

# The Reaper: Avenging Wraith

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## Chapter 1

The Reaper, also known as Jason, and even Captain Scott, paused to rest for a moment as he neared the fenced boundary of Highway 36. During the previous two hours since leaving the religious cult compound he'd carefully made his way south, through the heavily wooded strip of land between Macon and Long Branch Lakes. The density of Hell's offspring was higher here, in and near Macon, which stood to reason for it was a much larger city, yet the Reaper stayed in thick wooded area's for he wanted to identify all the players before announcing himself. In the four mile trek from the compound he had encountered and been forced to dispatch over a dozen of the undead spawn, using only his machete, for he did not wish to reveal his presence to any other surviving groups until he had a firmer grasp on the conditions here in Macon. He checked his watch briefly, noting that he still had over thirty minutes before the satellite would be within range then looked around his position. Forward and to the west, he saw a large group of Satan's spawn approaching the city along the highway in herd-like fashion. They were not moving especially fast, but they also never stopped. These minions of Hell were in search of prey, and he ignored him for now. They were too far away to spot him and he needed to get a message out first.

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While he watched and listened, the Reaper's mind drifted back to his very first encounter with these spawns of Satan. A family man, and retired from the United States Marine Corp as a Force Recon sniper with the 1st Marine Division, he had taken a job as a machinist to supplement their family income. Upon arriving home after working third shift on the day the undead rose, he found his entire family slaughtered. Going berserk, he had killed every zombie in sight using any means at hand. They had truly died under his wrath, and he, the Reaper, had survived. It was then that he realized the Lord had a new mission for him.

Jason had always been deeply religious, even as a child. He knew the Lord had a purpose for everything that happened in life, so the fact he had lived indicated God's plans for him were unfinished. He had prayed to the Almighty, and realizing his mission through divine guidance, he once again donned his old tools of the trade—the tools of a Marine Corps sniper—and set out to eradicate the spawn of Hell from the surrounding Newaygo, Michigan area. After weeks of combat and slaughter, along with more than a few signs from God, he realized his mission had changed in a subtle manner. No longer was his mission to hunt only the undead, but also the evil men living amongst them, who in many ways were much worse. These incarnations of evil preyed on other survivors, and the Lord had spoken loud and clear. The unspeakable acts of murder, rape, and immorality he'd witnessed had shown the Reaper where he could best use his talents.

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Macon was a much bigger city than Paris, Missouri. The Reaper had just left the smaller town after pulling the survivors and brought in additional military personnel to eradicate a menacing group of marauders. The population here in Macon was six times larger and the size of the city illustrated this increase. In Paris, the Reaper had called in reinforcements from Newaygo, Michigan, who had been sent two full twelve-man ODA's (Operational Deployment-Alpha) of Special Forces to assist in the suppression of hostile survivor forces. Through the grit of the full combination of all local survivor groups, they had prevailed and wiped the menace from the face of the planet. In that final battle though, the Special Forces had lost two men, another critically wounded, along with another nine members from the local groups. Now, they were on the fast track to recovery and the Reaper wished them the best.

It was almost two pm and several hours ago, he had been carefully scouting out the southern perimeter of what appeared to be the very large compound of a religious cult, located two miles northwest of the city at the tip of Macon Lake. Looking down within its interior from several vantage points along his path he'd estimated it at one mile square in size. Now he needed to get word back to Paris, Missouri about what he had seen, specifically the large upright cross, deep within its interior and decorated with the spiked bodies of a great many men, women and children. It was just two miles from the city limits and from the plumes of smoke, the Reaper already knew there were a multitude of survivors in or near this large town.

Initially, when he'd peered into the compound, his first inclination had been to slip between the strands of barbed wire, which were strung between the twelve foot tall stakes, spaced six feet apart. The fence had stretched for almost a half mile in every direction with roughly fifty yards of cleared area on both sides of its wooden and steel construction. Within, the cleared area ended in a dense wooded front and Jason knew it would only take a few minutes to run the distance to cover. It was while he was mulling over the decision to penetrate, or not, while carefully scanning the forest front, when he spotted the guard posts.

Placed just within the tree line were small enclosed platforms positioned every one hundred feet along it's length and built on stilts, leaving them approximately twenty feet off the ground. Another careful examination of several, revealed a large window in the front of each, and mounted within were what appeared to be machine gun emplacements. That those weapons were manned became obvious when he witnessed the barrels moving slowly back and forth. Interior penetration of this heavily armed fortress would need to be done at night and the recon a slow one.

The Reaper glanced over too his right, noting a large warehouse like structure that appeared to be abandoned, and immediately headed towards it. He needed a stable surface to set up his radio gear to communicate. It would suit his purposes and the vantage point the two-story structure afforded would allow him to get a better picture of the country and city limits he was approaching.

Fifteen minutes later, he saw him approaching the metal structure while noting its rust-streaked sides and broken windows. He held his machete in his hand and had already loosened the Navy Colt .45 in its side holster in case it was needed. The Colt had belonged to his father and upon the elders death had gone to Jason. The Reaper preferred to believe that by carrying the old, yet serviceable weapon, his pa was accompanying him on the Lord's mission.

This was an older facility, maybe 60's era and obviously abandoned for a great many years. He crouched in the snow-covered undergrowth as he came upon the cracked asphalt parking lot

surrounding the building and slowly scanned for Satan's spawn. Yes, there were here! Over a dozen of the undead were standing motionless between the main structure, and what appeared to be a large maintenance shed.

Carefully he backed until he was fully hidden from their view, then circled around to the south. He was looking for a ladder mounted to the side of this large building. Federal fire codes always demanded an easy egress to the roof surface of all commercial buildings, and it was for that ladder, he was searching. He found it within minutes, right where he expected it on the backside of the warehouse, with its vertical length surrounded by a metal cage-like framework. Thirty-five feet separated him from his destination and peering closely he saw that the safety barrier had already been removed, which would allow him to scale the roof without hindrance.

A careful look in both directions showed no signs of the undead from this side and he sprinted to the ladder. Removing his pack, he unclipped the support strap, lengthened it and fastened it to his leather belt. He would ascend while supporting the heavy bundle under his body for there was not enough room with it strapped to his back. His Rifle he slung muzzle down across the front of his body and grasping the metal rungs through his leather gloves, he quickly rose to the rooftop. Another few seconds saw him creeping to the southeast corner of the warehouse and dropping his ruck he quickly pulled his binoculars and started scanning the city that lay before him.

There were smoke plumes in evidence, a sure giveaway for survivor groups. He counted five in total and observed the movement of vehicles along some of the streets. *Busy little town*, he thought as he continued panning, noting what looked to be a school just ahead to his east and what looked like a decent sized motel just to his south, occupying approximately four square acres of space. As he slowly took in the details of what was a spread out, single story America's Best Value Inn; for he had read the sign in front, he noticed with interest that the zombies he had seen earlier were entering its crowded parking lot. *No time for that now, he needed to get a message out.*

Strapped to the side of his rucksack was a plasticized canvas bag measuring almost twenty inches in length. Inside this protective covering was an RF-3080-AT001,

High Gain UHF SATCOM Antenna assembly. State of the art military issue, Paired with the AN-PRC-152 it was the most commonly carried device in the field for secure extended communications. The Falcon III® AN/PRC-152 single-channel multiband, multimission handheld radio had been in use for many years by all branches of the U.S. Department of Defense. It was capable of providing real-time information and communication for units in the field. Its range was effectively limitless as combined with the SATCOM antenna, bounced signals through satellites overhead for world-wide coverage. This particular model also had a built in GPS (Global Positioning System) identifier.

During the Extraction at Paris, the Reaper had been pleased that Newaygo had provided several paired units of these communication devices and quickly secured one of them. He was the forward scout for Newaygo's advance towards the shadow government and needed the immediate ability to communicate resource and manpower needs with higher authority.

It took him less than a minute to unzip the pouch, extract and assemble the rapid deploy, high gain, crossed yagi antenna for SATCOM communications. Opening the top of his ruck to remove the lightweight radio transceiver itself, and connect it to the leads from the antenna array, only took a few more moments and he was powering it up while punching in the agreed upon frequency for Paris, Missouri. Checking his compass, Jason rotated the wire frame dish into optimal position while adjusting the angle of its primary antenna. He then then pressed the button

to record his current GPS coordinates. He would need those shortly and while continuing to scan his surroundings, he raised the small hand held device to his mouth.

"Reaper, to Paris Six, over."

"*Paris to Reaper, stand by for Six.*" almost a minute had gone by before he heard a return response. The reception was amazingly clear, but he didn't recognize the voice that spoke.

"Roger that, Paris." The Reaper continued to wait, and then heard Rodriguez's voice over the speaker. SFC, or Platoon Sergeant Dennis Rodriguez had been the leader of the largest survivor group in Paris, Missouri and the only surviving military elements in that area. Though Rodriguez had been skeptical at first, he had joined forces with the Reaper while supporting the combination of all local groups to take on the much larger group of marauders that occupied northern half of the city. Now, he was the interim leader of a growing and soon to be thriving community until elections could be held in the spring. Jason was proud to consider him a friend.

"*Reaper, Paris Six! What's the situation over there, and do you need our support?*"

"Paris Six, not at this time. Initial assessment is incomplete. Am transmitting GPS coordinates now," and the Reaper was thumbing the buttons that would burst the coordinates along the data link to the receiver in Paris, Missouri. "Copy that you received them, over."

"*Got them. Don't leave us in suspense, Captain. I've read the copy we made of that notebook and the situation doesn't look good.*"

"It is what it is. I'll know more within a day. The cult appears to be bad news. I was able to scan some of the interior and deep within their compound is a large cross that they've nailed men, women and even children. I was unable to do a forward recon during daylight, as they have manned machine gun emplacements every hundred feet along the exterior. At this time, their beliefs are unknown, but the fact they've killed children doesn't speak well for them."

"*Reaper, we can and will provide support. Things are going well here. Already, in the last two days, over two thousand refugees have come out of hiding and joined us. It's busy.*"

"I knew it would be, Rodriguez, but not at this time. Let me feel the players out and I'll get back to you. As previously discussed, if I don't report back by tomorrow then I'm compromised and this information needs to get to Newaygo."

"*I will make sure it does, but I do not see you being compromised, Reaper. Yes, I'm familiar with your dogma. When the Lord decides it's time for you to go home, he'll collect you!*"

"That's right," this time the Reaper growled, and at that moment, he heard gunfire to the south. The rapid staccato of weapons going off simultaneously made it sound like a pitched battle and quickly the Reaper held the binoculars to his eyes as he zoomed in on the motel across the highway, less than five-hundred yards distant. Instantly he was speaking into the hand-held unit again.

"Paris Six, Reaper out. Something needs my attention."

"*Copy that Reaper, keep us informed. We'll be here.*" Then the Reaper turned the handset off as he lifted his M40A1 sniper rifle, then crept to the south edge of the roof.

Looking down and across, he idly noted the distance was too short to require a sandbag and after flipping the magnetic covers up from the scope, he wrapped the sling twice around his hand gripping the fore stock of the Remington 700 and settled into a comfortable prone position. Slowly he panned across the parking lot and saw a myriad of Hell's spawn intermixed with human survivors in pitched battle.

The scene before him was too confusing to draw more than general picture of the events happening. It appeared the zombies had sensed survivors hiding within the motel premises, and had already breached several of the room doors in search of ... food. By combining their mass,

the undead could and did breached locked door, simply by continuing to move forward. The survivors in return were out in force, rushing from surrounding rooms and engaged in melee with the undead creatures in an attempt to hold them back. It did not look good for the defenders as the Devil's Spawn had vastly superior numbers and were aroused in their need for human sustenance. The Reaper instantly recognized the spawn of Satan were in fast mode as they intermixed with humans and as he watched, several of those alive were pulled to the ground. *Time to step in*, he thought as he chambered the first 7.62 x 51mm round in place and sighting carefully, fired!

In the parking lot, one of the undead had gripped a machete wielding female survivor by the hair and was pushing her to the pavement. As the lady's mouth opened in a scream of pain and denial, the Reapers ultra-sonic jacket of death was already passing through the head of the creature holding her, bringing it instant, ultimate death to ricochet off the pavement behind them. The unfolding battle was busy, with alive and undead fighting in close proximity to each other. Jason had to be careful that his rounds did not impact a friendly target, after passing through one of the spawn. He had no worries though, as he never missed and carefully aiming, he fired again.

This time, the jacketed round passed through not one, but two semi-decomposed heads, before impacting against the lower stone archway fronting the main entrance to the motel. The Reaper shifted minutely as his right hand automatically rotated another round into position. Three of the undead were crouched over a young man as he fired upward into their dead bodies with an automatic of some sort, clenched tightly in his hand and quickly Jason sent a round through the head of one, then a second, allowing the man to push the other aside as he staggered to his feet. Before Jason could fire again, the evil ones teeth had fastened on the arm of the gun-toting survivor, bearing him to the ground again. Another round passed through the barrel of the Remington 700, putting an end to the undead wishes.

Quickly yet methodically, the Reaper kept firing until he was switching magazines. Then again he serviced another of the undead horde before him. The survivors in this group were winning, and the Reaper continued to fire. Every shot through the head, with no misses.

Jason was on his fourth magazine before the battle was over. The firing from below had ceased and the survivors were milling around while checking on their own dead. As he slowly panned across the turmoil of the last ten minutes, he counted at least eight dead of the groups once living members. He could also see many of those below staring up at his position and relaxing, he slowly stood, while facing them and rested the butt of his sniper rifle against his hip. It was time to get down there and see what was going on.

Packing his gear up quickly, he proceeded to the ladder only to find the area below crowded with Hell's minions who had heard the shooting and came in search of Prey. The Reaper smiled grimly, for it was he who would prey on them and drawing his colt .45, he started shooting.

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## Chapter 2

Gareth Wood was thirty-six and a large man at six-foot three and two-hundred forty pounds. With his dark hair, broad face and calm demeanor, it was easy to mistake him for just a big happy-go-lucky guy, that easily resembled your neighbor and was easy to trust. Few knew his past though, and if they had, such neighborly trust might not have come so readily.

Originally a native of British Columbia, the sixth province of Canada, as a young boy he had made the journey to the United States with his family as they searched for better paying jobs. Finding them in Macon, Missouri many of his immediate family had followed the move to the United States taking advantage of the boom in Natural Gas exploration. The Gas companies paid well above average wages, with plenty of overtime, and while not rich, his family had become comfortably upper-middle class.

Though his father had insisted he go to college, Gareth had always charted his own destiny and instead joined the United States Marine Corps. Stationed in the infantry with the 2nd MarDiv (Marine Division) out of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and ultimately assigned to the 2nd Combat Engineering Battalion, saw him in exotic places doing exotic activities. Exotic was relative however, unless you considered several tours in Iraq, and Afghanistan, while planting demolitions and blowing up a significant percentage of every area he was assigned.

Two enlistments later, he'd finally decided the placid environment of heavy combat operations in a hostile territories was too tame for his dynamic nature and elected to become a semi-pro wrestler. His big break had come through a friend, who knew a guy and that had lasted for quite a few years while he toured the circuit from West Coast to East. The money had been very good; the female groupies better, and if he hadn't blown his knee out in a power move turned back might have still been in the biz.

Three surgeries, several pins and two screws later, found him out of wrestling and working at high-scale nightclubs in Atlanta as a bouncer where two things eventually happened. He became involved in the Mob, and then met a sweet little casino waitress named Jenny, whom he fell in love with. Life had been idyllic until Jenny's superior looks had caused problems with his bosses, for they were not content with her remaining a waitress and the pressure for her to become a stripper had become overwhelming. She wanted to leave, but the one thing you never did was leave the Mob.

Jenny had quickly turned into a listless shell of her former self, causing Gareth to intervene on her behalf. He had gone to the Caporegime and when that proved fruitless had requested, and been granted, an audience with the underboss for the Atlanta area family. His interference in the local bosses plans had earned him a beating, and a bad one, along with a warning to get himself and his girlfriend in line or they would find themselves permanently unemployed. Gareth had taken their threats seriously, but what the Mob did not account for was his determination to rid their lives of this looming shadow, and the skills and friends he had accumulated while in the Marine Corps. The Mafia knew he was a former soldier in combat engineering and assumed that meant he operated heavy machinery and built bridges and other forms of infrastructure for developing nations that the United States deemed to have national security interests. They had no idea that the battalion he had spent almost seven years in actually blew those bridges and heavy equipment up, or that his working knowledge of lethal chemistry meant every grocery and hardware store was a haven of supplies for homemade plastique. They knew he was from Canada

and assumed he had immigrated to America in order to join the service. They also did not know his family resided in Macon, Missouri and Gareth did not intend to reveal that information.

The Mob was into many lucrative activities, one of which was insurance fraud. They would buy older facilities, insure them for sums larger than they were worth then have a contractor torch the structures for the money. The racket worked, for in each case they would start construction towards renovation, but said construction company's were also owned by the Mafia and while many hours were billed, no man hours were actually performed.

Gareth needed to make a clean example of what might happen if they were not left alone, but in such a way that he didn't make the underboss or boss of bosses unduly angry. So enlisting the help of two friends from his old battalion and after making several trips to different grocery and hardware stores they had assembled and set a great many charges. Then after ensuring the properties were vacant had detonated those charges, while ensuring his bosses knew that it was the work of multiple people. It had been a win for the Mob for the insurance money and a win for Gareth and Jenny in that they were officially 'retired'.

Sure, the Mob attempted to hire them in a different capacity after Gareth's skills were proven but they had turned down all such and quietly moved away in the middle of the night to Macon, Missouri. He and Jenny had married and started a new life together. Then, going back to school and passing his commercial driver's license exam resulted in a job as a truck driver for a metal stamping plant making runs to the west coast and back. After six years of incredible married life, they now had three children; two boys and a girl, ages three, four and five, but it was on one of those three-day runs when everything turned upside down.

For hours before arriving back in Macon, he'd listened to the emergency broadcasts continuously, driving faster, even pushing road conditions to make it back to Macon. Nearing the large city of his hometown, he'd been forced to weave in and out of traffic. In other circumstances he would have been paranoid of being pulled over, but right then, he knew the police had larger problems on their hands. He had made it back and reunited with his family though it had taken hours of fighting off the undead who were attempting to eat every living thing in sight. He was just thankful neither of them had taken the latest flu vaccine.

Gareth felt he and Jenny were still alive because of his paranoia. In previous years gone past, every time he or any in his family here in Macon had taken the yearly flu immunizations the government advocated, had seen them sicker than you would believe. Eventually, even before he met Jenny, they had stopped doing so and it had proven a successful strategy. They had not contracted the flu since. Once he and Jenny were together, he had convinced her to continue the new family tradition, to which she agreed. It was only later, the day after the rise of the zombies that they learned a tainted batch of vaccine had caused this entire mess.

He was now located at the America's Best Value Inn, their inner city home having been deemed too small and too vulnerable to the undead hordes. With him were his remaining family; comprised of both of his parents, his brother, a few friends and other survivors they had taken in. Jenny's family had not been as lucky as his, for they had all been out to dinner when the end came and did not survive the aftermath. Those that had not already turned into zombies that is.

The Inn had all the space they needed and was mostly defensible. It contained a restaurant and bar of which both were well stocked with food stores. A generator out back provided power and they were located near a local grocery distribution center. Before the outbreak Gareth had collected fire-arms and once the violence ensued, he and his brother along with two friends had used those weapons to raid one of the several local gun shops whose owners were mysteriously absent. They had stocked up on everything and trucked it all back to their new location allowing

all the adults to have decent protection against this new apocalypse. They numbered eighty-four breathing individuals, with sixteen men, twenty-five women and forty-three children. It was amazing how many children had survived. Immune from the tainted virus, they or their parents had hidden them from the ravaging horde of new risen dead and Gareth could not stop himself from taking every one of those little tykes in, not that his Jenny would have let him, and if they found even more children, they would protect them also.

Now, he mournfully surveyed their losses after an attack of the undead. The herd, for that's they only way the massed up zombies could be referred to, had caught them by surprise and even though all outside doors were barricaded, the bastards had pushed against the large glass windows of individual outside units and forced their way in by climbing over the sills. Gareth had immediately ordered a counter attack for that was the only way to keep them from the children, hiding in fear within the inner rooms. Nine dead. Two of his men and seven women, one of those men a close friend. Thank god the bastards had not gotten to the children.

"Who do you think that is? One of the other groups? Military?" asked Dean.

Gareth was pulled from his reverie at his brothers question. "I don't know." he responded and together they watch as in the distance a small figure stood atop the old abandoned warehouse, a large rifle jutting from his hip. "But he helped save our ass. I'm not sure how many he killed but it was a lot. I saw them dropping all around me."

"Yeah, me too. Maybe we should pay him a visit after we get this cleaned up and express our thanks."

"Look!" and Gareth pointed. "He's disappeared. He may be coming to us." Together both men gazed at the distant abandoned warehouse in search of this man who had assisted them in taking out the undead. He was not to be seen and after several minutes, they turned back to the task at hand.

"Have Cody bring a truck around so we can carry our dead around back, then grab some boards so we can use the torch to burn in their names. We'll use the backhoe to dig the graves."

"What about these undead, now dead fuckers?"

"We'll dig a larger hole somewhere else and bury them there!" growled Gareth.

"Gotcha Gareth, I'm on it!" and Dean was walking quickly to another one of the men still standing, talking excitedly as one of the women stood beside him while patching the wound on his arm from a bite.

That was scary, as they had learned early on, that a bite from an undead left untreated, quickly festered into a massive infection. Thank God, they had also raided one of the many pharmacies within the city. Gareth hoped the wound would not become infected, for while the Samaritan Hospital was still open for business, abet with a greatly reduced staff, they literally charged an arm and a leg for their services. You had to bring your own medical supplies along with something of value; food, ammunition, they were even accepting livestock. As yet, supplies were plentiful with a majority of the population dying off suddenly, but Gareth knew that by next year, those supplies would dwindle as everyone hoarded. He was not looking forward to the headache. His group had livestock of their own out behind the Inn. Forty laying hens because everyone liked eggs and a half dozen dairy cows they milked twice a day, then boiled it before setting it out in the snow too cool. The little kids needed the milk and even Gareth had to admit that the rich creamy taste of the fresh stuff was more delicious than any he had purchased from the store. In the spring they were planning on taking over one of the larger farms and he was suddenly wondering if locating one now might not be prudent.



"Hey! Who's that?" One of the women was calling out and Gareth recognized the voice of Karen as he looked in her direction. An outstretched arm and pointing finger had him turning again north in the direction of the highway. Coming towards them was a lone figure of a man with a large rifle slung over his shoulder, a large pack of some military design on his back and a large machete swinging from his hand. As Gareth watched, he saw two of the undead move from where they had been hiding amongst the vehicles stranded, or simply left on the road, advancing on the walking stranger.

"Dean!" he shouted. "The guy needs help. Let's go!" His brother ran too him while looking out across the road and as he neared Gareth grabbed his shoulder and together they ran. His Ar-15, taken from the gun shop was in his hands as was Dean's and he flipped the safety off in preparation to firing, but it was already too late as this man moved to intercept the two undead.

With quick, sure movements, this man walking towards their sanctuary took out the two zombies approaching. Gareth grinned as he witnessed the lightening quick strokes with the heavy looking blade which saw the undead immobile on the ground within seconds. *Man knew what he was doing*, was his only thought as he watched the stranger wipe his blade off on the ragged clothing of the dead.

It was an older man who was approaching them; mid 50's or perhaps sixty, with a short, neatly trimmed beard and muscular build. The large rifle slung over his shoulder was large, obviously custom and had a powerful scope mounted on it. As he drew closer, Gareth recognized a brown Carhartt jacket with brown pants and the pack he carried on his back was obviously of older military issue.

"I see you had a bit of trouble," the man remarked as he came to a stop and sheathed his machete.

"Yes, this would have been worse if not for you. Mind telling me why you took a hand, stranger?"

"Names, Reaper and it seemed like the thing to do." Responded the Reaper as he surveyed the bodies lying all around them. "Looks like you suffered casualties," he continued.

Gareth sighed as he rubbed a hand across his face, and then noticed it still had fresh blood on it from checking the bodies of their group members who had perished. "Crap," he muttered as he pulled a rag from his pocket and rubbed his face again, hoping he removed most of the blood, then wiped his hands thoroughly before holding his right out. "My name is Gareth Wood, this is my brother Dean and it's a pleasure to meet you, Reaper. The two big men shook hands strongly, before the Reaper turned to Dean, hand outstretched, who clasped it in return. All three men nodded at each other. "Come on, I'll introduce you to the others. Normally we would not be so friendly, but most of us saw what you did. You're good with that thing, military?" he finished while nodding at the modified Remington 700.

"The Lord guides my hand, Gareth. Let me give you a hand with those who have fallen. Former yes, and you?"

"2nd CE Batt with the 2nd, USMC."

"1st Recon Batt, 1st, out of Pendleton, though we were rarely there." responded Jason in return.

"Recon?"

"Force!" the statement was said with pride and Gareth nodded in return. There was a difference between USMC Recon and Force Recon.

"I met a few Force Recon at Legeune, in between blowing things up in various exotic places. Quiet bunch they were. Team sniper?"

"Correct."

"Well, let's go, we can talk more later," and with that, Gareth and his brother continued walking towards the others.

Three trucks had been backed up and gently the bodies of nine people were laid within their beds. Dozens of people had gathered, surrounding the vehicles and silently looking on while the process took place. Some were silently crying while others just looked mad as hell and not a few stern looks were directed at the new arrival in their midst. The Reaper.

"Who's this?" The voice was husky yet melodious, an odd combination and the Jason turned to view the speaker. Before him was woman, early thirty's perhaps, and of incredible beauty.

"Jen, this is Reaper. He's the one that helped earlier when the zombies attacked." Gareth was now speaking to his wife, who looked suspicious while fingering the Beretta 92 shoved in her waistband.

"What do we know about him Gar? You guys are looking all comfortable over here, yet I'm suspicious. Is he from one of the other groups near us?" she inquired as her stare bore into the Reaper.

"Ma'am. I mean you and yours no harm. I've just arrived and figuring out what's going on."

"It's Mrs. and what do you mean figuring out what's going on?"

"Hun. He took down maybe thirty of the bastards himself. He kept more from losing their lives. Calm down please. Reaper, this is Jenny, my wife." Then Gareth was caressing her tense shoulder as he indicated the woman. Distrust was still plainly written in her stiff stance and narrowed eyes, but finally she nodded minutely to Jason.

"Thank you, Reaper, but why do you call yourself by that name?"

"You're welcome. As for the name..." The Reaper paused then waved a hand around them before continuing. "My given name is Jason Scott. However, when all this occurred over a month ago, I came home from work to find my entire family slaughtered by these Hell Spawn of Satan. I killed every one of the demons and then buried my family. It was then that I realized the Lord had a mission for me, as I had survived. To be the Lord's Reaper of the Devil's undead progeny, and those who would visit evil acts upon the survivors."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Reaper. Everyone here has lost people, most of them close family." Jenny remarked.

"I know. It's the way of things in this new trial of the Lord's."

"I hate to break up this gathering but we have nine of our own to bury and say a few words over. The holes are already dug and they're getting ready. We'll dump the zombies in one of the out pits the city dug when we're finished," commented Gareth who had been speaking with another of those near, but in low tones.

Several minutes later, on the backside of the motel, Jason stood near the back of all those assembled to say a final goodbye to friends and family. Gareth was in front, beside him Jenny and he was fumbling with the small bible in his hand. The Reapers eyebrow rose as he watched the confusion on their leaders face, and called out.

"You do not have a pastor in your group?"

Startled Gareth turned looking at the Reaper and shook his head. "I just usually pick a few verses at random and go with it." He backed up for this man called the Reaper was already striding forward, approaching and removing his equipment.

"Then allow me."

"You're a minister?"

"No, but I know the bible."

When Gareth started to hand Jason the bible he shook his head, then clasped his hands before him, head bowed and started speaking.

"Romans 14. Verses 7-9.

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.

So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

These men and woman sacrifice themselves that others may live. Their souls are now resting at God's side, their bravery, and sacrifice, is a testament to what good, honorable, and caring people will do for each other. But know deep in your hearts, that God is with us and everything has a reason." The Reaper lifted his head and stepped back from the nine freshly dug graves before him. As he did so he heard a deep, murmured "Amen" from behind.

"Thank you Reaper. That was fitting." Gareth had stepped closer and was now speaking.

"You're welcome. We are all in this together."

"So, do you need a place to stay? We could use someone like you in our group. You're obviously religious and you took out quite a few of the bastards that attacked us. Every group in town has mostly cleared the undead out, but more and more of the undead keep arriving. In fact some have come from as far away as Kansas City, according to their driver's licenses." Gareth quit speaking for he saw the Reaper shaking his head.

"I'm sorry Gareth, I'm on a mission not only of the Lord's, but also the Governor of Michigan. You may not realize it, but there is organized evil afoot within the world."

"You mean this whole rogue government organization we've heard rumors of?" interjected Gareth.

"You know of them?" Surprise was clearly written on the Reaper face, and Gareth chuckled.

"Yeah, we get rumors. City Hall has some radio equipment and we understand a lot is happening out there. We've heard stories, even of Newaygo. So you're from there?"

"Yes!" Jason wanted to tell them more but knew operational security came first. "You have a functional city government?" he inquired.

"Well, somewhat. The hospital is all about, pay as you go, but the police and fire departments are still there along with what's left of the city managers. Not many of them left either, but they have their own group and are trying to keep some order in town."

"And they haven't asked you to relocate closer to them?"

"No why? Why should we."

"Because there is safety in numbers. Why didn't they respond to this incursion?"

"Because they don't. They don't want more numbers, and there are other reasons."

"What reasons?" the Reaper growled and for the first time, Gareth received a hint at how dangerous this man called the Reaper really was.

"There is a cult, north of town. Mostly, the police try to keep them out of Macon. Early on, this cult was taking people when everything went down. The City barely put a stop to it. Now they do their thing and the rest of us do ours."

"I need to talk to the city. Can you take me there, Gareth?"

"Sure, I suppose, but they don't take to strangers."

"I'm used to that. Why don't we get the undead cleared away and then you can introduce me," remarked the Reaper while Gareth nodded.

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## Chapter 3

"Did your boys find out what that ruckus was all about, Ray?" Harley Dunnon was the fire chief of the city of Macon and had been for over the last dozen years. At six-foot and two-hundred pounds with a bald head framing blue eyes he had become a permanent fixture at the firehouse, for he had worked there for over thirty-five years. Since the apocalypse occurred, Chief Dunnon found himself understaffed and forced to cut back on most of the activities they used to do. Between his remaining firemen and their surviving dependents and those of the police department they were trying to keep a semblance of order within the primary business and housing district of Macon city.

"Yes, two of my boys, Graves and Wilson, witnessed a herd of the zombies attack Wood's bunch over at the motel. They got there too late to help, but said wood took care of it, along with someone shooting from on top of the old Sonnelly Sons warehouse. That might have been one of Gareth's, or someone from another group; we simply don't know." Ray Thomas was the chief of police for the city of Macon, Missouri. Five-foot ten inches and one hundred and seventy pounds portrayed a muscular man with crew cut brown hair and matching eyes. He was Harley's counterpart and co-leader of the city. Together with Douglas Atwood they were all that were left of the city management and were the drivers behind holding Macon together in almost one piece.

"Casualties?"

"Some, but I don't know how many. They held a funeral out back. Graves said it looked like quite a few."

"Damn, too bad. I know we talked about this, but isn't there any way we can extend coverage to more of the outlying groups?"

"No, I wish, Harley, but simply not possible. We have to keep most of our men on the north side to counter those damn Children of Mesoch. If we let our guard down, they'll wipe us out."

"Crap! I wish there was something we could do about them. If they were out of the picture we might be able to bring this town together. We can't keep living like this. We have to get it together and we have an obligation to the people in our community!" ground out Harley as he slammed the palm of his fist down on the desk in frustration.

"I know, but while we outnumber them, they have heavy weapons, which we don't. We wouldn't last long if we attacked," replied Ray, equally frustrated at the situation. It was an old argument between them. Both Chiefs and the men under them wanted to keep safe the people they were sworn to protect as civil servants but there just was not enough of them to go against a heavily armed religious cult sworn to eradicate the ungodly. Ray had no idea where they had gotten the weapons but had lost two officers when they had driven up to the front gate of the compound. The freaks had opened fire before Ray could even speak, and it was only by luck that he managed to escape. Just then one of Ray's remaining eleven officers rushed into the office where Harley and Ray were talking, blurting out.

"Chief! Wood's is here. He has another guy with him. Big rifle and looks military. They say they need to talk to you." The newcomer was Greg Jones, and before the end of the world had been a new trainee in the department. He was a good solid officer who rarely became excited.

"Calm Greg, what's got you all excited? This isn't the first time Gareth's come to visit."

"It's the new guy, Chief. He has military written all over him and I'll kiss your ass if that isn't a sniper rifle he's carrying. Maybe help is on the way, against...you know who!"

"We'll see, but don't hold your breath, Greg. Invite them in after disarming them gently. We'll see what it's all about," responded Chief Ray before turning to his best friend of almost thirty years. "You coming, Harley?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the end of the world," quipped Harley, sarcastically.

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As they drove further into the city, more and more people were seen. Some were in vehicles and others walking the streets in armed groups. There were also, quite a few armed patrols in evidence and every one of those patrols had at least one man with a badge of some kind fastened to their winter coats.

The entire central part of the city was blocked off with gates established on four sides. The city's forces held approximately sixty square blocks, all blockaded in with larger vehicles and armed guards spaced out along each side's interval. The gate they had been stopped at held ten guards, four of them men and the rest women. After verifying that it was Gareth attempting entry to speak to the Chiefs, they had allowed him to pass unmolested after radioing it in.

"How many people are in this group?" inquired the Reaper as they slowly drove north along Rubey Street.

"I guess, at least a thousand. It's hard to say. They took in many survivors fleeing the major cities during the first week of apocalypse. We're not getting as many groups coming in now though."

"Mostly children?"

"Of course."

"Where's all the food come from?"

"Well, Macon does have big box stores, you know; a super Wal-Mart and others, which the city grabbed early on."

"That won't last forever."

"Too right, that's why we're looking for a big farm come spring, or earlier."

"Wise decision, Gareth."

Gareth turned right after about four blocks then pulled over to the side of the road into an angled parking space and gestured for the Reaper to get out. "We're here."

To their right, was an open paved lot, filled with several police cruisers and an emergency response vehicle. A large L shaped building occupied the far corner, and it was towards this, that Gareth led him. The front entrance was built up with sandbags to resemble a guard post and it was manned by two armed men, one of whom held a German shepherd on a leash and in the near distance, the Reaper could hear a generator running. As Jason moved closer, he saw the canine focus on he and Gareth, its attention alert and the muscles in its forearms and thighs tense, indicating a trained K-9 unit. The rifle in the other guards hand trained on him and Jason saw that it was a typical small police force AR-15.

"Bill. We're here to see the Chief if possible. I have someone that would like to meet him," said Gareth as they came to a stop. The Reaper made sure he made no sudden movements and that his body was relaxed, as the man Bill, the guard with the dog, responded.

"He's expecting you Gareth, and I'm sorry for your loss. A couple of our guys were near the area, but by the time they arrived it was already over."

"Thanks, I guess it's the thought that counts," commented Gareth ironically.

"I need you gentlemen to leave your weapons and equipment here," responded the guard, ignoring Gareth's comment. A low table was indicated and the Reaper carefully laid his rifle and munitions bag down, then his colt, and finally the machete strapped to his side. His rucksack he shrugged off and set on the ground beside the table after removing a packet from a side pouch, as Gareth did the same with his own weapons. A quick pat down was performed and they were finally allowed inside the well-lit interior where another guard waited for them.

"Follow me."

"Nice to see you also, Officer Michael's." Gareth ground out as they followed the uniformed officer deeper into the complex. "Officer Michael's insists on being called 'Officer Michael's' instead of by his first name Stan. He gets quite upset if you don't show him the respect he deserves," stage whispered Gareth to Jason.

"You're not funny, Gareth. Get in there, the Chief's are waiting for you two," scowled as he opened a side door and pointed inside.

Inside a large spacious office were three desks, two of which were occupied. Behind one was an older, heavysset balding man wearing the uniform of a Fire Chief and behind the other occupied desk was a muscular middle-aged man with short crew cut. This second man's uniform was that of a Police officer bearing the insignia of Chief of Police. Before their desks were several chairs and the Police Chief stood while indicating two chairs in front of the other.

"Thank you Officer Michael's that will be all. Gentlemen, have a seat please. I do not recognize your friend, Gareth. By the way, I'm sorry for your loss, but please introduce us to your friend," he said indicating the Reaper.

"Thanks Chief. This is the Reaper; he just arrived, but has some major skills and helped us out in a tight jam when a herd moved in on our group. Reaper, this is Chief Ray Thomas and Chief Harley Dunnon," he said as he indicated each man in turn.

"Chief's," responded the Reaper as he shook each mans hand, then handed over the packet containing his commission and orders. Slowly the others read the proffered documents before handing them back. There was silence for a moment before Thomas spoke.

"So you're a Captain in the military, and an advance scout. We know all about the rogue government and Newaygo. We have a shortwave receiver. It was from their general broadcasts we knew to secure a dairy farm, fuel supplies and plant all the edge of town nurseries. We also know the general status of America and that no help will be arriving anytime soon. What is it you're here for?"

"To take down this cult north of the city!" growled the Reaper.

"Good luck with that. You will need an army for they have some serious firepower. The compound they call Magog and there's no way to take it. We're barely holding on here against them."

"Magog?"

"Yes, Magog and they call themselves the Children of Mesoch and their leader refers to himself as Rho's, the prince of Mesoch. They claim to be descends of the original Magog, whatever that is.

"Ahhhh that explains everything." the Reaper murmured as he nodded.

"What do you mean?" asked Dunnon as he leaned forward in his chair.

"You do realize that they intend to eliminate you soon?" answered the Reaper with a question of his own. His stare was hard as he sized up both men.

"No, we do not know that! We currently have an armed truce which looks to last until at least spring." Chief Thomas had jumped into the conversation, and was glaring at the Reaper.

"They won't wait. They need to be taken out now."

"How do you know that?" Harley now asked in frustration.

"Because if they are indeed followers of ancient Magog, then they'll follow the prophecy's written in the bible.

"Okay, I see it just became complicated. Explain," barked Thomas, as Jason sighed then continued.

"It is complicated, and it depends on which scriptures you read. Most indicate they will gather a host of armies that Satan has deceived, and rise against the true people of god. There are also a few passages that indicate that the people's of Magog are really the chosen ones of God and that all will follow them or suffer God's wrath."

"What in Hell's name does that have to do with us?" interrupted Dunnon who had risen to his feet in agitation.

"Because they won't wait. All the scriptures are clear, from the books of Amos, to Ezekiel, to Revelations. The sign for them to act is when the apocalypse occurs and locusts devour the land, which could be loosely mean, the undead. At that time, they are to act. If they believe in their prophecies at all, they must act. They will attempt to recruit you to their version of Old Testament God and mark each believer with a 'sign'. They cannot wait for if they are of that particular prophecy, then God has told them to act now. Time is of the essence." The Reaper paused briefly as he saw the Chief's looking at each other. "Tell me, have they approached you with the idea of assimilation and do their followers wear a mark somewhere upon their bodies?"

"Yes," muttered Thomas after a full minute of silence had ensued. "A capital G branded into their chests over the heart."

"Most scholars would say that 'mark' is the sign of the beast as spoken in Revelations. They are also reverting to Old Testament practices with crucifixions and slavery. That must be stopped before we revert into anarchy!"

Chief Thomas rubbed a tired hand across his face before responding. "Look, Reaper, or Captain Scott, whoever you are. Even if what you say is true, there's nothing we can do. It's possible we might be able to take their compound. Very iffy as they have heavy weapons, but still possible. We have numbers are on our side, but we would likely lose a majority of our capable shooters if it came to that. They tried early on to breach our north gate with some sort of heavy machine gun that one of my guys said was a .50 caliber, but we were able to take out the truck as it was closing. There were several other vehicles behind it which turned around after we filled them full of holes."

"Did you recover the .50?"

"No, damnit, it exploded as one of my men climbed into the bed of the truck. I lost two people that day along with a half dozen wounded. They booby-trap everything and yes, I know they're crucifying people on that big cross of theirs and are keeping slaves. One escaped; she's still recovering at the hospital."

"You have a functional hospital?"

"Yes, the Samaritan Hospital. We protect them, so get our medical free of charge, but all other outlying groups need to pay. They have several doctors and nurses, including other staff; it's a pretty decent sized hospital."

"What about the girl? Any Intel from that?"

"Limited. We haven't been able to question her much. A high powered round took her down, just as my men were taking her in. Maybe one of those .50's, because it blew a chunk out



of the underside of the patrol vehicle after it almost took her thigh off. They had to finish the amputation at the hospital and currently she's still in recovery."

The Reaper nodded, as he thought for a moment before responding. "What are your long range plans?"

"You'll have to talk to Douglas Atwood, the serving city manager. Used to be on the council but the others either died or turned into those creatures. He's the planner but we're hoping to make the community viable. The shortwave out of Newaygo has good tips on getting started. New programs every day, and repeated. We just need power beyond generators in order to get more of the infrastructure back online."

"Newaygo can help. They helped Paris and there's an away team present right now getting power back on. That same power source can also be directed to Macon."

"Paris? That's only ten miles away. What's going on there? Power, as in electricity?"

"Yes, and a lot, and you need to start combining your separated communities together. Rebuild America. The longer you wait, the harder it will be for everyone!" intoned the Reaper.

By now both Chief's were looking at Jason with a combination of desperation and suspicion and bent their heads together to indulge in a whispered conversation before Wilson turned back to the Reaper, as he spread his hands.

"Provide a viable solution and we'll consider it. But right now we can't attack the cult. We'll lose over half our people just getting inside and we are not willing to risk the loss of life on that scale."

"Granted, but let's check in with Newaygo and let them know what's going on. Then I need to contact the other larger groups just outside your perimeter." The Reaper had been glancing at his watch to see where the satellites would be in relation to his position.

"How can you contact, Newaygo? We only have a receiver."

"I brought along some equipment, but we need to be outside and I'll need my ruck." he finished.

Another, brief whispered conversation between the two men in charge of Macon, and he received an affirmation. "Let's go outside and contact your superiors." Wilson said as he opened his desk drawer to grab, and then holster, his .40 caliber Glock 22.

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Rho turned away from the servant he had recently bestowed his blessing upon and rose from the bed. His godlike lust satisfied for the moment, he toweled himself off then donned his robes and walked sedately from the bedroom. That the slave he had just left was very young, had no meaning; for these were biblical times, with biblical rules. The host left on earth had only two purposes: To follow the rule of the one and only God, or to suffer under the heel of his chosen. Rho could only care about the chosen, for he had been anointed by God to collect the hosts from the four corners of the earth from amongst the warring survivors of the apocalypse as spelled out by Revelations and earlier. Like locusts, they would lay waste to the ungodly, bringing a final peace unto the world.

Rho, had not been born Rho. He had been the unwelcome offspring of billionaire parents who had conceived him during a moment of weakness in between their busy schedule of business and social commitments. He had rarely seen his parents as he grew up, and like most in his situation rebelled with frequency in a variety of creative ways. Vandalism was the first, to be closely followed by alcoholism as a mid teen. Drugs followed shortly later, and there was not a

drug, he had not tried many times. Every car his parents gave him, he crashed, always high on something, or drunk. His young socialite girlfriends were legion and since he never wore protection, many had become pregnant, only to be bought out by his father, who would simply shake his head before heading out to his next appointment. So, he did his own thing and rebelled, until...

He found religion, or rather a variety of religions. Some of those religions were good, though some were bad. They all loved him, for he brought a great deal of money into their coffers as he experimented with each. Satanism, Druidism, Wiccan, Christianity, along with many others, they all blurred together, until he had the vision. One night during an intense party with the latest religious group he had attached himself to, he'd had a vision. The party had been going nonstop for two days and they had liberally used everything from Marijuana, to LSD, to Meth, to Ecstasy which culminated in a massive group orgy. The tab was on him, and everyone loved him. But, he experienced the vision!

Even high, they had been reading from the old testament, specifically Ezekiel, before moving to Revelations, doing all of this while under the influence of drugs he couldn't even name when he had fallen to the floor in convulsions. Those closest to him, dragged him outside and called 911 for they did not want their rich benefactor to die. He had felt himself being lifted, then the mild discomfort of his bare heels dragging over rough asphalt but it didn't matter as the vision was unfolding behind his eyes.

It was at that moment everything fell into place. He realized he was truly a descendent of Magog, from the line of princes and kings and 'The God' was telling him that the land of Magog needed to be reborn and that his true name was Rho. Rho he became and after his parents died, he'd invested in a one square mile of land in Missouri. Then he collected followers.

Being very selective, he'd started with those he knew and then branched outward. Seminaries were held, all expenses paid and he'd gathered more. Now the land of Magog was state of the art, with all the amenities, including weapons.

"Are the men vigilant, my servant?" Rho was addressing brother Jaaziah, who was waiting just outside the door. Jaaziah was his right hand man, the Captain of Rho's host. They had known each other for years, having met shortly after he realized through a vision that he was Rho, a direct descendent of the kings of Magog. It was also Jaaziah who had secured the heavy machine guns through a corrupt supply sergeant in the Army, from a base on the west coast. His Captain had also secured a great many of their other weapons and supplies from that same sergeant. The land of Magog was secured and about to gather their hosts and move outward.

"Yes. We are continuing our parameter sweeps and all are dedicated to the cause." The cold stare of death greeted him as Jaaziah responded.

"Any word on the footprints you found?" he asked.

"No. We lost them. It was only one person though."

"Does an example need to be made?" Rho frowned as he gazed with equally deadly eyes at his disciple.

"No, Prince. It's under control and an example will be made, but of whoever was spying on us. I've sent one of our best to show the ungodly their sinful ways. Those within the city will join us shortly, or they will perish. You have my word!"

"Good, because I would hate to crucify a useful servant," responded Rho, who paused as a faint mewling could be heard behind the closed doors at his back. Jerking his head towards the direction of the sounds a very young child in agony would make, he continued. "Dispose of that. I may have damaged it, irreparably.

"It is only a slave, Prince."

"Agreed, and the godless shall be buried beneath the earth" said Rho as he walked off and Jaaziah entered the Princes quarters, to coldly stare at the infidel that lay upon a blood soaked bed, while rolling in agony.

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