crap didn't burn her dollyhouse along with her dollies," Ret snapped. Beautiful though Ret is, sometimes I think that woman was raised by dobermutants. We decided to pass it by.

Going east from the doll house room, we came into a room full of objects no normal little girl would be interested in: Iron maidens, branding irons, whips, that kind of thing. There was a row of cages hanging from the far wall, and Ret pointed when she saw a pale hand protruding out from between the bars of one of them. The hand twitched...there was someone alive in there! The Admiral picked the lock as quickly as he could, and we were all surprised when a Clown in full greaspaint and colorful costume came tumbling out. The Clowns even torture their own, I thought. It figured.

This Clown, who told us his name was Joey Auguste, had a gruesome story to tell. He had been the leader of a group of Clowns who were tired of their violent way of life. When cruel old Kermit Eli retired and his even more savage daughter Kiwi took over, she immediately rounded up all the dissidents and tortured them to death. She had saved Joey for last. I asked Joey if he wanted

to join us to end the Clown reign of terror. He said yes before I even finished my question.

After Scarlotti had patched Joey up, we went upstairs. Joey told us to concentrate on the east side of the second story; there was a trapped carousel somewhere in the west. The first room on the east was lined with bent and warped mirrors that grotesquely distorted our images (except for Scarlotti, who they made look normal).

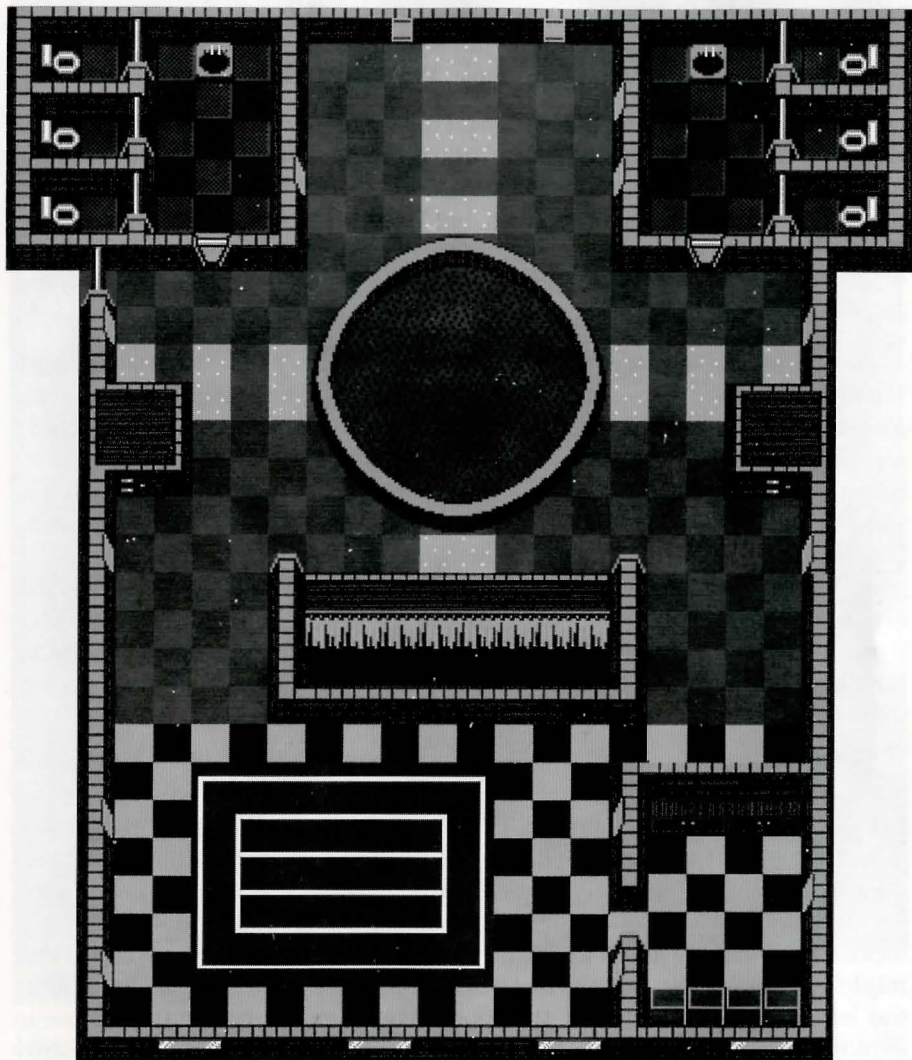
But suddenly, it was as if we were in the OhOh Trial by Horror again; every time we tried to take a step, we were somehow transported to another area of the room. I looked around for a smoking plant, but the room was empty; when we happened to land in corners of the room, I tried pouring rum on where I thought a brazier might be, but to no avail. Then Ret had an idea. Unholstering a pistol, she fired it at one of the mirrors. It shattered, and she tried to take a step. It worked; she stepped exactly where she wanted to. The rest of us aimed rifles and pistols at the mirrors and soon they were covering the ground like bright confetti. (That was actually Joey's literary image; I have no idea what confetti is.)

We walked through the room and turned south. Looking around a corner we saw two boxes covered with buttons, slots, and flashing lights. Joey said they were obvious traps; they weren't all that obvious to me, but I deferred to Joey in matters of Clownism.

We went back out into the hallway and turned south. We opened the next door to the down, and came almost face to face with the biggest cat I'd ever seen, as well as the only three-eyed one. It positioned itself between us and a safe against the east wall. I hated to kill such a beautiful animal (even survivalists like cats) but we had no choice. The tiger (as Joey called it) thought it had no choice, either, and sprang at us. Joey went down in the fight, but Scarlotti was able to revive him. Which was a good thing since we never would have gotten the safe open without him. The lettered dial had the Admiral stumped until Joey suggested trying B-O-Z-O. Joey said he was just guessing, but it work nevertheless, and we got some excellent armor for our pains.

We left Kiwi's Playhouse through the same door we entered. Joey suggested that we hit the arsenal in the Clown College next. He pointed the way to go and we followed his lead, even though a loud bell began to ring from somewhere inside the building as we approached it. We assumed from that that we had lost the element of surprise.

Slap Fu 101



The bell stopping ringing as soon as Scarlotti popped the door. The big room was almost dark; one piercing beam of light flooded a ring in the north end of the room, and several smaller lights on the edge of a raised platform

(Joey called it a "stage") illuminated a peculiar curtain that was embellished with signs that said things like "Buy Dr. Eli's Enervating Ophidian Elixir: It has a real bite!" The place was quiet, but the silence seemed artificial. "This is the college," said Joey, "they're here, lots of them." I pointed to doors in the northeast and northwest, and Joey ran a finger across his throat. He did the same thing when I pointed at the stage. We'd save those doors for later.

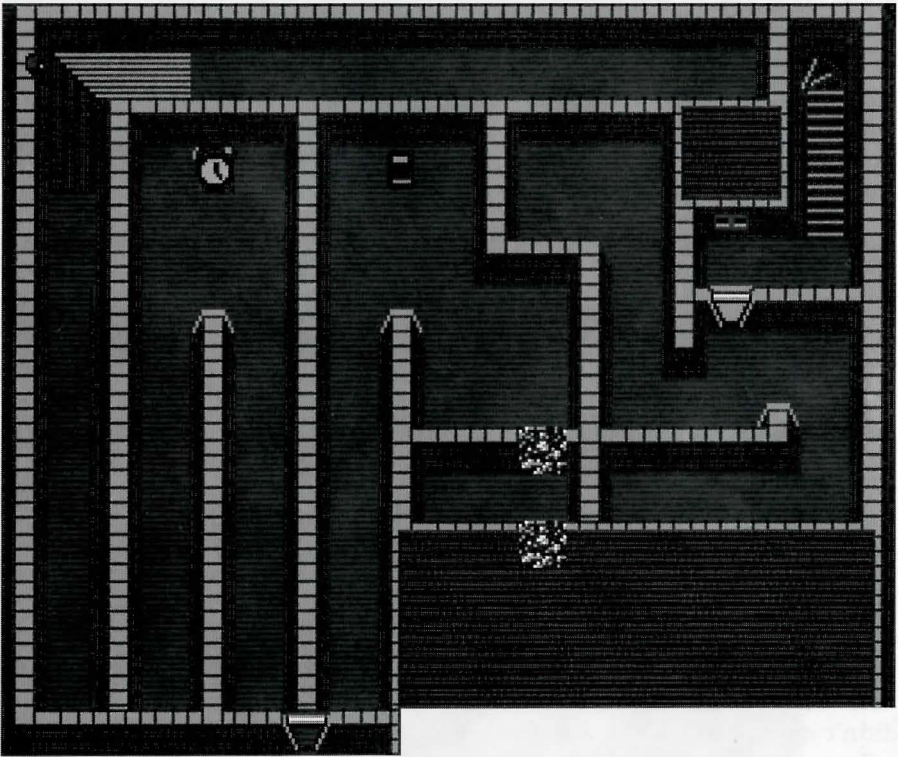
We moved south along the wall, past the stage (which was enclosed on the sides and back). What looked like a large cabinet was built into the side of the wall past the stage. "Just a prop closet," whispered Joey, "don't waste your time." I had no idea what a prop was, but I took his word concerning its value. Then Joey pointed southeast to an imposing looking, heavily locked door. "One of the arsenals," he said. I knew the meaning of arsenal well enough and made a beeline in that direction.

I was walking across an area that had a resilient feel, like spongy ground. That was when the Clowns got tired of waiting. I don't know where they came from; they just appeared. They began to spray us with bullets before we could react. Our armor absorbed a lot of the damage, but not all. Joey was on them before we could return their fire, and he inflicted injuries on one of them that were bad enough that I was able to finish it off with a burst from one of their own weapons. The other two just pranced around capering and shrieking with laughter when our gunfire ripped them. They thought the clips they ripped off at us were even funnier. That was their mistake, even though they took me out then and there. When Scarlotti brought me to, with Ret behind him rubbing his hunched shoulders, the clowns were dead, and their megaUzis and explosives were ours.

Joey led us on to a door in the southeast corner, and we rested there before going on. The Admiral picked the lock on the door, and we were in another battle. We used explosives first, which shortened the battle, but didn't prevent it and we all suffered more damage before the Clowns fell. We got more megaUzis, but no more explosives. We all but crawled into the armory, hoping for no more battles for awhile and wary of traps. The room was full of stoutly locked arms lockers and Joey suggested that we try to disarm any traps that might be present. We found a huge bomb attached to the second locker from the left on the south side of the room. My recently acquired expertise in explosives told me that if we set it off without disarming it, it could destroy everything in the room, starting with us. I got my nerves as steadied as I could and tried to neutralize the lurking trap. It went kaput without so much a sigh. We cleaned out the remaining lockers, fought our war outside, and ran back toward Kiwi's Playhouse.

We paused behind Kiwi's Playhouse to plan out next move. There was a pool of water there that was an obvious trap. The sandbox was a trap, too, but not an obvious one. So we stepped in it. We began to sink, but all our strength was not enough to pull us free. I held my breath when I sank down to my chin, sure that this was the end. Almost, but not quite. Clowns came and surrounded us, laughing and throwing things. One by one, they knocked us out.

Dark Midway



I awoke so the sound of music, the same music we had heard throughout the clown stronghold. It saturated the shadowy hallway we were in. The notes were as full of pain as the mutant wolf we heard die in the sawgrass; but every bridge and trill also howled with joyous cruelty. Our nerves weren't just singing, they were harmonizing. We walked toward the cold green light in the distance.

I was still a little groggy, puzzling about how light I felt. Then I realized that almost all of my weapons were gone, and all I had left were a .45 pistol with an extra ammo clip and a machete. Everyone else turned out to have the same light inventory. Ret and Scarlotti would be fine since they didn't depend on firearms too often, and Joey always had Slap Fu to help in a fight. I didn't know how helpful BL or I would be during the next fight, though, nor how healthy we'd be when it was over.

When we were halfway down the hallway, the floor clicked beneath my feet. I jumped back just as the green light turned red. I looked at Joey, who shrugged "I don't know anyone who has ever come back from this; I don't know what's here." I grimaced; Clowns don't make it easy on you even when they're on your side. Scarlotti grabbed me with a lobster-like claw. Then he buzzed and pointed either at a mutesquito hovering between us and the red light or the floor in front of us. When the mutesquito landed on the floor and disappeared in a nosegay of crackling sparks, I surmised he may have been pointing at both. I hadn't seen much electricity, but I knew it when I did see it, and the floor in front of us was full of it.

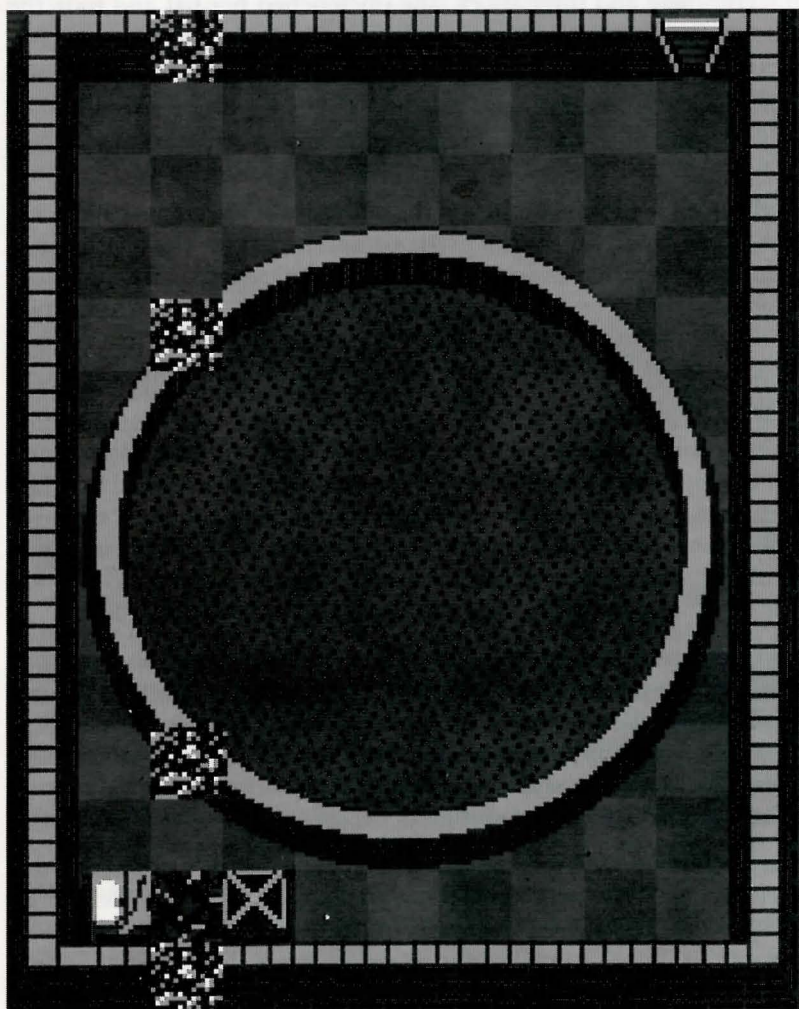
Scarlotti began to yank the rubber boots we'd found in Mario's house from his backpack and passed them around. He pulled his on, gesturing for us to do the same. I was confused until he put his rubberized foot on the electrified area of the floor. There was no result, no sparks, no smoke, nothing. Somehow, they were protecting him from the charge. We didn't understand it, but we all slipped into our boots; we'd get it explained to us later. We walked over the deadly floor without so much as a tingling sensation.

If the Elite Guards around the corner were impressed by the fact we made it past the electricity, they didn't say so. They just started wailing on us. We wailed back, and although it took awhile, in the end we wailed better. Stepping over their mangled remains and careful not to slip in their spurting blood, we proceeded down the gloomy passageway. Joey offered the opinion that everything we'd see would be a trap, and I was inclined to agree with him, so we didn't touch anything we didn't have to touch. I let the phone ring, I knew what an "Egress" was but I didn't want to leave yet, the subject of the book didn't interest me, and I was already awake so the alarm clock was only a minor annoyance (although we wouldn't have gotten past it very easily without the radios we'd found in Imelda's house).

The 8-ball was different. It was the most helpful trap I ever sprung on myself. We had reached a dead end. There were blank walls all around us, and no one could locate any hidden doors. We knew the 8-ball was a trap, but we had the feeling we needed to set it off to advance any further. Joey, whose recovery since we'd rescued him from Kiwi's dungeon had been remarkable,

volunteered to be the guinea pig. The rest of us stood aside, while Joey reached out and grabbed the ebony sphere. He gave it a sharp tug, and the wall just north of him burst outward as an 8-ball the size of a hut hurtled toward him, throwing him aside, and knocking a gaping hole through the south wall into a hidden room. There was light and music coming from the uncovered chamber, and a delicious smell unfamiliar to me but that the Admiral recognized.

"Popcorn," he said. "There must be a circus in there."



Kermit's Big Top

As we went through the hole in the wall, we heard a hissing noise. We quickly scanned the floor for snakes or mutant vipers, but there was nothing there besides crushed brick and scraps of wallboard. I looked around a corner and saw an elderly clown filling balloons from an ancient tank of compressed gas. At first, I thought he was just filling them with air, but the balloons were floating at the end of strings, so I knew it had to be something else.

Ret was about to smash his face when he handed her a bunch of the airborne toys. To my complete and utter shock, she unclenched her fist and took the drifting spheres. It was the only time I'd ever seen a soft expression on her face. "I've always wanted some of these," she mumbled. The old clown cackled and pointed to the circus tent. "Enjoy the show, boys and girls!" he yodeled, and then screeched with laughter. I decided to just let this guy slide by, even though he was a Clown. Anybody who could find Ret's soft spot deserved to live.

I looked through the tent flap. Inside there was a simple circus ring in the middle of the floor, a bed and trunk in the corner, and far to the south was a wizened, almost tiny clown furiously playing a pipe organ. This was the source of the dissonant music we'd heard throughout the house. He seemed to know I was there without even looking, and the music swelled to a violent, clashing crescendo. The Clown turned, his face a grease and putty mask of distilled evil. It was Kermit Eli himself.

Two mutant lions sprung from the shadows at us. We cut them down quickly and charged the aged master Clown. The explosion beneath my feet flipped me over once and I landed heavily on my shoulder. The checkerboard-patterned floor was mined! If only we'd had someone with BL's powers of perception along, we could have easily picked our way among the trapped floor panels. As it was, we would just have to feel our way forward.

When we were near enough, we all opened fire on Kermit Eli. He went down surprisingly fast; but an even greater surprise was the sparks and flashes erupting from his shattered body. Kermit Eli was a fantastic machine...if this was the real Kermit Eli. This could be a double that would explain the fact that he'd "lived" to such an extreme old age, or it could be another of his evil tricks. We learned the truth soon enough.

There was a crate by where Kermit had been standing. We approached it warily, having come to expect everything in this Circus From Hell to be trapped. We prodded it gingerly, and then flipped the lid while jumping aside. Another Kermit Eli sprung from the pile of wood chips inside, screamed some nonsensical battle cry that sounded like "Pop goes the weasel!" and opened

fire. But we were quicker, there were more of us, and we were far saner than Kermit Eli, and in time, he went down. We knew this was the real one. This one bled.

We scooped out the contents of the crate without even really looking at it. We were too exhausted, and too wounded, to pay much attention. The Admiral was down, so Scarlotti saw to him first. Ret and I collapsed and waited. Joey just stared at his former mentor like he couldn't believe he was really dead. Joey reached down and took a large key ring from the body. "This will get us into the other arsenal downstairs," Joey said. I decided I'd try to care later.

After we were rested and healed, we decided to take the quickest way out: Through the hole in the wall created by the giant 8-ball. We leapt into space and landed on the grassy earth with a thud. The Admiral was again exhausted and begged us to take him back to Miami. He wasn't that much more tired than we were, so we agreed.

Granny

We raided the arsenal on the second floor of Kermit's mansion (Joey took us right to the hidden entrance at the north end of a hallway) before we returned to Miami. Even the Admiral thought that this was a good idea. We dropped him off when we got back, and told Ignatz and BL what had happened. The rest was doing Ignatz good, I'd never seen him look better. Joey was fascinated by Miami (he'd never been outside the Clown Compound except on raids), and we promised to give him a guided tour when we got back. But first we had business to finish back at his former home.

We went straight for Kermit's mansion and entered through the back door. We went right from the kitchen and found another area where the giant 8-ball had helped us out. Lying on the floor was a crushed giant ape who we would have no doubt had a lot of trouble getting past. A gap had also been torn in the north wall of the ape room; we went through it into an area of the house we could never penetrate before. After some battles with Elite Guards (who didn't seem so tough anymore) we found a small, bare room occupied only by a small, elderly, complaining woman. "This must be Granny Astor, I thought. "She reminds me of my mother," said Ret. "I hated my mother."

We returned to Miami; it would be the last time I saw the town. We made sure Granny was safe with the Miami PD, so Gramps and Doc Brewho joined Joey and me. Gramps explained that the secret to Water of Dreams was in The Glades, and it was up to us to go there and make sure Florida's mutant plague

was brought to an end. Ret and Scarlotti stayed behind, since Scarlotti was still badly hurt. "I like him better this way," said Ret. "Mangled?" asked Ignatz. "No," said Ret, "mutated." I didn't wait for an explanation. I'd just had lunch.

My pulse was pounding as we we got nearer and nearer to the Glades. The shack where Wilfred was held was still there. and so were the animal mutants. They were going to run from us, but then they spotted Gramps and Doc. Gramps talked to them soothingly, and that combined with their trust for Doc, who had been helping them with the debilitating effects of mutation, led them to trust Joey and I, too. Without my even having to ask, they told me where the Fountain of Dreams was, due north and not even very far.

We thanked them and walked toward the fountain. We were almost there, we were on the verge of winning.

We were half way there when Kiwi killed Joey.

One For The Swamp Warriur

Kiwi appeared out of nowhere and crushed Joey's throat with a muffled half-crackle/half-squish, like rotten wood being squeezed in a vice. I ripped off a clip at the frilly monster; she danced and gamboled between the bullets like a child frolicking among wildflowers, and giggled. The only thing I hit was her teddy bear, which she slung at me underhanded. Even though her throw was wide, I still suffered damage when the grenade concealed in the toy's stuffing exploded, and the concussion knocked me off my feet.

I reached into my ammo pouch for a fresh clip, but I had none left. Nothing had ever felt so empty. Kiwi saw exactly what was happening, and pouted, "Aww, you're out of caps. Let's play another game, then." She became a pink and white blur hurtling straight for my head. I ducked and tried to backhand her, but I only managed to fetch her a glancing blow against a remarkably taught bunch of muscles near her shoulder. One tap shoe almost filled my mouth and the other ricocheted off the side of my head as she whizzed past me. I fell to one knee; the blood and shattered teeth in my mouth tasted and felt like I'd taken a bite out of a beach, and I gagged when I saw my ear laying on the ground. "Tag," Kiwi cooed.

Even as my head swam, I realized something important; I was quicker than she was! I was thankful I'd built up my dexterity as much as I had. She didn't see the TNT I pulled from my belt before I tossed it at her. The blast bounced her against the wall and shredded her dress, exposing the thick, veiny sinews in her arms and legs. She screamed, in rage at first, but then her voice turned

into something more, something full of the power to hurt. Finally, it wasn't a scream, but a shriek attack. "Kiwi's a mutant!" I thought. Then my mind went blank as all I could think about were the twin knives of sound that penetrated my ears and struck black sparks as they clashed behind my eyes.

I was going down, I could feel it. I could see Kiwi skipping toward me, winding up to give me a final, killing blow. My weapon had been knocked free, and all I had left was a machete. I pulled it from my belt and swung wildly with a downward sweep. I was glad I got to look her straight in the eyes as I spaced them farther apart as I cleaved her skull in two. Eat your heart out, Lucille II. I collapsed to the ground and gasped, "You're it." Some Clowns and mutants were rushing toward us and cheering.

I didn't care. The ground looked comfortable. I decided to rest.

Epilogue

As I said, that was all a long time ago. I haven't been back to Florida for years. Ret and Scarlotti decided to quit adventuring after they ran off the last of the Bahia Mafia, and they've been playing house in Miami ever since. He's taken up woodcarving as well as doctoring and she's revived the arcane, mysterious cult called "professional wrestling." There never was a Lucille III. Ignatz has BL to comfort him during his golden years, which should last a good long time since she got him to quit smoking. The OhOhs and the Combers coexist peacefully; Doc Brewho and Wilfred opened a chain of Zombie's Cucumber Pickle stands ("so good they'll destroy your will"TM) all across the island, and the Combers have learned to ride the surf at the seashore on big waxed boards, which is all they really care about doing now. Everybody chipped in to build a memorial to Joey Auguste for defeating the Eli family "single handedly"; those of us who know the truth about what happened thought the clowns would need a new "spiritual leader" since Kermit and Kiwi were gone, and we let it be Joey. The remaining Clowns reinvented the circus in his honor, and every fall they play the amusement park the Glades mutants opened up. I helped Admiral Ochoa recondition an old yacht he had stashed on the Gulf coast. After he ferried me across the strait to the mainland (which was an adventure in itself), he headed southeast; he said he wanted to see if Jamaica was still there, "A place where they have REAL rum, not that DeSoto dishwater." Everybody else returned to their everyday lives. At least that's the way things were the last time I heard.

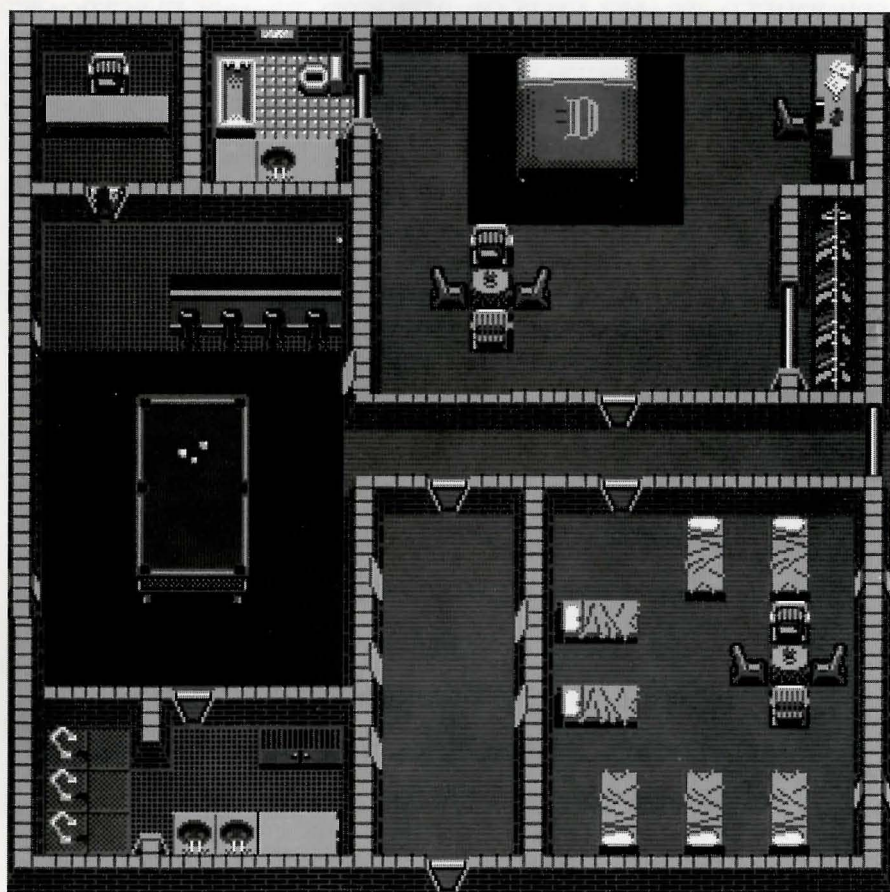
Me? I had no everyday life to return to. Home was in ruins, Junior was dead, Ignatz finally retired for good, and everything just got too settled, too fast. I

take some of the responsibility for that, I guess. There's not much purpose in being a survivalist when survival itself stops being challenging. That, combined with the fact that I'd read everything on the island, was making me bored. So going to the mainland seemed to be a natural selection for me. I've found a little adventure here—survival of the fittest is still the rule—and I've picked up a few new skills. I could program a VCR, for instance, if I knew what one was. But it isn't like the old days. Still, other than my friends in the Glades, I haven't left any mutants behind me.

At least none that I know about.

Desoto Barracks





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