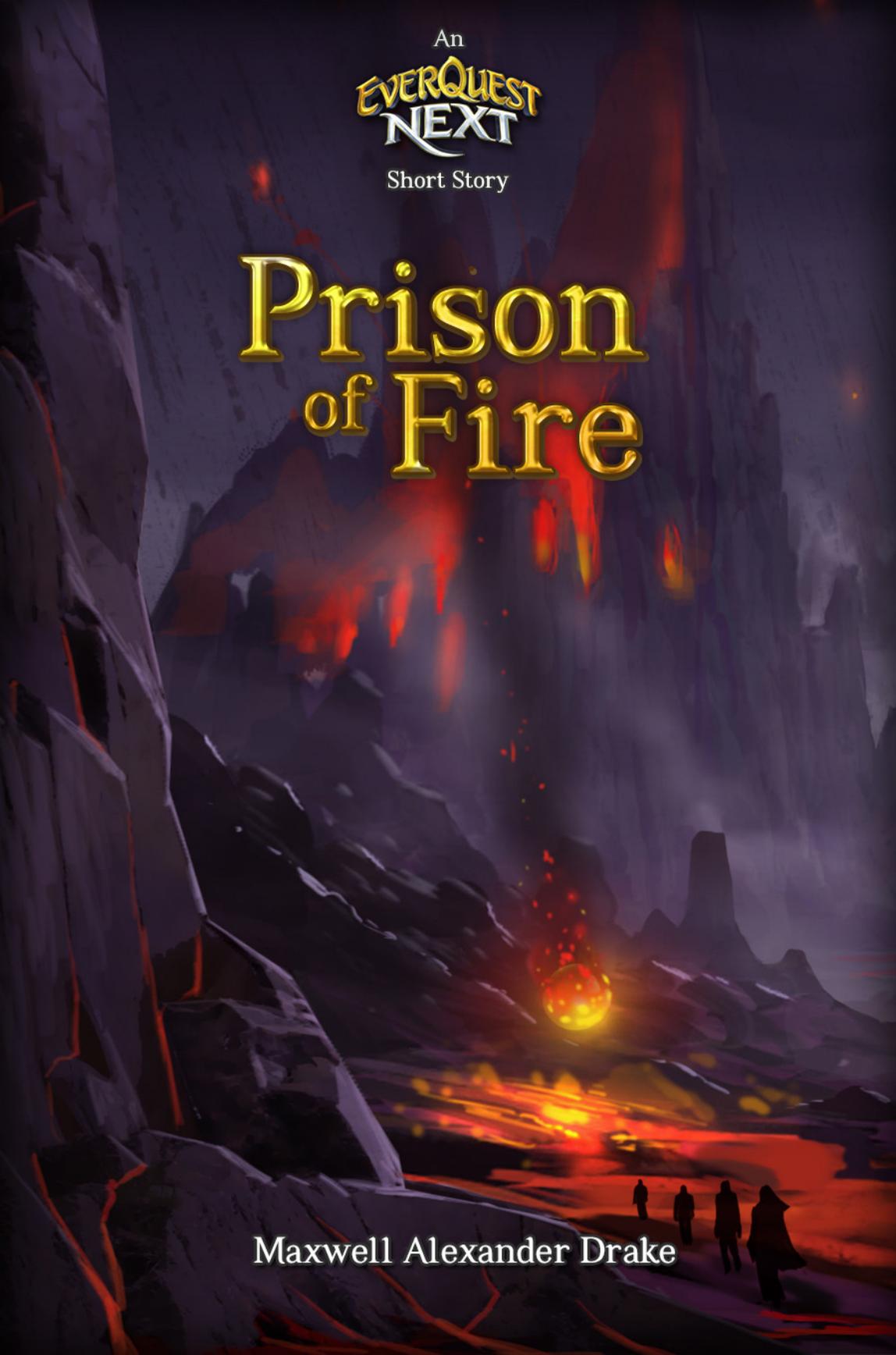


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Short Story

Prison of Fire

Maxwell Alexander Drake



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An



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TABLE OF CONTENTS



[Prison of Fire](#)

[About the Author](#)



PRISON OF FIRE



Neria Naldiir yelped as a searing pain ripped through her arm. The fire elemental danced back, its flames writhing in the arid wind cutting across the mountains of Lavastorm.

"I told you not to get too close, girl!" Mantineus' warning held an edge tinged with mirth.

Neria glared at her longtime mentor as she resisted the urge to grab the fresh wound. It stung. The smell of burnt flesh rose from beneath her blackened leather armor.

Varaca can heal it later. For now... focus!

"Never take your eyes off the enemy!" Jantris stepped forward, positioning himself between Neria and the fire elemental. He raised his two-handed sword over his shoulder, preparing to strike the creature down.

Overprotective as ever! I'm not helpless. I've seen nearly as much combat as you!

Pressing forward, Neria slipped inside the range of his striking arc. She knew the old elf would chastise her for it, but she would not let him finish this battle for her. She had already worn the elemental down. If Jantris or any of the other elders stepped in now, she would never hear the end of it.

The scowl that deepened across Jantris' face told her she was correct. Perhaps she should not have been foolish enough to move where a fellow combatant could strike her by mistake. She could already hear his chiding. *'When fighting shoulder to shoulder with allies, you must pay attention, girl! As much to the warrior on either side of you, as to the enemy you face.'* Jantris lowered his blade and backed away, however, so her maneuver had served its purpose.

She forced down a smile before it reached her lips.

No need adding fuel to his ire.

Prison of Fire

Lava spewed into the air from a fissure off to Neria's right—the one the elemental had been hiding in before it ambushed them. Neria shifted further between Jantris and the creature, just for good measure. The fire elemental was small, though far from newly formed. Its strike could prove fatal to the untrained. Or unwary.

Even so, she hated how the three elders watching treated her like a child. She had won as many tournaments over the past five years as any elf in the empire. When would they come to realize she was as skilled as they?

Forcing the pain in her arm from her mind, she tightened her grip on her sword's hilt. Widening her stance, she circled her foe. The elemental snaked forward, but this time she would not give it the satisfaction of landing a hit. Bringing her small shield up, she slammed it against the creature's attacking appendage.

It howled—a wordless crackling of fresh-cut wood flung upon a funeral pyre—and snatched back its arm.

Dropping low, she swung her blade. Sparks flew.

The elemental let out a hissing scream as it tumbled to the rocky ground.

Pressing her advantage, Neria leapt forward, striking the fire monster in the chest. Her blade hit something hard and a loud *ping* echoed off the jagged obsidian rocks that formed the valley around them. With a rush of wind, the fiery essence of the beast imploded in upon itself, leaving a few chunks of molten rock in the general shape of what had been the fire elemental.

"Well done, girl!" Mantineus strode forward laughing. He clapped her shoulder, sending a jolt of agony ripping through her shield arm.

Neria's flinch only served to boost the old elven warrior's delight. Jantris joined in as Varaca pushed between the two. "Don't mind these old fools, dear." The mage flicked a finger at Neria's arm. "Let's take a look."

With a bit of effort, and much wincing, Neria managed to remove her leather jerkin. Once she pushed up the sleeve of her undershirt, she found the wound minor and was stunned

that it had caused her such grief. Just over a hand's width of bright red skin glared angrily at the world. A few small blisters were scattered about the area for good measure. By far not the worst injury she had sustained in a fight.

Reaching out, Varaca placed a hand above and below the burn, wrapping her long fingers around Neria's slender arm. "It seems your armor took the brunt of the damage." Golden tendrils snaked out from where her hands rested and bore into the singed area.

A warmth spread through Neria as the blisters faded and her skin mellowed from red to pink, then to her usual alabaster tone. She gave the graying mage a smile as she pushed her sleeve down. "Thank you."

As was her way, Varaca did not return the smile. Instead, with a huff and a low grumble, the mage turned and walked up the path.

Mantineus bent over and picked up Neria's jerkin, then held it out for her. "Well fought." It was more praise than the grizzled fighter typically gave, and she could not suppress the smile that sprang to her lips.

A glint of pride flashed in her instructor's eyes just before he averted his gaze and looked up at the smoke-filled sky. "Damned ash clouds! Can never be sure of the time when traveling through these accursed mountains." He followed the mage up the path their small group had been walking before the elemental attacked. "We need to get moving. We can still cover a lot of ground before we make camp for the night."

Shrugging on her jerkin, Neria nodded to Jantris, who stood watching her. The two moved to catch up with the others. Neria thanked Jantris as he helped her up a steep incline. "How long until we reach the prison?"

"No more than three days, I should guess." Jantris gave a smile, but it only accentuated the large, jagged scar that ran from his chin to his missing ear. "Provided we aren't stopped by more lava flows. Or worse, more blasted fire creatures."

Neria signed inwardly.

Three more days of trudging through this...



Cresting the final rise, the Tagnik plateau spread out before Neria Naldiir. Though it was a far cry from the welcoming green blanket of the Midlands, the flat area was at least high enough to offer shelter from the steam vents and soot clouds that rolled across the endless sea of grays and blacks. At the sight, she stopped and took a moment to catch her breath. Trudging through the treacherous obsidian peaks of Lavastorm was taxing at best. At worst, deadly.

Her company had left Takish'Hiz nearly three weeks past. After a pleasant and uneventful ride to the border guard post, it had been a relentless and steady climb ever higher into some of the most inhospitable terrain on all of Amaril. For the Lavastorm mountains earned their name honestly. They were one of the most volcanically active regions on Norrath, and travelers had to stay vigilant against the sudden and violent eruptions from the thousands of vents littering the area. Woe to anyone walking next to one when it exploded, spewing out boiling hot steam and ash. Fresh lava flows were a daily occurrence. More than once a new river of molten rock blocking their path forced her small troop to detour, adding hours to their travel time. And if that wasn't enough to convince all who dared enter these mountains to turn back, the thick storms of black smoke and burning cinders pouring from the active volcanoes made the journey nearly unbearable.

Neria coughed into the thick scarf wrapped around her mouth and nose.

The ground radiated heat, and the air was scorched and dry. Sweat poured from her as she stood sucking in the thin air. Even here, in one of the few safe havens found within the blackened landscape, the sky held a smoky haze. Still, it made Neria smile as it was the first time she had seen *any* rays of sunlight cutting through the clouds since leaving the far more temperate lands to the south.

As the others crested the plateau to stand beside her,

Neria let out a sigh of relief. She raised her arm and pointed at a large stone complex on the far side from where she stood. "There it is. Finally."

Varaca's scowl deepened. "Keep in mind. Now that we are on the plateau, they will be able to see us coming. Gone is any stealth afforded to us while we were in the mountains."

The grizzled veteran, Mantineus, ran a hand through his graying hair and nodded. "I had forgotten how unbearable these infernal mountains were. Had I remembered, I would have refused your father when he asked me to accompany you."

Neria grinned.

As if you would let me take on this quest alone, you old bear.

She also knew her father did not 'ask' him to join her. Mantineus had been like a second father to her since her birth. Not that the other two who had 'volunteered' to come along were any less dear to her heart. All had served her house since they were old enough to hold a blade. She also knew her father would trust no one else to accompany her on such a perilous journey. If the Emperor caught wind of this mission, she was certain her entire family would be executed for treason.

She loved her father, and was proud that he had risen so far up the ranks of the elite. Yet she feared for him. His morality did not always align with the Emperor's, a troubling fact that could well end up being his undoing.

Sending me to a forbidden prison chasing a rumor is proof enough of that!

Still, she knew above all else, her father loved his people. So, if the whispers he heard were true, then she agreed with him. They had to find out if Emperor Tah'Re was planning to—

"I agree with Mant. I should have thought twice before agreeing to accompany you." Jantris' words broke Neria from her thoughts. "Must admit, makes the perfect location for a prison. Even if someone managed to make it out, the guards atop the walls could track a prisoner running for leagues in any direction." Thin, even for an elf, he always reminded Neria of a stray dog. He took a swig from his canteen then held it out for her.

Prison of Fire

Taking the canteen, Neria drank deeply. She glanced up at the sky then peered across the long strip of flat ground. "Indeed. Which means they've doubtless noted our approach by now." She handed the canteen back to Jantris, who took it with a nod.

They worked their way over to the Old Road. They had passed sections of this road on the way here, using it as a landmark to ensure they were traveling in the right direction. A millennium of lava flows and emergent volcano peaks had obliterated vast swaths of it, and very little of the road remained—the stretch running along the top of this plateau being the largest unbroken stretch she had seen.

Pity, as it would've turned our three-week climb into a six-day walk. Or better—a four-day ride!

"Having paved road again is a most welcome boon." Jantris' words echoed Neria's thoughts.

Looking over at the slim elf as she walked, she smiled. He was the youngest of the three traveling with her, though he was still older than her father by a decade. The massive two-handed blade sticking over his shoulder made him appear smaller than he actually was.

I've never understood why he favors such a heavy weapon.

Striding along on the other side of Jantris, Varaca wore her usual scowl. Neria had never seen the mage smile in all the years she had known her. Varaca's red robes, normally so clean they had a sheen to them, hung heavy over her shoulders, matted down by a layer of black soot. When the group stepped onto the paved stone road, Varaca's scowl deepened as she beat on her robes in an attempt to dislodge some of the ash.

Mantineus laughed. "I told you not to wear those robes up here." He made a show of wiping some loose soot from the shoulders of his hardened leather jerkin. "But as you say, there is nothing an old warrior like me would know that a scholarly mage such as yourself didn't learn years ago." He barked a laugh again and Jantris grinned openly.

"At least I don't smell like a wet horse!" Varaca gave up her attempt to clean her robe and started trudging down the hill.

“Three weeks on the road and none of us smell pretty any longer.” Jantris’ coarse chuckle joined with Mantineus’ as the three moved to follow the mage.



Though the sun was descending toward the distant peaks, several hours of daylight remained by the time the gray stone walls of the Tagnik Vukar prison stretched high over their heads. As Neria stepped into their shadow, an eerie oppressiveness fell over her spirit. She stopped and glanced at the others. “We all know why we’re here, and how this could turn out. Tread carefully. It’s not just our necks on the line. My father’s life is at stake as well.”

When they approached the main gates, the one on the right groaned and swung outward. A massive humanoid—a good ten-foot tall—stepped from within. Draped in a thick tan cloak, only the creature’s fiery red-colored hands and face were visible. It glared down at Neria’s small group as they came to a stop a few paces away.

“I open my front door and what do I find? A pair of shelves and their dal consorts.” The guard’s voice crackled across the empty plateau like a forest fire.

Mantineus stepped to the front of the group. “Do not take that tone with us, you fire-dipped demon!”

The guard snarled as it reached up and pulled back its hood, and demon the creature was! Not as ugly as an orc, the creature was still a sight to behold. A large, flat nose hovered below eyes that gave the appearance of fire burning within. Two small tusks flanked a row of sharp teeth along the bottom of its mouth, and Neria could just make out small horns on either side of its head.

She had heard descriptions of ifrits, but the sight of the creature nearly made her take a step back. Swallowing her shock, she reached out and placed her hand upon the grizzled warrior’s flexed bicep. “Mant, stand down.”

Prison of Fire

The old fighter inclined his head and took a step back, but never stopped glaring at the towering figure blocking the door.

Even as monstrous as the guard appeared, Neria doubted she was in any danger. The ifrits had been ground under the heel of the empire's boot for centuries now. She stepped forward. "Shall we start this again?" She paused long enough for the red-skinned humanoid to make a motion of a shrug. It was more than she had expected from the creature. "Good." She let the word settle between them for a long moment. "My name is Neria Naldiir, Captain of the Ebon Dagger. I've come here on the orders of my father, Dalen Naldiir, Minister of Security for the Emperor's council." When the ifrit made no further motion, she hardened her voice. "We have just spent the past three weeks making our way here. I expect to be received as my title and station warrant."

The ifrit stared at her for so long, she thought the towering brute was going to deny them entry. Finally, it tipped its oversized head and stepped back. "Welcome to Tagnik Vukar, *Captain.*"

The tone with which the ifrit stressed her honorific could have been due to its naturally gruff voice—or it could have been an insult. Neria chose to believe the former and stepped through the door.

Whoever had designed and built the prison lacked all imagination. The courtyard was enormous, but utterly bare save the dark-gray soot that dominated the landscape. Atop the looming exterior walls ran a long parapet dotted by crenels from which dal mages and archers could keep watch over the yard below. The walls stood empty, and for the second time a haunted feeling crept over Neria.

Inside the enclosure, resting in the center toward the back, sat a squat, square building. On the far right side were a set of massive, ramshackle huts. Two fire giants milled about the area. They were of no concern to her, or her mission. The few giants in residence here at the prison were crafters, assembling war machines and battlements on a scale so massive it would take dozens of dal to match the work of a single giant. Though

it was odd that upon her group's entrance, the fire giants stopped what they were doing and stared in their direction. It was as if the behemoths were waiting for something. Or expecting it.

Once Neria's three companions had entered, the ifrit guard shut and bolted the gate. He then squared his shoulders on the party, and for the first time Neria noticed the scimitar hanging from his left hip. Standing this close, she could feel the heat radiating off his body—hotter even than the sweltering ground beneath her boots. "To what do we owe the honor of this visit?"

She may have let the first insult pass, but she would be damned by the Seraphs to let another go without word. "How dare you question me!" She kept her tone even, but firm. "My business here is none of yours. Take me to see Warden Rithier."

The ifrit's cocksure expression slipped for a moment before the creature regained its composure. It tipped its head to the side then headed down the worn path leading to the main building.

Neria watched the ifrit go. As it walked, it waved a hand at the giants and they shuffled off and disappeared around the back of the prison. Neria did not like any of it. She turned to look at her companions.

The furrow on Mantineus' brow deepened. "Stay sharp." He leaned in close and lowered his voice. "Something feels... off. We have yet to see a single dal."

She nodded her agreement, then turned and followed the ifrit guard.

While it was strange that they had not seen any dal yet, she welcomed the idea of stepping inside the main building and escaping from the acrid air and oppressive heat. Her race was not built to live in such an inhospitable climate. Had she been assigned to this post, she would wish to spend as little time outside as possible.

No. That was not what had her nerves on edge. It was the missive in her pocket—one meant for the warden. At best, her visit could be considered odd. At worse, it could lead to an investigation that would trace back to her father.

Prison of Fire

I must tread lightly here, and trust that the warden is as close a friend to my father as he remembers. The words written on it, if seem by the wrong people, would send my father to the gallows.

The interior of the building was little better than the outside. Drab, gray stone blocks formed large, square rooms. The entrance area held no furnishings save for an imperial banner upon the far wall adjacent to the doors. It hung limp, covered in dust and frayed at its edges. Neria doubted anyone here cared.

The main difference was the heat. As hot as the ground was outside, it felt like a furnace within. All hopes of an improved climate evaporated as sweat began beading on her forehead and dripping down her sides under her leather armor.

This makes no sense. Surely the mages stationed here would maintain at least a pocket of cool air.

As the door shut, the ifrit turned and addressed Neria. "I will show you to some rooms where you can freshen up before your meeting with the warden, Captain." He raised an arm indicating a stairway leading up. "This way."

"No, thank you." Neria needed to take control of this situation, and as her father always said, *'Doing what your opponents least expect is the best way to keep them off guard.'* She nearly laughed at the expression that sprang to the ifrit's face. "I would prefer to meet with the warden immediately. Where is she?"

"Warden ..." The guard took a step back. If Neria didn't know better, she would swear the creature wanted to draw its blade. "Warden Rithier... is currently occupied." The creature visibly worked to regain its composure. "If you would like to wait in the quarters I indicated, I'm sure—"

"Unacceptable!" Neria's shout echoed through the large, empty chamber. "This is the second time you have presumed to be more than you are. Make it your last." Moving forward, she pointed a finger up at the red-skinned figure towering over her. "You will do as you are told. I don't care if Warden Rithier is *occupied*, take me to her anyway."

The door on the far side of the room banged open and

a female ifrit, similarly dressed in a thick tan cloak, entered. "That will be enough, Boan. You may see to your duties in the lower cell."

The guard who had led them in, the one called Boan, rounded on the newcomer. "Duties? I thought—"

"I said, that will be enough! Warden Rithier sent me to see to our *guests*."

The female ifrit's voice held an edge that made Neria uncomfortable, despite the fact that this new guard's ire was not targeted at her. It brought Boan in line, for the ifrit tuned and hurried out a door opposite the one the female had entered.

The female guard glared at Boan's back as he departed, then moved to Neria and her group. "Please forgive Boan. He can be... slow." She inclined her head. "Welcome to Tagnik Vukar. My name is Aathin."

Neria rose to her full height before Aathin. Even though the ifrit was female, she was still nearly twice as tall as Neria. This did not bother her. On the contrary—with the three elves standing behind her, Neria feared little. "I wish to see Warden Rithier immediately."

Aathin's face hardened for a moment, then relaxed. "As Boan informed you, the warden is indeed busy." Aathin raised a hand, cutting off Neria's response. "She is inspecting the site of a most curious and unusual occurrence. I'm sure she'd wish for you to join her."

It was not the response Neria was expecting. If anything, it raised her curiosity to a new height—and her caution as well. "Fine. Lead on."

The ifrit inclined her head and indicated the door Boan had left by. "This way, if you please."

Aathin took the lead and crossed the room. Once through the door, Neria found herself at the top of a wide, winding ramp leading down into the bowels of the mountain range. It was massive. Wide enough to accommodate ten mounted riders abreast, and tall enough that if the riders were carrying lances, they would not be able to touch the ceiling even if they stood

Prison of Fire

in stirrups and stretched for it. Their ifrit escort was already descending, so Neria lengthened her stride to catch up.

The ramp wound its way down much further than she thought possible. The deeper they went, the more uneasy Neria felt. It took her a while to figure out why. Then it hit her.

There's no noise!

She had never been to Tagnik Vukar before, but she had visited other prisons. And while each had been different, they all had one thing in common – the loud, relentless lamenting of those held within their walls.

The silence here pressed heavily upon her, making the hairs on the back of her neck prickle.

To make matters worse, as they descended it felt as if the heat rose exponentially. Every so often they passed a landing with tunnels leading away into the belly of the plateau. The ifrit guard passed each without slowing. By the time they reached the bottom, sweat ran in rivulets down Neria's cheeks. Here a wide, naturally formed corridor stretched off in both directions. Aathin turned and headed right. If Neria thought the ramp leading down was large, this corridor dwarfed it.

Large steel doors and round, tube-like tunnels broke the hallway at uneven intervals. The tunnels seemed to wind off in a haphazard manner, and it was obvious that lava had created many of them. Where they led was lost in a cloak of darkness. Each of the doors had a barred covered window set in its center. Neria peered into several as she walked, and what she saw disturbed her. Or more precisely, what she didn't see. Hurrying forward, she came even with Aathin. "Why do all these cells appear empty? I thought this place held hundreds of prisoners."

The female ifrit did not break stride. "It once did. Not anymore."

The feeling of unease that had stole upon her as they descended to the sub levels began to constrict her insides. "I don't understand."

The ifrit's eyes burned bright in the darkness. "Please. You will soon."

The hallway ended in a set of ironbound doors, standing open. Inside, a large table and some chairs sat in the center of a room that was far from inviting. Straw littered much of the floor and benches lined the walls. An assortment of gruesome tools lay strewn across the benches. Instruments forged for purposes Neria did not want to think about.

The ifrit crossed the room and entered another chamber on the far side. Neria began to follow, but stopped when Mantineus snagged her elbow. Looking over her shoulder, she opened her mouth to ask what he wanted when he nodded to the far side of the room. Her eyes soon found what he was indicating. A large, fresh stain covered the floor and splattered the base of the wall. She had seen similar patterns before.

Blood.

The stain was large enough that she doubted whoever made it would have survived. Casting her gaze around the room, she saw other fresh bloodstains, half hidden under the straw. Varaca noticed them too, and whispered a solemn prayer under her breath.

Aathin's voice rang out from the room beyond. "In here is what you'll want to see."

Neria glanced at the others and saw the same cautious looks upon their faces, mirroring hers. Mantineus moved his hand to the hilt of his sword before nodding for her to lead.

Taking hold of the grip of her own sword, she crossed the straw-covered floor and entered the massive bowl of a chamber beyond. When she stepped across the threshold, what greeted her made her stop hard in her tracks.

Aathin stood with Boan and the two fire giants. Beside them were two massive dragons – one green, one red. Both had been butchered.

The lower jaw of the green was gone, along with the creature's eyes. A large gash ran down the green's side, and lengths of gore spilled out onto the floor next to it.

All of the red's clawed fingers were missing, and not just the ones on the beast's front paws, but its back as well. By the jaggedness of the wounds, it looked as if they had been ripped

Prison of Fire

off, leaving the stumps to be cauterized. Its head lay limp on the floor, mouth agape. Neria was horrified to see that all of the poor creature's teeth had been removed. Judging by the poor state of its gums, these had been pulled with the same viciousness as the creature's fingers.

Large, gaping swaths of skin were visible on both dragons where scales had been torn away. The stench in the room was overwhelming. Neria swooned for a moment, fighting back the urge to retch.

"What..." She turned to Aathin. "What happened here?"

"Do not insult us by pretending you don't know!" This time the ifrit's ire was directed squarely at Neria, and she found it hard not to shrink before Aathin's rage. "When the three dragons were brought here, I voiced my objections. But the mighty dal would never listen to a mere *slave*."

Varaca stepped forward, frost crackling from her hands as she moved. "You will watch your tou—"

In a blur, one of the fire giants brought his mammoth club down on the side of the mage's head. Varaca crumpled to ground in a tangle of dirty red robes. As she fell, the spell she had prepared fired from her hands, striking Boan. A bolt of ice slammed into his chest, boring a hole through his brown robe and filling the chamber with a freezing burst of air.

The ifrit pitched back, landing in the entrails of the green dragon.

Jantris bellowed and rushed the giant who attacked Varaca. In one fluid motion, he drew his long, two-handed sword and cleaved through the fire giant's left arm, severing it halfway between elbow and wrist.

The giant wailed, clinging to his ruined stump of an arm. The massive creature leapt forward, enveloping Jantris with its sheer size and driving them both to the ground in a heap.

Aathin drew the thick scimitar that hung from her hip and lunged with a vicious attack meant to cleave Neria's head from her shoulders.

Neria did not have time to think. Instinct and training were all she had. All she needed. Her own sword sprang to her

hand. The clang of the weapons bore into her ears as the two blades collided, sending a shockwave cascading up her arm.

The world spun in an explosion of pain when something struck her from behind. Neria found herself sailing through the air. When she hit the floor, she slid through the dragon-blood soaked straw. It took a second for the stars to clear from her vision. When they did, Mantineus was fighting the last fire giant.

Her old mentor grunted as a giant's club racked down his spine, crashing into the floor. When he spun, the thick leather armor that covered his back flapped in tattered strips. The skin under the torn armor was in no better shape, and the old warrior's blood flowed freely from several deep gouges.

If the pain affected him, he did not show it. He launched his own attack even before the fire giant could lift his club from the floor.

A spinning flurry of metal streaks assailed the giant, opening a series of large gaping wounds in the span of a few heartbeats. Instead of the giant picking up his club, it almost appeared as if the club pulled the giant down to his knees.

The last gash to sprout from the creature was one across his neck. Lava spurted into the air as the fire giant fell back, twitching.

Mantineus turned and took a step toward Neria, his face twisted in a mask of anguish. By the time he took his second step, he collapsed to hands and knees.

A smile spread across Aathin's wide face. She moved toward the fallen elf, testing the edge of her sword with a finger. With a snarl, the ifrit raised her blade into the air.

"NO!" Neria's scream sliced through the numbness that had held her captive. Fighting through her own pain, she sprang to her feet.

The ifrit froze, pivoting her head so that the two locked eyes.

"Please!" The terror and pleading that filled her own voice repulsed Neria, but she cared only for Mantineus. She didn't want to think about a life without her old bear. "Don't do this."

Aathin laughed. It was not the response Neria was

Prison of Fire

expecting, but at least the ifrit relaxed. She did not lower her weapon, however. "A dal who shows concern for someone other than herself? If there were more like you, perhaps your race would not be so despised." With a flexing of her biceps, the ifrit brought the blade down across Mantineus' neck.

The elf's gray-haired head popped from his body and rolled to where Neria stood looking down in horror.

Neria had not heard the old elven warrior cry out, for her own screams drowned out all sound. Scooping up her sword with numb fingers, she staggered forward. The agony filling her side refused to let her stand up straight. Her vision blurred again when Aathin backhanded her. Her legs buckled, dropping her to the floor once more. All she could do was glare up at the female ifrit towering over her.

"I warned them." Aathin shook her head. "From the moment they brought them in, I warned them holding dragons prisoner would spell doom for us all." The ifrit knelt down next to Neria. "But your mighty emperor craved their power! Hungered for their secrets! When the torture began I knew—" Shifting her gaze, she looked back at the dead dragons. "I knew all hope was lost. That is why I sent word to them."

Aathin turned back, hatred filling her fiery eyes. Reaching out, the ifrit cupped Neria's face. The heat from the ifrit's palm singed Neria's cheeks. Aathin's grip tightened when Neria tried to pull away, forcing them to lock eyes once more. "You are too late. The dragons know. Ithiosar the Black was here. He rescued the one he could and is already on his way to Velious with news of your crimes." She released Neria with a flick, then stood. "It's a pity your arrival was so ill timed. A few more hours and all you would have found was an empty prison." Aathin waved at the dragons' corpses with a grimace. "And omens of your doom."

Face turning grim, the ifrit raised her scimitar. "Still, I can't leave witnesses." As she brought her blade down, a bitter cold gripped the room. Bolts of frost crashed into the side of the ifrit, picking her up and sending her flying.

When her sight cleared, it was all Neria could do to rise up on her elbows. Varaca was sitting where she had fallen. Blood

matted her hair and covered half her face. If it wasn't for the fact that her eyes were open and looking around the room, the mage could be mistaken for a corpse.

On unsteady legs, Neria rose and crossed to Varaca. "Let me help you up. We have to get out of here."

The graying mage shook her head. "Not until we give Mantineus a proper burial."

"We can't!" Neria looped her arm under the mage's. "We can't hope to fight anymore. If Aathin gets up—"

Varaca gave a grunt, but did not stand. "That bitch will never rise again. Nothing here will." She waved a hand around the room. "Only death remains."

"Don't be so quick to count me among that number!" The shout was muffled, but it pulled Neria's attention to where the fire giant with the missing arm still lay face down.

Leaving Varaca's side, Neria shuffled over. The tip of a thick elven sword stuck up from the center of the fire giant's back. "Jantris?"

"I could use some help." The old fighter's thin voice had never sounded so good.

Looking around, she spied several planks of wood. "Hold on!" She hurried over and picked up one of the boards. Sliding it under the giant's ribcage, she worked at lifting the creature's body enough for Jantris to wiggle his way out. Once free, he reached back under and retrieved his sword.

Standing, he grinned despite being covered in burns and bruises. "Thanks." His smile slipped when he saw Mantineus' still form. "No..."

Varaca had stood. "Thank Anashti it was quick. I'm glad he didn't suffer."

The emptiness in the mage's voice brought a tear to Neria. She knelt beside her mentor's body, but kept her eyes from wandering to his severed head. "If we are going to bury him, we need to do it now." She gazed up at the other two and felt the fire burning in her core. "We must return home with all haste. My father must know what has happened here. I fear the Emperor has doomed us all."



They buried Mantineus in the courtyard of Tagnik Vukar. Varaca used magic to dig out a hole in the baked ground, and they wrapped the warrior's body in the imperial banner that hung in the prison's main entrance. Thankfully for Neria, it was Jantris who had retrieved his old friend's head.

Seraphs bless you, Jantris. That was a duty I could not bear.

The wind picked up, but the breeze did little to comfort Neria as she stared at the pile of fresh-turned rock and dirt covering her mentor.

She felt... hollow.

How could this be? Her old bear had always been there. Grinning down at her. Comforting her against the pains of the world. Berating her when she fell short of his expectations.

She smiled, and the motion released tears perched in the corners of her almond-shaped eyes. They cascaded down her dirt-caked cheeks to be greedily sucked up by the dry ground. The wind began to gust, but she paid it no mind.

"I will miss you." The heartbreak lacing Varaca's words made Neria look over at the mage. Her face was stone, though there was something more upon it than her normal scowl. Something deeper.

For all their bickering, she loved him. I wonder if he ever knew.

She opened her mouth to offer comfort, though she had no idea what she would say.

Then the ground lurched and she found herself dumped unceremoniously onto the hard earth.

Jantris was beside her before she realized she had fallen. "That was no earthquake! Are you alright?"

She looked around in bewilderment before nodding her head. The thin elf was right. It felt as if all of Norrath had been shoved aside. She took his arm and he helped her rise.

Varaca had regained her feet as well and stood looking off to the south, her red robes whipping in the strong blasts of

air that seemed to have arisen from nowhere. "Something's wrong." Her whisper was forced, filled with fear.

Neria moved closer to the mage. She reached out to grab her arm, but stopped at the look in the mage's eyes. Panic. "What is it, Varaca?"

"I'm not sure." The mage turned and faced Neria. "But something's very, very wrong. I can feel it."

Vibrations began to tickle Neria's toes, and for a moment she thought an insect had infiltrated her boots. As the vibrations grew stronger, she knew she was mistaken.

The earth shook.

A continuous rumble that grew in intensity with each passing moment until the small stones that littered the yard began to bounce in a chaotic dance.

Varaca gasped. She put her hands to either side of her face as if she wanted to cover her eyes but couldn't. "NO!" She wailed and continued to stare southward over the walls of the prison. Then she grunted as if struck in the stomach, collapsing to her knees. Through it all, her vision remained locked to the south.

Looking in the direction of the mage's gaze, all Neria could see was the ash-filled haze that dominated the Lavastorm.

The ground rumbled as a massive tremor ripped across the plateau. The fire giants' shacks collapsed along with part of the outer wall. It was all Neria could do to keep her feet. The wind had risen to gale-force, whipping ash and pumice into a frenzy, as if millions of angry bees swarmed past them.

"We must take cover!" Jantris' shout was barely audible over the roaring storm.

Through the thick cloud of dust and dirt whipping about, Neria eyed the collapsed part of the wall. "That's not a wise idea!" Though the thin elf was within arm's reach of her, she screamed so her words would be heard.

Jantris pointed back to the prison. "We can't simply stand out in this! If the winds continue to strengthen, we'll be ripped to shreds!"

As if to prove his point, a chunk of rock the size of a child's

Prison of Fire

fist ripped across Neria's cheek, leaving an angry gash dripping blood. She wiped the wound and scrambled to where Varaca still sat on her knees upon the ground. "Help me with her!"

Each grabbing an arm, they began pulling the mage toward the prison's main building. Before they had made it twenty paces, Varaca screamed and her limbs went rigid.

At the same moment, another tremor slammed the area, tossing Neria and the others into the air. She landed hard, the wind whooshing from her lungs. The noise that crashed down upon her nearly stopped her heart. It sounded as if the entire world had broken in half. Wave after wave thrashed the land. She repeatedly smacked into the ground as she clung desperately to Varaca. Her world became a relentless assault of the ground bent on beating the life from her.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. The wind died to a steady breeze, and the earth fell silent. Neria lay on her back looking up at the sky. The sun was well on its way to setting, but she couldn't help but stare in wonder at the beauty of the clear-blue vastness above her. The sky seemed to stretch further than she ever thought it could.

She took a moment to take stock of her body, flexing first fingers and toes, then arms and legs. She was one massive bruise, but she was glad to find nothing broken. She tried sitting up, but the spinning in her head made her immediately regret the attempt. She squinted hard to steady her vision, then looked in the direction of the prison's main building. Or more precisely, where it had been.

The structure had fallen into a large hole formed by the collapse of the corridors below. Looking around, she found that the entire outer wall had toppled as well. With an unobstructed view, she marveled at how beautiful the landscape looked. The bright sun glinted off large, jagged spires of pure black obsidian stone. She wondered at how she had never noticed them before. Then it struck her.

There is no ash covering them. Nor in the sky!

Whatever the winds were, and wherever they had come from, they had scrubbed the Lavastorm mountains clean.

A hand gripped her forearm. "Are you alright?"

She smiled up at Jantris. "I'll live. Varaca?"

Panic filled Neria when the mage failed to answer. Scrambling to her feet, she was relieved to find Varaca standing some ten paces away. But the mage was once again staring off to the south, this time with a hand covering her mouth.

Neria stumbled over to stand next to the mage. It took only a moment for her keen eyes to catch what Varaca was staring at. A massive blackness streaked across the sky, such as a sword would rend in flesh. So high was the black rip, she could clearly see it over the peaks of the Lavastorm. It undulated like a snake, with energy crackling and swirling about its edges. But the flashes were not lightning, for there was nothing natural about them. Neria was certain she could see a night's sky, complete with stars, deep inside of it.

"How is that possible?"

Varaca shook her head. "I... I don't know."

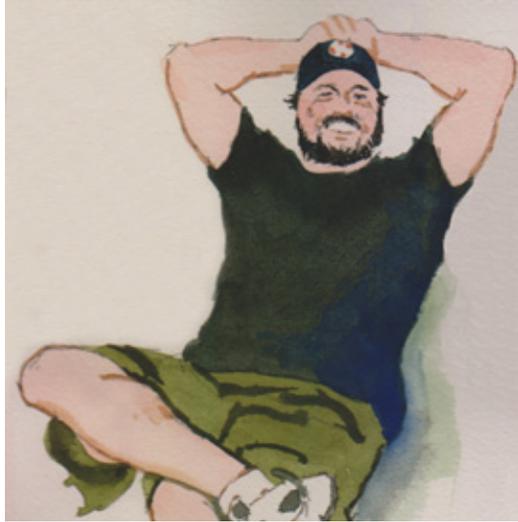
Casting her gaze to the mountains below the plateau, all she found was devastation. From her high vantage point, she could see clearly for hundreds of leagues. To the east, whole mountains were gone. Entire swaths of land had disappeared, the void they left behind claimed by the raging waters of the sea. It was as if she were looking upon a new landscape. "What could have caused all this destruction? Wait." Neria's brain began to put the pieces together. She turned and pointed toward the fracture in the southern sky. "Takish'Hiz lies at the heart of that storm!"

"Yes." The mage turned and stared hard into Neria's eyes. "Though I fear the capital may stand no longer."

The weight of the mage's words bore down upon Neria, driving her to her knees. "Father..."



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.

Find out more about him and his schedule of appearances on his official website, www.maxwellalexanderdrake.com.

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.