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Short Story

The
ENEMY of
my **ENEMY**



Maxwell Alexander Drake

The Enemy of My Enemy

Both Parts

An



Short Story

Maxwell Alexander Drake

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THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

PART ONE



“We are ogre!” Grazdin slammed his meaty fist on the rough wooden table. “We were not born to kneel and cower!” His growled shout reverberated off the thin walls of the tiny shack he called home.

A grin sprang to Brozka’s lips. Partly because Grazdin was not yelling at him, partly because he enjoyed watching his friend, Akani, cower before the elder’s onslaught.

Akani, like Brozka and the other three adolescent ogres gathered in secret here tonight, was true of heart. But Akani let her tongue wag before her brain thought about what she said. Small for an ogre, she was the most agile of their kind Brozka had ever known.

If only her brain could keep pace with her hands!

The thought made Brozka laugh aloud.

Grazdin stood to his full height, his balding head grazing the nine-foot ceiling as he glared at the gathered adolescents. The elder let his ire linger on Brozka before he spoke again. “Our ancestors would *spit* in our faces if they saw us living so.” He spat on the floor, then ground his tusks against his thick, dark-olive colored lips. As sudden as his anger welled up, his face softened and his shoulders slumped. Letting out a grunt, he waved a hand and turned away. “You youngsters know of nothing else. Slavery is the life you were born to. Why should I expect more from you?” He hunched down and picked up a bowl of mashed oats from the table. Giving the bowl’s contents a grimace, he shoveled a spoonful of the tasteless gruel their dal masters provided into his mouth.

When the elder failed to return his attention to the group,

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Mulna rose from her seat. "Explain it to us, then. It is why we are here. Why we risk coming to you after curfew each week." Of all Brozka's friends, Mulna was the one he respected most. Shaking her head, Mulna looked at the others, hoping for some support. None of the five young ogres gathered here tonight came to her rescue. Akani averted her gaze, and Brozka could only shrug.

What can we do?

When Mulna made to return to her seat, frustration washed over Brozka. He jumped to his feet. "You preach about us not understanding what it means to be ogre. How the way we live insults our ancestors." He had never spoken so to Grazdin, nor any elder for that matter, but he was tired of the old ogre's talk and lack of action. They had been coming here for months now, and each time they left all he felt was... defeated. "You whisper about battle and war. The honor of dying in combat. About how horribly our elven masters treat us. But you omit how we are supposed to change any of it!" He took a step forward, hovering over Grazdin's massive shoulder. "We are here. We are listening. Yet you say nothing!"

Grazdin sat with his spoon halfway to his mouth, calmly watching Brozka rant. Placing the spoon into the bowl, and the bowl onto the table, the elder stood and met the younger's stare.

The older ogre was a good head taller than Brozka, though the younger would still be growing for another five years or so. It took all of Brozka's willpower not to break eye contact. He stood firm. Finally, the elder pointed a clawed finger at the vacant chair. "Sit!"

When Brozka returned to his seat, Grazdin grabbed a stool and slid it before the five youths. "You all misunderstand. I do not bring you to my—" He glanced around the small, one-room shack and frowned. "—*home* to incite a rebellion. I bring you here so you can learn our history, and remember."

Jondak shook his head. He was the youngest of the group, and most of the time his rashness matched his age. "I care nothing for our history! I want only to take control of my future."

"Then you are a fool." Grazdin harrumphed. "For without understanding where you come from, you will walk like the blind towards certain doom."

Jondak *was* a fool as far as Brozka was concerned. He was not even sure he liked the young whelp. Jondak was more of a tagalong than an actual part of their group.

"Certain doom is living as slaves to the elves." Dak lifted his bulk from his chair. The largest of the adolescents in attendance—larger by far than many adult male ogres—Dak was slow to speak. But when he did, what he said made sense. Turning, he faced the others. "Why do we allow this to continue? We are stronger than any other race. I say we rise up and break our bonds!"

"And our master's skulls!" Jondak added.

All of the young ogres nodded in agreement. Akani wore a large, open grin upon her face.

Grazdin laughed at this outburst. "If there was still a gateway to Akashidak, your words might have weight, my boy. But that portal is gone. Destroyed along with so much of Amaril, with most of our people stranded in the realm beyond. As strong as we ogres are, we are weak in number here. What could the few hundred of us do against the multitudes who bind us to their will?"

"We could fight!" Anger began to boil inside Brozka.

The elder shook his head. "You would die."

Akani leapt to her feet, sending her stool thumping to the floor. "Then we die in battle! That would not only make our ancestors proud, it would return our spirits to the Warfield. We could then be reborn on Akashidak!"

"Dying in battle brings honor." Grazdin passed a cold gaze over the small group. "Being slaughtered like an animal for the butcher does not." He looked up at Akani. "And how do you know your death in this realm would not trap your soul here as well? Perhaps those who die on Norrath never reach the Warfield of Akashidak."

Brozka could tell his friend had not thought her logic through, as usual. Picking up Akani's stool, he motioned for

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her to sit. "I am not suggesting we overthrow our masters. But we could escape. Toskirakk still stands. We could go there. Live with our own kind, in our own city. Free from the hatred of the dal here in Tahrin."

"So you have mastered the art of sailing the oceans, have you?" A mirthless grin came to Grazdin's lips. "Or were you planning on sprouting wings and flying to Amaril from here?"

It was Brozka's turn to be embarrassed by not thinking before he spoke.

Fool! Toskirakk. A child's dream.

Even with the mental chastising, the humiliation did not stay with him long. His anger rose to the surface once more. "So what do you suggest we do?"

"Again, you misunderstand. I do not expect you to do anything except learn. Perhaps the time will come in your life when things change, and you can use the knowledge I give you to live as a true ogre. If it does not, you will be able to pass our knowledge on to the next generation." Grazdin's scowl deepened and, for the first time, his age showed. Sagging olive skin hung loose over his stooped shoulders. His rapidly thinning hair made a weak graying ring around his skull. Even his tusks were dull. Brozka did not know how old the elder was, but he was sure Grazdin was well over a hundred.

As Brozka studied the ogre he had known his whole life, realization washed over him. "I understand all too well now." He rose and nodded to the others. "Our elders are content to sit and talk. If action is to be taken, it falls upon the shoulders of the young. Their time has passed them by and—"

Strong hands gripped Brozka's upper arms, lifting him up and sending him sailing across the room. He landed on the table, crushing it under his weight. The bowl of mashed oats flipped off, slamming into the far wall.

Rolling over, he found Grazdin looming above him. "You will not insult me in my own home!" The older ogre reached down and grabbed the younger by his leather vest. Brozka made to remove the elder's hands and was shocked by the old ogre's strength. Grazdin pulled him up, then off his feet and

into the air, slamming his head and upper back against the ceiling. "You impetuous whelp. Do not mistake my acceptance for complacency!" The elder ogre flung Brozka to the floor once more. "We cannot fight the elves because it would be a worthless battle." He crossed his thick arms over his chest. "And escaping the city of Tahrin means being hunted like animals out in the wild. An even less honorable death. If you were not such a—"

The building shook, sending Grazdin lurching backward.

Those still sitting rose and glanced around. Dust rained down from the ceiling as the walls shuddered around them. Akani and the others made for the door as Grazdin reached down and helped Brozka to his feet. Racing outside, the pair stepped into chaos.

Tahrin burned.

Though a thick layer of clouds blotted out all light from the moons and stars, the city itself glowed. In every direction Brozka looked, flames licked into the sky. Thick smoke billowed up, adding its blackness to an already dark night.

Ogres and dwarves spilled from the ramshackle buildings that made up this district of the city. Each face reflected the surprise and fear clawing at Brozka.

A silhouette glided over the street they were on, darker than the sky above. Brozka saw a glint of red as it raced toward where they stood. Whatever it was, it was massive. It stretched from the tops of the buildings on one side of the street to above those on the other. Something slammed into his shoulder, driving him against the wall.

"Dragon!"

Grazdin's shout was drowned out by a loud rush of air. An instant later the street exploded with fire. Unbearable heat washed over Brozka in a wave that drove him to his knees. Looking up, he saw burning liquid pour from between teeth as large as broadswords. The fire illuminated the beast, glinting off its scales.

He could not believe anything living could grow so large.

The flames struck the ground just past where his small

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group stood huddled against the building. It bathed over those standing in the street, both dwarves and ogres alike. If they screamed, the sounds of their bodies igniting drowned it out.

In the second it took the dragon to disappear into the darkness, the street turned into funeral pyre. Everyone caught in the blast lay crumpled on the ground, a mound of charred corpses, their flesh popping and hissing. The scent of the cooking meat made Brozka's stomach growl before his mind made the connection to what it was he smelled. Disgusted, he turned and heaved.

Motion caught his eye. Grazdin brushed passed him toward the fire. Reaching out, he tried to stop the old ogre. "They are dead! You cannot help them."

The elder shook him off and continued forward. "I must get back inside!"

The buildings on either side of the street were ablaze, including half of Grazdin's tiny home. Brozka tried to take a step forward, but the heat would not allow it. His skin already felt as if it would blister if he stayed where he was. "Grazdin!"

Several clawed hands grabbed him and pulled him away. Spinning, he looked into the terrified eyes of Akani. "We cannot stay here!"

Brozka nodded and the five of them moved back from the area of destruction as Grazdin disappeared through the door to his home.

Jondak lead the group by a good twenty feet. When they reached an intersection, a horde of kobolds poured out from the cross street. The little brown creatures all wore mismatched armor and wielded tiny thin blades. Before Brozka or any of his friends could react, several of the draconic beasts leapt on top of Jondak, stabbing him over and again. He flailed his arms, smashing those attacking him to the ground. But for each he dislodged, two more replaced it. In an instant, Jondak disappeared under a sea of tiny brown limbs and the flashes of blades slick with blood.

Cut off, they had no choice but to retreat back toward the flames.

Lacking the element of surprise, and seeing their victims were trapped, the kobolds followed at a less frantic pace.

The four remaining ogres spread out in a line, walking backward. As small as the kobolds were, if Brozka's group became surrounded, they would not last long.

A kobold holding a spear yelped and broke from the line. It ran at Brozka, spear held high. Just as the creature jabbed, Akani's hand whipped out and caught the tip. Startled, the small creature held onto the other end of the weapon as he was lifted into the air. Akani used its spear to flick the creature back at the horde pressing in on them. The kobold smashed into the front line with a meaty thwack, sending at least a half dozen of his fellows to the ground. Spinning the tiny spear around, Akani held it like a dagger.

The reprieve was short-lived as the kobolds behind stepped over their fallen comrades and filled the hole created by Akani's attack.

The heat of the fire behind began to burn Brozka's back and he knew they had reached the end of their retreat. The others seemed to notice the same and all four came to a stop.

"Come meet death!" Dak's bellow startled the kobolds in front. One even dropped its sword, turned and tried to push through the throng clogging the streets. When it failed to penetrate those behind, it turned and scooped up its weapon.

The two groups stood looking at each other for a moment before the kobolds started yapping in their native tongue. Brozka could tell they were working up the courage to attack en masse. Once they did, no matter how many his group killed with their bare hands, he and his friends would all die here in this street.

The kobold's sporadic squawks turned into a rhythmic chant that began to build in power. Just as it reached its peak, the wall of the building to the left burst open. Gripping a weather-worn book in one hand and wielding a mace as big as the stump of a small tree in the other, Grazdin stumbled into the street. Bellowing, he swung his weapon in a wide, slashing arc that swept a dozen kobolds away in a spray of

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black blood. Taking a step forward, the elder's backstroke took out at least half as many as the first. This time the four adolescent ogres were in the path of the destruction. Brozka raised a hand to protect his face as broken bodies sailed past, covering him in blood and gore.

By the time Grazdin took his third step, the horde of kobolds had broken, running down the street in chaotic panic.

Turning, Grazdin wore a smile bigger than any Brozka had ever seen before on the old ogre. The elder raised an arm and wiped black blood from his forehead. "If only the little bastards were orcs, this day would be perfect!" He pointed back into the building he had bashed his way from. "Inside is a sack with more weapons. Get them."

The four looked at each other before Mulna ducked into the building. She returned with a dirt-covered burlap sack. Inside were several more maces, much like the one Grazdin held, and one large sword that Dak picked up, his eyes wide.

"Come." Grazdin turned and started the way the kobolds had fled. "We need to figure out what is happening here."

Brozka jogged to catch up with the elder. He eyed the old leather-bound book the elder cradled in the crook of his arm. "Where are we going?"

The old ogre used his mace to point toward the center of the city. "To the palace. That is where the best defenses are, and where we can join the fight with the most efficiency."

Mulna appeared on Grazdin's other side. "Join the fight! With the elves?"

Grazdin came up short and squared his shoulders on the young female. "What else? If you have not noticed, our kind is being slaughtered along with the dal!"

"Perhaps that is because the dragons do not know our situation." Mulna cast a glance Brozka's way. "This is our chance, can you not see? The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Waving a hand, Grazdin started walking again. "Bah! Do not spout tactical drivel at me, girl. I have lived it, while you whelps have not."

"Halt!"

Brozka's heart skipped a beat at the command. Glancing around, he saw five armed elves melt from the shadows of a nearby building, their purple capes marking them as royal guards.

Each had a longsword and dagger drawn. None looked happy to see them. "Why are you ogres armed? You know it is forbidden for you to have weapons inside the city." The one who spoke wore some insignia upon his shoulder, but Brozka had never learned what they stood for.

I simply know it means this one is in charge.

Placing the head of his large mace on the ground, Grazdin leaned on its handle. "In case you have not noticed, your city is under attack."

The elven officer's face twisted into a sneer. "And for all we know, you lesser races are in league with them."

A growl erupted from the elder. "I should kill you where you—" The elder's eyes popped open and his hand shot to his throat. In the dim light Brozka had not seen the elf move. But when blood began streaming from between the elder's fingers, he did not need to see the wetness on the tip of the dal's sword to know what had happened.

"Elder!" Dak ran forward, swinging his large blade like a scythe harvesting grain. The sword slammed into the chest of the elven officer, cleaving him in half. If did not stop until it had passed through two of the other elves as well.

Mulna used the shaft of her mace to knock aside the blade of the guard in front of her before bringing the weapon's head down on the elf's helmet. The dal's head disappeared in a spray of blood and his body slammed to the ground.

The last elven guard turned and ran.

Brozka caught Grazdin as the old ogre's legs crumpled. With the help of Akani, he laid him gently on the cobblestone street. "Elder, I..." He had never seen so much blood pour out of an ogre before.

Grazdin shook his head weakly. He reached out, took Brozka's hand and placed it on the old book he carried. "L—learn... remember..." The words came out in a bloody gurgle.

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Then the elder's eyes rolled back into his head and his chest compressed for the last time.

Upon the blood-spattered cover was embossed the insignia of Grazdin's old war clan. Brozka ran one thick finger over the image, tracing its lines. He shifted his gaze to the body of the ogre who had been like a father to him. How could the gods allow the elder to die with such dishonor? Looking up into the sky, he screamed, pouring all his rage and pain into it.

When all the breath was gone from him, Mulna placed a hand on his shoulder and helped him rise. "We must go." Without a backward glance, she started walking – not toward the palace, but away from it.

Brozka tucked the elder's book under his arm and looked at Akani. She wore a puzzled look that matched what he himself felt. He turned back to Mulna. "Where are you going?"

"Where we should have gone in the first place." Mulna didn't break stride. "I am taking us to join the dragons!"



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PART TWO



Brozka knelt on the cobblestoned street, tears pouring down his olive-colored cheeks.

Reaching out a clawed hand, he closed Grazdin's sightless eyes. A large pool of blood bathed the stones beneath the elder ogre.

The four dead elven guards surrounding Grazdin mocked Brozka's pain. How could they have taken so much from him in just one moment of time? Life would never be the same.

An explosion snapped him from his thoughts. To his right, a dragon banked away, leaving a watchtower bathed in flames. Tiny figures writhed within the fire's luminescence. They were too far away to hear their screams.

Akani reached out and placed a hand upon Brozka's thick shoulder. "We cannot stay here, brother. There is nothing more we can do for Grazdin. His soul must now find its way to the Warfield. Despite what he said, I pray he will be reborn on Akashidak."

Her words washed over Brozka in a wave of peace. Smiling up at her, he nodded. Pivoting his head, he stared after Mulna. The young female ogre had stopped some ways off and now stood staring back at the small group.

Brozka looked over at Dak. The large adolescent's grip on the hilt of his sword was so firm the tendons in his arms were taut. He gazed in the direction the last dal guard had fled with a look that promised vengeance.

Though much had changed since the dragons attacked, much had stayed the same. Within his small group of friends,

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Akani was the voice of reason—even though she did not always think things through. Dak was the protector, with Mulna the hothead trying to take charge. Yet all of them looked to Brozka to make the final decision.

He let his eyes fall to the dead elder—the ogre who had been like a father to him and the others for so many years.

I do not want to make decisions.

'But decisions have to be made.' Brozka could almost hear the elder's words. Akani was right, of course. They could not stay here. It was amazing they had lingered this long without drawing attention.

Reaching out, Brozka picked up the old worn book the elder had been carrying. He ran his fingers over the sigil on its cover, then tucked it under his belt at the small of his back. He stood and glanced at his three friends, letting his gaze settle upon Akani. "What do you think, help our elven masters, or try and join the dragons?"

Akani waved her hand over their dead mentor. "The elves have taken everything from us." She spat on the body of one of the dead guards. "I have no desire to aid the dal."

"Very well, then." Brozka motioned to Mulna to take the lead. Without a glance back at Grazdin, they set off away from the palace.

The four made their way through the burning city of Tahrin. For the most part, this district of the city lay intact, with only a few streets destroyed by fire so far. Not surprising, as the inhabitants of this district were either slaves or *lesser races* as their dal masters called them—none of whom would take up arms in defense of the city.

To take the city, the dragons will need to put down any resistance first. After that...

Even with as little damage as there was here, this area comprised of small, wooden shacks packed so tightly together would not remain whole for long. With no one attempting to control them, the few fires that burned here now would grow and spread. In time, this entire section of Tahrin would be little more than charred rubble.

“Where are we headed?” Dak’s rumbling voice broke the silence of the troop.

Mulna did not break stride, instead talking over her shoulder. “There are dragonspawn inside the city, which means the front gates must have fallen. If I were attacking this city, that is where I would organize my forces to take the rest.”

They walked through deserted street after deserted street. Brozka could not believe how long they had gone without seeing anyone.

It cannot have been more than an hour since the attack began.

He figured the majority of the inhabitants were still cowering in their homes.

That will change, once the fire knocks on their doors.

A low rumbling shout cut through the night. Dak grabbed Brozka’s forearm and pointed down a side street. “It came from over there.” Hefting his sword, he ran off in the direction of the cry.

Akani and Brozka looked at each other and shrugged, then broke into a jog to catch up to the larger ogre. Brozka heard Mulna’s lumbering steps following.

They caught up with Dak just as he was rounding the corner of a merchant shop. About halfway down the street, a blacksmith’s forge burned. The light from the fire made it impossible to see further down the avenue.

Mulna ran past and held out her mace to stop the group. “What are you doing? We need to move to the front gates.”

“No.” Dak’s gravelly voice held an edge. “If someone is in trouble, we must help.”

“Like they would help us?” Reaching out, Mulna placed her clawed hand upon Dak’s chest. “Like the dal helped Grazdin?”

“It’s not just dal dying all around us!” Dak batted Mulna’s hand aside. “Ogres, dwarves, even humans are held here as Takish captives. Should we turn our backs on—”

“Run!”

All of the adolescent ogres’ heads whipped around at the shout. An old dwarf wearing a blacksmith’s leather apron

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came running from the dark on the far side of the fire. Blood ran down the side of his face, soaking into his long, flowing beard. He waved a large hammer at them as he came. "Run!"

Before the dwarf took two steps, a massive beast leapt from the darkness, landing on his back and driving him to the ground. The monster was unlike anything Brozka had ever seen. It resembled a large jungle cat, if such a beast had been spawned by Anashti herself! Thick black scales covered its hairless body. A gaping, dog-like maw dominated much of its oversized head, filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth.

The creature bit down onto the back of the screaming dwarf's neck and skull, ripping away a mouthful of flesh. It pulled its head back, eyes locking with Brozka. A shiver ran down his spine. The beast's cadaverous gaze bore into his, black and lifeless.

Drawing back its upper lip, the beast launched itself from the corpse and hurtled toward the group. Dak bellowed and charged, his sword held over his right shoulder.

Just as the two met, the creature flung itself sideways. Dak swung his blade in a wide arc, missing the monster by a foot or more. His erratic swing spun him around, throwing him off-balance. He went down hard onto hands and knees, his large sword clanging onto the paving stones.

The creature whipped out a paw and raked its sharp claws across Dak's side before skidding around to face the ogre's back.

Crouching, it made to jump onto Dak just as Mulna's mace slammed into the beast's hindquarters. Letting out a screech, the creature tried to adjust, but ended up flopping on the ground, one of its thick, sinewy hind legs crushed and useless.

Mulna bellowed as she smacked her mace across the jaw of the creature. The thing's body slid for a dozen paces before coming to a stop, black blood oozing from a jagged hole in the side of its skull.

She glared down at Dak. "Can you not see? The only ones we need to help are ourselves!" She reached out her hand.

Taking it, Dak let her pull him to his feet. "Thanks. But you are—"

Growls from deeper down the street cut him off. Everyone turned as a set of eyes glinted from the deep blackness on the far edge of the fire's light.

The small group came abreast, each holding their weapon at the ready. Fear shot through Brozka as a second, and then third set of eyes winked into existence.

"Easy now."

The hairs on the back of Brozka's neck stood on end at the stranger's voice coming from behind him. He chanced a glance over his shoulder and was stunned to see that several score of elves had materialized on the street.

Where did they...?

The elf in the lead, a tall, strong-looking dal with long blond hair and rich blue eyes, reached out slowly and placed a hand upon Brozka's upper arm. It was not a threatening move, as the elf was not even looking at him. Instead, the dal was staring past Brozka at the rapidly growing collection of glowing eyes. "Move behind us, now. We'll take care of these."

Without waiting for a reply, the pale-skinned elf slipped between him and Akani. Brozka had always felt that elves moved with grace. This one, however, glided with a cat-like elegance that put all others to shame.

An elegance that promises violence.

Even though the elf wore plain armor—at least by dal standards—and no insignia adorned his uniform, his demeanor left no doubt that he was in charge. As this commander stepped past, he drew a set of long, thin swords.

A few other elves ghosted between the ogres before Dak moved forward with them. He shot a glare at the other adolescents. "Are you going to stand there and let the *dal* fight our battles?"

Mulna was the first to move. "No." She hefted her mace and let its shaft fall with a meaty thwack against her palm. "I am not."

Akani locked eyes with Brozka, shrugged, then stepped up to join them.

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Brozka scowled.

I will not look like a coward!

Hefting his own mace, Brozka joined the line. As he drew even, the elven commander pivoted his head toward them, but did not take his gaze off the approaching beasts. "You four don't look as if you've had much practice with those weapons. Mind what you hit, and don't swing wild. Focus on your targets and try to attack with a downward strike." He imitated the move with one of his swords. "This will minimize the chances of you hitting each other. Or one of us."

Dak grunted and peeled off to the side, separating himself from the group of elves. Mulna followed, but kept a bit of distance between herself and the larger ogre.

A few more steps and Brozka saw the first of the beasts emerge from the darkness, each as big as the one who had attacked them moments ago. The pack slunk past the burning blacksmith shop in a staggered array three across. Wave after wave emerged from the gloom.

Brozka stopped counting at three dozen. "What are they?"

"Phyxians." The twang of loosed bowstrings accompanied the commander's word and a score of arrows sprouted from the creatures at the front of the pack. Two fell. The third lurched forward a step before joining its companions upon the cobblestone street.

The arrows did little except drive the rest into action. The pack of monsters poured down the street toward the waiting group of elves and ogres in an avalanche of frenzied snarls and snapping jaws. A second volley of arrows flew over Brozka's head, followed by a third. With each volley, phyxians died.

Those creatures not struck down by arrows raced toward them without so much as a backward glance at their fallen kin.

When the monsters closed to twenty paces, lightning sprang from the hands of two elves near the front. Each bolt lurched out and divided, carving jagged white lines across Brozka's vision. The electricity danced and arced between the lead phyxians, leaving twitching corpses in their wake. Tendrils of black smoke rose from where the energy struck.

Then the wave of phyxians crashed over them.

The elf to Brozka's right fell as a beast hit him full in the chest. Brozka brought his heavy mace up, spun, and smashed the weapon into the middle of the creature's back. A high-pitched yelp ripped from the beast's throat as it bent in half, the back of its head nearly touching its rump. It fell to its side, twitching.

The tackled elf flashed Brozka a smile before rolling over and driving his sword into the neck of the still-twitching phyxian.

Pain ripped up Brozka's leg and he stumbled back, a phyxian's jaw clamped tight around his thigh. Instinct kicked in. Dropping his mace, he grabbed the sides of the creature's jaw. With sharp fangs slicing into his fingers, Brozka's claws found purchase in the tender flesh of the beast's mouth. Wrenching with all his might, he pried the phyxian's maw open.

The dragonspawn's eyes bulged. It whimpered as its teeth were pried from Brozka's skin. Once the beast's jaw was free, Brozka heaved and lifted the massive creature from the ground. The snap of its neck as it broke reverberated through Brozka's ears. Using the monster's corpse as a club, he slammed it down on the head of a phyxian Akani held at bay with her own mace.

Before the creature could extract itself from the tangle of limbs, Akani crushed its head into the paved street with her weapon.

The pair grinned openly at each other. The elation filling Akani's eyes matched what he himself felt. He sought out his other friends. When his gaze fell on where they were, his heart sank.

Dak was down on one knee, a phyxian pinned down under him while he pummeled it with his bare fist. A second phyxian had latched itself onto the big ogre's back. The beast bit into him, tearing off chunks of flesh with each attack. Several elves surrounded the creature, stabbing it with their thin swords. The creature seemed unaware of them.

The Enemy of My Enemy - Part Two

When the phyxian below Dak stopped thrashing and lay still, the big ogre reached over his shoulder and grabbed the one on his back. Flipping it around, he slammed the beast atop of its fallen brother and began punching it as he had done the first.

Brozka could not believe his friend was able to continue fighting. The ogre's back was a ruin of blood and shredded skin.

Then, as quickly as the attack had begun, it ended.

Brozka raced over to Dak's side, Akani right behind. The big ogre stood on wobbly legs watching them approach. As they reached him, the larger ogre collapsed into their arms and took them both to the ground.

Even though his eyes screamed of agony, Dak smiled. "Let our ancestors spit in our faces now!"

Brozka cradled Dak in his arms, trying to keep his friend's injured back off the ground. "No. Our ancestors are smiling at us for the first time. I can feel them."

Looking around at the carnage, Brozka was shocked to see that very few elves could be counted among the fifty or so dead phyxian beasts. He wished he had paid more attention to them during the fight. The commanding elf strode up, took one look at Dak, then turned. "I need a healer!" He knelt down between the ogres. "Stay with us, lad. Keep your eyes focused on me."

A second later and another elf knelt beside them, her eyes closed in deep concentration as golden tendrils extended from her hands to envelop Dak's body.

With the elves helping Dak, Brozka stood, pulling Akani up with him. "I think I see Mulna." He nodded to a pile of the dead creatures. At the bottom, an ogre arm jutted out.

Akani turned to where Brozka was looking and she gasped. The two dashed over to the pile of phyxians. Three elves were working to pull one of the beasts off, and the two young ogres rushed to join them. By the time they yanked the third cat-like creature away, Brozka heart sank and hopelessness clawed at his soul.

Mulna stared up at the night's sky with a sightless gaze, her throat torn away. Akani bent down and closed her eyes. "May you find battle on the Warfield, sister."

"I'm so sorry." The sincerity in the commander's voice shocked Brozka. "By the look of things, she didn't go without taking a few with her." The commander's face hardened as his gaze swept the area. "There's nothing more we can do here." He turned his cold blue-eyed stare back to the two ogres. "Where were you heading when we came upon you?"

Akani pointed to the main gates. "We were headed—"

"We were headed to the palace." Brozka shot Akani a glare as the ogre lowered her arm and gave him a puzzled look.

The elf passed his eyes from one to the other. Brozka felt as if he had been weighed to the ounce and measured to the inch. Finally the dal commander shook his head. "There is no reason to go to the palace. It has fallen. Emperor Tah'Re is dead."

Though he had never seen the Emperor, a warmth filled Brozka and a smile sprang to his lips. When he noticed the elven commander staring, Brozka wiped the expression from his face. "That is—"

Raising a hand, the elf cut him off. "Let's not start our relationship with lies. I know there was no love between the dal here on Faydwer and the other races. Do you have family in this city?"

The odd question took Brozka aback, and he stared at the elf for a few moments. "No. Akani and Dak are the only family I have left."

"Very well. My Teir'Dal and I were moving to the eastern gates. The city is lost. It seems the dragons have begun the war they have long threatened. Come with us. I have an army waiting on me near Stonepier."

"An army of elves?" Dak sat up. While he looked stronger, it was obvious he was still in great pain. "We would be better off on our own." He winced as he tried to push himself up to his feet.

Akani went over and helped the big ogre rise. "I agree.

The Enemy of My Enemy - Part Two

How many nights did we leave Grazdin's hut, whispering of being free of the dal's grasp? This is our chance."

Keeping his face a stoic mask, Brozka internally cringed at the bluntness of his friend's words. He shifted his gaze to the grim face of the elven leader who stood staring back at him. Brozka flexed his empty fingers, keenly aware that he had failed to retrieve his mace after the battle. For the first time since the attack began, he felt vulnerable.

The elf took a step and closed the distance between them. He held out his hand. "My name is Keramore Thex. I know that your people have ample cause to hate mine. But believe me when I say that neither I, nor my family, have ever condoned the prejudice that ran rampant under the Emperor's rule."

With nothing else to do, Brozka reached out and shook the offered hand. "Brozka." He indicated to his friends in turn. "Akani. Dak."

The elf nodded to each as they were introduced, then turned back to Brozka. "I'm not asking you to fight for me. From the conditions I have seen since arriving, it would not have surprised me if you'd chosen to help the dragons burn this city to the ground. But if you come with me, I can give you safe passage to Amaril. All the way to the ogre city of Toskirrak, if you like."

"Toskirrak..." Dak and Akani whispered the name in unison.

"No!" All eyes turned to Brozka. His gaze drifted to Mulna.

The dragons and their spawn do not care who they kill. Elf, dwarf, ogre... we are all prey to them.

Brozka reached behind him and took out Grazdin's book. He traced the outline of the elder's sigil with a clawed finger.

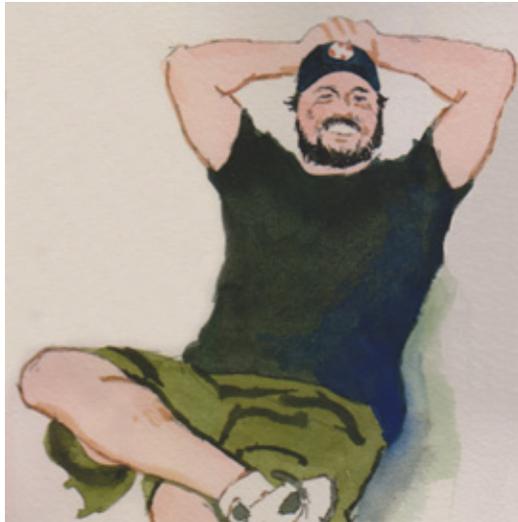
We will honor our past, even as we forge a new future. I swear it!

He locked eyes with Keramore. "We will come with you only if you allow us to fight the dragons and their spawn."

Keramore's eyebrows rose. He looked at the other two in turn, both nodding their agreement. "Very well. Welcome into the ranks of the Thex army." The elf turned and started to walk away. "If tonight is any indication, I fear we shall need all the help we can get."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Maxwell Alexander Drake—or Drake as he is known to friends and fans alike—has been writing professionally since 2007. In addition to working for SOE on the EverQuest Next project, he teaches creative writing at fan conventions and writers conferences across the country, as well as holding monthly classes at the Clark County Library District in Las Vegas.

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The Genesis of Oblivion Saga is Drake's first major series and has won both a 2009 and 2011 Moonbeam Young Adult Fantasy Award for excellence in literature, as well as being named Dragon Roots Magazine's Best New Fantasy Saga.

You can read the first five chapters of *The Genesis of Oblivion Saga*, as well as keep up to date on this series at its official website, www.genesisofoblivion.com.