



CORPSE FAUNA
VOLUME ONE

THE DEAD BEAR WITNESS



JAMES
CHAMBERS

"...evokes the sense of terror that has kept zombie lore a staple of the horror industry for years..." --Vampirella Magazine

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BIRCH'S REFUGEES

DAY 16, 6:03 P.M.

A man in ragged, red clothes walked among the dead.

No, *not* a man. A corpse.

That James Birch thought of him as a man at first glance made him extraordinary. He didn't move like the other corpses wandering the field below the hospital, tripping over scattered bodies and broken limbs. Rather, the red man moved with a purpose and alertness alien among the walking dead. But Birch had no doubt he *was* dead; the decay visible on his face and arms was modest but unmistakable. Besides which the dead would've pulled apart and devoured any living man who walked in that field, but they ignored the man in red.

His actions astonished Birch even more than his appearance. As he crossed the field, the red man paused by each damaged corpse he passed and lingered to press his fingers against each one's eyes like a priest delivering a final blessing. The field was littered with hundreds of bodies hardened by decay, capable only of twisting and wiggling because their legs and arms had been shattered or severed in a battle with the living that Birch hadn't witnessed; from the hospital roof, they looked like broken ants trapped in the mud. But once the red man touched them, they turned stone still and didn't rise.

Truly dead.

Any living man or woman would've killed or died to know how to do that. Birch opened his mouth to call the others over to look, but he couldn't speak. His lips were frozen. The cloudless afternoon darkened and Birch shivered. The strange red man radiated a kind of energy that rose in cold ripples, seeking something, seeking...*life*. It flowed into Birch and connected to him with a jolt at the base of his neck and a twist of nausea in his gut. From across the hazy distance, the red man met Birch's stare, and Birch sensed a presence enter his mind—a presence like black, hateful whispers around the fringes of his thoughts. Behind him, a motor growled and propellers whined as the pilot prepped the helicopter for take-off. Soldiers were loading the cargo space with the last of the supplies gleaned from the hospital. Birch clutched tight a box of Petri dishes filled with agar jelly. He should've been helping to load

the huey so they could make it home before dark, but the red man's gaze paralyzed him. Even worse, it felt somehow familiar.

The red man stared at Birch and reached, without looking, for the next corpse: a woman in a torn workout suit, her body cut in half at the waist. Drawn by the helicopter noise and activity on the roof, her two halves were clawing and squirming their way toward the hospital. Then the man in red touched her eyes, and both parts of her flopped to the ground. Dead for good. Her savior awaited Birch's reaction, but Birch was too stunned to express anything. He wasn't even sure if what he was seeing was real. No one else in the scavenger group, including the two snipers posted to watch the hospital grounds, seemed to have noticed the man in red.

Because he isn't real, Birch thought. He can't be. Can he?

He wondered if after days of haunting his sleep, his dream visions of the dead were bleeding into his waking life.

Riled up by the droning helicopter, the dead mobbed the hospital entrance. They beat against the doors with weak fists. Even the ones who couldn't move and all their scattered limbs, stretching and rolling toward the hospital, yearned to join them. They hungered for flesh, thirsted for blood, and Birch wanted to know if the dead felt pain when they starved. Severed arms, legs, and heads shifted around on the ground, like worms in the soil, hands dragging themselves forward on rotting fingers, driven by an incomprehensible need to find life and consume it. And at the center of the field, the red man put down another shattered corpse. Then another. And another after that. To Birch, it was miraculous. He wondered what the dead felt in the seconds before their wasting bodies stopped moving, if they felt anything at all.

The red man carried no weapons or tools. He laid the dead to rest with only a brush of his gray fingertips against their eyes.

Birch wanted to hold that power in his hands.

He was certain he'd seen the man's face before. He couldn't remember where, but then no one ever looked quite the same in living death as they had in life. The cold energy that flowed between them surged, driving a frigid spike through Birch's head. He winced as silent words sprang into his mind: *You killed me. You wouldn't let me serve the living, so now I bring mercy to the dead. You and everyone else will soon be part of my ministry.*

The voice echoed in Birch's mind, almost recognizable, yet shallow, distorted. A fresh blast of pain flowered in his head, and then his body unlocked, and he could move again. He flinched and dropped the case

of Petri dishes. Plastic and glass cracked when it smacked the ground, and the lid snapped open. Birch glanced down at the box then back to the field.

The red man was gone.

His presence faded from Birch's mind, and the cold energy dissipated.

"Doctor Birch?" Private Lou Nelson stood at Birch's side, eyeing Birch's shaking hands. He shouted over the helicopter noise. "You all right, sir? Need some help?"

Birch hesitated then shook his head. "I'm fine. Just tired. I was up all night."

He folded the box shut and lifted it.

"See something down there?" Nelson asked.

"Thought I saw a living man walking around."

"No way. Anyone alive down there is a walking MRE for the dead. Some of the rotters still look pretty good, I guess. Probably that's all you saw."

"Maybe." Birch scoured the field for another minute. He wanted to find the red man and make him tell how he killed the dead. He knew that if he insisted on what he'd seen the men would believe him, that if he asked it of them, they would hunt for the strange dead man, fight their way through throngs of the walking dead, kill or die, if he only told them that's what it would take to end the dead plague. Even as he thought that, Birch noticed a shred of hope glimmer in Nelson's eyes, so faint the private probably didn't realize it was there.

"Sir?" Nelson joined Birch in watching the field. "Is something there?"

I don't know, Birch thought. I don't know what's real anymore or what I should believe.

"A good-looking rotter is all," he said. "That has to be it."

He took a last look across the field with the wind of the chopper blades beating at his back. Layered strands of gold and orange were stacking on the horizon, and the shadows of the dead fell long across the dark earth. He saw no more of the red man.

"Sir, just so you know," Nelson said, "the chopper's loaded and set, and we'll go whenever you're ready. But, sir, if you don't mind me saying, we'd all like to make it back to Vanguard before sunset."

"Right, me too," Birch said. "Let's go."

He followed Nelson to the helicopter, crouching low as he boarded and shoved the box into a space in the cabin. As the whirlybird rose, Birch studied the field again. He'd seen it from the air many times on

supply runs to the hospital, but it had never seemed so still. Despite the dead clamoring at the hospital doors and the many broken bodies still twitching on the ground, the swath of unmoving corpses and body parts left by the red man made the field look like an overturned graveyard.

Birch wondered who the strange dead man was, and how he—unlike any other of the living dead Birch had encountered—could have consciousness and purpose, could reach into his mind, could speak. It was insane. Even if the man was real, even if he was someone Birch had killed, Birch had done a lot of dirty work in his day. He couldn't remember everyone who'd died because of him. He didn't even know who they all were.

He nudged Nelson and pointed out the band of motionless bodies. "What do you make of that?"

Nelson shrugged. "Guess they rotted out. Everything wears out sometime."

The field dropped from sight as the chopper angled away, and Birch closed his eyes. The memory of the dead man's words stoked his anger. It was hard enough these days to sustain his belief in life as something worth preserving at any cost. He didn't need the dead invading his mind. He didn't want the dreams and visions of them that came to him almost every night, didn't want to be the only man with answers for the living. He had nearly lost his faith that the key to ending the dead plague could ever be known—until today, when he saw what the red man did. It couldn't be a waking dream, he told himself. That would be far too cruel. But that was how life was these days, cruel and full of pointless hopes and empty promises. The dead had risen and taken over the world, the living were in decline, lights out, curtains closed. Maybe that was all there was to it, and anything else was only wishful thinking.

DAY 17, 1:15 P.M.

The soldiers flattened the dead with tanks; the treads crushed them to dust and jelly, leaving only a scattering of fingers and toes twitching in the mashed earth. It was Birch who'd suggested using lengths of cable to corral the walking corpses and then crushing them with the four M2A3 Bradley's Major Alan Novak commanded. Now the procedure was a daily routine. The men cleaned away the remains with flamethrowers. The Vanguard biolab facility wasn't enclosed but it was far enough from the nearest town that not too many corpses found their way there. The "wrap and smash," as the men had named it, had won

Birch the major's confidence. He watched the operation through a window in Novak's commandeered office and took comfort in its simplicity. A direct solution for a clear-cut problem, the complete opposite of the dilemma he faced in the lab and the favor he hoped Novak would grant him.

"The *Clostridium tetani* produces a neurotoxin, called tetanospasmin," Birch told Novak. "It ravages living muscle and skeletal fibers, causing the muscular contractions and lockjaw of tetanus. Theoretically, a modified form of the bacteria could produce an attenuated toxin that might explain the movements of the walking dead. They could mimic life through bacteria-driven muscular contractions."

"It's mutant tetanus? That's the cause?" Novak jotted notes on a pad at the center of his well-ordered desk. "Can I report that to General Collier?"

"Nothing's certain. The bacteria and toxin are present in the tissue samples I've studied, but the rest is only a hypothesis," Birch said. "Or part of one, anyway. It doesn't explain why they attack and eat the living or why they move around. If reanimation was due to the bacteria alone, their movements would be random, and they'd be decomposing at a normal rate. This might be a clue to *how* the dead are walking, but it isn't the only factor, and it isn't *why* they're walking."

"What's the difference?"

"You drop a bomb on a target, that's *how* you destroy it," Birch said. "The reason you drop that bomb, the reason that bomb exists in the first place, are separate things. The bomber might not even know why he's using it. To him, the bomb is merely a tool."

"Are you telling me this is an attack? The bacterium is a bioweapon?"

"No. This wasn't created in a lab."

"Fuck's sake, Birch. Make yourself clear. I've been cutting you some serious slack since I got here, because you were Special Forces back in the day and you seem like the only one with his head screwed on right about this clustershtup. But I need results. The brass are getting nervous, and when the brass get nervous, I get nervous, and that upsets my stomach, which means I can't enjoy that oh-so-important first cup of coffee in the morning, and that puts me in a rotten mood all day, every day. That's no good for anyone. So, fix this shit already, you fucking mad scientist egghead, because I want to know that all is right in the world again so I can enjoy my morning coffee."

Birch waited for the major to smile or laugh—but he was serious. Birch felt an improbable burst of admiration for the man. Confronted by