

# ***Crimson Spiders***



CHRISTIAN WARREN  
**FREED**

# CRIMSON SPIDERS

A Tomorrow's Demise Story

CHRISTIAN WARREN FREED

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### HAMMERS IN THE WIND: BOOK I OF THE NORTHERN CRUSADE

"I love this book. This book hooked my attention on the first page and it was hard to put down. There is darkness in this book, you know something is going to happen so you keep reading to find out what. The author writes it so good, it's like you are there experiencing what the characters are. And I love it."

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\*Forthcoming

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# Crimson Spiders

## I.

*The only thing I can think about is getting back home. Back to everything important in my life, or at least what I thought was important. Funny thing is, the more I try to think about it the less I remember. How does that work? This forsaken place has stolen everything from me, right down to my sanity. Every time I close my eyes and try to picture my house and even my wife all I can see are my nightmares come back to haunt me. Is this thing so powerful it dominates every aspect of my life?*

*I often try to wonder what it was like before this. Before the fighting and dying. Looking back, I can't remember. In fact, today was the first day in my new life...*

## II.

Turgan River Valley. Planet Shaalam IV. C Company Headquarters, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Command. Captain Orna Malago, commanding.

Ten figures huddled around the holographic map display. The non-infra red light gave the command bunker an ethereal glow. Various clerks shuffled around them, each performing an integral part in the company's combat operations. Most of the line soldiers passed foul glances at them, for they were the fortunate ones who never had to worry about shooting it out in the mud or seeing their best friend die in their arms. These were the paper piques, but at times, some of the most important troopers in the unit.

Each of the ten troopers staring at the map wore the standard gray uniform of the Imperium infantry. The gray had hopelessly stained from weeks in the field. Stacks of body armor and weapon packs cluttered the limited open spaces in the bunker. They kept a hold their individual weapons. No trained soldier was dumb enough to be caught without one in their hands, especially in the middle of enemy territory.

Captain Malago ran a hand through her sandy hair, a look of disdain furling her brow. She'd been a combat commander for almost two years, and out of everything, this was the part she hated the most.

"Listen up. This valley is the center point for the whole damned sector, and it's all ours. Battalion wants us to open it up for them so they can begin funneling in the ground troops."

"One company through all this jungle? Sounds like suicide to me, boss."

"Perhaps you would care to tell the Colonel that, Sergeant Kimel?" She hated being interrupted, even if the man had a point. A good soldier never questioned authority. That was the first thing the Academy taught. If the situation wasn't so dire, Kimel, known as Snake Eyes to his troops, wouldn't even be in this meeting. An indig mortar round took

out the platoon sergeant a few weeks ago and that left Snake Eyes in charge. It was one of the little parts of the war that people back home, whichever planet they were from, would never find out about.

Snake Eyes rubbed the tiny red spider engraved on the left breast of his body armor and smirked. Malago was such a kiss ass, never once bothering to speak up to any superior, even if it meant her people getting killed in the process. But he knew when to keep his mouth shut. A man just couldn't make sergeant without that instinct.

She'd only been in command for the better part of three months. Hells, she hadn't even been assigned to the battalion when they made planetfall. She'd been incredibly hesitant when the orders came down to assume command of C Company. The Crimson Spiders, so aptly named for their decorative emblem on their armor, had one of the fiercest reputations in all of the Imperium. Who in their right mind would willingly step in and try to establish command in the middle of a combat operation?

"He's right you know, Ma'am," First Sergeant Derlnth told her.

"Orders are orders, First Sergeant. Mine say I need to tear a hole through enemy lines so the rest of the army can assault. Division's been stalled for too long. Don't make this hard, Top. The mission is a go at zero four hundred."

First Sergeant Derlnth blinked his middle eye. Each of the three was capable of singular movement and control. His steel gray skin blended almost perfectly with his armor. He was a Crendaphidian, one of the hardest warriors in the entire galaxy. Still, there was something about this mission that didn't sit well.

"What kind of support are we getting? Latest intel says the Xemp's got one, maybe two brigades of reinforced infantry down there. We're good, but not that good."

"Division has given us a clip of gunships," she answered.

Madness. "What about artillery?"

"None. Secrecy is our largest asset, gentlemen. The rest of the brigade attacks once we have the far end of the valley secure. We are all alone until then."

A hushed silence settled in the bunker. The severity of the mission sunk in.

Malago looked at each man in turn. "I suggest you go brief your people and get some rest. Tomorrow's coming early."

ϕ

The one hundred and twenty-four hardened soldiers in the Spiders waited for the signal with mixed emotions. This was what they'd been trained for. The moment when men hunted each other in a deadly game. Lieutenant Fera Mons and his recon squad already departed during the middle of the night. With any luck they would have a secure lane opened up for the rest of them.

Snake Eyes gathered his squad leaders for a last minute motivational speech. The five of them glanced nervously back.

"Elias, I don't like this any more than you, but we are the point section for the whole damned operation. You and Rolg spread out two abreast and fan out as far as possible in a wedge. If and when you make contact I'll bring up the remainder of the platoon. We flank if we can and do what we do best. We don't have time for prisoners. Mons should have a temporary position set up about five clicks in. We break there."

"Provided all goes according to plan," Elias added. He was the most experienced squad leader there, but the prospect of humping endless clicks through a thick jungle was not enticing.



“Right.”

“And nothing ever goes according to plan.”

Snake Eyes grinned. “Call it a perk.”

Derlnth crept out from behind a clump of leafy bushes. He had the look that all the troopers under his command had when it was about to hit the fan.

“Kimel, its show time. Get your people up and moving. The rest of the company will be following in twenty minute intervals. Good hunting.” He extended one massive hand.

“Thanks, Top,” he replied. “You heard the man. Elias, you got point. We move in five.”

### III.

*Can you tell me what makes a man want to pick up a rifle and head off into certain danger? Is it the fear of not knowing what will happen, or the thrill of hearing that first round being fired? I remember a time, before the war, when no one really cared what happened. Those days were long gone. The only thing real to me now was the jungle. The jungle and the Xempsarillian Defense Corps.*

The predawn jungle was so quiet you could hear your blood flow and your heart pounding like a drum. Not even the bugs made a sound. A strange bluish mist clung to the ground. Corporal Hern Apalon stalked his way through the heavy underbrush with all the skill of a natural predator. More than one comrade whispered that he was born for this. A natural killer.

The blackened metal of his twin barrel ion rifle gently parted the leaves and branches so carefully that he left no sign of his passing. A distant noise, too near for his liking, stopped him in his tracks. Apalon dropped to one knee, leveling his rifle at the jungle. Like wraiths, the rest of the squad did the same. Elias crept his way up to Apalon and listened. Early morning haze and steam kept visibility to the bare minimum.

“How many?” he whispered. Streams of sweat already streaked his face paint.

Apalon shrugged, so slight it was hardly noticeable. “A squad, maybe more. Want me to take them out now?”

“No. we can’t risk letting one slip away. Make contact only if there is no way around them.”

Elias crept back to the rest of the squad. “Hsst, Dibbs. Bring up the radio.”

The young private passed the handset and resumed watching his sector of the perimeter.

“Butcher Six, this is Butcher Point.”

“Go ahead, Point.”

“Contact. Squad size element. Request permission to wait in place.”

“Affirmative Point. Engage if discovered. Report when all clear. Six out.”

Damn it all to the Seven Hells, Snake Eyes cursed. They were only an hour into the operation and were already getting bogged down. The wily sergeant removed his helmet to wipe some of the sweat off his brow. He could just hear Malago gripping now. Well, he

had no intention of letting her know, at least not at the moment. As a noncom there were ways around everything.

“Butcher Two, this is Six.”

“This is Two.”

Good. “Take your element to the left flank and push forward. Point is held up and we’re on the clock. Move fast and quiet. Kill when necessary. Discretion is yours. Six out.”

He almost breathed a sigh of relief, and then gunfire rang out like a demonic symphony.

Empty shell casings flaring from the ejection chamber seared their exposed flesh. Both Elias and Apalon were unleashing all their pent-up aggression into the enemy squad. The first three Xemps crumbled under fire. Crimson blood sprayed onto the vibrant green leaves in cadence with the ion bolts shredding the enemy. Return fire erupted, but it was poorly aimed. The confusion gave the Spiders the time needed to get on line and lay down a withering suppressing fire. The Xemps quickly tried to break and run. They had not been expecting a fight.

“Dibbs get Rolg on the horn and tell him to flank the bastards while they’re moving!”

The terrible dragon-like roar of the squad’s heavy machine gun were nothing when compared to the telltale double thumping of incoming artillery as the rounds went supersonic. Elias looked up in horror, certain they were anti-personnel rounds.

**“INCOMING!”**

ϕ

Plumes of black smoke smeared across the jungle canopy. Malago grimaced at the thought of what was happening to her men. Snake Eyes words were coming back to haunt her. She was almost at a loss. Almost, but not quite.

“Top! Find out what’s happening and get them the Hells out of the kill zone.”

Derlnth glared at her before storming off. He had just about had enough of that academy trained woman. He angrily snatched the handset from the radio man.

“All Spider elements, this is Spider Five. Push forward and get under their fire. Find the observers and eliminate.”

Cpt. Malago felt her stomach tightening. This was the first time she’d been responsible for sending people into harm’s way. It made her sick.

Derlnth was finished yet. “Cobra Seven-seven, request immediate air support. I got a battery of Xemp arty tearing my people apart.”

“That’s a roger, Spider Five. Birds inbound. E.T.A. ten minutes.”

Ten minutes and there wouldn’t be anyone left to waste the bombs on.

ϕ

The combined life of the second platoon was drawing precariously shorter the longer they stayed in the kill zone. Snake Eyes knew this. He already had three dead in the command squad alone. The last one had been his radioman, a young female private only nineteen standard years old. She wasn’t old enough to be called a woman.

“Sarge! We ain’t gonna make it,” cried a young private as the concussion of another round crushed them to the ground.



Dirt and debris rained all around them. Ears ringing, Snake Eyes knew the trooper was right if they didn't act fast. Grabbing the trooper by the lip of his armor, Snake Eyes hauled him up.

"Find me a new radioman. We're getting out of here now."

More rounds impacted, breaking the world. The Spiders were caught in a sweep and zone mission, a series of targets just far enough apart to pepper the countryside and end any hopes of assault. Assuming the Xemp artillery operated under the same basic principles as the rest of the known universe did, their data would continually increase. This meant that everything in front of the Spiders should be clear. It was now or never.

"Butcher Six to all Butcher elements. Attack on line! Don't stop until you reach the recon site."

#### IV.

*Certain events happen in a man's life that push him in directions he doesn't want to go. I've done a lot of things I'm not very proud of. Before this started I was a generally nice person, but now, after seeing the horrors of full scale warfare, I don't know. There comes a point when the caring doesn't matter, and all you can do to get home is kill. I was at that point all day.*

Fera Mons watched through his eyepiece as Imperium gunships swooped in low and fired off their missiles on the Xemp firebase. Machinery and Xemp soldiers died in a massive ball of fury. Screams from the interstellar jets made a banshee's howl pale. Mons knew his team was safe from that destruction. They were well trained, with years of service and combat experience on a dozen different worlds. There were none other that he would gladly give his life for. The gunships broke out even faster than they had arrived, leaving a nightmarish landscape of twisted metal and broken dreams. This was war at its nastiest.

Mons scanned the smoldering ruins one last time and then issued his orders. "Move out. I don't want any prisoners."

Moving as one, the recon squad worked down the small ridge towards what remained of the Xemp firebase. Sporadic gunfire came back at them, the grim reminders that air power never killed all the enemy. Fera Mons hit the sandbag wall surrounding the firebase and did what he did best. It took only minutes for his troopers to secure the base.

Mons removed his helmet, his pitch black hair flowing in the stiff breeze. The hair was a stark contrast to his green skin. He pulled a canteen and drained the last bit of fresh water he had. Satisfied, he nodded at his radio operator.

"Go ahead and radio command. Objective secure."

ϕ

Snake Eyes finally led his ragged troopers into the perimeter nearly two hours later. They'd been in constant contact from the beginning and were down to just over fifty percent strength. War was dirty business, but he swelled with pride upon reaching the goal. Most of his troopers wanted to collapse once they crossed the line, but pride and discipline kept them in order. Each knew there was much to be done before any of them could rest.

Squad leaders reported in and began the tedious work of rebuilding the defenses. The Xemps would be back, and in force.

“I want those heavy guns pointing south,” he told the squad leaders. “It won’t do us any good if the Xemps creep in with our pants down around our ankles.”

“I’m on it,” Rolg said. She collected up her gear and moved out. A lot of men in the platoon were jealous of her. She was a hard woman, and consummate professional. Rolg was a true warrior.

Snake Eyes showed no emotion. “The rest of you make sure your people have clean socks and get some chow. We need to start digging in until word comes down from higher. Rotate the troopers through a sleep plan. I have a feeling the fun is only starting.”

Every man and woman in the platoon knew their roll and they worked diligently to get to that precious sleep. The bad news didn’t come until an hour later when Malago called in to report that the rest of the company was holed up behind heavy brush and would be hours late. Snake Eyes immediately planned for the worst.

ϕ

Malago rubbed her aching temples and sighed. She wasn’t used to the harsh conditions and heightened physical demands this planet asked of her. Hells, she wasn’t used to the special ops. Her last command had been a cushy office assignment on one of the outer worlds. This was a vastly different animal and she wasn’t so sure she liked it.

“Top, how much longer until we get clear of this? I want to link up with the rest of the company by nightfall.”

Derlnth wasn’t sure of much these days, but he did know it would be a bloody long time past sundown. “Hard to say, Ma’am. This ain’t like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

His muscles tensed at the slightest sound in the jungle. Derlnth unslung his rifle and stalked forward. Others did the same, assuming a defensive posture without as much as a word. Derlnth pushed aside a large leaf and peered into the deceiving midday shadows. A whirl of motion tumbled him to the ground. Gun fire filled the trails. Through his daze, Derlnth caught the deep, throaty scream of a woman.

V.

*True fear comes from the darkest ranges of the mortal mind. No one knows what sparks it or why, but its very presence commands us. The day it happened to me I could feel the fear and, in some dark, twisted way, it kept me warm through the growing uncertainties of war.*

Derlnth brushed some off the dirt from him and surveyed the scene. Seven dead and three more would be joining them by the end of the night. They didn’t know what hit them or why. The first beast had knocked him to the ground. The second decapitated Captain Malago. At least she didn’t suffer, he nodded.

“RTO,” he growled. “I want coms with the rest of the company, now. Warn all elements of what’s out there.” Only he wasn’t sure what was out there.

A navy skin soldier covered with sweat matted fur poked the tip of his rifle through a pile of gore. "Horz is gone, Top. Radio with him. Looks like we're all on our own."

Derlnth swore to himself. It was going to be dark soon and the Gods only knew what was stalking them.

ϕ

"Yo Sarge! We've got a line one over here," one of the troopers cried out.

Snake Eyes set down his can of rations and collected up his weapon. This was not what he needed. Marching across the firebase in disgust, he cursed the day the Imperium recruiter ever came to his city. The day was ending and his body ached the way it always did right before a fight. It had been a long time since they last made contact with the rest of the company and Mons and his boys had already slipped off into the jungle. Snake Eyes had the distinct impression that his world was about to blow up around him.

"Go and find me Sgt. Elias."

The trooper dashed off, leaving Cpl. Apalon to guide the platoon sergeant.

"Where did you find him?"

Apalon smirked. "Down in the grocery. Not like Mons and his boys to overlook something this big."

Snake Eyes nodded. "Show me."

Apalon peeled back the heavy wool curtain and reveals a cowering Xemp. His reptilian skin was dehydrated from fear and it looked like he was in shock. The two Spiders exchanged sidelong glances while the prisoner watched.

"Nice. What got to him?" Snake Eyes asked. "I've never seen one so shaken after a strafing run."

"Don't know. He's been babbling about 'them' since we found him. He just won't say who 'them' is"

Bad things were coming fast.

It took a lot of coaxing and a few gallons of dirty water, but the Xemp finally started to make sense. By then it was too late. A surprisingly chill wind rustled through the jungle, making the Spiders shiver in their armor.

"What happened after the air strikes?" Snake Eyes asked.

The Xemp swallowed the last bit of water. "Thosse who the bombs didn't kill, we got ready to attack. Your peopless didn't arrive for ten minutess."

A deep howl echoed through the wind swept trees.

The Xemp cowered in fear. "They have returned."

"Who?"

"The Skaness." The Xemp began crying.

It was immediately clear to Snake Eyes that this Xemp was not a prisoner, but a survivor. Snake Eyes had to move quickly if any of them were going to survive the night.

"I want everyone up and alert. Bring in the lines and double them. Two to every fighting position. Nothing gets inside the perimeter," he bellowed across the point, half in the hopes their attackers would hear it and think twice about coming. He didn't know what a Skane was, but he doubted his words had any effect. It took a lot to scare a Xemp.

Elias grimaced once, refusing to let his troops see the weakness of his fear, especially since they were all looking to the noncoms for strength. Sometimes it was a pain

being the example. He hoped that strength was rubbing off on the troopers, because his own fears were rising.

“What if this is just a Xemp trick?” he asked. “We’ve been hit by them through the backdoor before.”

Snake Eyes didn’t think so. “No way. That Xemp is scared out of his mind. Whatever a Skane is, we can bet they’re not friendly.”

The two sergeants stared into the growing darkness and watched the shadows grow larger. The jungle took on a haunted flavor. Every noise became a symphony. The rattle of a pebble skipping down armor. A rifle butt scraping across the ground. Aside from the sounds of his troopers, the jungle was as quiet as death.

“This is the worst I think I’ve ever been in,” Kimel whispered. “It’s going to get ugly fast. Keep your people up and doing their jobs. With a little luck we just might make it out of here.”

Elias slapped his friend on the shoulder and smiled grimly. “I gave up looking to the Gods a long time ago. This is all us.”

## VI.

*The ultimate price for bravery is either emulation by your peers or a crisp metal casket covered with a flag and a posthumous medal pinned to your chest. Either way, heroes are the thing of legend. We all know the worlds need men and women to look up to, but that night no one wanted to make the leap to hero status.*

Sergeant Rolg watched the jungle with a growing anticipation. She’d been in this type of situation before and knew that the wait was the most disarming part. All they had to do was wait. Wait for the enemy to attack. Wait for the rest of the company to arrive. Just wait. She stifled a yawn. That’s when large, hulkish shadows lurched to life just beyond the edge of visibility. They attacked with alarming speed. How they managed to get that close Rolg would never find out. Her jaw dropped open even as she brought her ion rifle to bear.

Rolg screamed, “They’re inside the wire!”

Ion fire raked the skyline. Skanes howled and attacked. The firebase erupted into battle. The dread silence became a wistful memory. Dozens of the nightmarish creatures launched from the night, worming their way through the perimeter practically untouched. The battle was as fierce as it was overwhelming, Snake Eyes dashed to the wall, staring wide eyed at the scale of carnage. Bodies, his people, were being torn apart almost effortlessly while the enemy was virtually untouched.

A bullet ridden body landed in pieces nearby and he wasted no time in moving to inspect it. He prayed to find some weakness in the Skanes before his whole command was wiped out. The Skane, what was left of it, was made of mostly shadows, with short, hairy limbs and a murderous row of double teeth. Whatever cruel twist of fate made them intended them to be the ultimate killing machines.

It soon became clear to Snake Eyes that his platoon was about to suffer the same fate as the Xemps. That left him with only one choice. A blur sped past and he snapped off

a quick burst from his rifle. There were too many screams to know if he had hit it or not. Snake stormed across the killing ground to Elias's position. The two haggard men slumped under cover to catch a quick breath.

"We're not going to make it," Elias said.

Snake Eyes agreed. "Pull the perimeter in. I'm calling in an air strike."

Private Dibbs stumbled through the carnage. His left arm was missing from the elbow down. He made it far enough to fall dead at Snake Eyes' feet. The last act of a proud soldier who had done his damndest. Sorrow gripped him, but Snake Eyes didn't have time to mourn yet. He snatched the handset from the dead man and mouthed a command that he had only ever heard about.

"Cobra Seven-seven, this is Butcher Six. Request immediate air strike on coordinates papa alpha seven-seven-four-one-three-zero. No way out of this one."

"Copy Butcher Six. Birds inbound. Tell your boys to keep their heads down. This is only going to last a second."

Snake Eyes had already returned to the battle. He mumbled a quick soldier's prayer as the screams of jets roared overhead. Gods help them all.

## VII.

*I don't remember what happened after that. I was up to my armpits in gore, both mine and theirs. Funny thing about them was they disappeared once they died. Whoever came to inspect the scene when the smoke cleared would find no justification for Sgt. Kimel to call in an air strike on his own position. All I knew was that we had suffered enough casualties to be pulled from the line. The Crimson Spiders were sent to a much needed R and R world while replacements trickled in.*

Snake Eyes knelt next to the stretcher Elias was strapped down on. He passed a half smoked cigarette and the both laughed. Anyone who's never been associated with the military wouldn't quite understand, but the rest of the troopers paid no attention.

"Looks like you finally got bit hard enough to go home," Snake said.

Elias let out a lungful of smoke. "It's about time. What do you think they're going to say about all of this?"

"Hard to tell. The Xemp died during the fighting. Doesn't really leave much credibility to our story. How's the leg?"

Elias grimaced. "Apart from almost being torn off? I don't think I'll be hitting the dance floor anytime soon. You know, the funny thing is I am going to miss all of this. I really am, Snake."

The rotor wash from the medevac thumped through the valley. Snake Eyes clasped his friend's shoulder for the last time and said, "you're crazy. No one in their right mind should ever miss this."

"So long, Snake. Maybe we can do this again someday."

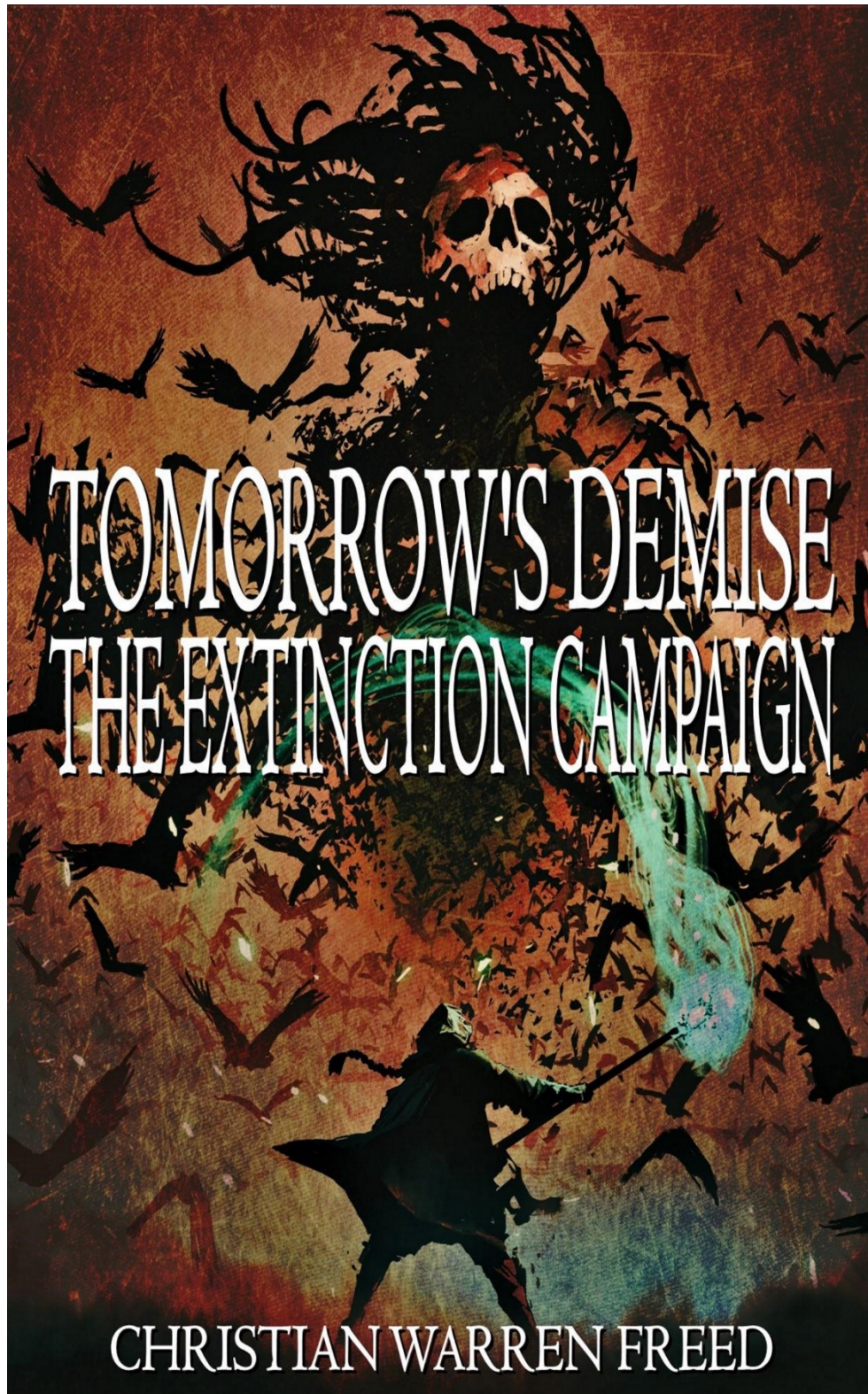
The medics rushed to get me to the bird and that was the last I ever saw of Sergeant Kimel.

*And that's my tale. A day and a half of pure Hells in that murderous jungle. My life as a soldier was over, but it left me with an entirely new challenge. I was alone again. How could I possibly start over?*

END



Check out the first volume in the Tomorrow's Demise universe:  
The Extinction Campaign.



## BEGINNINGS

Ganelin D'mala sat by himself enjoying the calm summer day. A cool breeze blew, rustling the trees while easing some of the extreme heat. The sky was laced with clouds of purest white. Songbirds flit everywhere. For a moment, he could almost forget this was his last day on Mandrak Prime. His last day home. He conjured a ball of pale fire in his right hand, letting it dance between his fingertips as visions of the future entertained him. Not even the power of his magic was enough to remove the pall of leaving everything behind, however. This was a moment of immense...change. How easily would he cast aside all that he once was in favor of the vast unknown of time and space? Even being accounted as one of the future's brightest wizards, Ganelin found the concept as terrifying as it was exciting.

Still considered young by most standards, at one hundred and twenty-seven he was on the brink of assuming a junior teaching position at the Academy. A prestigious spot for any wizard. He'd graduated at the head of his class in both conjuring and illusion and already held a reputation as one of Mandrak Prime's master illusionists. The future was indeed limitless. All that stood in his way was a brief mission abroad.

His thoughts drifted back when he was first informed of his selection to the Crusade. His best friend, Aragin Mephistile, a powerful wizard in his own regard, burst into his quarters with a grin so wide his face could barely contain it. Four had been chosen for the once a year expedition. More importantly, Crusade was the right of passage for becoming a fully ordained wizard.

It was the hardest task an apprentice undertook and Ganelin had the feeling theirs was going to be especially difficult. They were being sent to Telgeise III to assist the native peoples in constructing a better civilization out of the ruins in which they presently dwelled. Their hope was to bring the people of Telgeise into the stars within a few hundred years.

"Ganelin, come on. There's time for one last drink before the shuttle leaves."

He looked up to see Aragin standing in the cantina doorway waving at him. Ganelin returned the gesture and let the flames in his hand to dissolve. There'd be enough time to fiddle with his craft during the long voyage. He collected his gear and hurried to join his friends, who were already well into their cups. Ganelin wasn't much of a drinker but knew better than to try and escape now.

Aragin passed him a mug and raised his own in salute. "My friends, today we embark on a long journey. Though we will long to be back home among friends and family I have no doubt that our deeds will long be echoed across the stars. To us! And the glory of our deeds!"

"To us!" they cheered.

Ganelin smiled but again found a cruel shadow creeping over them. He suddenly doubted they were ever going to see Mandrak Prime again.

Aradias Kane sat atop the lone boulder watching Helscape's twin suns set. Most of the other village children were out playing now that the heat was finally subsiding. A barren desert stretched out before him. Barren but far from empty. The Wastelands of Helscape were unfriendly for young and old alike. Villagers struggled to etch a meager living farming or making random trinkets and goods for those rare, passing caravans still

venturing this far into the sands.

His village was comprised of mostly mud huts and reinforced tents. The weather was brutal most days, conspiring against them with punishing heat during the day and near frigid temperatures at night. Both paled in comparison to the darkness lurking just beneath the surface. A menace unlike any other hunted the local population, killing without reason. Or mercy.

Everyone in the Wastes knew the stories. An ancient horror that lurked beneath the shifting sand dunes, patiently waiting for the moment when exquisite violence could be unleashed. Most people had lost friends and family to this horror. It was a fact of life. Men named them Berserkers. Strange and powerful beasts from the most vivid nightmares. They had been a plague on humanity for so long few, if any, remembered where they came from. Prayers were whispered for safety and deliverance though such contrivances seldom worked. There was no safe haven from the Berserkers.

Aradias's father often told him stories of lone warriors named Slayers who roamed the deserts in search of the darkness. He filled the boy's head with tales of grand heroes who willingly sacrificed all for the sake of others. Aradias wasted too many hours pretending to be a Slayer while the other children mocked him, treated him like an outsider. He didn't care. Aradias knew what his life held in store and dreamt the nights away hoping for the day when he might prove his worth.

Eyes closed, he tilted his head back to enjoy the last rays of sunlight on his face. The sound of children playing drifted lazily past him and into the village. Leather winged argots, the great carrion birds of the desert, floated across the near horizon. Aradias opened his eyes and watched with envy as they disappeared in a collage of gold, red, and orange.

His silver eyes were cold, emotionless. At seven years old he was already feeling lost.

The dinner bell rang from the village square. Some children stopped playing to run home for a meal generally consisting of fried cactus and zorin meat. Meager feedings, but nutritious. The rest of the children ended their games and hurried home before the sun dropped. Aradias tried his best to ignore them, finding their fear of the night boring, contrite. Life in the tiny village of Rivide was often without imagination. Or so he believed.

"Come on, Aradias. Stay out here any longer and the monsters will get you!" Barsh, one of the older boys taunted as he loped back to the village proper.

Sighing, Aradias reluctantly jumped down from the rock. He'd only taken a few steps when he thought he felt the ground move. He froze. The old one whispered of intense quakes in the moments before the monsters came. Aradias scanned his surroundings but there was only rock and sand. Kicking a small stone, he turned away from the sounds. He'd let his imagination get the better of him and felt the fool for it. The critical look in his father's eyes when he returned home confirmed as much.

"Where have you been, son? I could have used your help in the field."

Aradias slumped, feeling weight press down. He'd forgotten. Submissive, he lowered his eyes. "Nowhere, father."

His father grunted. "Probably out on that damned rock again. I just don't understand why you won't play with the other children."

"Leave him be. He's just a child," his mother scolded.

Aradias was about to speak up when a blood curdling scream tore across the edge of dusk. His heart leapt. His father was already on his feet and reaching for the rifle he

always kept behind the front door. The floor timbers creaked menacingly with each footstep. Aradias knew he'd remember the look on his father's face for the rest of his life. A mix of mind-numbing fear and the sudden realization that they were about to die filled his heart. The crisp metallic sound of the rifle being cocked filled the small home.

"Berserkers," his mother breathed.

"Get to your room now, both of you! Aradias, help your mother," father whispered.

"I can help you," Aradias whispered back. He ran to the cupboard and pulled out the old dagger they kept stashed there. It might as well have been a sword in his tiny grasp.

Father snapped. "No. You cannot stand against this."

The front door burst apart in a ragged storm of splinters moments after Aradias and his mother secured the metal door to his bedroom. They heard his father's screams. Smelled the fetid combination of blood and urine. Aradias shook uncontrollably. He didn't want to die. Heavy footsteps padded closer. His grip on the dagger tightened. A sob escaped his mother. Just one. Fists and feet began beating his door down. One blow at a time the monsters were getting closer.

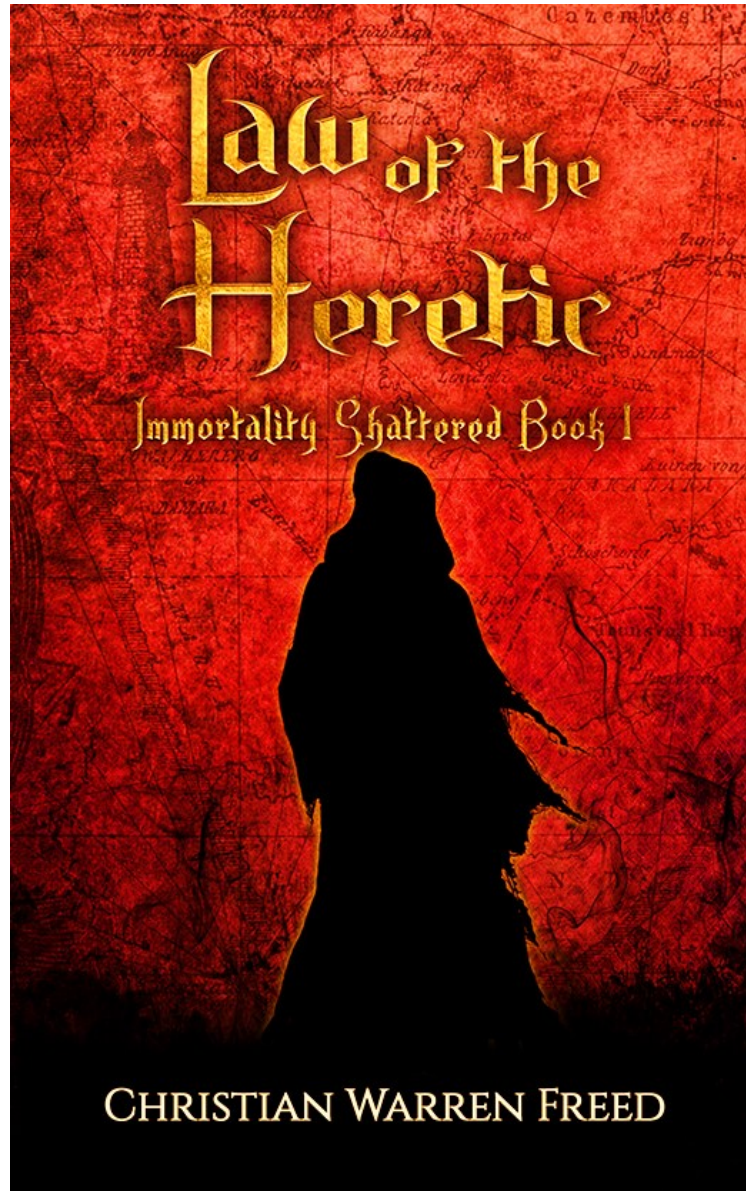
Aradias Kane bolted up from his bedroll. Time weathered hands snatched his rifle up. He scowled. Sixty years worth of nightmares remained as vivid as that night his parents were murdered. Kane groaned and climbed to his feet. The predawn air of the Wastelands was chilled, pitch black. Kane didn't mind. He found the solitude oddly comforting. A lifetime spent patrolling the deserts in search of the monsters responsible for killing his family were not lost. He felt alive out here. More alive than being trapped in any of the larger, better protected cities to the east and south.

This morning was but another on the hunt. A short distance away his horse snorted. It was the only form of good morning Kane ever heard. Alone as a man could get, Kane began the well-rehearsed drill of packing, eating, and getting ready to ride. Somewhere out there, near yet still far enough to confound him, was a pack of Berserkers in need of justice. He was that sword. An unbreakable force unleashed upon his enemies until there were none left. Kane climbed into the saddle and headed out.



Other Books by Christian Warren Freed

Law of the Heretic: Immortality Shattered Book I



The Staff of Life has been lost for a thousand years. Imbued with the powers to dominate all life, the Staff can save or ruin the Free Lands. Many have sought out the Staff. All failed. Until now.

Aron Kryte has served the Hierarchy for years. Honorable. Duty-driven, the young man has risen through the ranks of the venerable Golden Warriors. Born into this life, Aron

patrols the Free Lands, maintaining the long peace. Little could he know that the world he knows is built upon lies. His quiet summer days are shattered when he is led into an ambush by the man whose brother he once killed.

Imelin is the last of his order. A powerful wizard and member of the High Council, he has ever harbored the secret desire for power. Darkness dwells in his heart. He defects from the Council and heads to the forsaken land of Suroc Tol, where an army of darklings await his command. With the creatures of legend under heel, Imelin can at last embark upon his quest to discover the Staff of Life and begin a war of attrition that will bring the Free Lands to their knees.

Events are set in motion that will change the Free Lands forever. War brews. The ancient elven fortress of Dol'ir is overrun by a timeless enemy, the survivors forced to flee. Traitors rise. Armies gather. Only a handful of men and women stand against the coming storm. It begins in Galdea, where an aging king is slowly losing control.



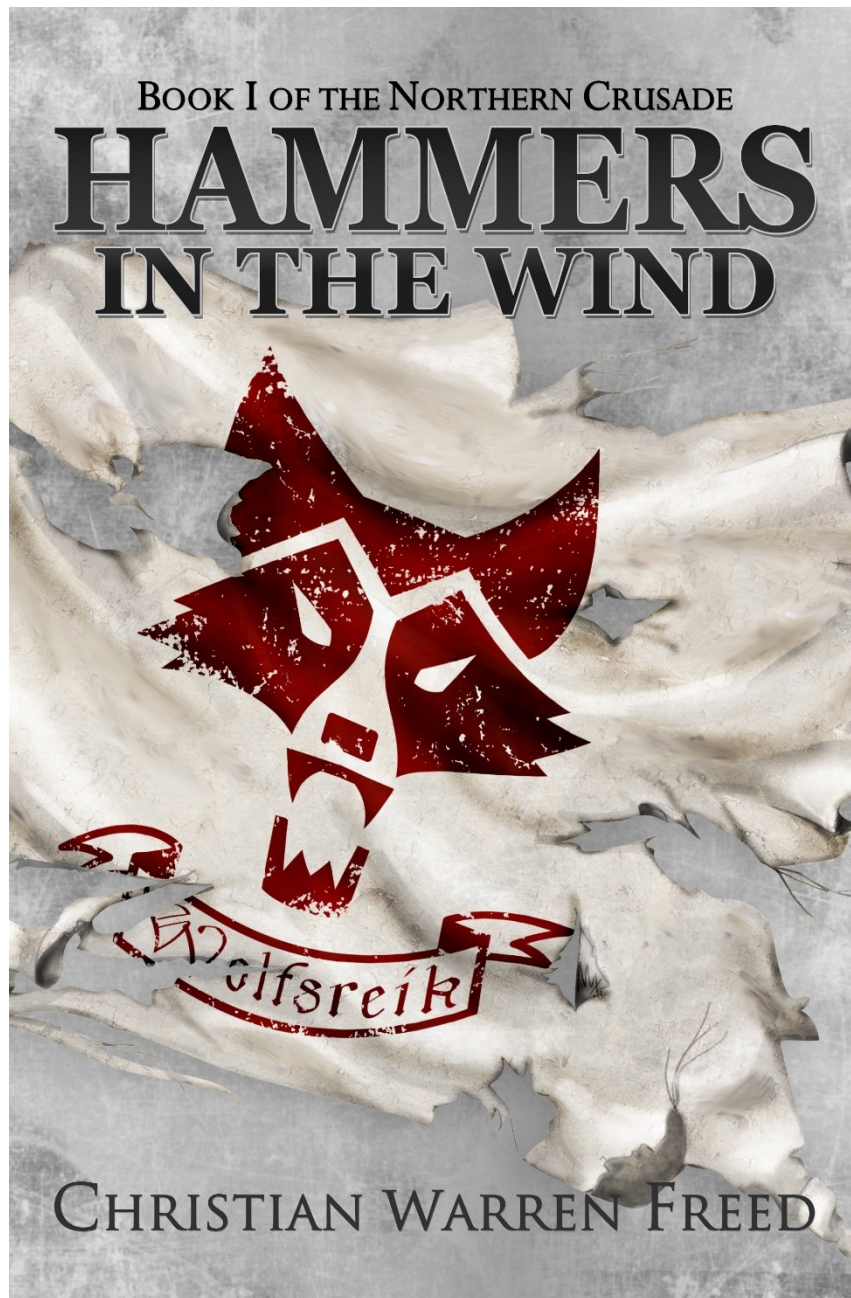
## Dreams of Winter: A Forgotten Gods Tale #1



Under the rigid guidance of the Conclave; an order of holy men seeking to bring back the glory of the time of the gods, the Order of the Inquisition and their Prekhauten Guard divisions the seven hundred known worlds carve out a new empire with the compassion and wisdom the gods once offered. But a terrible secret, known only to the most powerful, threatens to undo three millennia of progress. The gods are not dead at all. They merely sleep. And they are being hunted.

Senior Inquisitor Tolde Breed is sent to the planet Crimeat to investigate the escape of one of the most deadly beings in the universe. Amongeratix, one of the three sons of the god-king is loose once again, the fabled Three. Tolde arrives on a world where heresy breeds insurrection and war is only a matter of time. Tolde is aided by Sister Abigail of the Order of Blood Witches in his quest to find Amongeratix and return him to Conclave custody before he can begin his reign of terror.

What he doesn't know is that the Three are already operating on Crimeat. Each serves a different emotion: Vengeance, Sorrow and Redemption. Their touch drives the various characters beyond themselves and towards an uncertain future that can only end one of two ways. Either the Three win and finally destroy the gods, or humanity stops them and continues to survive.



Chaos has come to the northern kingdom of Delranan. King Badron's house is invaded; his son murdered and his daughter kidnapped. Badron's desire for revenge pushes the north into a long anticipated war. Confident of neighboring Rogscroft's involvement in the attack, Badron orders his feared Wolfsreik, an army without equal, to attack and destroy his enemies.

The ship *The Dragon's Bane* returns to Delranan during the night of the attack and is quickly hired to hunt down and return the princess: dead or alive. Mercenaries and sell swords answer his call; none stranger than the seemingly feeble old Anienam Keiss, a man claiming to be the last living wizard and hiding the failures from a dark past and the mysterious warrior woman from the deep southern jungles: Rekka Jel. She comes with a

dire warning. A dread evil has awakened and threatens to consume Malweir in a wave of fury.

It begins in Delranan.

## 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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