

Chapter 1

Ferals are a lot like pens, Jake Carter mused. There by the hundreds if you didn't need them, but nowhere to be found when you're actually looking for them!

If there had been one to be seen, it wouldn't have been hard to spot. The flat landscape around the small convoy was pretty much a uniform beige color, with dots of gray or green. Every now and then a hill would pop up out of nowhere. Looking off in the distance he could see a long line of them on the horizon.

Through the passenger window of his heavily modified Ford F-350 he could see for miles. He could almost see as far on his left except where his driver Danny Marcus blocked the scenery. In front of them the view was obscured by Red Devil's rig. The white Hummer with its black eagle flag was almost hidden by the massive third generation Outbreak Response Battle Suit it towed.

The newest generation suits were supposed to be faster and tougher than the first gen suits that Springfield's ZOD teams had put together four years before. Part of the reason they were on the road in the middle of the Texas Hill Country was to battle test the suits before they joined the units converging on Springfield.

Red Devil's ORB was painted like his support vehicle, but it also carried crates of unpainted ORBS parts near the front of the trailer. Jake's vehicle had several crates of its own, just like Ken Bowman's rigRanger. Behind them was the massive armored bus that carried the team of engineers hand-picked by Peter Mayhew himself for this run. Led by one of Peter's countrymen by the name of Paul Blakefield, they represented the best field crew for the ORBS units.

"You missing Corpus already?" Danny broke Jake's concentration.

"Oh, sure. Nothing like sleeping in a barracks that's older than my grandfather and busting my ass in a hangar all day in hundred degree heat. And don't give me that 'dry heat' shit, either. That depot was right on the damn water."

Danny laughed. "Yeah, me too. But, better you than me, buddy. I'll take Ash Trooper training over being an ORB pilot any day."

Since he knew Danny had put just as much sweat into building the Spartan rig's bio-diesel support truck as he had put into helping build his own ORBS unit, Jake let that comment slide. "Tell me again why I volunteered for this gig?"

"Because you aced the pilot tests and the alternative was working on more ORBS units in hundred degree heat."

"Right, instead of sticking my ass out on the front lines of the feral fight in Springfield."

"Hey, they made the first of the battle suits. That's pretty hard core."

"Gentlemen, you may wish to open your windows or stick your head out of a hatch for a moment," Paul's slow, deep voice came over the radio. "We're picking up gunshots back here on the microphones. It may be that it's time to test your armor out."

Jake rolled his window down, smiling at Paul's hybridized accent. Most of the time the faint traces of his native British accent were there, but some words sounded like he'd been born and raised in the South.

Sure enough, the soft but distinctive pop of gunfire reached his ears after a few seconds.

Jake pressed the transmitter on his mic. "This is Spartan, confirming gunfire."

"Very well, then. Get suited up and prepare for battle."

“You heard the man!” Danny called over his shoulder. “Get your butts in gear and get Spartan ready to roll!” Jake climbed through the opening between the two bucket seats and into the back of the modified truck. Bunks lined the wall on the left, with a cramped table at the end.

On the right was the radio and operations station, with the compact toilet and galley taking up the rear of the back cabin on that side. The other three Ash Troopers had already opened the armored rear door and were moving across the tongue to the trailer that held Spartan. The first two across were Bobby and Dean Harper, siblings from Missouri. Both had been going to school in Rolla. They had been down in Houston when things went to shit five years ago and decided they’d stay to lend their engineering skills to the ZOD teams.

Bobby opened the front of the ORB and climbed inside, letting her brother power up the systems externally while she loaded up the bolt-gun mounted to the right ‘arm’ of the suit. Trooper Hirota had grabbed Jake’s harness and holsters. Hirota took care of the weapons, both on *Spartan* and on his person.

“Okay, the Glock is loaded up with the XTP rounds I told you about, and I loaded the Judge with buck shot rounds.” Hirota slipped the harness and assault vest onto Dean’s shoulders. She quickly strapped a Glock’s holster to his right leg and grabbed the side of the trailer as Danny hit a curve.

“Here’s hoping I don’t have to use them.”

“Your mouth, God’s ears. I went with the wave blades on the knuckle saw. Pneumatics are good on the spikes and everything else is good to go.”

“Batteries are good,” Dean called out. “You should have a few hours of juice.”

“Bolt gun is loaded with spike rounds,” Bobby added. “Secondary mag has the explosive core. Don’t matter which one you use, nothin’ short of a car is gonna stop ‘em.”

“Got it.”

The leg covers folded in when he put his boots into the foot harness and twisted into the locking mechanism. He grabbed the comm set and slipped the ear piece into place, then grabbed the hand controls.

Bowman’s voice crackled over the radio. “Ranger, ready to deploy.”

“Red Devil, ready!”

The steel mesh of the cage was broken by a two inch gap that gave him good lateral vision, though the mesh itself was also pretty easy to see through. Though it wasn’t visible from his side of the cage a red lambda was painted below the ZOD unit logo on the front of the cage, with matching symbols on each shoulder. He reached down and grabbed the arm controls. The one on the right was much like a fighter pilot’s stick and the left appearing more as an oversized glove.

Both arms sported a heavy blade welded to the underside so even if the other weapons were somehow destroyed or disabled, the arms themselves were still pretty formidable weapons. Jake flexed his left hand, and the left arm’s thick steel claws closed and opened in response. The right arm’s weapons mount swiveled left and right to match his movements on the stick.

“Spartan, ready to rock and roll!”

The pops of pistol fire and the crack of rifles became easier to tell apart. Shadows fell across the windshield as buildings of a small town blocked the light. The truck slowed to a stop. The green van with the Ranger tab painted on the front of it pulled to the right and stopped almost parallel with Spartan’s black and red truck. Bowman had been a Ranger in Iraq and Afghanistan. He had the records to prove it, not to mention the battle scars. If he hadn’t, ZOD would have vetoed using the unit insignia.

“Bison Four to ORBS, I have folks fighting creepers on two sides of the street. Looks like a horde of the fuckers!” Caleb Jackson’s voice shrilled across the radio. Red Devil’s crew chief was more excitable than usual as he continued. “One group of survivors is in some kind of uniform or something.”

Paul’s voice flooded the trailer. “ORBS, you may deploy. Let’s avoid any... local entanglements if we can.”

All three ORBS operators acknowledged the order as the support clamps released. The three Ash Troopers were already behind Spartan as Jake walked it forward. The step off the trailer was a bit of a challenge for him, but he managed to do it without stumbling. The delay meant he was the last one to the corner.

Red Devil and Ranger were already advancing on the horde of creepers, Ranger’s chainsaw blade spinning and Red Devil’s pneumatic axes pulled back and primed. Jake struggled to catch up and stumbled for a moment as his right foot hit the ground a half second late. Servos whined as he struggled to keep his footing and only managing at the last second to raise his left foot a little higher to catch himself on the third step. He could see that his misstep had brought him about a yard further forward than the other two battle suits. His heart was pounding and his throat felt like hot asphalt as he tried to swallow.

“Okay white boys, let’s see if you kill these fuckers better than you can walk.”

Without waiting for any acknowledgement Red Devil waded into the mass of infected, leaving the other two to follow. Jake’s first step sent a body flying, then a feral was clawing its way up his leg. He pulled his left arm up and bent his elbow back until the snarling face on the other side of the mesh was between the claws. He closed his hand in the control glove. The head deformed and one eye erupted, sending a gooey stream of clear liquid into the cockpit. Jake straightened his arm and opened his hand, sending the now permanently dead man flying into the crowd like a cannonball.

He stepped forward and kicked another creeper then thrust his right arm forward while he squeezed the control under his index finger. The pneumatic system drove a double edged blade forward with hundreds of pounds of force, skewering a monster’s head. As he pulled his right arm back he closed his left fist and punched the one closest to him. The angled edges of the claw collapsed the skull beneath them. Number three dropped. Once he’d cleared the ones next to him he started swinging at any creeper that came close and a pile of small, twisted-bodies started to grow in front of him.

“This ain’t much of a challenge.” Bowman’s voice sounded tinny in Jake’s ear.

“Don’t worry,” Paul’s voice chided over the radio. “A pack of the larger ones is on its way from the west. You’ll get ample chance to test your suits out shortly.”

“Hoo-ah!” Bowman called out. Jake swept his arm in front of him and let the blade slice two creeper heads from about the nose up. Once his immediate vicinity was clear he turned his head to look west and saw the half-dozen ragers running their way. Fifty yards short of the horde, three more slammed into them.

“Come on! Hit ‘em while they’re fighting each other!” Red Devil turned and started to wade through the gathered creepers, sending them scattering with each step. Jake followed suit, extending his arms so that each step brought his blades through the crowd of the twisted children around him. More than a few fell with their skulls split never to rise again. In his peripheral vision he could see Ranger outdistancing him, but he kept his pace. Falling wasn’t fatal in an ORB suit, but he knew he’d never live it down if he did.

“Fire in the hole!” Red Devil called out an instant before a puff of smoke came from his right arm. A micro-second later, an explosion flung two of the ragers apart in a spray of blood and body parts. One was missing everything from the ribs up, but the other was rapidly regrowing the flesh on its chest and face. It got to its feet and shook its massive head. The one eye that still seemed to work zeroed in on Red Devil. It let out a roar before it leaned forward and started to run at the offending ORB unit.

The ORBS pilots knew their enemy’s tactics. They had specialized training and equipment to counter them. As the rager took its first step Red Devil pivoted his left leg back and turned his feet so that they were both pointed directly at the oncoming beast. When its foot hit the ground the third time metal spikes shot out at an angle from the housings in the lower leg and buried themselves deep in the asphalt. The ORB leaned forward slightly with the arms extended, right hand over the left. Jake knew that Red Devil was aligning itself to divert as much of the impact as possible in a straight line that ran to the support spikes. He kept wading forward, but his eyes were on the charging behemoth and his fellow ORBS.

The rager hit Red Devil at full speed with a loud *clang!* Servos and hydraulics whined and Jake saw the ORB recoil slightly as joints flexed under the enormous weight that had just slammed into it. Before it could bounce off the nearly immovable barrier it had struck the claw on the left arm closed, sending curved steel talons between the thing’s ribs to close around its breastbone. Almost in the same instant the pneumatic axe that lay against the right arm activated and sank into the thing’s head again and again.

As the rager’s skull turned into a red and white ruin Ranger and Spartan passed on either side, both headed for their own targets. Two of the newcomer ragers were still locked in combat with the ones that had been approaching. Jake maneuvered Spartan to the left and came to a stop as the pair he had targeted rolled toward his feet in a snarling mass of fists and flying blood.

He lifted his left leg and planted it on the bottom rager’s chest. Reaching down he grabbed for the larger rager’s head. Between the rolling and biting he was forced to settle on snatching it by the shoulder. Once he got a good grip he began closing the claw. Bone crunched under his foot as he put his weight down and lifted the other rager into the air. It roared in his face as it grabbed the robotic arm.

Steel bent under its thick fingers and Jake’s eyes went wide as hydraulic pressure alarms began to sound. He twisted his right arm toward his left, and drove the double edged blade through the thing’s eye.

More alarms sounded as the one beneath him sank its fingers into the armor of the leg on top of it sending the suit tilting to the right. With the gyros protesting, Jake pressed his thumb down hard on the stabilize button on the right stick. The spikes extended with a wet sound and the suit’s slanting stopped. Jake leaned forward and let the dead rager’s weight right him before he disengaged the spikes and stepped clear. A distant roar rattled the cage as he dropped the rager’s body in the suit’s left hand. His comm suddenly went wild.

“Spartan, brace yourself!” Bowman called out.

“Your spikes!” Red Devil was yelling to him from feet away. “Fire your spikes!”

Jake pressed the thumb button, but the only response he got was a red flashing light on his overhead control panel. He glanced up to see the warning light for the stabilizers flashing. *The spikes haven’t finished retracting or the pneumatics aren’t fully recharged,* his mind screamed as he looked out through the opening in the cage to see an oversized rager charging him.

Ten feet of flesh slammed into Spartan. For a moment the world was a crazy blur. When he could see again the rager was stepping into view with both fists raised over its head. The cockpit

rattled and multiple voices sounded in his ears as the gigantic beast took a step forward. The red light stopped blinking on the overhead control panel.

By reflex Jake lifted his right leg and caught his humongous attacker in the chest. He bent his left leg to bring his foot down flat. Red lights flickered on the control panel as he caught a ton of rampaging monster against his suit's foot. He hit the stabilizer control button. Three spikes slammed into its chest and the deafening roar turned into a burbling cough.

"Stabilizers... Good idea."

The suit whined in protest as he straightened his left leg, slowly bringing Spartan upright and planting the impaled rager on the asphalt. As the weight of the ORB crushed the thing's chest its struggles weakened. They stopped entirely as Jake fired the bolt gun and sent three feet of steel through its skull. The last rager was charging forward and Red Devil stepped into its path.

"Fire in the hole."

This time Jake could hear the soft *bloop* of the M32 grenade launcher being fired. He saw the forty millimeter hole the round punched in the rager's chest an instant before the round detonated and vaporized everything from the waist up. Both legs went spinning as Red Devil let out a victory cry.

"Don't try that shit at home, kids!"

"Trained professionals and all that." Jake added.

Paul's voice echoed in their ears. "Well done, gentlemen. Return to your vehicles if you would and let's see about getting your suits patched up, shall we?"

"Yeah, that might be a little...complicated."

"Oh, dear. Local entanglements?"

"Pretty much."

Red Devil groaned. "Looks like we've got our choice of rednecks to choose from... the local Confederate good ole boys club or the cast of *Deliverance*."

"There's Union blue in there, too." Jake offered as he scanned the two groups emerging onto the street. On his right, he saw blue and gray uniform coats, with the kepi hats almost universally associated with the Confederate Army and the Hardee or 'Jeff Davis' hats favored by Union troops.

The men and women in the mixed uniforms held an equally eclectic mix of guns. Everything from assault rifles to bolt action hunting rifles was represented in the mob. The other side was mostly wearing ragged jeans and t-shirts. They carried guns, blades, or blunt objects in hand. None of the latter group looked like they'd so much as combed their hair since the world went to shit.

"I think these folks are a historical group. The other guys... I'm with Devil. I'm hearing 'Dueling Banjos' over here."

"We're pretty much entangled here." The speakers clicked as Bowman switched his radio transmitter off. "Okay folks, we're not looking to start any trouble here, but as you can see we can end it pretty damn fast if we have to. Just let us on through and we'll leave you folks to whatever you were doing."

"Ya'll are pretty good against infected," one of the men in uniform said. "But I'm thinking you're not so hot against folks with guns."

"I don't think it's a question we'll have to answer today."

Bowman lifted his left arm and extended one of the claws toward the rear of the group that was facing them. The leader turned to look over his shoulder and most of the people with him

followed suit. To the rear of both groups the gray clad Ash Troopers had spread out and were now covering everyone from cover with assault rifles and a couple of M 240B squad automatics. The leader nodded and held a hand up.

“Can’t blame a fella for trying! Those suits would come in awful handy. Especially against these scavs.” He pointed with his thumb at the ragged group facing them.

“Get ‘em!” someone from the less organized mob yelled. The group on the left surged forward in an uneven wave.

“Fall back to cover by squads!” the uniformed leader yelled as he brought his gun up and fired a shot into the charge before heading for cover. The uniformed crew leaped into action, with most firing a shot or two into the advancing crowd as they scrambled for cover. A few shots rang out from the group on the left as they ran forward. One round sent sparks off the top of Spartan’s cage. A group of ten scavs made a run toward Red Devil. They got an HE round from the grenade launcher for their efforts. People and body parts went flying. Ranger stepped to the right.

“Concentrate fire on the scavs!” Bowman called out over the radio. The M-240B mounted on his ORB chattered as it sent 7.62 rounds into the group. Red Devil matched his movement taking their line of fire away from the Ash Troopers who were busy firing into the scavs from their position. The tactic created a shallow crossfire with only one avenue of escape. Jake moved his ORB right as well. The bolt gun on his right arm was better suited to single targets so he didn’t waste rounds on the over-matched scavs.

“A Squad, B Squad,” he heard the uniformed leader call out over the din of gun fire. “Volley fire on my command! Ready arms! Fire!” Nearly a dozen rifles opened fire in a single fusillade that ripped through the few scavs that seemed intent on continuing the fight. The rest broke.

“Hold your fire!” Bowman called over the radio. “Cease fire, cease fire! Save your goddamn ammo!” A few more shots came. Soon the only sound was the moans of the dying and the clatter of feet through the abandoned streets.

“Squads, stand to!” the other man called out. Jake watched as rifle barrels were raised to point almost straight up. The man stepped into the open and approached Ranger. His rifle was slung and a broad smile splitting his beard.

“Thanks for the help.” Bowman called out from inside the armor.

“Likewise! I’m Sergeant Nate Bradley with the Texas Confederation, Second Platoon, Regiment B. You folks must be with ZOD.”

“Yes, sir. ORBS Division.”

“Recognized your symbols. Heard some good things about you folks.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t say we’ve ever heard of the Texas Confederation.”

“Not surprising. It took us all awhile to find each other. Most of us are from Mountain Man or Civil War historical recreation groups. We’re in contact with some groups out in Mississippi, Georgia, and Virginia. Heard through them it’s hell east of ‘Ole Miss, but they’re holding out.”

“Good to know! If you ever need to get in touch with us, I’ll have one of our techs give you the HAM radio frequency we’re usually on.” More of the Confederation members had stepped into view and Jake could also see other faces peering at them from inside a nearby building.

Jake whispered softly over the radio. “I’m seeing kids here. These folks were defending their families.”

Paul’s voice crackled back. “Perhaps we should stop and say hello after all.”

"Believing that they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers, and that they were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren, and they were also wronged while crossing the sea; and again, that they were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance..."

-Mosiah 10:12–13