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Short Story



Rise of the Ring

Maxwell Alexander Drake

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Wind buffeted across Ithiosar's leathery wings as he banked over the peaks of the Velious mountains. Below him lay barren rocks covered by ice and snow. Nothing grew this high. Nothing lived here. Even his massive lungs struggled to pull in enough air to keep him conscious.

It was one of the reasons he loved returning to the Skyshrine.

This is the dominion of my kin alone. None trespass here.

Following the jagged spike-like tips of the mountains, Ithiosar continued to climb. Gaining altitude, he passed through the last thin band of clouds, the freezing cold mist stinging like tiny daggers as droplets slipped between the layers of black scales armoring his body.

And still he forced himself to climb higher. The tops of the mountains shrank as he crossed the point where many dragons feared to go. Looking up, elation washed over him.

Beyond a thin veil of pale blue, a deep darkness found only here stretched off into eternity. He could see small pinpricks of light, stars piercing the endless blackness that was the night's shroud. Here, at the edge of the world, they seemed more real. As if all he had to do was push a little harder, fly a bit higher, and he could break free of Norrath's grip. Just a few beats of his wings and he could sail off to join the Skymother and become one with the stars.

His vision tunneled. Small, white wisps danced before him. He closed his eyes and a weightlessness stole over him.

With a jerk, he realized he was falling.

He couldn't have been unconscious for more than a few seconds, for a quick glance down found the tops of the

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mountains still far below. Ecstasy filled him with the thought that he had come closer to the stars than ever before.

Flexing, he stiffened his wings and let them take his weight. He scanned the terrain for recognizable markers as he soared above the sparse cloud cover. His sharp eyes quickly found that which he sought.

Still some leagues away, a massive black cone of a mountain rose above the gray rocky peaks. A thin tendril of white smoke drifted up from the center of the round hole that formed its summit.

Skyshrine.

Steepening his angle, he glided down toward the dormant volcano. When he reached it, he circled around, still several hundred feet above its rim, trying to peer into its depths.

Shadows were all he saw.

My Ring brothers will no longer be forced to hide. For from those shadows, I shall reveal truth.

Ithiosar's master had been pleased when Lord Yelinak called this meeting of the Claws of Veeshan.

In the wake of the devastation unleashed at the heart of the elven empire, a gathering was unavoidable. Rumors swirled and fears abounded, even among the dragons. The timing of this council could not be better.

When they see, when they understand, they won't be able to deny what must be done.

He knew there were still dragons who opposed what he called for. It was the *why* Ithiosar could not understand. How could the Claws be so blind? Why were they so stubborn? The crimes of the dal were unforgiveable. It was the elves and their haughty emperor who betrayed their trust, breaking every pact forged to ensure peace. The elves had even led the other mortal races to ruin through centuries of war and subjugation.

It was the elves who brought about the Ashfall and broke the world—I'm certain of it!

The Claws' opposition frustrated him. What was it that made so many dragons sympathetic to the *mortals*? They were

a scourge. A blight. Norrath was a better world before the lesser races infected it with their greed and treachery.

And it will be better once they are wiped from it! The Ring shall see to that!

He filled his lungs with a deep, calming breath—it would do him no good to arrive gripped by anger. He passed through the wisp of smoke. Warmth wrapped him, driving off the chill air, if only for a moment.

They will see today. When faced with the reality I throw at their feet, they shall all see.

Dipping his head, Ithiosar pulled his wings back against his sides and dove into the mouth of Skyshrine. Passing into its interior, his eyes quickly adjusted to the deep shadows of the place. He made a looping pass around the massive bowl-shaped cavern. It seemed he was the last to arrive—as his instructions dictated. It was good, as his *guest* needed more time to prepare than expected.

The Skyshrine had stood as the seat of power for dragonkind since the war against the titans. The city itself—if this place could bear the title of city—was a collection of lairs and temples, structures and tunnels, all built into the mountains surrounding the volcano. A place the First Brood had named the Mother's Eye. The city had been built to accommodate thousands of his kind. But since the dark days of the Ravaner Wars, most of its chambers stood empty—silent reminders to how few of Veeshan's children remained.

Though white smoke poured continuously from several large vents, the volcano was dormant. The obsidian floor—black even than the scales covering Ithiosar's powerful frame—had been worn smooth by thousands of years of dragons striding across its surface.

The entire city carried the name Skyshrine, but Ithiosar always thought of this place, this sanctuary, when he heard the name. The rest of the city was simply the shell that surrounded it.

By dragon standards, the chamber was simple. Layers of rock ledges lined the circumference of the room, the first

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one about fifty feet above the obsidian floor, with additional levels at regular intervals. Each level cut deeper into the sides, forming a coliseum-like area before the top of the cone shifted inward to form the mouth of the volcano. The dragons in attendance stood upon raised platforms, which sat evenly around the top of the ledges.

As it always did when he attended these gatherings, sadness washed over Ithiosar.

How I wish I could have seen this chamber in the beginning. When this room housed a parliament of dragons representing countless others, and my kind's numbers spread to every continent.

But he was Second Brood, born into an age when every living dragon could take a seat here and still not fill half the alcoves.

Aaryonar the Watcher eyed Ithiosar as he flew by. "You have already tested my patience by being the last to arrive, young one. Do not further vex me with your tired cries for war."

Ithiosar bristled over the insult and nearly lashed back with a snide reply. But bickering with such an ancient dragon would do little to serve his master's plans. Instead, he blinked slowly, feigning capitulation, and headed for his usual dais next to Klandicar.

As he stepped up to the empty platform, the elder black turned to him. "Have you heard any word? My brother has never been silent this long." He snorted, a deep gravelly sound like boulders cascading down a mountain. "You spoke of a message you received as you investigated the Aerie. Did it bear fruit in locating him?"

Anxiety bit at Ithiosar over the directness of the question. He dared not lie to the brother of his mentor. Yet if Klandicar learned of what he'd found before all was ready, the elder's rage would plunge the chamber into chaos.

He bowed his head to break eye contact. "I am awaiting the arrival of certain... evidence, which I plan to offer up before this council, my lord."

Klandicar glowered, drawing close to the younger dragon.

“Do not trifle with your betters, whelp. Though my brother and I disagree about many things, we stand together against those who would oppose us.” A puff of smoke rose from his nostrils as he turned away.

I'm counting on it, my lord.

Glancing around, Ithiosar caught sight of his aide, Hasslain. The drake came slithering out from the tunnel behind the dais. Ithiosar stretched his long neck around as the drake approached, away from Klandicar so the elder could not hear. “Is he ready?” He cringed as his attempt at a whisper echoed around him.

The drake reeked of fear. “Not yet, master. I regret to say his... condition is making preparations difficult.”

For several moments Ithiosar stared at the drake, his nostrils flaring in and out. The thought of biting his servant in half came to him. Or bathing him in acid. Neither would ingratiate him to those gathered here today. He closed his eyes to regain control. “Make sure I know the moment he is ready. I don't know how long I will be able to stall when the time comes.”

“Yes, master.” Before Hasslain even finished the sentence, he had already turned around to flee back to the relative safety of the tunnel.

“Now that we are all here, let us begin.” Lord Yelinak's deep baritone rang through the cavern and Ithiosar returned his attention to the chamber. The silver stepped to the front of his dais and swiveled his head, taking in everyone. He bowed. “In her name we gather.”

In unison, the dragons answered. *“In her name.”*

Yelinak turned his eyes upward. “Watch over us, Skymother. Guide our wings.”

“Guide our wings.”

“From your realm above, to the world below...”

“Guide our wings.”

He unfurled his wings and looked around him. “May we act ever in her name.”

“In her name.”

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Yelinak paused in silence for several long moments, then folded his wings. "You all know why I have called this council. A great destruction has occurred, unlike any since the dawn of the Age of Ruin. Amaril lies sundered, and this devastation has touched every corner of Norrath."

From a shadowed alcove on the chamber's first level, a voice as old as Yelinak's spoke. "And what of that which lies below?"

The leader of the Claws did not tolerate interruption, yet this was the one voice even he could not ignore. The silver dragon fell silent for a moment before he spoke. "I have communed with our Great Father, Vulak Aerr. He continues to sit vigil with the Warders. The prison was shaken, but holds."

Murmurs arose throughout the chamber, emphasizing the silence that spilled from the shadowed alcove.

When no further comment came, Yelinak turned his gaze upon another. "Lady Vox. You and your scholars have studied the event the mortals call the Ashfall. What have you discovered?"

The elegant white stepped to the front of her dais. Ithiosar could not help but admire her beauty and bearing. "We understand the nature of the destruction." Her metallic voice rang like chimes on the wind. "The portal to Akashidak erupted, creating a surge across the ley lines connected to it. One such line burned through Amaril, tearing it in two. Another surge likely did as much to the realm of Akashidak... or worse."

"What of Takish'Hiz? What of Miragul?" A guarded concern laced Yelinak's words.

A slight smile curled on Vox's lips. "The city is destroyed. The emperor with it."

Yelinak nodded, and Ithiosar thought he saw regret in the silver's eyes. "And the cause? The culprit?"

Vox swayed her long head with practiced grace. "Still unknown, my lord. From the extent of the destruction, it is likely we may never uncover the truth of it."

The chamber echoed with whispers. Yelinak motioned his followers to silence. "Continue your investigation, good lady. Now, on to a matter closer to our own hearts. Has any among you received word from those who stood watch at the Aerie? Or from those who failed to answer the summons to this council?"

Ithiosar's excitement got the better of him. He stepped to the edge of his dais and leaned forward, determined to leave no doubt over his desire to be heard.

Yelinak's eyes met Ithiosar's, and the elder dragon sighed with resignation. When the hum of conversation died down, Lord Yelinak addressed the black dragon. "Ithiosar, you may speak."

Ithiosar composed himself. He fought through his eagerness and kept his voice level as he addressed the hall. "I have news of great import. Evidence I wish to present concerning our missing kin. I humbly request the floor, my lord."

Yelinak shook his head slowly, then stepped back. "I yield the floor to Ithiosar."

Leaping from his perch, Ithiosar glided in a slow circle down to the smooth obsidian below. Once there, he took a moment to walk the room one more time, eyeing several of the attending dragons he knew would be thorns in his side. Passing before the shadowed alcove, he gave its inhabitant a deferential nod.

When he reached the center of the chamber, he stopped directly in front of the ancient silver dragon and bowed. "My thanks, Lord Yelinak. For both your patience and your trust that what I bring before the Claws this day is of grave importance to all gathered. Something that will surely break the stalemate that has gripped our council for so long."

Turning, he raised his voice to drown out the low roars of disapproval that followed his last statement. "Our Mother bid us to keep watch over Norrath—on this we all agree." Several dragons gave him approving looks. "All those present know my stance on the mortal races. They are responsible

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for so much destruction and deceit, it is long past time they answered for it.”

Several of those approving looks evaporated.

“There are those among you who oppose my beliefs.” Ithiosar let his gaze fall upon the green, Wuoshi. “Why they voice this opposition... is a question I often ponder.”

A low snarl spilled from the green and he pushed half over the lip of the ledge he stood upon, gripping it with his front talons. Extending his neck, he glared down at Ithiosar. “Let me put your impudent mind to rest, whelp.” He snapped at the air in front of him. “Many of your elders oppose dragging this world into another war because we have seen firsthand the costs of doing so.” Unfurling his wings, the green used them to gesture around the room. “Look around this chamber. Every empty dais once held one of my brothers or sisters. I watched skies full of my siblings die to the ravaners. Wept as their hearts were consumed and lost to us forever. Would you have more seats emptied by the dal and their High Magic, just to satisfy your hatred and bloodlust?”

Ithiosar dipped his head before turning his gaze up to Lord Yelinak, forcing the leader of the Claws of Veeshan to chastise the green for speaking out of turn. The silver’s warning growl reverberated through the chamber. “Wuoshi. Ithiosar holds the floor.”

With a snort, Wuoshi pulled his green bulk back, averting his gaze as he did.

Don’t worry, coward. That will not be the last sulking you do this day.

Suppressing a smile, Ithiosar turned his back on the green and addressed the rest of the assembly. “No, I did not fight the ravaners. It grieves me that I did not have the honor of lending my strength in that terrible war. But I do know—as do we all—that the mortals of that age were responsible for opening the portals and allowed those foul creatures to find their way to Norrath. For hundreds of years I have urged this gathering to take heed. Warning of the dangers that would come from letting this new generation of vermin races breed.

Of allowing them to spread their corruption across Norrath." He let his gaze drop along with his voice. "And always I have been rejected."

Lady Vox stepped once more to the front of her dais, catching Ithiosar's eye and making it known she wished to speak. The black bowed his head, acknowledging her and granting his leave. "We have not rejected you, young Ithiosar." Her voice lilted. "All we have ever asked for is proof."

At her words, Ithiosar could not stop from looking up to his platform. The drake, Hasslain, hovered just inside the lip of a shadow, shaking his head.

Ithiosar wanted to roar.

How much longer must I stall?

Pulling his attention back to the task at hand, Ithiosar began to pace. His mind raced. He could not fail his master now that they were so close. He would never be forgiven. "Proof? Proof!" His bellow echoed through the chamber. "How much more proof do you need? It was the *elves*—" He spat the word out like a curse. "—and their constant meddling with the portals, who plagued this world with the likes of the shissar. It was the *elves*, turning their High Magic against the other mortals, who built an empire so decadent and prideful that they defy a pact forged ages ago with our own leader." He looked toward Yelinak, but the old dragon's face betrayed nothing.

Shifting his gaze, he glared up at Lady Vox. "And soon enough our lady in white will prove it was the elves' own folly that destroyed the portal and broke the very world we are charged to protect."

Lady Vox stepped forward, but Ithiosar turned away, denying her a voice. He knew what she would say anyway—that there was no evidence of the elves' involvement in the Ashfall.

But my words have stirred a few. I will not allow her to undo that.

Instead, he looked to another for the support he was sure he would find. "In the wake of this disaster, our brother, Jaled Dar, observed for himself the actions of the dal. Tell us,

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brother, with their emperor dead and capital torn asunder, have the elves called out for our help and guidance? Have they cast aside their lust for power and sought the peace and protection our pact with them affords?"

The black dragon flexed his shoulders, stretching his wings out to the sides. "No, brother. They have turned on each other like rabid beasts. Their noble houses now scramble for the empty throne. Instead of helping their own people thrown into turmoil by this tragedy, they mass their armies on Faydwer. Nothing has changed!"

Even as the old dragon's voice reverberated through the hollowed out volcano, Ithiosar knew that while moving, Jaled Dar's words would not convert his opposition.

Lord Yelinak stepped forward on his platform and Ithiosar was forced to give him leave. "Enough speculation, young Ithiosar." Irritation laced his words. "When you took the floor, you claimed you had evidence. It would please me to see that this evidence was more than the same tired accusations."

Panic set in.

Ithiosar glanced back to his dais and found it empty. His mind struggled to pull the words that would purchase him more time. As he turned to address the silver, motion caught his eye. Hasslain slithered from the back corridor, his reptilian eyes sparkling in the dim light. His animated bobbing up and down on his thick tail sent a wave of relief washing over Ithiosar.

Returning his gaze to the silver, he bowed his head. "Lord Yelinak." He turned in a slow circle, taking in the rest of the gathering. "My brothers. Sisters. I bring before you indisputable *proof* that the dal have overstepped themselves and committed an act of such heinous depravity, none in this room shall be able to ignore it!" His gaze rested firmly on Wuoshi as he said the final statement.

At the predetermined signal, a *thump, scrape* echoed from the main entrance tunnel to the council chamber.

Ithiosar threw his deep gravelly voice so it echoed across the hall. "I have long warned of the evils of the mortal races."

Thump, scrape. Thump, scrape.

"But many in this room have turned a deaf ear to my pleas."

Thump, scrape. Thump, scrape.

"And now our own kin have paid the price."

Thump, scrape. Thump, scrape. A pair of glowing eyes materialized from the tunnel.

"You wanted proof?" Ithiosar stood on his hind legs and stretched out his neck so he could look the dragons on the lowest level in the eye. "Then find it here, carved upon the visage of our lost brother, Zlandicar!"

As soon as the ancient black dragon broke from the darkness of the tunnel, a hiss sprang from every dragon. Ithiosar understood. He felt the same when he first saw his mentor rotting in the depths of Tagnik Vukar.

Zlandicar was broken. So thin, his scales hung from his body like rags. So weak, he could barely stand on his own. Old scars and fresh wounds carved across his face at odd angles. Where his left eye had been, a gaping hole remained. His back leg was folded in upon itself, bent at a grotesque angle as the dragon dragged his bulk across the floor.

None of that was what shocked those who looked upon him.

The wounds were physical. Many could be healed. Those that could not would be tolerated. What horrified them was seeing Zlandicar only half-alive. Each and every dragon could sense that the elder's mythir heart, his very soul and essence, had been all but drained from him.

Even Ithiosar found it difficult not to look away. Remembering what was at stake, he realized he could not afford for others to avert their gaze. "Look!" He let out a roar that shook soot from the rim of the cavern high above. "Look at what the elves have done to one of our own!" He locked eyes with Yelinak. "As I searched the Aerie for clues to my mentor's disappearance, word came to me from a slave of the elves that Zlandicar, along with young Tarinar and Yonilar, had been imprisoned in Lavastorm. I flew with all haste." He let sorrow fill him, surprised to find that it was genuine. "I was too late. The bastard Miragul had stolen the life from my two broodmates and left the atrocity you see before you."

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Yelinak shifted his eyes from Ithiosar to Zlandicar and back again. He pulled back his lips, exposing rows of razor-sharp fangs. With a thunderous screech, he launched himself from his perch. He made one circle of the chamber, then with a mighty flap of his wings, descended. Crashing his fist into the obsidian floor, the force of his blow cracked the ancient surface for the first time in millennia.

Klandicar stepped forward and leapt from his dais. He glided down to land next to Zlandicar. The look of revulsion warring with that of concern played across the black's face. "Brother. We... I feared you dead."

Pulling back what remained of his top lip, Zlandicar revealed a row of filed-down fangs. "Dead..." The elder's reply came out in a long, sickening rasp. Throughout the hall, dragons roared in anguish.

I must focus their outrage.

Ithiosar leapt into the air and soared around the chamber. "When Zlandicar and the others first went missing from the Aerie, I knew the elves were behind it. You doubted me and demanded evidence. Our scouts have witnessed Miragul and his Keepers of the Art unleashing High Magic, but many here insisted it was all a show. Even when more of our kin went missing, their lairs left empty, those who oppose my words were not swayed!" Flapping his wings, he hovered over those on the floor and pointed a taloned claw at them. "Can there be any doubt now that those missing have met the same fate as Zlandicar and the others?"

Folding his wings, Ithiosar dropped to the floor and landed between the brothers. "I am only grateful I was able to save my mentor before his suffering became fatal as well."

"This is madness!" Wuoshi launched himself from his platform and glided down. "How do we know any of this is as you say? It is well known Zlandicar feels as you, Ithiosar. Perhaps your mentor provoked the dal and brought this pain upon himself?"

Like a bolt of blackness, Zlandicar shot forward, shrieking. He slammed into the green with such force more dust fell from

above. The two smashed against the wall, Zlandicar on top. Whipping his head forward, the elder black bit into the side of the green's neck. Had the black still possessed fangs, it would have been a fatal strike. Even with his teeth gone, Zlandicar's bite ripped away several of Wuoshi's scales.

A flash of red batted Zlandicar's emaciated body sideways. The dragon slid across the smooth obsidian floor, struck the wall and fell motionless. Ithiosar feared his mentor slain. Lord Nagafen's massive form hovered over Wuoshi. With a pitiful groan, Zlandicar opened his remaining eye and lifted his head. Lord Nagafen glared at the crumpled mass of the black dragon. "How dare you attack a brother!" The ancient dragon pivoted, squaring on Ithiosar. "Zlandicar was my friend. I shall mourn his passing." His face became a mask of hate mixed with pity. "I do not know what *that* is."

Zlandicar regained his footing. A look of confusion and pain rippled over his scarred features as he glanced about the room. Turning, he shuffled out of the chamber through the same tunnel he had entered by, leaving a low, sad moan echoing behind him.

The ancient red dragon's ire pressed down upon Ithiosar until the black took a step back. "It was irresponsible to bring him here in his state. I blame you for this. That... *abomination* should be destroyed." With that, he jumped up and flew back to his dais on the top level of the chamber.

Wuoshi rose on wobbling legs, but regained his composure before he had taken more than a few strides. With a final glare at Ithiosar, the green leapt upward, returning to his alcove in silence.

Ithiosar should have felt delight over his rival's humiliation. Instead, he held his breath. He could not decide if what had just happened would help his cause or hinder it.

"Enough!" The voice from the shadowed alcove reverberated through the chamber, bringing sudden silence to the chaos. Trakanon stepped from the shadows, his ancient form—large as Yelinak himself—rose high in the chamber before landing on the obsidian floor. "I will bring Zlandicar back to Kunark,

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where I have the means to restore some form of life to him. As for the evidence brought forth by Ithiosar..." Trakanon turned to Yelinak. "It is irrefutable. The dal must be punished."

Shouts and roars erupted throughout the hall. Yelinak shook his head. "The cost—"

Trakanon hissed. "What Lady Vox failed to report is that whatever caused the Ashfall also broke the elves' control over High Magic. They are wounded. They are without their most powerful weapon. The time to strike is now."

Yelinak snarled. "We lack numbers. Even after being crippled by disaster, the mortals swarm across the southern lands. We could not breed drakes quickly enough to—"

"We need not confine ourselves to drakes." Trakanon shifted to face the silver. "Just as the young mortal races rose from the days of ruin to take the place of those who came before them, lesser creatures bearing echoes of our greatness arose as well. We will make of them an army to serve our cause."

Yelinak's eyes went wide with the realization of what the ancient was suggesting. "Kobolds? Phyxians? Wyverns?" He snorted. "Little better than the mortals themselves. Unfit to stand beside us."

"But controllable." Ithiosar knew his voice would be unwanted between the two, but in his excitement he couldn't contain himself. "Weapons that can match the mortals in numbers, and surpass them in ferocity. We of the Blackwing have experience in bending such creatures to our will."

Trakanon locked his eyes on Yelinak. "When he exiled himself to dine upon ashes and regret, our Great Father chose you to lead. Give the command you know you must."

Yelinak looked around the chamber. All but a handful of the dragons were nodding, growling, baring their fangs. He looked upon the eager visage of Ithiosar and the bitter, accusing countenance of his ancient brother.

He shook his head. "No. There must be another way. We could send an envoy to—"

"To what end?" Trakanon chuckled, a sound Ithiosar had never heard. "The mortal races have never been receptive to logic."

The silver looked up and Ithiosar's gaze followed. He was glad to see the leader of the Claws had very few supporters.

Letting out a deep breath, Lord Yelinak stepped forward. Despite his reservations, when the dragon spoke, his words rang with conviction. "Ready your armies. Build your forces. While the mortals scramble for their fleeting throne, we will unleash an answer for their crimes. We will give them a war such as they have never seen."

The chamber erupted in a deafening roar. One after another, the great creatures soared from their platforms and circled the chamber. Ithiosar looked up in wonder at their rage, their power, their singularity of purpose.

At last, he had won.

Trakanon leaned in close, the elder dragon's black eyes peering into his own. "You have served me well, young one." The blue-green flesh around his fangs curled back into a smile. "You have bound us together in war. The time has come to emerge from the shadows. The mortals will fall, the Claws shall bend. And it will be the Ring of Scale who controls them all."

Ithiosar bowed his head. "Yes, my master," he whispered. "The world will be ours."

As it was, and as it will be again.



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.