



An
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NEXT

Short Story

The
ENEMY of
my **ENEMY**

Part Two

Maxwell Alexander Drake

The Enemy of My Enemy

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Maxwell Alexander Drake

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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.

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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.

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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.

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.