

# An Infestation of Blue

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Wendy N. Wagner

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The first thing she knew was that smells didn't have the same shapes or colors anymore. Not wrong, exactly, but different. Even her own scents—rawhide and dirty paws and bits of grass that had brushed her belly—were changed, not just undercut with the stench of iodine and other human-sick smells, but made new.

The second thing the dog knew was that the sounds the female human made at her were now shaped as differently as the smells. She'd always been good at recognizing human sounds, their strange growling and whining and awkward in-between noises, but they had been as meaningless in themselves as the colors and shapes of human bodies. Meaning came from the posture of the speaker, the tension in their throat, the shapes of their eyes, the smells on their breath. But now the female human repeated the combination of sounds: Reh-beh-caw, and the dog knew it meant herself. Not just a sound to be answered or pointed toward, but a replacement for the comfortable belonging of *pack/togetherness/scent*. She wasn't the dog who lived with the Woman and the Man in the warm-good-place anymore, she was now *Rebecca*.

"Rebecca?" the human female repeated. "Sit, girl. Sit."

The dog sat up and shifted on the cold tile floor. The coolness of the air stung against a long strip of soreness running across her scalp. She remembered the cut that had been made across her belly when she was a pup and the long time of aching it had given her. She remembered the way the Woman had held her and carried her everywhere, emitting soft scents of comfort and regret.

The Woman was gone. The dog made a tiny whimper at the thought. The Woman was gone, and she was alone here in this place of sick animals and strange humans. The female in front of her said the name again, and the dog barked. Angry a little. Why was she here? Where was the Man? What had happened to her head?

The female touched a black device clipped onto her jacket. "Subject awake and responsive. The Operator appears to be integrating with subject's neurosystem." She knelt and put out her hand. "Good dog." A tiny square of bacon sat on the female's palm, and for a second, all the new parts of Rebecca's mind evaporated at the power of that scent, the irresistible offer, the old

comfortable words.

She lapped up the treat. Beneath the salt and the smoke, a tiny hint of bitterness warned her that something was wrong.

The female stroked the top of Rebecca's head. "She's ready to be moved to the work site," the female said to someone in the doorway, someone who smelled familiar, but whose face was already beginning to gray out.

Rebecca's eyelids went heavy, and the world was black again.

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This time she woke up on carpet. She dragged herself to sitting, and she spent a few frustrated minutes mentally pawing at smells that should have made familiar sense but instead clashed together in shapes she couldn't assemble. Then a faint blue scent of wood smoke tickled the back of her nose, and she knew why she ought to know where she was. She had been here a few times in her life, always with the Woman and the Man, always for short stretches of particularly delicious meals and extra time outdoors.

Rebecca looked around, ears swiveling. But of course, no Woman. No food smells, except for a very distant whiff of cold pizza. The Man, though. He was in the other room, reading one of those oil-smelling, rustling paper things he was so fond of. She got to her feet—it made her head hurt more, but she ignored it—and followed the prickling wool carpet out of the foyer and into the next room of the mountain lodge.

Sunlight filled the floor-to-ceiling windows stitching the house to the wilderness outside. Rebecca paused in the doorway, recognizing the sound-patterns flitting through her head as words—words quietly intoned by something that hadn't been inside her the last time she'd laid down in her crate, alone and cold and missing the Woman.

The voice was like the Woman's, but a little off, as if someone had heard the Woman's voice reading out loud once, and then somehow spun those two or three thousand words into Rebecca's own mind. The words came more easily now than they had in the room with the sick smells.

She whimpered to herself, not liking the changes. She remembered the time she threw up worms, their bodies wriggling up her throat, the same temperature as her body and yet somehow separate from her. Infested. She felt infested with someone else's voice and thoughts and ways of thinking.

Her paw came up, scratching at the stitches on the back of her skull. Claw them out. Scratch out the voice. Claw and scratch!

Rustling as the man put down his newspaper and slid off the leather couch. "Hey, hey, none of that." He caught her paws in his hands and held them for a moment. "You don't want me to get out the cone of shame, do you?"

*Screw you*, she said, or tried to say, but of course they had only put the voice in her head and not in her mouth. Her throat scraped and whined and drool dripped down her lip, her tongue too large and floppy for English.

"We've got so much work to do together, girl," he said, rubbing the hair under her collar, the same familiar scritch he had given her since she was a puppy. It felt good, lovely. Reassuringly unchanged.

"I never thought you'd become one of my subjects," he continued, pulling her to his chest and then standing. She wasn't a large dog, so he did it easily, carrying her over to the big window. Their reflection looked back at them, man and dog.

He began to pace. She wiggled, but he didn't put her down. "She didn't kill herself. You know that and I know that."

She wiggled harder, but he carried her into the kitchen, where most of a pizza sat congealing on the counter. He put her down then, opened a can of the fish-perfumed food she loved best, and put a slice of pizza in the microwave. Rebecca lapped up the food in two enormous licks and lay down on the cool tiles, listening to the voice in her head. It wanted pizza, even though another part of Rebecca smelled the way the meat had aged from sitting on the counter too long. The two lines of thought—one from a ghost, one from her nose—collided in her head,

their meanings intertwining and fighting until they reassembled each other. It was bad to eat old meat, she understood, and for the first time ever associated vomiting with illness and regret. The shape of the pizza smell changed in her head again, gone prickly and unpleasant.

"Tomorrow you will start with the tablet," he said and offered her a scrap of the meat. She looked from him to the meat and back. She did not eat it. He looked at her, shrugged, and popped it into his mouth.

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That afternoon, the Man let her outside into the fenced yard of the lodge. Unlike the rooftop garden that belonged to the condo in the city, the lodge's grounds were extensive, and the tall deer fence meant Rebecca was allowed to explore the area. She found her old favorite smells, like the nut and oil smell that came from the paws of the gophers digging under the walnut tree, and the piney stink of a skunk's pee. Here and there she caught a faint whiff of the Woman, a trail leading to the potting shed and then more faintly to the fence line. Rebecca followed the scent until it disappeared in the damp, dark branches of the young trees, and hesitated, unsure where to go next.

"They got you, didn't they?"

With a yip, Rebecca sprang back from the voice, which had come from upwind, behind her, completely a surprise. Tail and ears pulled tight to her body, she turned around, showing her teeth. A black bird fluttered down from the deer fence to perch on the back of a bench. It adjusted its wings and made a low rattle in its throat.

She barked back at it.

"Yes, that's why they started with my kind," the bird croaked. The rough edges of its voice made it hard for Rebecca to sense what it intended for her to feel. She had liked that about the Woman—all the careful colors of her voice, the sounds projecting an emotional response for the listener. The Man had never seemed to understand that about the Woman, how she was in charge of everyone's feelings. It had made her the center of their world.

"Everything's different since they cut into my head," the bird continued. "It's like my mind's not big enough for all the thoughts."

Rebecca raised her head, fixing her gaze more sharply on the bird. That was exactly it, exactly the feeling she'd had when she'd tried to smell where she was when she first woke up on the rug in the foyer. It wasn't that her nose didn't work as well, but that the part of her mind that understood smells had been compressed. Squished aside to make way for something foreign. *Infested*.

"I'm sorry it happened to you. You look like a nice dog."

Rebecca wagged her tail.

The bird dropped from the back of the bench to the ground. It kicked in the dirt for a moment, turning its head from side to side as it studied the soil it had churned. Then it hopped toward Rebecca. "Do you know what they want from you?"

Rebecca remembered the way humans pivoted their heads to say "no," and tried it.

The bird seemed to understand. "Ah. Good luck," it said. "Even now that they've given you words, they won't treat you like a person." It ducked its head, amused, perhaps, by its phrasing. "You know what I mean."

Rebecca found that she did. She stretched her muzzle toward the crow and felt the strange smoothness of its beak, like an enormous claw growing from its face. She wondered what it was like, being a bird. She had enjoyed chasing them whenever she could, but never once imagined what their lives might be like.

"See you!" the bird—the *crow*, the Woman's voice corrected—took a few hops away and then launched itself into the air, its wings flapping and rustling and then going silent. The dog watched it go. Its dark shape diminished into first an M and then a dot and then nothing. How strange to be a bird, unbound by weight and gravity. Anytime they wanted, they could just get up and melt into the sky.

She took a step toward the bench, where she could still pick up a hint of the Woman's smell. She, too, was gone. Only a distant outline of her remained, the ghost of an M speaking inside Rebecca's mind.

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The Man woke very early and took Rebecca down two flights of stairs into the basement, a place she'd never been allowed to enter. White boards with dark writing filled one side of the wall, and the air smelled sharply of rubbing alcohol and medical tools. A feather had been caught beneath the leg of the one big silver table. She recognized the smell of the crow, faint but persistent, as if the feather had been laying there a long time. The smells in the room made her legs wobble. This place was like the clinic where she had woken up. The Man was a user of those smells, a part of those smells. A part of what put words in animals' heads.

"Now, I don't expect much, since we've only just inserted the Operator." He showed her one of the flat screens he and the Woman used all the time, and offered her treats to tap the lights that danced across its shiny surface. She played along because she was hungry. Her close vision wasn't the same as the Woman's, of course, but she easily recognized the shapes buried inside the lighted buttons. N-O, no, blue. Y-E-S, yes, yellow. She wasn't sure what he wanted from her, but she could see he didn't understand how much she'd changed.

After a break to eat—more canned food for her, but thankfully no more of the pizza for him—he brought out a T-shirt Rebecca instantly recognized as the Woman's favorite. Now she knew the colors and shapes weren't just a pattern, like the pattern on the wool rug, but numbers and letters: Holiday 5K, 2032. The reds and greens rubbing away from being worn and washed so many times. The fabric still gave off the powerful whiff of the Woman, not just her regular smell, but her running smell, sharper and deeper. The shirt had not been washed yet, so all the complicated nuances of the Woman's sweat remained: the subtle tang she gave off when she ran in the morning, right after finishing her coffee; the acrid whisper of the medicines she took, stronger since she had added two new pills at night; the sweet funk she had developed a few months ago that had begun very slightly and then worsened until she was sometimes touching her side, the scent's place of origin, as if she, too, disliked the stink. Rebecca could still even smell the strange odor of iodine, which the Woman had brought home with her several times after leaving the house. It clung to her skin for days, and the spots where it reeked most powerfully, the Woman had refused to let Rebecca lick.

Rebecca smelled it all and felt a whimper crawl up her throat. The Woman. She missed the Woman so much it made her want to lay on the floor and stop breathing.

"Okay, girl." The Man pushed the T-shirt into Rebecca's face. "Show me where she went the last time she was here."

Rebecca looked at him, confused for a moment by the shirt, the smells, the request. Experience had taught her that he couldn't follow smells the way she could. He couldn't understand the paths the Woman had left across the landscape of the lodge. Human minds could not understand any of the shapes smells took.

He sighed and pushed the screen toward her. "Can you smell her, girl? Push 'yes' or 'no.'"

So that was the purpose of the screen. The words on the screen could connect their two worlds in much the same way the words in her head could. She wished there were more words on the screen so she could better explain the nature of the smells the Woman had left behind, their nuances and depths diminishing every day.

She tapped the yellow button with her paw and led him up the basement stairs. Into the kitchen and then to the sliding glass doors. He stumbled along behind her, breathing like he was sick. When the doors slid open, she stood on the back deck for a minute, drawing in the clean, fine air. The Woman had loved to stand outside, inhaling the forest air. She would take Rebecca hiking and stop under certain kinds of trees, breathing deep. "This is the life, isn't it?" she would say, every time, enough times that the phrase had imprinted in Rebecca's mind as the shape of something good, something like bacon or peanut butter. Now she turned the words over in her mind and wondered what they had really meant. Wasn't being alive itself *life*? Why were some moments more alive than others?

The Man stooped over her, his pats too hard. "Come on, Rebecca. Show me where she went."

Overhead, a crow rattled, and Rebecca looked up into the sky to see if she could see it, but she saw nothing, her eyes no good for distance work. So she put her nose to the ground and

sniffed for it, the bird with a voice. It had sat on the deck earlier that day, maybe even just a few minutes ago. She could smell the sap of a Douglas fir on one of its talons and the faint tang of blood on another. The crow was watching out for her. The thought felt more comforting than the Man's hands on her back, and that made her sad. She had never loved him as much as the Woman, but he had still been part of her pack, her home, her self.

He made an impatient sound, and she took off running, tired of him, tired of strangeness, tired of thinking in words. She ran hard. Jumped over a fallen log, skidded on loose pine needles. Flushed a bird from a bush and barked after it like she had a thousand times. It almost felt good.

Her tail sank down, the fine threads of it dragging over the sticks and pinecones of the path. She had come back to the bench, just as she was supposed to. The Man caught up to her, breathing hard.

"Shit," he said.

She put her paws up on the seat of the bench and barked and barked.

He stumbled forward, caught the back of the bench and eased himself to sitting. She put her paw on his knee and stared into his face, wishing she could read human expressions as well as she could read words. They had forgotten to put that in her head, whoever had changed her. He scooped her into his lap and stroked her ears kindly.

"This is where the gardener found her," the Man said. "The police said she must have killed herself, but there was no weapon to be found. No syringe, even though they said she overdosed on morphine. Someone must have done it, though. She would have never given up on life."

He carried Rebecca back to the house, his words replaying in her head: "She would have never given up on life."

That word again. What did it really mean?

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He lay on the bed, making small unhappy sounds in his sleep. It wasn't the usual sleeping time, but she could tell he was exhausted. It had been three days since the Woman had kissed Rebecca on the nose and said to them "I'm going to fix a few things at the lodge—see you this weekend," which was something Rebecca now knew was a lie. She hadn't known about lying before they put words in her head. Smells didn't lie.

Rebecca paced around the room for a moment, feeling the words inside her head. Itchy. Hungry. They were multiplying the same way the worms had multiplied in her belly. She followed the words and her nose back downstairs, where the sliding glass door had not quite latched. The smell of fir trees brightened her nose. She almost felt happy, smelling that smell. But she didn't let it distract her. She went back to the bench.

The crow sat on it. Waiting for her.

She sat beside the bench and stared at the crow. She wished she had a way to take the words out of her mind and share them with the bird. Her stomach felt hot and angry. Why had this bird gotten a voice and she hadn't? It was unfair, unfair and cruel. It was *anti-the life*, if she was to take a page from the Woman.

"She used to bring me peanuts," the crow said. "You would be running around, digging for gophers or some stupid thing, and she would give me peanuts."

Rebecca shifted her ears to show her interest.

"That's how they caught me." The crow sleeked its wing feathers with its beak and then shook itself. "They kept me in a cage in the basement, but when she found me, she let me go. She was crying. I think she was sick."

Rebecca barked.

"You think so, too, huh?" The crow looked around, cocking its head for trouble. Waited a moment, and then carried on: "She had something shiny, and I liked it. When it fell out of her hands, I took it to my tree. I came back, though. I thought she would wake up and give me more peanuts. But she didn't."

The words boiled in Rebecca's throat. If only the Man were here! He needed to understand the Woman's last day. Maybe if he understood, he would take the words out of Rebecca's head and they could go back to something normal, a *pack* again, the two of them belonging to each

other, smelling akin.

The crow stared at Rebecca, and she realized she had whimpered. “Do you want the shiny thing?”

Rebecca barked, one excited yes. Which the crow seemed to understand—it flew up into the tallest of the trees on the other side of the deer fence and returned almost immediately, the syringe glinting in its claws. It set it on the bench, and Rebecca cautiously grasped the thing in her mouth. It stank of poison and sickness and faintly of the Woman’s fingers. She knew she had to show it to the Man, but also she would need words to explain.

She remembered where the Woman kept words. She could do this.

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The Man had stopped making sounds and now lay quietly, deeply asleep. He smelled better, more like the person who rubbed her ears gently and knew best how to play tug of war. She could almost forgive him for putting the words in her head. She put the syringe on the floor in front of the Woman’s dresser and then went to the bookshelf beside the bed. She had thought at first to spell out her request, but it was already written out for her on the spine of a blue book, so that she only had to shimmy the book from between its companions and drag it over by the syringe.

Rebecca looked at the cover of the book and felt her world shift unpleasantly inside her. *Let Your Dog Be a Dog*, the cover cheered in bright yellow letters, printed over a photo of a dog running with its mouth open across a grassy field. The photo radiated happiness. Beneath the dog’s feet, the words “By Dr. Rebecca D. Fulbright” were written in blue. Rebecca’s own stomach made a squeeze of unhappiness as she read and reread the words. Knowing but still needing to do it, she turned over the book to see a photo of herself, particularly well-groomed and bright-eyed, held in the arms of the Woman. Smiling. They were both smiling, because this was *the life*, after all. What life should be like.

The dog pawed the book cover-side up again and lay down beside it, misery pinning her ribs and her tail to the ground. She could not remember what the Woman had called her, what shape the word had once taken inside her mind. That had been scraped out to make way for . . . what had the female in the clinic called it? *The Operator*. The Operator was more than just words and a new way of thinking. It came with its own name, taken from the woman the scientists must have based it upon. Taken from the Woman. Whoever the dog had been before she’d had the Woman’s name and voice shoved into her was as gone as the Woman herself.

With a quiet groan and a grumble of dark-scented air, the Man sat up, stretching and yawning. He froze with his arms over his head, seeing the dog laying on the floor beside the book and the needle. Slowly, slowly his arms came down and then he pulled back the covers. It took him several long moments to make it out of the bed and to kneel beside the things the dog had put into place.

He knelt and stared.

She nudged the tablet closer to him, its screen flickering to yellow-and-blue life. The dog tapped the book with her paw.

*Let Your Dog Be a Dog.*

Yes?

No?

She stared at him, every fiber of her being wishing he would understand what she was telling him. That he would take the words out of her head. Take Rebecca out of her head, and let the smells settle back into their appropriate shapes and colors.

His breath caught in his throat. He was only looking at the syringe. Water came out of his eyes and seeped over his cheeks.

“Why?” he whispered. “Why, Rebecca? Why?”

The dog nudged the book with her nose, but he wouldn’t—or couldn’t—look at it. He dug the heels of his hand into his eyes and let out a low moan of pain.

The dog closed her eyes and tried to remember being in the woods. It came back surprisingly easily, the clean smell of Douglas firs and crushed ferns, a *green* smell—a color she could not

## ANALOG

see but felt the rightness of the word. *This is the life*, the voice in her head said, and she agreed. That was *the life*, but it had turned into a black M, shrinking into the distance, smaller and smaller. For the first time she understood why the Woman could have wanted to go to sleep and never wake up.

The Man dropped onto his side beside her, crying for Rebecca, and she, who could not cry, put out her tongue and wiped tears away. They smelled and tasted like “no” felt. She licked them and licked them, because even if he had put the words in her head, he was her pack, her family, a part of herself, no matter how complicated or broken her self had become.

And the dog part of her told her this was life: to lick and to try, until the world smelled yellow again.

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*Wendy N. Wagner is a writer and Hugo award-winning editor. Her books include the forthcoming cosmic horror novel The Creek Girl (Tor Nightfire, 2025), The Deer Kings, The Secret Skin, and the Locus best-selling An Oath of Dogs. Her short stories, essays, and poems have appeared in seventy-some publications, running the gamut from horror to environmental literature. She is also the editor-in-chief of Nightmare Magazine and the managing/senior editor of Lightspeed.*