



AN HOUR OF WOLVES

A FORGOTTEN GODS TALE

CHRISTIAN
WARREN FREED

AN
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WOLVES

A Forgotten Gods Tale Short Story

Christian Warren Freed

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I.

3160 A.G. (After Gods), Inquisition Headquarters, planet Vau Prime.

Boots. Heavy footsteps marching down the marbled hall echoed from the walls. Men and women slipped aside. A petrified glare froze on his face. He bumped into a clerk, carelessly knocking a stack of documents into the air. Papers fell in his wake, but he had no time for niceties. The worst possible scenario he could imagine had just happened. He had to tell the Inquisitor General.

Armed guards blocked the ornately carved metal doors to the Inquisitor General's private office of state. Black uniforms immaculate in the halogen lights, the guards tensed, but did not move. They viewed the aide impassively despite his hurried appearance.

"Let me pass, I must speak with the Inquisitor General," he demanded. His breath came in ragged gasps.

The guard on the right looked down on the smaller man, disdain in his eyes. "The Inquisitor General is occupied. He does not wish to be disturbed, clerk."

"He will once he learns what news I have to tell."

The aide's cheeks flashed crimson. The burning ran down his neck.

"I said no," the guard reemphasized.

Undaunted, the aide said quietly, "this is about the Three."

The guards passed a worried glance to each other and slowly opened the door. Each member of the Inquisition knew the standing order regarding news of the Three. The aide passed an angered glare and slipped past. He found the outer office of the ranking member of the Inquisition austere. Spartan furnishings hardly interrupted the solid steel grey of the walls. A singular round wooden table from the first Inquisition held a vase with a single

rose. The petals were blood red and tinged with blue. Blood to remember the dark times. Blue for the promise of the future. Incense filled the air, a thin cloud clinging to the cathedral ceilings. The polished white marble floor was streaked through with gold. The aide bowed as the Inquisitor General entered the antechamber.

Farius Graeme was an older man of more than one hundred. He had close cropped silver hair and a pencil thin moustache accenting his drawn cheeks and pinched nose. A gaunt man, Farius wore the white robes of office. He was tall, much taller than most in the order. Hardly noticeable wrinkles edged his striking blue eyes. He looked up from his morning reports, surprised to find his adjutant.

"Good morning, Alain. What brings you into my office so early?" he asked. His voice was gentle yet stern.

Alain stood and met his commander's piercing eyes. "My apologies for interrupting you, Lord Inquisitor, but we have a problem."

"There are always problems, Alain. This is a complicated universe," Farius replied with in a mirthless tone.

Alain swallowed hard. "My lord, it concerns the Three."

Silence assaulted the room. The Inquisitor General felt as if his stomach had been wrenched out. The Three was the most volatile and hushed secret in the known universe. For generations the Inquisition had kept knowledge of their existence from the general population. They became faceless whispers of a far more brutal time, lost to the ages and struck from history. Only the few in the Inquisition knew their dark secrets. Farius Graeme had dedicated his life to maintaining order in an otherwise unruly age. The sudden reemergence of the Three threatened to shred his life's work.

He struggled to find strength in his voice. "Which one?"

"Amongeratrix."

The Inquisitor General stumbled back a step before recovering. He used the diversion to clasp his hands behind his back as he moved to the massive bank of bay windows. The dawn was brighter than usual today. Sunlight glistened from the tops of the rain soaked buildings of Krenz, principle city of both the Inquisition and the Holy Orders that ruled the galaxy. The combination of rain and sun made the spiraling columns and rounded rooftops appear almost majestic in the early morning.

"Amongeratrix hasn't made a move in over five hundred years. What has he done?"

"Preliminary reports say that he was recently spotted on planet Plom."

Farius cast a stern gaze back over his shoulder. "You didn't answer my question, Alain."

Alain felt the blood leave his face. "My lord, he was seen murdering over one hundred people, to include the local Inquisitor."

So this is how it begins. Farius Graeme remained silent for a time. Part of him refused to acknowledge the statement. Five hundred years of peace wiped out in the blink of an eye. Amongeratrix was the worst of the Three. The Order had failed. Inspired dread choked him, paralyzed him.

"I never thought in all of my days to bear witness to this," he whispered. "Do you know why the Inquisition exists, Alain?"

"To maintain the status. We are protectors of the universe. It is our charge to ensure that none of the gods are awakened before the rest," he dutifully rattled off. Every inductee to the Order went through a rigorous training period before earning the badge of the rose.

“A fanciful dream, but nothing more. No, the Inquisition exists because if one of the Three manages to remember who they are the universe will burn. I have dreaded this moment from the instant I took the oath of office. Where is he now?”

Alain rechecked his data pad. “The murders were on planet Keltoo and he was last spotted boarding a spacecraft on Plom. We have had no word since then.”

“We must move quickly. Amongeratix is the very worst of his kind. He alone has the ability to destroy all that we know,” Farius ground out. “I want a team of Inquisitors assembled before noon. We must stop him now or there is no point.”

“Inquisitor Breed has just returned from Tharnis,” Alain offered.

Farius considered the name. Breed was an anomaly amongst his peers. Young, barely thirty years old, Tolde Breed represented what Inquisitors of lore used to be. He refused to rely on technology, preferring to use his wit and ancient tools that modern society frowned upon. Tolde Breed was the perfect man for the job. Amongeratix represented the very worst in men; millennia of pain and suffering waiting patiently in the dark places of life for the right moment. Farius prayed that Tolde had the strength to stand up to the night.

“See to it. Ensure he has everything he needs. There can be no failure, Alain,” he said in a stark, measured tone.

“At once, my Lord. Shall I have him report to you?”

“No. I must go inform the Cardinal Seniorus. The Conclave must be told.”

Alain bowed sharply and backed away. His eyes stared at the single rose on the way out and he wondered what would become of them all.

II.

Harsh winds terrorized the plains. Lightning stabbed down from the purple-black sky across the distant mountaintops with wicked intent. A brief glance made the mountains look like jagged teeth from great beast about to swallow the world. Three moons hung at odd intervals across the sky. Eight men stood huddled beside a dead tree, the polished branches offered only the illusion of protection. Each wore the standard gray field uniform of the Inquisition. Heavy hoods and breather masks protected their face and head from the harsh elements of planet Keltoo. Their gunship was in low orbit; watching, waiting. One of the men intensely consulted the data box in his hands.

“There is nothing alive in the general vicinity,” he announced. His voice came out metallic, strained from the breather mask.

Tolde Breed glanced up at the tree. The branches reminded him of fingers reaching out to grab him in the night. He snorted. Childhood dreams his mother used to spook him into behaving revisited him. The only thing missing was the horrible screech as the fingers clawed at his bedroom window. Older, wiser to the universe, Tolde took no comfort in his childhood. The memories were just that. Reality made him a harsh man. As an Inquisitor, his was a life spent reaching into shadows. Life was bitter. He couldn’t remember the last time he stopped to enjoy a sunrise; the smell of newly bloomed flowers.

Of course there is nothing left alive. Tolde scanned the near horizon. Keltoo was a barren world filled with endless plains of dying trees, scrub brush and patches of grass. Yet

still men came to settle here; a prison colony to be precise. Some of the cruelest criminals in the known universe were incarcerated here. Keltoo offered them the end of their natural lives. This was the one prison where there was no possibility of parole and no death sentence. Once condemned here, you stayed until you died. It was a tidy secret the Conclave turned their head away from.

“How far away is the main compound?” he asked.

The Conclave. Tolde had little need for the body of head cardinals that comprised the actual rulers of the universe. He knew the mythology well enough. Every child was taught this from the moment they learned how to read. He could recite it verbatim without effort. Long ago the gods went to war. A great explosion occurred, destroying their physical forms and sending shards of their essences to every planet in the universe. Those planets evolved in the worship of that specific god. It was a convoluted system, but the elected head cardinal of each religion gathered on the central planet of Vau Prime.

“Less than a kilometer, Inquisitor.”

Tolde Breed rolled his shoulders, stretching against the weight of his pack. Inquisitor. The rank, the title, the authority of it was humbling. The Inquisition was the most powerful force in the universe. Hardened men and women who stepped forward to ensure that the essences of the gods remained *asleep*. The term was juvenile and did not belay the importance of the matter. After the explosion the gods were reduced to essence and those remained in a dormant state. The Inquisition and the Conclave believed that should one god awaken that god would have total domination over all life.

“We move in a five meter spread. Keep your optics on. There is every chance that he is still in the area,” Tolde said.

They fanned out and moved. His men were all battle tested veterans; the very best the Inquisition had to offer. They needed little direction. Each knew their jobs. The point man, Sergeant Matthias, gestured and his men began the tactical march. Tolde was impressed. Inquisitors were a special breed, but the Prekhauten Guard was daunting. Matthias and Tolde had worked together on numerous missions. Both trusted the other to do the right thing and bring each other home alive.

Matthias came across the first corpse less than two hundred meters from the entry bunker. He instinctively help up a fist and dropped to a knee. His men drew up in a loose semi-circle, weapons facing outward. Tolde continued to march. His gut told him that Amongeratix was long gone. Keltoo was a dead world all but forgotten by the Conclave. Matthias scowled behind his breather as the Inquisitor slipped by him and knelt by the body.

“Secure the Inquisitor, full perimeter,” Matthias growled to his men.

Tolde barely passed them a glance. He could already see the disapproving glare on his sergeant’s face. The thought was oddly comforting. Another figure moved closer. The Inquisitor nodded. Every team was manned with a Phallalian Surgeon, the best trained in the universe. Demin was one of the best so far as Tolde was concerned. He moved aside to let the man examine the body.

“This man was killed by radiation exposure,” the doctor announced.

Keltoo was chosen to house the worst criminals in the universe for that reason. With an orbit that took it too close to the Belkin gas nebula, the planet was saturated with radiation. Rumors whispered of escaped prisoners that mutated, though aside from that

nothing lived on the barren surface. The ground was scarred black and grey, in a comparative state of nuclear winter.

"There must be some other wound. Amongeratix would not be so careless as to leave survivors," Tolde ventured.

Demin used the biometric scanner built into his mask. "I see nothing. Look here; do you see how the gums are drawn back, almost shrunk? That is from a side effect of the nebula. This man died from exposure."

The Inquisitor reluctantly stared down as Demin drew open the body's mouth. "I don't see how. He is only a few hundred meters from the front door. Radiation doesn't kill that quickly."

"This is prolonged. Perhaps from being stationed on Keltoo for too long," Demin replied as he busied with the examination.

"I don't like it." Tolde looked around, hungry for any signs of struggle.

Matthias slung his rifle and moved beside the Inquisitor. "Sir, we are exposed here. I suggest we move on, find some cover just in case."

"Agreed. Move your people out, sergeant."

A stiff wind picked up, driving into the soldiers with released aggression. Dust and debris slashed into them. Matthias scowled behind his mask. His mind worked through the task at hand. Tolde Breed's words continued to haunt him and had done so since he accepted this mission. *The universe will burn if we do not catch him.* A daunting prospect but one he was up for. The Three were myths to the normal population. Rumors of a time long ago. He personally had never run in to one before, though there were whispers of teams who did back at the training academy.

The Conclave prison was an ugly building. Onyx black and grey, it was entirely too angular and oppressive. There were no windows; no exits or entrances save for the simple concrete bunker that should have been heavily guarded. A field of motion sensors implanted a few inches beneath the surface prevented anyone from getting too close or too far away. An aerial view showed the prison was a rude square shape, most of it underground. The Conclave took extra care for the undesirables. The safety of the universe was at stake after all.

His chiseled jaw clenched as they approached the gaping hole where the prison entrance used to be. Matthias ran a comprehensive scan of the blast marks and was surprised to find that they came from the outside in. His hazel eyes narrowed to slits. *You'd figure a man escaping would do it from the inside out, not the other way around.* He passed a glance over his shoulder and nodded. Matthias was the first one in.

The building was all but destroyed. Ceiling panels hung by a hinge. Gaping holes pock marked the walls. Burn marks intermittently traced the floor. Matthias absorbed the scene dispassionately. A battle. He'd seen this before, only not in a Conclave prison facility. He knew the common legends surrounding the Three, they all did. Only the most senior members of the Inquisition and the Conclave knew the actual truth. The truth that the Three had nearly destroyed the universe in an all out war thousands of years ago. That secret was the most closely guarded in all the Conclave's history.

Matthias took point and clung to the right wall. The rest of the squad filed in, leaving only Demin and Tolde outside. Amongeratix was likely long gone but this was not the situation in which to take unnecessary chances. They found three more bodies in the

entrance bunker. Unlike their counterpart outside, these men had been murdered. Tolde Breed felt his anger rising. Matthias inched forward until he secured the first hallway.

"It is clear," he whispered over his helmet intercom.

Inquisitor Breed stalked in. He'd drawn his side arm in the event of an ambush. The weapon was small, standard for his rank, but packed enough of a punch to incapacitate an opponent long enough for him to be apprehended. Sleek and metallic silver, the barrel was stubbed with a tiny flash suppressor on the end. Only Tolde could fire it; the sensor in the trigger well was coded to his DNA. It was a standard issue ion pistol for the Inquisition, capable of firing blue-white bolts of ion fire that generally burned the enemy and used an electrical charge that stopped their hearts. He idly wondered if it would be enough to contain one of the Three. A ceiling light burst part way down the hall, showering the area with sparks and then darkness.

"How many personnel were assigned here?" he asked.

"Fifty-seven guards and a hundred plus inmates," Matthias answered.

Damn. "Is there any sign of life?"

Demin checked his biometric scanner and shook his head. Tolde ordered them in deeper. There had to be some clue to Amongeratrix's whereabouts. People did not just disappear after a massacre like this, not even one of the Three. It was a game. A great hunt that could easily define his career. Matthias clenched his rifle a little tighter and struggled to contain the adrenalin raging in his blood. The single beam of light attached to the underside of the barrel pierced the intermittent gloom enough to make him wary.

They found the first body in a broken doorway. Dried blood caked the face around the eyes, suggesting the man had died horribly. His body lay in a ruined, twisted mass of flesh and broken bones. Tolde tried not to stare at the agony in the man's lifeless eyes; the pain and horror frozen over with a dull glaze. He had seen death before though the violence of it remained elusive to him.

"I have movement," Private Sarle all but shouted.

Matthias was beside him practically before he finished saying it. "Where?"

"Twenty-five meters due west of here. It looks like the operations center."

Matthias glanced at Inquisitor Breed. It was more of a *this is where we are going* then a request for permission. Tolde had no issues with the Prekhauten Guard doing their jobs. He recognized and appreciated their expertise and was more than willing to let Sgt. Matthias take over this aspect. The squad moved.

More bodies littered the halls at odd angles and places. It was evident that all had been trying to escape some great evil. A part of Tolde had always doubted the validity of the Three as major players. Too much of them revolved around myth and legend. He'd never dreamed that one day his path would cross with one. He wondered what lies had been told to the prison staff about Amongeratrix, for surely none would have volunteered to stay if they had known. The very thought of a rampaging demi-god charging through the hallways and killing everything he came across chilled Tolde's blood.

The operations center door was a ruined piece of metal. Tolde wasn't sure, but it almost looked melted. Matthias breached the door first, immediately shifting right to cover the near corner. Sarle entered second and did the same with the opposite side. Professionals, the guardsmen spent countless hours training on proper room clearing procedures. It took months for the right team to gel to the point where they could read each other's mind and actions.

Bodies. Bodies lay strewn in every corner; over every console. Matthias heard one of his men choke back his vomit. Red mist clung to the air amidst piles of entrails and drying pools of blood. Another soldier cursed softly.

“Maintain your focus, gentlemen,” Matthias soothed. “The room is clear, Inquisitor. You may enter. Sarle, where is the life sign coming from?”

Sarle swept the room. A singular blip on the screen showed what he needed to know. Dropping the scanner, he raised the barrel of his rifle. “Here, under this pile of corpses.”

“Tor, Jamison, move the bodies. The rest of you provide cover. Sarle, take the back door. I don’t want anything sneaking up on us.”

Demin and Tolde casually entered, the Inquisitor suddenly doubting his resolve upon seeing this massacre. The violence of action necessary to commit such a crime escaped him. Worse, he felt hatred in the air. Tolde wasn’t sure how such was possible, but there was an unmistakable taint of malice hovering over the dead.

Demin spotted the survivor first and raced between the two soldiers. It was the prison warden, or so his identity chip read when Demin scanned him. What little life was left in him threatened to escape. Demin shrugged his medical kit from his shoulders and did his best to save the man’s life.

Tolde bent down, worried not so much about the warden’s inevitable fate but for the information he might possess being lost forever. “Tell me, where did the man who did this go?”

The warden looked up with his one good eye. His voice cracked and was hardly understandable when he spoke one word. “Occanum.”

His body shook in a final rattle as he died.

III.

Cardinal Seniorus Utharian Dal walked with his hands folded into his heavy crimson robes. The Osari Seal hung on a thick chain around his neck, marking him as the most senior official in the Conclave. It also meant that he was the deciding authority for the entire universe. The sheer weight of responsibility had aged him tremendously over the last two decades. His skin was pale, wrinkled and loose. Spots decorated his exposed flesh, running his scalp through thinning white hair. Permanent circles stained his dull brown eyes, giving him a haunted look.

Today he felt old, tired and wasted. The strength of youth had long faded, leaving him a shallow puppet of the man he once was. Decades of leadership and the subsequent burdens hammered his thin frame but never once did he question his commitment to the trillions of beings in the universe. His was a life of servitude and one he would gladly serve until his death. Dal sat in his purple cushioned chair, fingers steeped in front of his face.

Inquisitor General Graeme waited patiently from his seat on the opposite side of the mahogany desk. His normally passive eyes betrayed a spark of fear, of raw emotion that threatened to consume him in a moment of weakness. A single strand of hair in his left eyebrow jutted out of place, forcing his attention away from the Cardinal Seniorus. He wanted to scowl at the annoyance but knew better than to show such blatant disrespect.

“You bring us grave news, my friend,” Utharian said in strained tones. His voice was thin, a crack in the silence.

Farius Graeme nodded in an all but unperceivable move. “The universe is not as nice as everyone would like to think.”

“Indeed. But we have had relative peace for centuries. The Three have not been seen in a very long time.”

Farius shifted uncomfortably. “This could explain the rise in cults we are witnessing. My inquisitors are stretched in efforts to halt them from spreading. Amongeratix has already killed one of my best on Keltoo. I fear we are in a time of change and I do not like the direction we are headed.”

“The universe constantly changes, it is we men who are hesitant to do so,” Utharian said. “Our top priority must be the safety of the people. Any one of the Three is dangerous by himself, Amongeratix the very worst. His wrath could easily wipe out entire populations. Worse, he could signal the beginning of an apocalypse. The gods sleep for a reason. The Three can ruin that balance and throw this universe into total chaos. Is your man Breed up to the task?”

How do I answer this? “I believe so, Cardinal Seniorus. He is young and headstrong but he has the necessary skill set.”

The Cardinal Seniorus nodded. “Do we know where Amongeratix is headed?”

“Inquisitor Breed found a recording in the prison’s main computer. He is apparently en route to Occanum, but for reasons we do not know. I have ordered the warship *Lanarion* to rendezvous with Breed and his team at Hawker’s Gate. Additionally, I have requested a Blood Witch to aid them.”

Utharian slowly eased up and, moving around the bust of the very first Cardinal Seniorus, came before Farius. The look in his eye was one of collided emotions. He did not like the idea of a Blood Witch running free under Inquisition jurisdiction. They were as unstable as any one of the Three. Realistically there wasn’t much choice. No mortal man was enough to stop Amongeratix. He laid a frail hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Farius, I fear that this might be the catalyst to our ruin. Ensure your man does not fail. I cannot say why, but I get the impression that there are conspiracies at work against us here. An hour of wolves has befallen us if we are not able to see the movements of the Three.”

The Inquisitor General rose, crisp and static. “We shall not fail, Cardinal Seniorus. I will keep you apprised of the situation as it develops.”

Utharian watched him leave, escorted out by a low level orderly. He liked to think he was a good judge of quality and Farius had that. The Inquisitor General was a no nonsense man with a keen eye for detail and unquestionable loyalty. Utharian wished more men were like him. As it was now, his organization was filled with power hungry priests who wanted glory and riches and were willing to sacrifice their oath of office to get it. The Conclave was a shadow of its former self, although Utharian was fast to admit that perhaps the universe had always been so. Men had a habit of making things seem worse than they were if for no other reason than because they lived in such times. The door closed, leaving him alone with disturbing thoughts.

Why Occanum? The question practically mocked Utharian. Occanum was lightly populated and away from the main trade lanes. What could Amongeratix possibly want there? There were more than seven hundred known colonized worlds in the protective umbrella of the Conclave and Occanum was minimally important. He wondered if

Amongeratrix wanted to disappear or if there was a more sinister objective. Answers did not come. A gnawing feeling tore at him.

A crow landed on the window sill and stared in at Utharian Dal. It cawed loudly as if in challenge to all the Cardinal represented and flew off. A single feather drifted back down in its place. Utharian felt his blood run cold at the portent.

VI.

Tolde Breed marched with purpose. His black cape flowed out behind him, a visual warning against any who sought to delay him. Mist clung to the buildings, held in place by a light drizzle. A snarl etched his jaw line. He'd never been one to enjoy the rain. It reminded him of his childhood; distraught and confused. Fractured memories of a father's abuse and the lack of a mother's love stabbed his psyche each time it rained. Tolde Breed grew up a hard man, dedicated to his profession. Only through age and perceived wisdom did he begin to figure that his soul suffered for it.

Hushed whispers danced to his ears. Men spoke rumors of the Inquisition as women tried to hide and protect their children as he passed. Inquisitors were respected and feared, perhaps more the latter. Tolde cared less. He was a man of purpose, conviction. The rest of the universe was either in the way or not. He marched through the halls of Hawker's Gate without a sidelong glance. A nervous attendant found him. The man was remarkably tanned for being assigned to a space station.

"Inquisitor, the facility manager instructed me to find you. She would very much like to speak with you before you depart," he said, his breath ragged and shaken.

Tolde regarded the man in a manner in which he wouldn't have before this hunt began. The horrors of Keltoo haunted him, taunting from the distant corners of memory and the promise of a violent future. Was he going to end up like the last inquisitor? Was death racing towards, eager to claim his soul? A small string of dark black hair clung to the man's forehead, marking him in an odd way. Tolde focused on that and forced the alternatives to the recesses of his mind.

"I do not have much time," he said, noticing the intricate design of zippers and buttons that comprised the man's dull brown tunic.

Matthias had already gone ahead to the Prekhauten Guard post to pick up their guest. He'd worked with a Blood Witch once and that was more than enough. Some said that they weren't human, weren't even alive in the proper way. Others claimed that they had dark powers and bordered on the ethereal. That much made sense. The one he met did not appear substantial. She was more illusion than hard object. And her powers. Matthias had shuddered with foul memory when Tolde informed him of the Inquisitor General's orders.

Tolde reluctantly agreed, with the confidence Matthias could handle this part and fell in line beside the smaller man. Hawker's Gate was one of the more notorious stations in the universe. Petty criminals and asteroid miners often used it as a haven and stop over. Seeing this man so elegantly dressed, complete with highly shined black shoes, was

somewhat odd. Still, Tolde relented and followed him to the administration center. Once inside, he found the administrator patiently awaiting him.

“Inquisitor Breed, it is an honor. I am Leila Kern,” she said in a surprisingly elegant voice.

At just over five and a half feet tall, Leila was lithe and very angular. She had long red hair that reminded him of flames tied off in a tail that ran halfway down her back. Her dress was exquisite, as befitting of her station, and tailored to accent her figure. The dark blue brought out the flame of her hair. It also made Tolde, clad in his field uniform, embarrassed to be so underdressed.

“Administrator Kern, it is my pleasure, but I really am on a tight timeline. As you know I am in pursuit of a dangerous...felon.”

Her cheeks flushed slightly. The slender length of her nose gave her a stern appearance. “I am well aware of your task, but I would urge caution. I have seen the man you hunt and he was terrible to behold. I am ashamed to admit this, but I have never felt such deep running fear as when I looked into his coal black eyes.”

“Ma’am, the Inquisition has protected this universe for thousands of years. I assure you we can handle this man. Now, if you please, I must be going,” Tolde politely reiterated.

Leila suddenly reached out and grabbed him tightly by the forearm. “It is worse. He...he gave me a message to give to you.”

Tolde Breed’s skin tightened. His stomach churned at the prospect. Had Amongeratrix spread his taint to the crewers of the station? “Go on.”

She leaned closer so that he was the only one able to hear her. “The message was simple, come and get me.”

He jerked away, shock twisting his features. Leila offered a pleading look, as if begging him not to go, not to journey further into the madness lest he be utterly consumed.

“I have my duties. Good day, Administrator.”

He stalked off with renewed vigor. Amongeratrix must be stopped. Of that there was no doubt. Tolde Breed was unsure of himself and now more than slightly afraid, but he was a member of the Inquisition and duty demanded. Leila Kern clasped her hands behind her back and watched him go. The tiny smile went unnoticed and was wicked. She had done her part.

V.

“Captain, we have found the derelict.”

Captain Aureliul turned to look at her helmsman. She bore a nervous expression, almost as if expecting the worst. Aureliul, however, had no such delusions. The Inquisition cruiser *Lanarion* was one of the newest and fastest ships in the fleet. It was specifically designed to handle deep space flight and packed enough firepower to take on most cruisers.

“Activate the cloak,” she said. Aureliul watched the enemy ship come into focus. Her heart beat faster, but as captain of the heavy cruiser, she had a responsibility to remain calm in front of her command. Still, her thoughts continually drifted to the Three. Being so close to one was enough to chill the marrow of her bones. The craft in front of her was anything but a derelict.

“Aye, Ma’am.”

The *Lanarion* shuddered briefly as the cloak spread across the hull. Aureliul smiled. She knew that her ship would be indistinguishable against the backdrop of space unless the enemy specifically searched for her. The tactic had worked many times before. She’s blown enemy vessels to pieces before they had the chance to raise shields more times than she remembered. Unfortunately, this was not that kind of mission. She glanced dispassionately over at the silent Inquisitor and his team of Prekhauten Guard in their dark black body armor standing in the corner.

She disregarded them for the moment. Their time would come, but this was hers. “Have they detected us yet?”

“No, Ma’am. The enemy vessel is continuing on its current heading.”

Good. Aureliul resisted the urge to blow the craft to debris. She watched as the enemy ship grew larger on the main view screen. It was an awful vessel. The hull was burnt, charcoal black and scored from numerous battles. Irregular angles announced where most turrets and deck guns were emplaced. The craft was as lethal as it was ugly. She resisted the urge to begin firing. This wasn’t that kind of mission, she reminded herself for the hundredth time. The captain clenched her fist and waited. She hated having her hands tied, hated it more than anything in the universe.

“Helm, close to within one hundred kilometers,” she ordered.

“Aye, Captain. One hundred kilometers.”

Tolde turned to the Guardsman patiently waiting in the corner of her bridge. “Sergeant Matthias, you are clear to proceed.”

Matthias nodded curtly and turned to his men.

“Go,” was all he said.

The black clad soldiers filed from the bridge without a word. Matthias admired their dedication. He himself had been a Guardsman for the last thirteen years. His service had taken him across the expanses of known space, all in the name of preserving the sanctity of the Conclave and the Inquisition. This was just another mission.

They reached the boarding pod in the main hangar deck and began going over their precombat checks. Magazines were filled. Smoke and gas grenades were secured to their synthetic webbing. The guardsmen went about their tasks like the seasoned professionals they were. Each man had served the Conclave for at least ten years before even being allowed to try out. Not even that was enough to guarantee acceptance. The Prekhauten Guard had the lowest acceptance rate of any military force operating in the galaxy.

Matthias affixed the silencer to his short barrel rifle. “Remember, no noise. We go in, find the cargo and get out. Mission parameters are to avoid contact unless necessary. I don’t need to remind any of you that we do not know how many hostiles are on that crate.” He paused to smile. “But if you do have to, use the knife and make it quiet.”

A low chuckle spread through the group. The commandos preferred to use a knife over the smell and noise of a rifle. Matthias strapped his night vision to his helmet and strode to the torpedo shaped boarding tube.

“Let’s go.”

His team filed into the cramped space. Anxiousness clung to the small craft. Though trained in a variety of combat and defense skills, this was not the normal mission. The suspected presence of one of the Three changed everything. Dangers amplified, life expectancies dropped. He turned to close the torpedo hatch when he noticed Inquisitor

Breed marching towards them in full combat gear. The blue and red rose looked almost out of place on the breast of his jet black uniform.

"We can handle this, Inquisitor," Matthias said.

"I can't let you go alone. This is my task. I must see it through."

Matthias considered the man, silently measuring him, before stepping aside to allow the Inquisitor aboard. Breed was a hard man, and a good one at that. Matthias thought back to his drill sergeant in basic training. The two were very similar. Each demanded perfection and loyalty. Men will live or die because of you, his drill sergeant used to bark in his face after he was exhausted from sleep deprivation and training maneuvers. The Inquisitor expected the same and earned it through his deeds. Loyalty and respect were earned, never given.

Matthias grinned behind his helmet and slapped the button to close the hatch. He moved as best as he could across the narrow torpedo, climbing over gear and bodies as he ensured his men were properly strapped down. Only he and Tor had conducted boarding operations in space before. The others were in for a shock. There was no other comparable action in the military, not even the thrill of parachuting from aircraft.

Once satisfied, he touched the intercom and told the pilots, "We are green. It's your call."

"*Lanarion*, this is assault pod, requesting permission to launch."

Aureliul glanced down at the intercom, briefly stealing her gaze away from the enemy ship pushing cluelessly through space. "Launch," was all she said.

The pod shot from the forward guns with a brief flash of blue flame. She waited long enough to ensure it impacted with the enemy hull before ordering the helm to follow at a distance. Aureliul clenched a fist, angered at being rendered helpless. There was nothing she could do for the Inquisitor now.

VI.

The interior of the ship was dark, suggestive of lurking horrors and a lifetime of bad dreams. A hollow groan from the air filtration system echoed hauntingly through the corridors. Surprisingly, there were no warning klaxons screaming in alarm. Tolde Breed instantly grew concerned. Even with the precision strike of the boarding pod there was no way the captain of this ship did not know they were here.

"Sergeant Matthias, keep your men focused. This is a trap," he warned.

Of course it is. "Jamison take point. Everyone stay frosty. Technical readouts say this crate can hold up to a thousand people. We might be in for a rough time." *And we don't have the bullets to take care of them all.* He kept the last part to himself. There was no point in stating the obvious to men who were already unnerved. "Move out."

Jamison made it to the first intersection with relative speed and ease. Violence of action was as necessary in a breaching operation as stealth. The guardsmen moved with surgical precision, trusting in their helmet's computers to guide them. Darkness blanketed most of the ship. Whoever was in charge was expecting visitors.

"Switch to infra-red. We can't see anything like this," he ordered. They inched forward.

Jamison suddenly called out, "I think I have something! I'm getting a lot of interference though."

They froze. Tolde sidled next to Matthias, finding comfort in the companionship over the ability to communicate from anywhere on the ship. Jamison continued forward a few more meters so he could get a clear reading. He was as confused as the sensor. Jamison turned in a slow circle, desperately trying to pick up the movement. He was facing the team when several hands reached out from the darkness and dragged him back. Jamison cried out, his finger reflexively squeezing the trigger. Ion rounds sprayed the hall, catching Sarle in the chest. The guardsman dropped with a grunt even as Jamison was dragged away. His final scream echoed down the corridor.

"Jamison!" Matthias shouted and rushed forward. Scanning the darkness he found nothing. It was as if whoever had taken him simply disappeared.

Demin was immediately at Sarle's side but it was already too late. He looked up at Tolde and Matthias and sadly shook his head.

"Tor, you're with me. We're going after Jamison," Matthias snapped.

Tolde clutched him by the forearm. "Sergeant, there is nothing you can do. He is gone. We must carry on with the mission. Stopping Amongeratix is our only priority."

He knew Breed was right, which made it more painful. Resigning Jamison to his fate, Matthias made the difficult choice of mission first. He glanced over the rest of the squad. Their body posture told him each felt the same. He nodded.

"We make for the bridge. Kill anything that gets in the way," he ordered.

Tolde gave him that much. There was little that could assuage the sting of loss. The Inquisitor turned to the Blood Witch. He struggled to keep from snarling. They were a dangerous breed with little use. The witch stood immobile in her white-grey robes. Her face was completely hidden, all but for the red eyes seemingly glaring out. When she walked it appeared she glided, hovering inches over the ground. When he looked upon her she seemed translucent, as if she did not belong.

"Can you detect him?" he asked, knowing that she would assume it was Amongeratix he referred to.

The Blood Witch turned her infernal gaze on him. He wondered if she had a name but was disinclined to ask. Her voice was surprisingly melodious, lending harmony to the impending doom of their situation. "The one you seek is waiting for you on the bridge."

His skin prickled. Why would Amongeratix be waiting for him unless he knew they were coming? A larger conspiracy opened. Tolde Breed realized that there were forces at work against him that he couldn't possibly comprehend.

"What about the crew?" he asked.

The Blood Witch raised her arms in response, wisps of robes fluttering in the artificial breeze like drying sheets. "Do not concern yourself with them. I suggest you dampen your hearing."

"Do it," Matthias quickly ordered. "Go to full silence."

"Keep moving. We don't have time for this," Tolde snapped. He had seen a Blood Witch in action before. The result was...messy. The less any of them knew of her methods the better off they'd be.

The squad shuffled down the corridor even as she began her spell. Whatever dark arts gave her power was hungry. Darkness was sucked from the corridor and collected in a miasma around her. The ship turned violent, dizzying colors. Strange noises echoed down

the hull in the anticipation of release. Matthias's team turned the corner before any could see what happened next. Tolde halted briefly and glanced back. The Blood Witch had tilted her head back, mouth agape in silent scream. He shuddered to think what it was doing to what remained of the crew.

The Inquisition assault team moved faster, freed from the apprehension of multiple enemy lurking in the dark corners of the ship. Matthias led them unerringly to the bridge. He halted upon seeing the foot thick steel doors torn to shreds. The damage was similar to what they had found at the prison on Keltoo. Guardsmen wordlessly took up covering positions, leaving the sergeant and inquisitor in the middle of a five meter wide corridor staring into what promised to be the maw of death.

"It has to be a trap," Matthias said unnecessarily.

"Of course it is," Tolde replied. The confidence of his words was drowned out by the growing sense of dread clawing at his stomach.

The very air smelled wrong. He forced himself to remember that he was an agent of the Inquisition. Great hatred awaited. Impulse demanded they run. It took every ounce of will for Tolde to make his body obey him. The Inquisitor offered Matthias a sad look and stepped into the pulsing darkness of the bridge. A single light, hanging by a wire from the ceiling, provided the only light. It rocked back and forth as the ship continued through space. An occasional electrical spark danced off the ships main view screen. Breed could make out the bodies of several of the bridge crew; the remains of the captain eviscerated in his command chair. He didn't know if this was Amongeratix's work or the Blood Witch. The one thing he was grateful of was the darkness. It did not allow for him or the others to see the carnage or his personal fears.

And there, hidden in the shadows, was the hulking form of one of the great enemies of mankind. Amongeratix. Tolde stood at the edge of darkness. Childhood fears resurfaced, memories he had long forced away. The night had always held a special terror and he never knew why. He squeezed his eyes shut. Ghastly images danced before him. Tolde did not know if they were real or not. Tormented by events from the past, the Inquisitor struggled to find the resolve to face his fears. Amongeratix was disinclined to give him the opportunity.

"Welcome Inquisitor," rumbled a strong voice from the shadows.

Breed tensed. His mind screamed for him to run, to abandon this madness and find a normal life. A drop of blood trickled from his nose. His muscles rebelled, threatened to rip from the bone. The raw power pulsing off Amongeratix promised to destroy him. He rubbed the rose emblem for strength. Laughter mocked him.

"That little charm won't help you. Nothing will. Do you understand what I really am? I was here at the birth of the universe, at the dawn when your species crawled from the water and took its first breath. I am the darkness of a burned out star. You cannot contend with this. Accept your fate and leave me to my task," Amongeratix boomed.

Tolde violently shook his head. "No. You are a blight on humanity. You and your brothers are abominations that do not deserve to be."

"And you think you are the one to change this? Eh? The Inquisition are but puppets to the priesthood. If you only knew the truth you would not suffer from these convictions. Your heart and mind would be free. Shall I enlighten you?"

“Your words are poison,” Tolde countered. “The Inquisition protects the people from your filth. Amongeratix, you are accused of murder and spreading heresy. Do not resist. It is in my authority to take you back into custody so that you may not contaminate the rest of the universe.”

Tension crackled like blue bolts of lightning. The acidic tang of blood hung in the air. Amongeratix eyed his opponent and was impressed. Overconfident, he rose to his full twelve foot height and stepped into the broken shaft of light. Tolde Breed bit back a gasp. The man was a monster. Heavily muscled with a square jaw, Amongeratix was a travesty of humanity. Raw fury powered him, drove him ever on in a quest for self proclaimed righteousness. Thin eyebrows and a sharp nose gave him intensity. His hands were calloused and massive, capable of crushing. His body might easily have been a museum sculpture; muscled and defined. The torn prison clothes did nothing to hide his bulk.

“You cannot survive this, little man,” he said bluntly.

“Sergeant Matthias, open fire.”

Dazzling blue-white bolts of power ripped across the distance, striking Amongeratix full in the chest and face. He grunted and staggered back. The guardsmen, using Tolde as diversionary cover, had silently filtered onto the bridge like ghosts and unleashed a fury upon him that would have killed a squad of men. He reared back, arms extended and flexed in anger and roared as rounds continued to strike. Sparks danced from his skin. His ragged hair caught fire, but he did not drop. Amongeratix charged into the guard. The first man never saw his death. His face collapsed with a vicious punch.

Tor was next, crushed beneath Amongeratix’s mass. Matthias bellowed at the top of his lungs and attacked. His rifle butt slammed into the back of Amongeratix’s neck. The weapon splintered without effect on his target. Amongeratix swapped Matthias away with a backhanded swing that broke six ribs. Tolde Breed watched the chaos, virtually helpless to stop it or to help. He summoned the reserves of his courage and drew the slender rapier at his hip. Amongeratix turned on him and laughed.

Ion rounds continued to bounce from his hide, occasionally striking his face. Several burn marks scored beneath his right eye, giving him the look of blood rage. Tolde knew that he could not hope to withstand the full fury of one of the Three. He swung his rapier with every scrap of strength. Amongeratix caught the blade in one hand and squeezed. The steel snapped and exploded. Tiny rivulets of blood trickled from between his fingers. Tolde Breed took that as a good sign. The beast could bleed. He reached for his side arm as Amongeratix took a step towards him.

Lost in the confusion and haze of the ion fire, no one noticed the lithe figure of the Blood Witch slip onto the bridge. Vapors echoed her passing. Amongeratix lashed out, knocking Tolde on his back. The pistol skittered away. Pupils widened as the hulking man reached down for the finishing blow. Amusement twinkled in Amongeratix’s dark eyes. Amusement and disappointment. He had hoped for so much more from one of the vaunted Inquisition. The Blood Witch attacked.

Amongeratix jerked backwards. Her arms extended, hands clasped together. Unexplainable energies pulsed from her, funneling through her fingertips and into Amongeratix’s chest. His clothes burned. His body smoked. He screamed loud enough to rip holes in the floor. Her robes fluttered as if blowing in an angry wind. Blue, white and violent energy poured from her, driving Amongeratix down to his knees. He struggled but could not rise. When at last she screamed he echoed the pain, blood shooting from his ears.

His body slumped, hesitant before crashing to the floor. His eyes rolled back as consciousness fled.

Matthias forced himself to a sitting position. Never had he witnessed a Blood Witch at work and now that he had there was no doubt he never wanted to again. The Blood Witch sagged to the ground, her energy used up. Blood trickled from her eyes and ears. Tolde Breed crawled over to her to check for life. Her breathing was shallow, but she still lived. Satisfied, he looked at the monster that had taken him across the stars. Smoke and steam billowed from the body. Tolde Breed did what most believed could not be done. He had bested one of the Three, bested but not destroyed. The Inquisitor collapsed to the deck.

VII.

Perhaps it was mere coincidence that lightning wreathed the skies over Prophet Isle the night Inquisitor Tolde Breed brought the Shackled Man to his prison. Perhaps not. Perhaps the gods, in the eternal slumber, recoiled against the thought of one of their own bloodline imprisoned, brought to his knees like common scum and subjugated to the whims of zealous mortals. Regardless, the skies revolted. Rain and sleet hammered the island in a majestic display.

The survivors of Matthias's team marched down the ramp of their landing craft with weapons at the low ready. They were less focused on the prisoner and more on their surroundings. The Inquisition prison facility on Prophet Isle was seldom used but that did not mean that agents of Amongeratrix would not be waiting. Inquisitor Breed drank it in, relishing the prospect of putting this affair to rest. Hidden conspiracies and laughing madmen whispered in the back of his mind. Someone had told Amongeratrix that Breed and his men were coming. The Three clearly had help, but from where?

Prophet Isle was a forgotten part of the planet Crimeat, a place so desolate and far from civilization that few bothered to remember it. Massive trees stretched hundreds of feet into the air and, unlike Keltoo; Crimeat was vibrant and full of life. Birds circled overhead, their calls echoing warning. The stasis capsule hovered a meter off the ground, Amongeratrix incapacitated within. Inquisitor Breed walked alongside it. He had fought hard and suffered losses along the way but Amongeratrix was his prize. He had bested one of the Three. Bested, but not defeated. He knew, as did they all, that the giant had every chance of escaping again despite the size of the shackles. The Blood Witch had ensorcelled the Shackles, making them all but unbreakable. The thought made him smirk. Amongeratrix had become the Shackled Man just as much as Tolde Breed himself had.

They deposited him in the most secure cell in the prison. It was a dank place with one tiny window for light high above. The cell was warded by the aid of a Blood Witch. The sheer power used would keep Amongeratrix secure for a very long time, at least long enough for the universe to forget him again. Tolde watched as they pushed the stasis tube into the cell. Inquisition engineers unhooked the cables and random devices under the vigilance of the Prekhauten Guardsmen. They silently prayed Amongeratrix awoke and broke free so they might extract a measure of revenge for their fallen comrades.

The cover hissed open, gas and fumes funneling upwards. The drop in temperature produced bumps on Tolde's arms. He regarded the unconscious man with disdain as the engineers unceremoniously dumped the tube. His giant body hit the ground with the wet smack of flesh striking concrete. Demin bent down and checked for vital signs.

Amongeratix was alive. Matthias gripped his rifle tighter. Flashbacks of the men he'd lost tormented him. Ever the proud soldier, Matthias now considered retiring. The stress of taking on one of the Three was simply too much. He looked down at the body with utter contempt; a twinkle of defeat lingering in the back corners of his eyes.

"Clear the room," Tolde ordered.

Only the Inquisitor and Sergeant remained. They patiently waited for the effects of the drugs to wear off. It was closure to a difficult assignment. Tolde knew he should feel some measure of satisfaction but the warning in his heart prevented it. The man lying on the floor was dangerous and he feared his task was not yet finished. There were questions left unanswered. Too much of this quest did not make sense. Tolde Breed felt that the Shackled Man had too much help escaping. Cultists no doubt. If that were true, and a cult had that much power he couldn't help but wonder how far up the corruption had spread. Any member of the Conclave or the Inquisition might be tainted, perhaps even the Inquisitor General himself. Caution was required, caution and commitment to rooting out the evil that surely must be spreading. Tolde had to return to Vau Prime and find the answers.

Amongeratix awoke slowly. All the drugs and nerve agents were unwilling to let go of their victim. His skin had a dull sheen too it. He was dehydrated, a shell of his former terror. His unfocused eyes took in the gloom as sharp memories reminded him of his position in life. Another prison. Another cage mortals thought could contain him. He painfully turned his head until he faced the Inquisitor. Pure hatred pulsed from his eyes.

"Do you truly think this facility can hold me? You cannot keep me here forever. One day I will be free and the universe will change. It will be my hand that sparks the change."

The Inquisitor offered a hard look. Gone was the fear, the hesitation. He had beaten what couldn't be beaten. "All of my life I have hated the night and what it represents. What you represent. I am tired of feeling closed in. You lost, monster."

Tolde Breed reached into his breast pocket and tossed a single blue tinged red rose into Amongeratix's cell before turning away. "Lock the door."

Amongeratix glared down at the symbol of the Inquisition and tilted his head back in deep laughter. It echoed down the halls as Tolde and Matthias left him to his madness. The sun had begun to shine and Tolde Breed found himself enjoying it for the very first time.

END

Tolde Breed's tale is just beginning. Look for:

Dreams of Winter: Book 1 of the brand new Forgotten Gods series



3187 A.G. (After Gods)

ONE

A single drop of rain fell. Lost quickly amongst the dust and grime of the village street, the rain drop went unnoticed. Who could have guessed that a single drop would alter the course of events set in motion thousands of years ago and change the face of the universe forever?

Autumn's bite was crisp this year. Sharp winds blew in from the northern sea, forcing people inside. Whole fields of crops were lost to the pre-winter freeze that gripped the land. It should have been a time for celebration, a time to pay tribute to the gods for their generosity bestowed. As winter drew closer the people prepared for the worst. Not everyone chose to hide in the safety and warmth. Two friends sat on a porch, staring off into the surrounding fields. Light mist clung to ground, curling up the porch and around their ankles. Frost kissed the few leaves that had not yet fallen.

"I cannot stay here much longer," Mollock Bolle whispered.

An angry wind blew his stringy gray hair across his face, forcing him to push it aside with a frown. Deep lines creased his face; the bags beneath his eyes were dark and haunting. He'd lost much weight over the past year. Sleep did not come easily anymore. Perhaps it was a sign of things to come, though Mollock did not believe in premonition or any such devilry.

Fenrin shook his head. "What are you talking about? You just arrived a few days ago."

"Doesn't matter," Mollock distractedly replied. His dark brown eyes focused on the night. A glint of fear danced around the corners of his eyes.

The wind howled; the cry of a thousand wolves. Fenrin shivered. His small plot of land on one of the surrounding hilltops overlooking the small farming village of Parnus was one of the larger vineyards in the region. Fields of grape vines filled the gentle slope off his back porch. Frost covered those vines now, frost and the first hints of winter. A half-moon hung high in the early night sky, shying behind the stratus clouds.

"Something is going on, tell me," Fenrin persisted. "This doesn't sound like you."

Mollock eyed his friend. They'd known each other for almost four decades; childhood friends in a way that no amount of time could threaten. This made Mollock more uneasy. He didn't know how to tell Fenrin something he himself couldn't explain.

"It is a feeling. Perhaps just a dream," he shook his head. "I don't know."

Fenrin narrowed his eyes. His curiosity peaked. "What do you dream of?"

"Do you have nightmares, Fenrin?"

He wasn't sure he liked the direction of conversation; the menace behind Mollock's tone. "No, not really."

Mollock rose and went and stood at the rail of the porch. His eyes scanned the nearby tree line, watching for things that his mind screamed couldn't exist. Every shadow haunted him, threatened his life in a special way known only to the lords of darkness.

"I do."

Fenrin rocked uneasily in his chair. The strained squeak echoed in the empty night. Dried leaves scrapped across the porch.

"If I didn't know you better I would say that you are starting to frighten me, old friend."

Mollock grimaced. Not even his long years of military service prepared him for this. "You should be frightened. I am."

His heart skipped. Fenrin felt his mouth water. Hands shaking, he reached into a pouch and drew out a long stem pipe. He packed in the tobacco and lit it, drawing deep on the soothing smoke. Fenrin wasn't scared. If anything he was confused.

"Mollock, I never heard you speak like this. We've been through wars together. How many times have we stood against the enemy and come out alive?" He exhaled a thick plume of bluish smoke. "None of what you are saying is making any sense. Come back over here and have a seat. I have some wine inside. It will ease your mind some."

Mollock Bolle smiled softly. "You have been a good friend to me, Fenrin and I have wronged you. I shouldn't have come here. I cannot say why, but I feel that every moment I stay here threatens you with danger. I must leave soon."

"You still haven't told me why."

Mollock stared at his friend, his face drawn and severe. "They are coming for me."

Fenrin's face paled. He leaned forward. "Who?"

"I don't know."

The darkness erupted. A flock of birds fled from the nearby stand of pine trees. Fenrin opened his mouth in shock, the pipe spilling embers on the old wooden porch. Mollock spun and drew his sword. His breath came quickly. They watched as a monstrous shadow crashed through the trees, coming closer to the house. There was no subtlety, no stealth. The creature was unafraid.

Mollock fought the urge to piss on himself. He closed his eyes tight. *Not again.* The beast roared; a dreadful wail that withered every tree and plant around it. Its massive bulk easily batted aside trees that had grown for over a hundred years. Their thickness meant nothing to the raw power exhibited. His mighty head rose higher than the tallest tree. The air grew rank, fetid. The beast was death, and nothing on the face of the world could withstand its awesome power.

"What in the name of the gods is that?" Fenrin stammered. His words were pregnant with slowly realized fear.

Mollock shook his head in denial. He couldn't believe he had been found so easily. He quickly regained composure. There would be time enough for chastisement in the future, hopefully. Mollock sheathed his sword. The weapon would be of no use against a creature of shadow.

"Get back inside and lock your door. Douse the lanterns. This thing won't bother with you once I am gone. It is me it's after." His voice was hurried, urgent.

Fenrin rose, hand scrambling for his sword as the beast drew closer.

"Damn it man, if you ever listened to me do it now. You cannot fight this. I must run," Mollock insisted. The harsh tone of his words broke the beast's grip on Fenrin. "Gods willing, I will be able to come back and explain what is happening."

"And if you don't?" Fenrin asked.

Mollock grimaced. "Then I am dead."

Gathering up his back and walking stick, Mollock Bolle moved to the edge of the stairs. He turned and looked back at his friend. There was much to be said, but he had not the words for it. Instead he gave a haphazard smile and said, "Winter."

Fenrin was confused. "What does that mean?"

"You asked me what I dream of. I have dreams of winter."

And with that he was gone, just another shadow in the growing darkness. Fenrin thought to call after him, to demand an explanation. The beast in the forest cautioned

otherwise. Instead Fenrin ran inside and bolted the door. Every footstep of the beast shook dust from the rafters and threatened to bring the house down around his head. He hurried to extinguish all the lanterns and candles, silently thankful he hadn't built a fire yet. The beast stalked closer. The ground trembled. The air became fetid and rank with the odors of death. Fenrin vomited in his chamber pot. His heart raced. His hands became sweaty.

And then it too was gone. The nightmare creature of shadow was gone. Fenrin struggled to his feet and, on shaky legs, ran outside hoping to catch a glimpse of the terror. Rather than finding the beast he saw a wide swath of destruction from the forest through his vine yards. The world had turned to death and decay. Fenrin murmured a quick prayer to Aris, goddess of protection and wisdom, for his friend. He knew Mollock Bolle was a dead man without the help of the gods.

The Bloody Man arrived at night. Twice the size of a mortal man, he didn't move, didn't even blink. The villagers of Kovlchen were both frightened and amazed. No one had ever seen anything like this before. Prayers were whispered, blades sharpened. The man was heavily muscled, sculpted almost, and completely covered in dark crimson blood. Arms at his sides, he stared out at the world with empty eyes. Villagers flocked to see the Bloody Man, if such a being might be called a man. Those daring enough moved closer, eager to get a better look. Mothers hurried their children home, lest they become contaminated or infected.

A week passed and with it the novelty. People talked less of the blood covered man. The mayor and constable decided that, while the man had not so much as blinked during in the time since his arrival, something had to be done. They sensed a latent threat and gave voice to that paranoia. A town meeting was called in the local tavern.

"The question is not what as much as when," Mayor Zenningberg told the assembled audience. "This bloody man represents a danger we have never experienced."

"But he has done nothing," farmer Aenni reasoned. The old man was well known for his wisdom. "How can we act against a being that doesn't even seem to breathe?"

"That is not the point! Sure, the bloody man may not have acted against us yet, but that is not to say he won't soon," Zenningberg insisted.

A chorus of cheers and murmurs filled the room. The people were frightened. That much was certain. An undertone of fear laced the smoke thickened air. Old and young alike could feel it. Danger lingered just beyond the borders of common sense. The bloody man was a danger. He must be dealt with.

Zenningberg held up his hands for silence. It took a moment, but the crowd finally stopped their chatter long enough for him to continue.

"My friends, I love this village. I have spent my entire life here and devoted the last fifteen years to making it the best village in the middle kingdoms. The Baron of Berchenfel has used this as his model community. That being said, we cannot allow this *thing* to remain here. The longer he stays the more danger we are in."

"Danger from what? He hasn't moved at all."

Zenningberg caught the familiar face of Prentiss. He snorted. The lad was the local troublemaker, a youth who did not see the value in the wisdom of his elders. The boy needed to keep his mouth closed and go about his business.

"Prentiss, imagine what would happen when he does move. That creature has got to be nearly ten feet tall. And look at the muscles on him. He's a beast of man and I for one

do not wish to find out what he means to do.” Zenningberg smiled to himself. He could feel the mood of the crowd shifting back towards him. “Let us not forget that he came here by supernatural means!”

“Prove it!” Prentiss shouted.

“How can you deny otherwise?” came a frail voice from the back of the room.

All eyes turned to see Father Dorchea striding towards Zenningberg and the podium. The Father was the most respected man in the village. When he spoke, people listened.

His stern eyes leveled on the crowd. He was a thin man, old and covered with liver spots. His hair, what was left, was thin, close cropped and streaked gray.

“This Bloody Man is a message, sent to us by the Gods to confront our sins against the Fathers,” he told them.

“Father, the gods do not always interfere with the whims of man. What have we done to draw the wrath of the gods?” asked the mayor.

Father Dorchea slid through the crowd to stand beside his friend. “My friends, who are we to question the creators of all life? Are we not the children of gods? The very spark sent unto this world to bring joy where once only darkness reigned. This is not an easy thing of which I speak. My heart aches from the signs before my eyes. The Bloody Man is a bane to our continued existence.”

Arguments spread through the crowd. Some for, some against the continued presence of the Bloody Man. Perhaps the worst part of the situation was that gnawing uncertainty buried within each of them. Uncertainty can be a powerful emotion; strong enough to spark unabashed fear or peak the highest curiosity. Fear slowly won out. The tide of emotions turned towards the bitter prospects of the potential horror the Bloody Man represented and how best to deal with the situation.

It was all talk until Jarris Thoom came in carrying the limp form of his youngest daughter. Tears streaked his cheeks and his voice trembled as much as his waning strength. “The Bloody Man! It was him! He killed my Elisa!”

Zenningberg bellowed for quiet. “How Jarris? How did he do this thing?”

Jarris sank to his knees. He cried uncontrollably, gently placing Elisa’s body on the dust covered wooden floor. “Those kids,” he whispered. “I told them not to go near him. I told them, I told them, I told them.” He looked up into the panic stricken eyes of both the Father and the Mayor. “They just wouldn’t listen. They had to go play near this monster. And he killed her!”

Zenningberg passed Father Dorchea a sidelong glance. In a voice just loud enough for the two to hear, he said, “that settles it. We have to get rid of him somehow.”

Dorchea nodded and dropped down to comfort poor Jarris.

“Everyone, listen to me!” the Mayor roared to be heard. “Go to your homes and find what weapons you can. Tonight we will end the threat of this Bloody Man. Go now!”

“And what of the gods? Will they not punish us for what we seek to do?” Prentiss asked accusingly. “I don’t believe much in gods and signs, but if what the Father and poor Jarris Thoom said are true then something must be done, but violence is not the answer.”

“There is no other way!”

“He has already killed once, are you so willing to let him do it again?” Zenningberg asked.

Prentiss shook his head. "A moment ago we all preached peace and now look at you! Nothing more than a blood thirsty mob! We were not raised this way. This village has avoided going to war for three generations and now we throw it all away on the whim of a single incident? I cannot stand for this."

"Our paths have already been chosen!" Father Dorchea replied. "The gods demand action."

"And if we die?"

"Then the gods decreed."

The simple answer was chilling. An eerie silence settled over those gathered for a tender moment. The atmosphere stifled. A choking feeling hung at the back of everyone's throats. Jarris Thoom solved it all in a single act of violence. Hatred and rage collided in his mind, creating a super emotion that no sense of morality or reason could overpower. He looked up at the young Prentiss.

"That thing killed my little girl!" he roared. Jarris moved quicker than anyone anticipated. On his feet and dagger drawn before they could react, he plunged the old, nicked blade deep into Prentiss' chest. The youth fell with a cry, dark blood flowing down his tunic.

In that moment every bird launched into the sky. A thunder clap so loud it shook the foundations of the world began a whirlwind. The Bloody Man blinked once. The emotions he felt were indescribable, but he'd felt them before. More than once he had been forced to act in response, lest they become too much even for his soul to bear. Strength filled his muscles and his skin danced with electricity that glowed blue in the dark of night.

The first to die were those closest. At nearly twelve feet tall and thicker than three men put together, the Bloody Man swung his fists like clubs, smashing and crushing bone and muscle. Men and women ran screaming. Some tried to make a stand, but it was not enough. Nothing was enough to stem the tide of violence pouring from the Bloody Man. It was a scene from Hell. Broken bodies began to pile up. Hatred so deep it set fire to every building in sight consumed the village. The Bloody Man did what the gods had created him to do. He killed. And killed. And killed until there were none left to oppose him.

Mayor Zenningberg died from fright. His old heart couldn't comprehend the sights opened to him. Father Dorchea knelt before the Bloody Man and prayed for those few moments before his head was crushed like a piece of rotten fruit in the Bloody Man's mighty fist. And then the Bloody Man stopped suddenly. His eyes opened and he saw the devastation he had caused for the first time. Not a soul lived in the village of Kovlchen. Even the smallest dog and youngest child had been killed, their bodies a travesty of human form. Homes and shops were leveled. The entire area looked as if a massive earthquake had ravaged it. He tilted his head back, horrified at what he had done.

"NOOOO!" he cried and dropped to his knees in misery.

Not again, he shook his head. Not again. Tears spilled from his eyes. The destruction burned what was left of his heart, ate at the depths of his soul. Pain and suffering seemed his eternal companions and he didn't know why. These people had done nothing to deserve the horror he'd unleashed. Murder. That's what it was. Sheer, brutal murder. No one would ever learn what had happened to the quiet village of Kovlchen on that dark autumn night. An entire people were destroyed before the sun had the chance to rise.

The Bloody Man cried for them all. Every last soul he sent back to his father caused a tear so large it created a sea of raw agony. He sank to his knees. The old doubt had

returned to his soul. He remembered why he had fled humanity so many centuries ago. He wasn't made for this life, but there was no alternative. The Bloody Man yanked himself to his feet. His movements were timid, like a scolded child.

Ever had he been this way. The gods had cursed him. The Bloody Man walked through the carnage, praying for a sign of life. Death mocked his efforts. Agony filled faces stared back at him. He heard their twisted laughter echoing back from the depths of Hell. This seemed his lot in life. Suffering. His soul cried through the dark hours of the night.

And then he found it. Found that single spark of life that suggested hope had not died. He knelt beside the body of a small child and gently cradled her in his massive arms. A tear fell, splashing on her cheek. The girl groaned and breathed deep. She opened her eyes; radiant green and speckled with fear.

"Shhh," he whispered. "Do not be afraid. I will not harm you."

She screamed and struggled in his grasp.

"Please," he pleaded. "I will not hurt you."

He finally set her down, expecting her to flee. But she didn't. She stood fast and stared back in wonder.

"What happened to my momma?" she asked. Her voice was strained and broken.

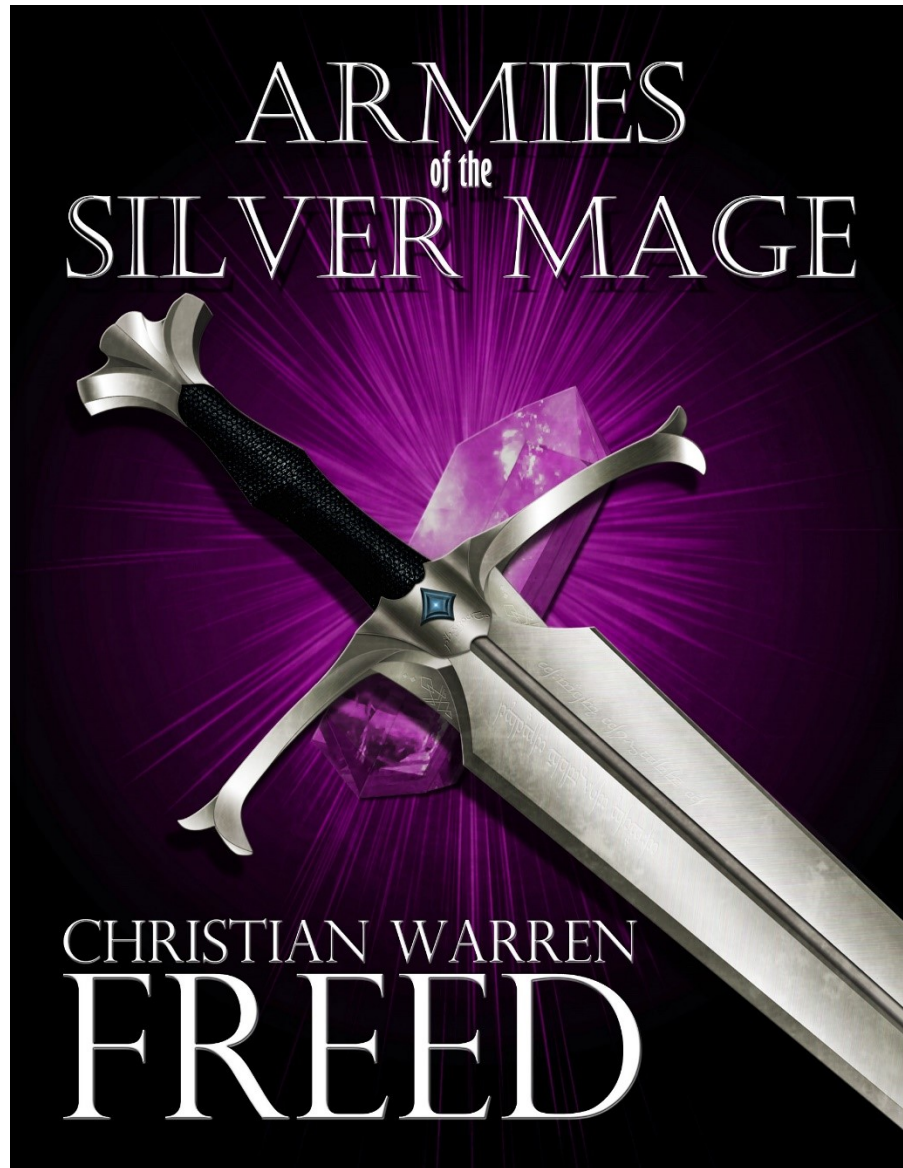
He bowed his head. "I am sorry."

The Bloody Man stood and turned to leave.

"Wait," the girl asked. "Who are you?"

He stopped long enough to look back over his shoulder with pained eyes. "Sorrow. My name is Sorrow."

Other books by Christian Warren Freed

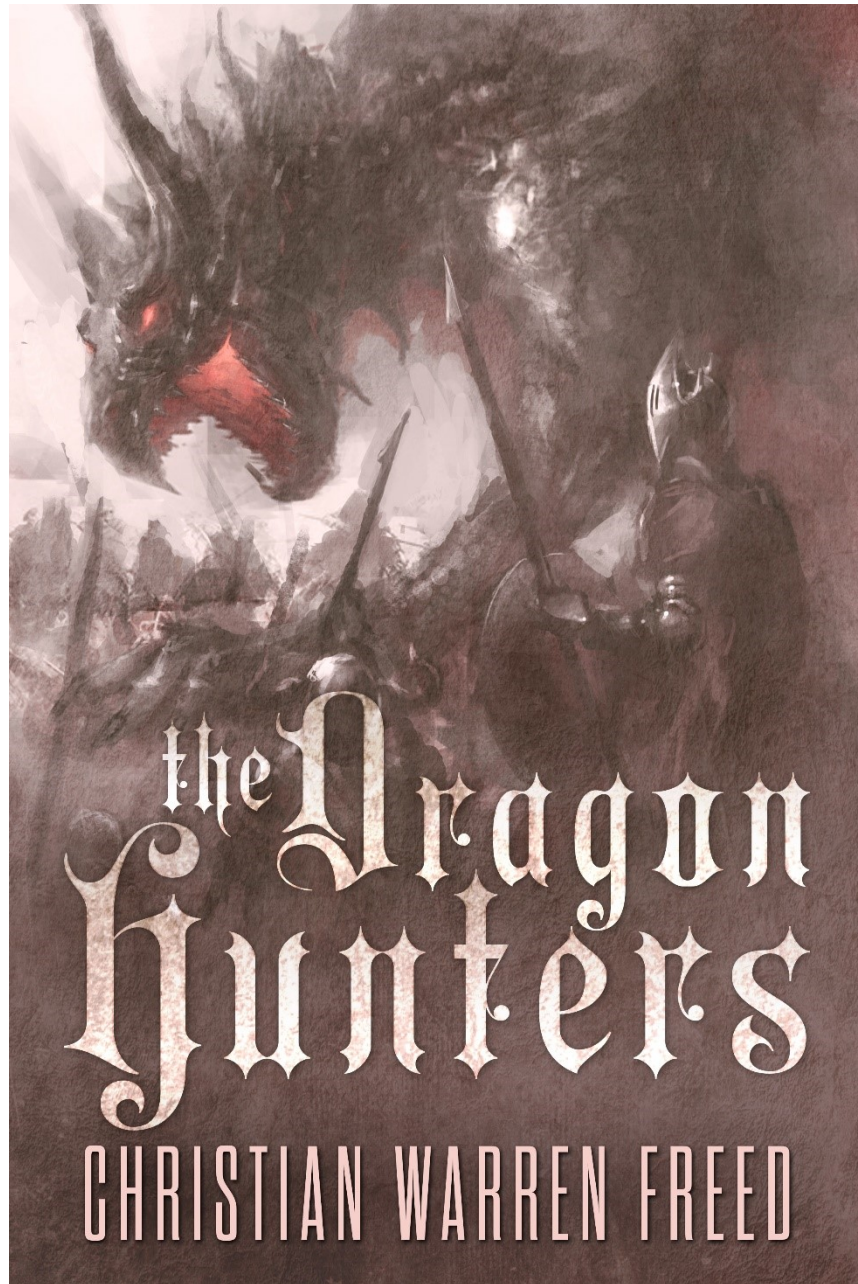


Malweir was once governed by the order of Mages, bringers of peace and light. Centuries past and the lands prospered. But all was not well. Unknown to most, one mage desired power above all else. He turned his will to the banished Dark Gods and brought war to the free lands. Only a handful of mages survived the betrayal and the Silver Mage was left free to twist the darker races to his bidding. The only thing he needs to complete his plan and rule the world forever are the four shards of the crystal of Tol Shere.

Having spent most of their lives dreaming about leaving their sleepy village and travelling the world, Delin Kerny and Fennic Attleford never thought that one day they would be forced to flee their town to save their lives. Everything changes when they discover the fabled Star Silver sword and learn that there are some who want the weapon for themselves. Hunted by a ruthless

mercenary, the boys run from Fel Darrins and are forced into the adventure they only dreamed about.

Ever ashamed of the horrors his kind let loose on the world the last mage, Dakeb, lives his life in shadows. The only thing keeping him alive is his quest to stop the Silver Mage from reassembling the crystal. His chance finally comes through the hearts and wills of Delin and Fennic. Dakeb bestows upon them the crystal shard, entrusting them with the one thing capable of restoring peace to Malweir.



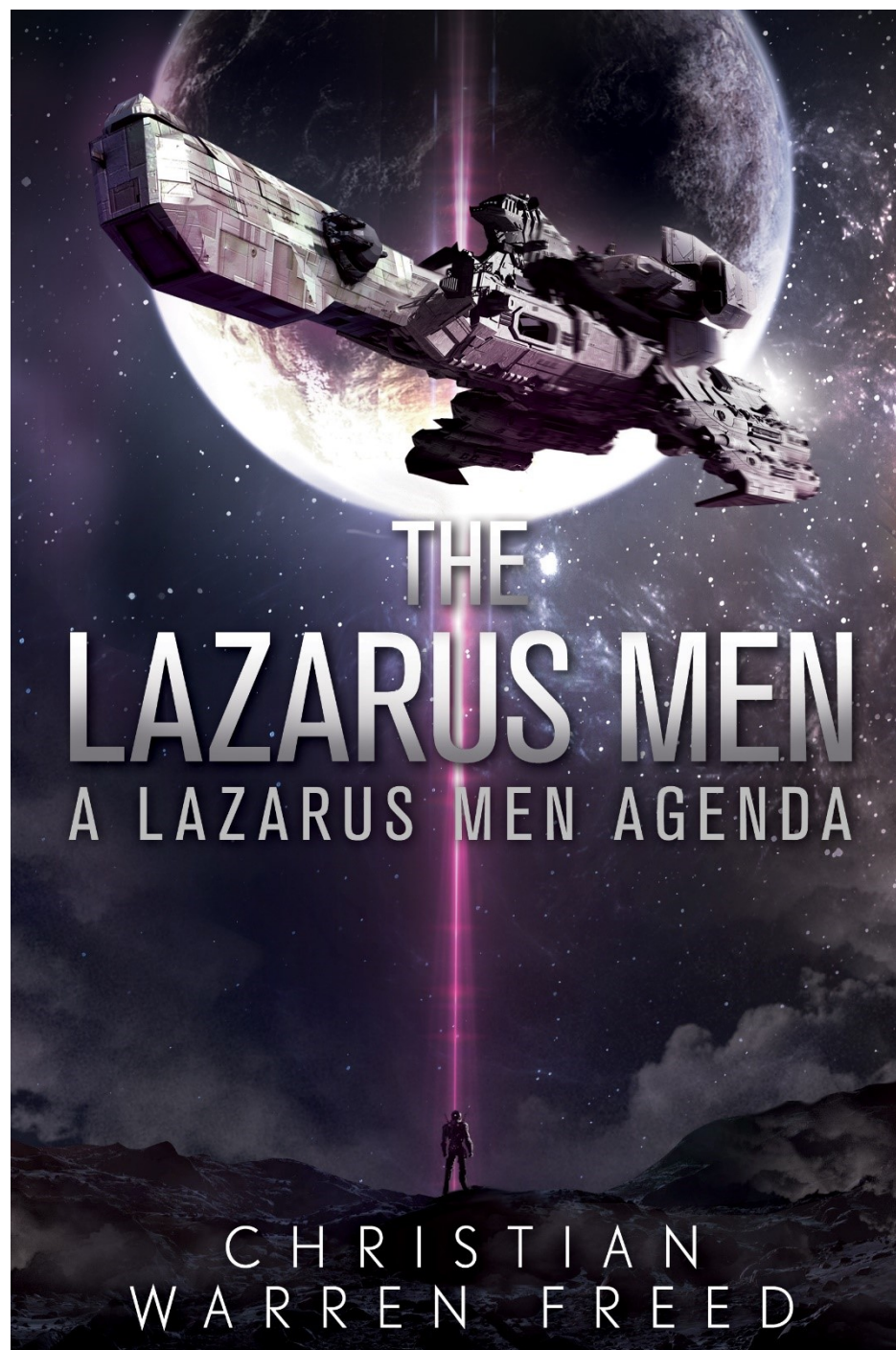
The Mage Wars are a fading memory. The kingdoms of Malweir focus on rebuilding what was lost and moving beyond the vast amounts of death and devastation. For some it is easy, others

far worse. Some men are made in battle. Grelic of Thrae is one. A seasoned veteran of numerous campaigns and raids, Grelic is a warrior without a war. He languishes under mugs of ale and poor choices that eventually find him locked in the dungeons of King Rentor. His only chance at redemption is an offer tantamount to suicide: travel north with a misfit band of adventurers and learn the truth of what happened in the village of Gend.

Grelic, suddenly tired of his life, reluctantly agrees and meets the only survivor of the horrible massacre: Fitch Iane. Broken, mentally and physically, Fitch babbles about demons stalking through the mists and a terrible monster prowling the skies, breathing fire and death.

What begins as a simple reconnaissance mission quickly turns into a quest to stop Sidian, the Silver Mage from accomplishing his goals in the Deadlands. The last of the dark mages seeks to recover the four shards of the crystal of Tol Shere and open the gateway to release the dark gods from their eternal prison.

Grelic and his team are sorely outnumbered and ill prepared to deal with the combined threats of a dark mage and one of the great dragons from the west. Not even the might of the Aeldruin, high elf mercenaries, and Dakeb, the last of the mages, promises to be enough to stop evil and restore peace to Thrae.



It is the 23rd century. Humankind has reached the stars, building a tentative empire across a score of worlds. Earth's central government rules weakly as several worlds continue their efforts toward independence. Shadow organizations hide in the midst of the political infighting. Their manifestations of power and influence are beholden only to the highest bidder. The most powerful/insidious/secret of these, The Lazarus Men, has existed for decades, always working outside of morality's constraints. Led by the enigmatic Mr. Shine, their agents are hand selected from the worst humanity has to offer and available for the right price.

Gerald LaPlant lives an ordinary life on Old Earth. That life is thrown into turmoil on the night he stumbles upon the murder of what appears to be a street thief. Fleeing into the night, Gerald finds himself hunted by agents of Roland McMasters, an extremely powerful man dissatisfied with the current regime and with designs on ruling his own empire. To do so, McMasters needs the fabled Eye of Karakzaheim, a map leading to immeasurable wealth. Unknown to either man, Mr. Shine has deployed agents in search of the same artifact and will stop at nothing to obtain it.

Running for his life, Gerald quickly becomes embroiled in a conspiracy reaching deep into levels of government that he never imagined existed. His every move is hounded by McMasters' agents and the Lazarus Men. His adventures take him away from the relative safety of Old Earth across the stars and into the heart of McMasters' fledgling empire. The future of the Earth Alliance at stake. If Gerald has any hope of surviving and helping saving the alliance he must rely on his wits and awakened instincts while foregoing the one thing that could get him killed more quickly than the rest: trust.

BIO

Christian W. Freed was born in Buffalo, N.Y. more years ago than he would like to remember. After spending more than 20 years in the active duty US Army he has turned his talents to writing. Since retiring, he has gone on to publish more than 20 science fiction and fantasy novels as well as his combat memoirs from his time in Iraq and Afghanistan. His first book, Hammers in the Wind, has been the #1 free book on Kindle 4 times and he holds a fancy certificate from the L Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest.

Passionate about history, he combines his knowledge of the past with modern military tactics to create an engaging, quasi-realistic world for the readers. He graduated from Campbell University with a degree in history and a Masters of Arts degree in Digital Communications from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He currently lives outside of Raleigh, N.C. and devotes his time to writing, his family, and their two Bernese Mountain Dogs. If you drive by you might just find him on the porch with a cigar in one hand and a pen in the other. You can find out more about his work by clicking on any one of the social media icons listed below. You can find out more about his work by following him on:

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