

# THE PURIFYING FLAME



A WAR PRIESTS OF ANDRAK SAGA



Christian Warren Freed

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I.

Brother Quinlan stood on the east rampart, strong winds blowing his long silver hair wildly about his shoulders. His tired gaze fell on the train of fresh knights marching towards the castle. Another in an endless stream under misinterpretations of what right should be. Knights and pilgrims, they were crusaders all. Brother Quinlan sighed. Most would not live to see the return journey.

“It is time again, Quinlan,” Brother Fos growled from behind.

Older, larger, Fos had stood against the Great Enemy for more than twenty years. He bore scars, physical and emotional but never once had he faltered in the face of the foe. Men like him were rare, even amongst the war priests. Fos was a bear of a man, hugely muscled with a thick neck and bull shoulders. Dark eyebrows shadowed his hazel eyes, giving him a natural menace. What he lacked was compassion, a trait Quinlan found hard to separate from. Younger by far, Quinlan was muscled, toned. His eyes were still sharp to the last vestiges of youthful innocence despite the horrors he had witnessed.

A curt nod. “If they only knew what they were about to experience.”

Fos frowned. “They come to stand against the Great Enemy. Do not begrudge them that, Quinlan. Castle Andrak is the last of the old defenses. If we fall, the planet follows.”

“There must be a better way.”

Quinlan’s argument was halfhearted, useless at best. He knew there was no alternative. The caravan was close enough for him to make out the faces of the scouts. A sigh. They were too young. Much too young to throw their lives away here.

“Come. Let us report before Master Sergeant Cron begins.”

Fos marched away without waiting to see if the younger war priest followed. His grey cloak danced on the building winds. Snowflakes burrowed into his unruly black hair.

Donal Sawq stared up at the mythical castle Andrak with awe filled eyes. The old ones told grand stories of nobler times, revolving around heroes; impossible men and women who dared face the darkness when none else did. Donal wasted countless childhood hours pretending to be a knight on the ramparts of the fabled castle Andrak, defending the world from unrelenting evil. He and his brother went through many sticks used as swords. Now here he was. Alabaster walls struck high into the winter sky, casting shadows over the slowly winding caravan. Donal shivered with the wind. A dull hum throbbed off of Andrak's walls. Donal felt the power, the raw energy that pulsed deep into the earth.

"Mind yourself, young Sawq," Sir Forlei reprimanded. "Those walls are for men, not squires filled with fanciful dreams."

Donal hung his head. Much of his life had been spent at the end of sharp tongues. It was a torment he'd grown accustomed to but did little to dampen his spirits. Adversity was a disappointing familiarity. Never truly loved, Donal's father sold him shortly after the pox took his mother. He was passed around from town to town, always doing the menial and often beaten on a drunken whim. Donal Sawq became a shadow of what he might have been. No one bothered with slaves. His luck changed when he was sold to the Grunding Academy. There he learned the art of squiring. Never in his wildest imagination did he think to find himself in the service of one of the noble one hundred chosen to defend castle Andrak during the Burning Season.

Donal was lithe, almost painfully thin. His brown hair was unkempt, hanging just past his shoulders; a stark contrast from the militarily disciplined Sir Forlei. The soft brown of his eyes was hidden beneath the dull brown and green of his tunic and the dark furs of the great draun bear. None in the caravan expected winter's welcome, though they had been briefed to prepare for anything by one of the Brothers before leaving the floating city of Mistwell. Donal had shivered when he dared look over the edge of the lone bridge winding up the more than a mile distance to where Mistwell drifted among the clouds. He struggled to keep from vomiting. It was his first sobering experience of this adventure.

Delusions of grandeur further evaporated the closer Donal got to Castle Andrak. He gazed up at the once beautiful walls, now sullied with the residue repeated Omegri assaults. Impact craters gouged deep holes. Evidence of fire scored some of the higher crenellated ramparts. Murder holes broke the illusion of serenity. Castle Andrak was not the thing of beauty poets and jongleurs wrote of. It was a place where men came to die. Donal sucked in his breath as they entered the massive portcullis and the courtyard beyond.

Twenty-five war priests waited, solemn in their pale blue cloaks. They arrayed in a triangle, each bearing stern glares with lurking hints of sorrow. The caravan stopped and Donal jumped at the sound of the black gate closing. Good or bad, they were now trapped.

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Master Sergeant Cron spat a wad of phlegm and eyed the new recruits. One hundred knights, men and women, stood in formation ten ranks deep. Cron was unimpressed. He absently scratched the scar tissue around his empty right eye socket. Too many had passed through the gates during his tenure as senior sergeant. So many he didn't bother learning names or getting to know them anymore. Cron lowered his fur lined hood, revealing a head



of silver hair closely cropped to the skull. The pale blue and silver of his cloak complimented winter's kiss. Sensing his brother's impatience, Cron took a step forward.

"Forget everything you have heard about Castle Andrak," he growled. His bear-like voice echoed around the courtyard. "There is no romance, no happy ending. The war priests have held this castle for thousands of years against the crushing tide of the Omegri. We are all that stands between the light and eternal darkness."

Murmurs and sudden restlessness rippled through the knights. Cron forced a savage grin and began to pace the length of the formation.

"Every one hundred days one hundred knights come to defend these walls. You sell your lives dearly so that countless millions might live. We salute you! Tonight begins your hundred days. The Omegri are ruthless and will not allow you time to prepare. Each day will confront you with a new challenge. Andrak stands on the border between reality and the immaterial. The Omegri do not exist in this world but that won't stop them from killing you. Brother's Quinlan and Fos will see to your billeting. All squires will report to Quartermaster Therig for weapon and armor issue. Ladies and gentlemen, your war begins tonight. Stand your watch and fear no darkness!"

"Fear no darkness!"

The battle cry rang from the walls as every war priest echoed Cron. Donal felt pride and youthful vigor fill his heart. His skin tingled in dread anticipation. No soldier, his job was to stand the wall behind Forlei and resupply weapons and, if needs be, take his place if he fell. Donal swallowed his fears and joined the line of squires and errand boys as the knights were led off.

## II.

A pale glow encased castle Andrak, fitting for the bitter grasp of winter. Andrak was old. Almost as old as the world itself. Time had lost the truth of the original builders, though legends claimed golden godlings descended from the skies to construct the six sided wonder in a single night. More conventional theorists claimed it was built from the sweat of captured slaves over the course of a century. The one thing scholars agreed on was that Andrak was one of six castles built along the same lay line circling the globe. Their purpose was obvious; keep the Omegri from returning from the void and devouring the world in utter chaos and despair.

A massive tower loomed over the center of the courtyard. The current Lord General of the war priests occupied the very top where he could watch each day's battle unfold. Some said he was a necromancer, others a powerful sorcerer. Only the Lord General knew for sure and he was not a man given to prolonged conversation. War priests patrolled the outer wall, resplendent in their pale blue armor and snow covered cloaks. Mighty silver crosses decorated their chests, matched by larger versions on the alloy shields each war priest carried.

Guards towers built into each of the six corners housed spare weapons and armor. On the worst nights the defenders could come in and get a hot cup of soup or coffee to ease the sufferings nature threw at them. There was, however, a curious lack of seating. None



took their jobs more seriously than the war priests. They suffered so that others might enjoy. Donal admired them despite the newfound fear lurking deep within.

Brother Quinlan marched by, the white wings attached to his helmet repelling the cold winter night. Face guards concealed much, leaving a narrow strip for each eye and his mouth uncased. Donal swallowed at a stern glare from the war priest.

Quinlan stopped a few meters away and addressed his section of the wall. "We are the servants of light, keepers of the Purifying Flame. The Omegri will stop at nothing to eclipse the light. Should any of you find you lack the courage to stand the wall you will be removed and banished from the duchies. Cowards and those weak of heart will not survive the first night."

His gaze swept left and right. "Do not underestimate your enemy. The Omegri are of the old world, in a time before men. Should you fall, should we all fall, the Omegri will sweep into the castle and extinguish the Purifying Flame. Will you let that happen?"

"No!" the knights cried as one.

Brother Quinlan nodded, silently unimpressed by display of their empty bravado. "Then stand and fear no darkness!"

Again, Donal's heart swelled. The war priest imbibed strength to the new recruits. The first night was always the roughest. Many would not live to see the dawn. Hearts would rupture, eyes would bleed and minds would shatter over the course of the next few hours. Not even the supernatural powers of the war priests were enough to save everyone.

Night deepened. Winds blew colder. Donal shivered and tried to lose himself inside the false warmth of his cloak. He looked ahead to where Sir Forlei stood. The knight remained composed. His shoulders shivered slightly. Donal suppressed a grin. Knowing one so powerful as a knight suffered from simple cold the same as he did wonders for Donal's morale. Time moved slowly.

Donal yawned, drawing a fierce glare from Brother Quinlan. Donal opened his mouth to apologize when a strange sensation overwhelmed his senses, driving him to his knees. Donal vomited from the sheer pressure building in his head and chest. Brother Quinlan immediately recognized the threat and spun towards the wall. Raising his body length shield, Quinlan whispered a short prayer and raised his shield. Ripples of power distorted the air, pushing back against the night.

Donal looked up to see a magnificent pale golden light pour from the silver cross. It was quickly echoed by more than a dozen others around the ramparts.

"Fear no darkness!" the battle cry sang from the opposite side of the castle.

Donal slowly pushed himself back to his feet and looked into the night. Never had he seen such total darkness. The protective light glowing from the war priest's shields did little to stem the oppression. Raw emotions crawled up from lost corners in his mind. Hatred demanded. Fear humbled. Despair beckoned. Donal threw his hands over his ears and gave a silent scream.

Shapes crawled in the darkness. He caught fleeting glimpses of scales and tentacles. Claws and fangs. The smell of puss and rot polluted the air. Fresh snow sizzled and melted wherever it touched the dark creatures. *No, not creatures*, a voice in his mind warned. *They are the Omegri*. It was too much for Donal's young mind. His vision darkened. The last thing he saw were monstrous hands reaching out from the darkness to snatch the knight standing next to Sir Forlei. Donal collapsed.

### III.

Brother Fos shifted uncomfortably beneath his heavy blankets. Sweat beaded his brow. His eyes were screwed tight. Fists clenched the clean sheets. Visions tormented him. They showed him a future of bleak despair. He watched helpless as a war priest extinguished the Purifying Flame in a desperate act of unmitigated hatred. The Omegri swept into Andrak with all their horrific glory. The faceless Brother turned towards Fos and smiled.

"You don't look well," Quinlan remarked casually after Fos settled into the place opposite him at one of the dining tables.

The inviting smell of roast deer and boiled vegetables soothed Fos's troubles, if slightly. His stomach growled.

Ignoring Quinlan, Fos asked, "how many did we lose last night?"

"Seventeen."

A casual shrug. "It's been worse."

Quinlan eyed him suspiciously. "That is almost a fifth of our strength and we still have ninety-nine more nights before the Omegri retire."

"You make it sound as if we will not hold," Fos growled in warning. "Andrak is the last of the six. We have no choice but to hold. Mind your tongue, Quinlan. Your talk might be construed as treason."

"Treason?"

Heads turned in their direction.

"Keep your voice down, I was only saying," Fos snapped.

Cheeks flushed, Quinlan exhaled a long, deep breath. Only now he noticed his fist clenched tightly around a kitchen knife. "My apologies. These are stressful times. I lost five knights alone on my section of the wall."

Fos grunted but held his tongue. "No. I was out of place. My dreams have been troubling of late."

"What do you mean?"

He passed a cautious look around the mess before answering. "I think the Omegri are going to try to turn one of our brothers."

Quinlan felt his blood ice. "Does the Lord General know of this?"

A firm head shake. "No. I don't know what to tell him. I am not a dream reader."

"Impossible. You must be mistaken. We cannot be turned."

Fos looked lost. "What should I do? I feel lost."

"If it were me I would go to Rosca."

It took much for a war priest to find fear or doubt. The very mention of the Lord General's name inspired tremendous respect combined with a healthy measure of fear. Master of the premier military order in the duchies, Maximo Rosca was the definition of hard.

"I'd rather not," Fos said slowly.

"Go and meditate, Brother. Perhaps you will find solace there."

Brother Fos rubbed his thick black beard, pretending to be in thought. He was no coward, but there wasn't much that could convince him to willingly walk into the Lord

General's tower. Fos excused himself, leaving Quinlan to his ruminations. The younger Brother watched him leave, fresh suspicion growing in his heart. Times were dark when one of the war priests dreamed of the end.

Dark memories crept back; unwanted yet ever present. Brother Quinlan knew what it felt like to watch everything fail. He alone survived the horrors of the Omegri victory at Castle Bendris. So many casually slaughtered so casually in a single night. His appetite abandoned him. Quinlan dropped his fork and left. Several Brothers watched him leave and kindly waited for the door to close before deconstructing rumors.

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"So, you are alive after all," an unfamiliar voice said smoothly.

Donal blinked rapidly and tried to sit up but the pounding in his head decided otherwise. He fell back with a soft grunt before realizing the voice belonged to a woman. Donal had been under the impression that all the personnel assigned to Castle Andrak were male.

"Where am I?" he asked groggily. The pain medication still had a hold.

"The medical quarters. Brother Quinlan brought you in. you were in very bad shape. I believe one of the Omegri touched you."

His heart jumped. "What?"

She offered a false smile. "Relax, Donal Sawq. The Omegri do not come in the light. You are safe here."

"What do you mean they touched me?" he demanded.

A stiff sigh. "You were not touched in the physical sense. The Omegri are creatures of shadow and illusion. It is rare for them to have physical contact with anyone. They broke through the castle's defenses and touched your mind and soul. This is more common than you might think."

Donal couldn't understand how she was so casual with her admissions. He drug his hands over his body, desperately searching for any residue.

"I said relax. Your body will be sore and you will have a bad headache but the Omegri are gone. You are safe."

Donal kept his doubts. He looked at her for the first time. The short red hair, blazing like a dying sun. The veil of freckles decorating her face and arms. The softness of her features and the warmth in her blue eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked suddenly.

This time her smile was more genuine. "I am Surgeon Emmanilline Thellis."

"Are you a war priest?"

Her laugh was the sound of conversing angels. "No. They do not allow women within their ranks. They do, however, have many in their employ who are not priests and definitely not male."

"I...I'm sorry. This is all very frightening to me," he reluctantly admitted.

"Not quite what you imagined growing up is it?" she chided.

He shook his head and was about to say more when a shadow fell over him. Donal was surprised to see one of the war priests looking at him. He struggled to rise.

"That won't be necessary," Brother Quinlan said. Turning to Emmanilline, he asked, "how is he?"

“Sore, but he will recover.”

Good. Quinlan knelt beside the wood cot. “You have survived a rare wounding, young squire. Not many can say the same. The castle is glad to have you.”

Pride beamed in Donal’s eyes. “Thank you, sir.”

“I am Brother Quinlan. We will talk more once you have recovered. Do not worry about your place on the wall. Another will stand until you are better. Rest now and enjoy your respite. You have earned it.”

Quinlan left him feeling better about himself. Doubts old and new were erased under the wave of pride he now felt. Donal fell back and let sleep claim him.

#### IV.

Day twenty-three began with sweltering heat. The sun was barely above the horizon and it was already close to a hundred degrees. Donal’s mind had yet to grasp the truth of where Castle Andrak was located. He’d seen thick jungles, nothing but mist, and frozen fields of snow and ice. Today Donal stared out into an endless desert. His mind struggled with the concept and the war priests remained ominously silent. That disturbed him more than he imagined.

“This is madness,” he whispered.

For once Sir Forlei didn’t bother scolding him. Forlei looked haggard. He suffered from several wounds, mostly cuts. The Omegri fought with tooth and nail and sword as well as with their minds, regardless of what Surgeon Thellis said. Dark circles shadowed Forlei’s eyes. He hadn’t shaved in over a week and his armor seemed to hang more loosely. Donal was convinced his knight was surrounded by an aura of demise.

Pennants and banners blew in a stiff wind. Sand pelted Donal’s face, forcing him to pull his undershirt up over the lower half of his face for protection. He’d never experienced heat so fierce, nor had he ever seen a desert or a jungle or ice covered fields. Donal felt out of his league. Each new circumstance reminded him of just how small he was; how little he knew of the universe. Donal sighed and looked up at the massive banner flying from the Lord General’s tower. The pale blue background was fringed with silver. A mighty gryphon filled the center, claws arched in simultaneous displays of defense and offense. The strength of the war priests. Donal often looked to it for inspiration when the gloom became too much.

“Look! On the horizon!”

Donal snapped back to attention, his private thoughts safely tucked away for the moment. His mouth dropped. A dark cloud rolled towards them. Lightning slashed the outer edges. Strange sounds carried on the wind. A tiger’s growl. The screams of tortured souls. Fear pulsed across the ramparts. More than one knight dropped to his knees in stark terror. A woman screamed. Donal looked left and saw her throw her heavy helmet down and claw at her eyes. Thin streaks of blood ran down her face. He barely had time to shout no before she fell over the edge. Donal wanted to cry but doing so would only dishonor her. She was a knight and a defender of Castle Andrak.

Shapes could be seen marching out of the storm. Dark and massive, they marched ever closer to the base of the castle. Donal strained to see until he could make out the forms of giant scorpions and worse. Muscled half-men with dark beards and moustaches floated on the air, their bodies nothing but cycloning wind from the waist down. Their eyes glowed bright orange. Donal's knees shook. His body trembled.

"Steady!" Brother Quinlan barked, sword drawn. "What you see is not real. The Omegri taunt our fears with illusions. These are not the threat. Be wary. The true assault with come soon."

"But what of Lady Kosf? She died of..."

Quinlan's shield slammed the stone wall. "Silence! She died a knight in the service of the light. Do not sully her memory. Stand strong and fear no darkness!"

The battle cry echoed down the line until the entire defense shouted back in defiance to the Omegri. Donal shouted it too. He looked up and down the battle line, reveling in the sight of so many brave souls. His eyes fell on another war priest. Fos he believed his name was. The larger war priest chanted almost ritualistically but there was something different with him, almost wrong. Donal wasn't sure, but it appeared Brother Fos was nervous. Emotions were rare among the war priests and seeing Fos behaving so disturbed him deeply.

"Here they come!"

The Omegri illusions struck hard. Scorpions and Djinn attacked with raw fury. Each blow strained the protective veil of power pulsing off the war priest's shields. Attackers vanished in puffs of smoke and ash whenever they were struck. Several knights fell, squires too. Donal watched mortified as Sir Forlei's sword snapped in two.

"Spear!" Forlei shouted before a hairy scorpion plunged a long claw through his chest.

Blood and gore splattered Donal's face. He spit. Wiped the residue from his eyes. His fingers whitened as he gripped Forlei's sword tighter. Something snapped. Donal roared, a voice confused with separate emotions, and attacked. He hacked and slashed, breaking the chitin casing. The scorpion died in a cloud of ash. Donal kept hacking until Brother Quinlan knocked the sword away.

Donal looked up through tear cluttered eyes.

Approval lit Quinlan's eyes. "Your knight is gone. You must take his place. That is the way of things."

Quinlan slapped his back hard, approvingly and stalked back to the battle. Newfound confidence blossomed and Donal rose to the challenge. He fought unlike anything in his limited imagination. By the time it was over he slumped down exhaustedly beside Forlei's pale corpse. Donal had never looked death in the eye until now. He found it oddly emotionless. Forlei's eyes betrayed fear, but his skin was ghastly white and blue. Donal gently close Forlei's eyes for the last time.

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"You did well today," Sir Jeg Mas told him over a mouthful of roast boar.

Donal was too humbled to reply. Those many wasteful hours dreaming of being a grand knight, defending the weak and innocent seemed strangely false. The realization of truth sobered him quickly. Some of Forlei's blood speckled his hands. He feared his clothes

were stained for good though. It was only day twenty-three. He still had more than seventy days to try and survive a war he didn't understand. Donal looked down at his hands. Blisters were forming and his muscles were sore.

A hush fell over the knights. Donal looked up and was surprised to see two war priests enter the common mess. Perhaps it was nothing new, he conceded. Squires and serfs were not allowed to eat with their knights. Perhaps the Brothers sought common bond with the fighting men and women. They stopped in front of him and bowed.

"Donal Sawq, you fought bravely today," Brother Quinlan said in a voice loud enough to carry across the mess. "It is our honor to promote you to the rank of knight of the realm."

Knights slammed their fists on the old wooden tables and rapped their knuckles in salute. Donal became embarrassed. A day ago he could have been killed and no one would have noticed. Now he was being proclaimed a hero and praised. It was too much. Whatever he aspired to be, Donal was a modest villager at heart.

"Thank you, Brother, but I do not deserve such honor," he replied with all his courage.

Brother Fos eyed him intently. His dark eyes glared down threateningly. Donal squirmed uncomfortably before Quinlan asked, "Why do you say such a thing? It is our policy that should a knight fall the squire must take his place. Your promotion was earned through blood."

A bell chimed three times. Knights left their meals and headed to the main compound.

"Come. It is time for midday prayer. We must thank the light that we have survived another Omegri attack."

Donal nodded, somewhat reluctantly. "Yes, Brother. If I may, I would like to speak with you after."

"Of course. The war priests of Andrak are at your service, Sir Sawq."

Brother Fos waited for them to go before following. His dark eyes never left Donal's back.

## V.

"Donal, come in."

Donal gave an awkward bow and slipped into the small chamber. War priests were very Spartan-like. Brother Quinlan had a small cot and a stand to place his devotional book and weapons. A wardrobe lined the far wall and a small circular window. A short silver cross affixed to the wall above the headboard drew Donal's attention.

Faith was never strong where he came from, but the war priests insisted on it from everyone to the lowest cook and stable boy. Donal took comfort in the recited words. Warmth in the bond shared by the Brothers. Donal felt a part of something greater for the first time and it was liberating. Unfortunately, it left him filled with questions.

Quinlan caught his unfocused stare. "You have much on your mind. This is natural. It is not every day a boy is thrust into the world of men without mercy or want."

"I...I don't know where to begin," Donal admitted.

"Please, sit," Quinlan gestured with an open palm. "I find that beginnings are always the hardest. Allow me. You have questions about the Brothers, about Andrak, and about the Purifying Flame. Am I correct?"

Donal nodded.

"Let me start with the easiest. The Brotherhood was assembled to defend the Purifying Flame, the source of all life and light in the world. Originally there were six castles. Each is built on a nexus, a gateway between worlds. Our castles bar the entrance of the Omegri to our world. Contrary to what most villagers are taught or believe the Omegri are not demons. They do not have the strength of evil deities."

"What are they?" Donal interrupted and instantly felt sorry.

If Quinlan took offense he ignored it. "The absence of light. They are the imagination of death manifested to crush us. Legend tells us the gods sent life to the world in the form of the Purifying Flame. Good cannot exist without evil. The Omegri were born as side effects from the flame. They hunger to return. To embrace the flame once more but doing so will extinguish the light and all life will die. The Brotherhood has vowed to never let that happen."

"But you aren't enough," Donal finished.

Quinlan shook his head, a thin smile on his face. "No. We were never intended to be. The people play an important part in our defense. We don't hide the light. We spread it. You and others like you are required if we are to keep hope. It is a small price to pay for continued existence."

Donal had more questions now than when Brother Quinlan began talking. Most of what he learned made little sense. He was a simple villager, not some ordained priest with worldly ideations. How many thousands lived their entire lives without ever knowing anything about the Omegri or the men and women who died in the castles of the war priests? Donal found the idea disturbing. One he would not have bothered with only a few years ago.

"Would it be possible to," he floundered.

"See the Flame?"

A nod.

"Perhaps, but not yet. You have only been a knight for one day, my young friend," Quinlan grinned. "But I sense you have more to discuss."

His heart lurched. Donal wasn't sure if he should say it or not. He did not want to betray the faith placed on him without good reason. He pursed his lips while debating the proper way to explain. "I have noticed one of the Brothers watching me strangely and I can't figure out why. I've done nothing to offend him, at least nothing I know of."

Quinlan's expression darkened slightly. "Which Brother?"

Donal couldn't help but notice the gravelly edge in his voice. "I don't know his name but he has a black beard and moustache. A big man with a hard look."

"Brother Fos."

Donal fell silent. His part said. It took great effort to keep from fidgeting. The last thing he wanted was to betray any hint of nervousness to Brother Quinlan. Friends were a rarity and he still wasn't sure where he and Quinlan fell in.

"Choose your next words carefully, Donal. Fos is a war priest, not one of the common rabble. He is above your scrutiny. This is the only warning I will give. Do not



speak of this to another or you will be expelled from Castle Andrak and left to fend against the Omegri on your own.”

“My apologies, Brother. I meant no disrespect,” Donal quickly recovered.

“Go back to your post.”

Donal hurried out, wondering if Brother Quinlan was going to turn him in for sedition or not. His stomach threatened to climb out of his mouth.

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“I don’t like your tone, Quinlan.”

Quinlan frowned. “I don’t have a tone, Fos. I am merely asking if you went to the Lord General or not.”

“What I do is my business. I should have never trusted you.”

“We are Brothers, Fos. Trust is our most important weapon.”

Fos growled a deep, forced laugh. “Then trust me to mind my business.”

“Have you had more dreams?”

Rage took hold. Fos slammed a massive fist into the wooden door to his right. Splinters flew like shrapnel, knocking a candle from the wall sconce. “Damn it Quinlan! Get your nose out of my business. But if it really means so bloody much to you, no! I haven’t. Satisfied?”

He shoved past Quinlan, grumbling under his breath. Quinlan watched him go until he disappeared down the long grey corridor. Worries lined his forehead. For a Brother to act so brashly, so inconsistently something had to be terribly wrong. Quinlan wasn’t resigned to believe Fos was finally cracking but his guard was raised. He did not like the almost wild look lurking behind Fos’s eyes.

Quinlan debated going to the Lord General himself but knew he lacked sufficient evidence to accuse Fos of anything other than fatigue. There were too many factors and complexities to make him comfortable though. The Brotherhood lacked much of the political intrigue and backbiting throughout the kingdoms but flare ups occasionally occurred. A Brother would show up a counterpart to get a choice assignment or to avoid work in the kitchens. Nothing they did was comparable to the hostility Fos openly displayed towards him.

A small part of his conscience regretted treating Donal so harshly. The lad was scared and thrown into a world where he had no clue which way was up and expected to behave just like a seasoned veteran. Ridiculous but that was what the war priests demanded of their supplicants. There was no apologizing. A Brother could not afford the luxury of admitting to mistakes in front of the volunteers. Morale would plunge and the Brothers would be forced to scour the lands looking for conscripts. Andrak would fall.

Quinlan cursed his fortunes. Nothing had gone right since the fall of Castle Bendris. Old nightmares continued to haunt him. He feared there was no escaping them. The Omegri mocked him by letting him live. Quinlan’s scars were more than just mental. Burn marks ruined his chest, reminding him daily of his devotion and blind hatred for the dark. His vow to destroy the Omegri was made on the bones of men and women he once called friend.

He wished he had no cause for suspicion but there was no denying the air of danger clinging to the older Brother. Thinking about it, Quinlan realized that he had witnessed Fos

acting strangely on several occasions. Perhaps Donal's apprehensions were not unfounded after all. Cracks spread through the foundation of the Brotherhood, which led him to only one logical conclusion: the Omegri were coming in force to finish their task of finally destroying the Purifying Flame.

Quinlan bent down to pick up the fallen candle, frowning at the burn marks on the pale blue carpet. He had much to think on before acting.

ϕ

The night laughed, a barking madness driven deep into the recesses of his psyche. Abject visions of torment, flames and misery mocked him. Fos was lost. He tried to move. To wake himself up. He felt frozen. His body rebelled. Muscles clenched. Blood cooled. Faces formed in the shadows. They watched intently, curiously as if he were an experiment gone wrong.

Whispers circled his room. He tried to scream for them to stop but not sound came when he opened his mouth. Tears clogged his eyes.

*"It is almost time."*

A flash. The darkness was gone. His body was his own. Fos could move again. Nerves abandoned him. Fos slowly crawled from his bed, furtively searching every corner and shadow in his room. Lastly he looked into the small mirror in his wardrobe. Fos jerked. The face staring back at him was not his. Red eyes of the foulest shade glared, surrounded by coalescing shadows. His bladder drained and those terrible words returned to haunt him.

*"It is almost time."*

## VI.

Donal stared out at an impenetrable jungle. Thick undergrowth crept to within a hundred meters of the castle. Brother Quinlan assured him the distance was more than enough for a killing field before the knights needed to worry. Donal wasn't so sure. He'd seen the Omegri kill in more imaginative ways with each battle. Donal was starting to think the Brothers were a bit too secluded from the rest of the world to understand the bigger picture.

Donal was tired. Youthful vigor was spent, washed on the cold rock ramparts. His strength abandoned him quietly over the last five or six weeks, leaving him a drained husk of the man he should have been. The one respite he had to look forward to was their tour of duty was almost up. Seventy-seven days felt too long. His sword weighed. His shield an impossible stone dragging him forever down. His shoulders sagged. His face took on a hollow look, dark and shallow. Nourishment was not an issue though he felt starved. Knights spent too much energy defending the walls.

"Look at that. Damnedest sight I ever seen," grumbled Jeg Mas. The older knight was leaning forward, letting the wall take his weight.

"I've never seen a jungle before," Donal replied flatly.

Jeg snorted. "I haven't seen most of what goes on around here. Snow one day and unrelenting sun the next. This place ain't natural. Makes me wonder why I asked to come here."

The sudden admission surprised Donal. "You don't believe in this?"

A shrug. "I used to I suppose. But after what we've been through? I'm just glad to still draw breath."

It felt good to hear another say what his heart felt, but Donal was reluctant to reply in kind. He'd seen the way the Brothers acted when one went against their rules. Sir Kulp was publicly flogged for refusing to take the noon prayer.

"Our time is nearly finished," Donal agreed, trying to change the subject.

"Damn boy, but you've got a twisted sense of humor. Today could be our last and you're worried about going home. Ha!" Jeg tapped the cold stone. "This is home now."

Donal's cheeks blushed crimson. He opened his mouth to reply when he caught Brother Fos glaring at him from the near shadows. Gooseflesh rippled up his arms. Donal was convinced Fos had it out for him but there was more. The Brother had been acting stranger with each passing day. That more than anything the Omegri threw at them made Donal nervous. Fos was not a man to be crossed and that was the one thing Donal had done by going to Brother Quinlan.

"Hey, you there?" Jeg asked.

Donal shifted his gaze back to his fellow knight. "Sorry, I got lost in thought for a moment. I guess Andrak is finally getting to me."

"I'll say. The Omegri shouldn't exist and we should be back defending our homes. I heard some of the lads saying the Dread Queen is on the prowl again. Dark days are coming if its true." Jeg hocked hard and spit over the wall. "I reckon it won't be long 'fore they come at us. We should get some chow while we can."

"I don't know how you can eat before a battle. My stomach won't sit still long enough for me to keep it down."

"Ha! You just haven't been in enough scrapes yet. Give it time, young master Donal."

They strolled down towards the common mess. Jeg trying to forget his rumbling stomach and Donal trying to forget Brother Fos.

Quinlan slammed his shield into a gray skinned ape man. Blinding white light flared from the giant cross and the ape man vanished with a cut off scream. Acrid smoke drifted across the battlements, choking the defenders as they struggled to keep the reinforced Omegri from getting over the walls.

Distracted from watching the power of Brother Quinlan's shield at work, Donal was knocked down by a pair of ape men. Hairy fists hammered into his helmet and armor, forcing Donal to raise an arm to protect his face. His sword skittered away. Donal struggled to draw the short sword at his hip. The air fled his lips in a hurried gasp as an ape man punched him in the sternum. Donal drove a knee up into the mutated beast, managing to pull his blade. Donal stabbed wildly. Most of his strikes missed but he was finally greeted with an abnormal grunt and a puff of greasy smoke. He rolled onto his knees and tackled the remaining ape man, amateurishly driving his blade into the monster's chest. The ape man disintegrated, leaving Donal retching up his breakfast.

"Back to the wall, pretender!" barked Fos.

Donal looked up to see the bear of a man pointing his sword at him and snarling. The wild look in his eyes was unlike any Donal remembered seeing on a human. It reminded him of...

Unmitigated fear blossomed. Donal recognized the truth in Fos's eyes and it was all he could do not to piss down his leg. "You..."

Fos charged, intent on knocking Donal from the wall. He never made it. A fresh wave of ape men leapt onto the parapet and swarmed their section of the wall. Men and illusion clashed in an unholy aberration of wills. Donal ducked, recovered his sword and turned towards where he last saw Fos. The Brother was gone. Heart pounding, Donal slashed through an ape man's stomach and whipped his sword up to cleave another from waist to chin. Both vanished back into smoke.

Donal frantically searched the battle for signs of Fos but the Brother was nowhere. Frowning, Donal surged back into the fight. That's when he caught a glimpse of a pale blue cloak dashing inside the central tower. Fos! It had to be. Donal Sawq would later look back on this moment and realize he found true courage. He charged recklessly after Fos, making it only a few meters before a set of strong hands grasped him by the shoulders.

"Abandoning your post during a battle?" Quinlan ground out.

Donal shrugged him off. "It's Fos! He was trying to kill me and I know why. Look in his eyes, Quinlan. He has Omegri eyes!"

Quinlan's heart bled even as he back handed young Donal. A trickle of blood ran from the split in his lip but Donal stood his ground. "Mind your tongue, boy! Fos is a Brother of the Order. You have no right to question him."

"If not me than whom? No one here speaks up. I warned you weeks ago about Fos." Donal was undeterred. He was tired of being railroaded into the mystic worship. He was tired of not having a voice.

Quinlan passed a furtive glance over the ramparts and was relieved no one noticed Donal's raised voice. The other knights were too busy fighting for their lives to worry about another. Satisfied, the Brother dragged Donal off to the side, away from the battle.

"Listen to me carefully, Donal. Your concerns are not unwarranted but we cannot allow you to speak dissent during an Omegri attack. Think what might happen if the knights lost faith when they needed it the most? You would destroy us all."

Donal hadn't considered that. Hadn't considered much of anything other than exposing Fos and clearing his name.

"On me my brave knights! On me and fear no darkness!" a deep voice bellowed over the battle, the sound of thunder breaking across a prairie.

Donal looked in awe as the Lord General cut his way through the Omegri ranks, slashing ape men back to the mists. An aura of power clung to the Lord General, one so powerful it was all any could do not to fall to their knees in supplication. Maximo Rosca charged heedlessly into battle. Hope buoyed. It had been too long since the men and women of Castle Andrak felt hope.

"I didn't know he fought," Donal stuttered.

A soft nod. "He comes when the press is most dire. The Lord General has the strength of the Purifying Flame imbibed in his soul. He won't fall."

Donal found no words worthy of the golden haired man single handedly turning the tide of battle. Quinlan snapped him back to attention.

"Come with me," he urged and took off towards the nearest staircase.

“Where are we going?” Donal struggled to keep up.

“To stop Brother Fos.”

They moved quickly. Filing past walking wounded and rows of stretcher bearers waiting to be called up. Surgeon Emmanilline Thellis looked up from her work on a young squire’s abdomen, her arms a disgusting red to the elbow. One look from Quinlan was enough to twist her stomach, and then they were lost from sight.

Brother Quinlan led Donal through a complex series of passages and tunnels, driving deeper into the heart of Castle Andrak. An oppressive sensation closed in around them, choking the air. Donal breathed harder. His sense of direction gone, it was all he could do to keep up. Andrak was much larger than he imagined.

“The Flame is not far but we must be cautious,” Quinlan whispered after stopping abruptly and shoving Donal against a wall. “Fos is not what he appears to be. You were right, Donal. I took your suspicions and watched him myself. Once I considered Fos a great friend and companion. Now... Never mind, matters have changed. We must hurry before it is too late.”

“For what?” Donal asked, fear squeaking his voice.

“Fos is going to try to destroy the Purifying Flame. Now come!”

Quinlan broke into a quick run, long legs striding down the sloping corridor. Huffing, Donal kept pace. The twists and turns ended. Blinding lights hanging at intervals from the ceiling made the corridor look more like a hospital ward than the path to the world’s greatest gift. Not so much as a speck of dust touched the floor. It was perverse just to be here. No windows or doors, the corridor began descending into the earth.

The air became humid, hotter the deeper they went. Donal began to sweat. He looked to Brother Quinlan for any sign of reassurance but the war priest ignored him and continued running. Time was as much their enemy as the Omegri. They finally reached the door to the chamber of the Purifying Flame and his eyes narrowed to bare slits. Quinlan drew his sword. The door, modest and unassuming, had been thrown open in reckless disregard. They were too late. Fos was already within.

“Prepare yourself, Donal. This is not going to be pleasant,” Quinlan warned and then ducked into the blinding white light pulsing from the doorway.

Donal took a deep breath. He’d expected the chamber of the Flame to be more symbolic of its importance. Mild disappointment slithered into his psyche. The door was no different from any other door in the castle; plain brown and wooden. He was forced to shield his eyes from the purity of the light. Donal drew his own sword and followed Quinlan before courage abandoned him.

The sheer intensity of the Flame nearly drove Donal to his knees. The light burned through his body, making him realize how frail the human condition truly was. Donal gasped in ecstasy. His soul felt...cleansed. Knees weak, he struggled to enter this most holy chamber. Ancient stone columns ringed the oval chamber. The purity of the Flame left him in awe.

His boots left imprints on the massive square tiles marking the path to the Flame. It seemed a travesty to step here. Donal tightened the grip on his sword. Brother Quinlan was already approaching the base of the Flame, some twenty meters away. Taking a moment since he figured this might be his last and only chance, Donal swept his gaze around the chamber. He was surprised to see no decorations, absolutely nothing special at

all. The walls were smooth, alabaster and unadorned. There were no windows, only one door. A closed oculus took up most of the domed ceiling.

“Fos! Drop your weapon and surrender now.” Quinlan’s voice boomed above the steady hum of the Flame.

Donal whipped around and saw Brother Fos standing only a few feet away from the Flame.

“You should not be here, Quinlan.” Fos didn’t turn away from the Flame.

“No, Brother. You should not be here,” Quinlan countered, anger lacing his words.

Fos’s dark laugh filled the round chamber. “No, I shouldn’t. Humanity’s time is finished. The time of the Omegri has returned.”

He drew his blade, the steel shimmering under the intense light. Donal gasped when Fos turned. His face was gone, replaced by constantly shifting shadows and leaving little doubt that he was not human. At long last the Omegri had successfully infiltrated the war priests and stood ready to plunge the world into eternal darkness.

Fos raked his fingertips across the edge of the Flame. Blackness spit on the floor, melting holes wherever it struck. Ignoring Quinlan, the Fos creature settled an uncanny glare on Donal. “Have you come to grovel before your new lords? I wanted to kill you from the moment you entered Andrak but I was ordered otherwise. Tonight you will die.”

“Your fight is not with him,” Quinlan stepped in.

Wicked laughter. “Goodbye Quinlan.”

Fos drew back to strike the Flame. The subtle hum erupted in horrible noise, knocking dust from the ceiling. Donal cried, his voice lost in the sudden roar. Reality slowed. Quinlan’s sword flew from his hand, drawing a straight line of impeccable silver across the chamber. Fos turned a split second before the sword sliced through his forearm. Tendons severed. Dark blood sizzled as it struck the light. Fos screamed an unholy sound. A stream of blackness burst from his mouth, hitting Quinlan in the chest. The younger Brother gasped, mouth twisted in a rectus of pain.

Donal watched, helpless, as Quinlan collapsed. Something inside snapped. Months of pent up rage and frustration finally won free. Donal barreled towards the Fos creature. Focused on the stricken war priest, Fos failed to notice the diminutive figure tackle him to the ground. The black stream evaporated. Smoke wafted up from Quinlan’s chest. Burn marks scored his cloak and tunic. He searched desperately for Fos and found him grappling with Donal.

The two exchanged blows, the Fos creature getting the better with every blow. Donal felt a rib snap. He bit his tongue only to absorb another crushing blow to his mid-section. One of his eyes swollen shut, Donal tried to roll away; tried to find any opening past Fos’s defenses. There was none. Donal felt the edges of his vision darken.

The Fos creature was relentless. Dark powers flowed through his mortal form; giving him strength Donal had no hope of countering. Whatever Fos once was, he was more dangerous now. Not quite man, not quite Omegri, Fos fought with berserk fury. Every blow punished Donal further into submission. Sensing victory, Fos increased his assault.

Quinlan managed to get to his hands and knees, coughing tendrils of smoke. Weaponless, there was little he could do to help Donal. His chest ached to the bone. The dark powers of the Omegri refusing to let go. Desperate now, Quinlan started crawling towards the fight.

Hatred flared from the Fos creature's eyes as he bore down on Donal. "Surrender to the will of the Omegri. They are the true masters of the world. Your kind will be swept aside in a single night."

Donal twisted desperately but couldn't get free. Fos was so close his breath, acrid and acidic, burned Donal's face and neck. His strength slowly ebbed. Donal stared back into those violent eyes and recognized his demise. A single satisfying thought wiggled into his conscience; he had done his best for the sake of the light. The Fos creature laughed maddeningly as if reading Donal's mind.

"Your death begins it," Fos snarled and gripped Donal's throat tighter. "It is a great honor."

Quinlan had managed to get within a few feet of the pair without being seen. His shield was heavy. His heart filled with tremors. Brother Quinlan forced his shield between him and Fos and slammed the reinforced base to the floor. Fos snapped up, suddenly fearful.

"Quinlan, no..."

"Fear no darkness!"

Quinlan thrust his shield forward. Blinding light flared from the giant silver cross, catching Donal and Fos. Both screamed. Intense heat scoured the chamber, blistering skin and singeing hair. The ground trembled, shaking the foundations of Castle Andrak. Donal screamed until his lungs burned. Death slowly reached into his soul and squeezed.

The Purifying Flame flickered wildly in response. Roaring, the Fos creature leapt up from Donal, clawing at its eyes. Quinlan slammed his shield down again, again bellowing the war priest mantra. A hand reached for the shield. Tendrils of darkness stretched from the ruin of Fos's arm only to evaporate as soon as they touched the silver cross. Fos screamed again as his fingers finally found purchase.

An explosion rocked the chamber. Great chunks of rock and marble crashed down from the ceiling. Dust rained in thick sheets. Fos was thrown back into the pillar of light. His screams faded as the Purifying Flame dissolved him into nothing. Exhausted and battered, Quinlan ensured Donal was still alive before collapsing. Euphoria would come later. He hoped.

## VII.

Quinlan clasped Donal's forearm in gratitude. His eyes watered but did not shed a tear. Donal struggled to rise. Pain lanced through his torso. Emmanilline scolded him quickly and eased him back down. His wounds were still too severe.

"Your courage has saved us, young Donal," Quinlan said.

Donal frowned. "More like casual stupidity. I didn't know what I was doing."

"We seldom choose those things. The security of the Purifying Flame has never come so close to being extinguished. If not for you," he let the thought hang. "The Brotherhood owes you a debt of gratitude."

Donal wanted nothing more than to heal and go home. His time in Castle Andrak had been the most severe of his life. No amount of slavery compared to the day in-day out



nightmares haunting him. He was too traumatized to comprehend what his actions meant, not only to the war priests but to the entire population of the world.

“The Omegri are defeated?”

Quinlan shook his head sadly. “No. It will take more than the death of a single agent to end their threat. They are beaten, for a time, but not defeated. The Burning Season will come again and another batch of knights will stand the wall with us.”

“Brother,” Emmanilline softly cut in. “He needs his rest.”

“Very well. I must return to my duties but before I leave the Lord General wishes me to express his deep gratitude and to offer you a gift.”

“Gift?” Donal blurted out before he could stop himself.

“Yes. The Lord General has offered you the opportunity to enter the Brotherhood.”

Even Emmanilline paused. She had been assigned to Castle Andrak for ten years and never heard such a thing. The sheer amount of honor intoned in those simple words was astounding.

“Me? A war priest?”

Quinlan smiled. “Not immediately. You would be a Novice and enter our training program. I have every confidence that you will earn your shield quickly. I have volunteered to be your mentor.”

Cheeks flushed, Donal couldn’t keep from grinning. A war priest. Childhood dreams might come true after all. He was speechless.

“I...I don’t know what to say,” he finally stammered.

“Take some time to rest and think on it, my friend.”

Quinlan released his arm and headed towards the door. Surgeon and knight watched him go, mixed emotions colored their faces. Emmanilline passed Donal a knowing glance. The decision was already made.

Quinlan turned back to Donal at the last second and, smiling, said, “Fear no darkness, Brother Donal.”

END

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OTHER BOOKS BY CHRISTIAN WARREN FREED



The follow up to the L Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future award winning short: The Purifying Flame, the Children of Never is an all new novel set in a world of raw imagination. Get your copy today!

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## 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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