



THE ORB OF  
XORRIAT

THE WAR-TORN • BOOK 2

E D W A R D B O L M E



# SHADOWS OF THE LAST WAR

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## CHAPTER 1

*Evening, the 28th of Olarune, 998 YK*

**T**eron walked across the blood-hued grass as the last sliver of the sun began to sink below the horizon. Although he was light of frame and stood on the shorter end of average, his tightly packed muscles gave him weight. His short-cropped black hair and beard framed a face taut with tension and a pair of blue eyes as cold and dead as a hanging convict. His skin, the color of oiled walnut, blended with the well-washed gray of his simple canvas outfit.

Although he walked with a cat's gentle step, in this area he felt as stealthy as a drunken orc. The grass creaked beneath his bare feet. It was not the brittle crunch of dead vegetation, but still a far cry from the whispery rustle of healthy growth. Too much had happened here for the ground to ever be whole again.

The rolling grassy plains held little resemblance to the rest of Aundair. Even those Aundairian towns that had been utterly razed by the Thrane army were fairer in comparison. The grass of the Crying Fields bore an unhealthy red hue. Under the light of the setting sun, it seemed the color of fresh blood. The tone stood as a reminder of the cost of the Last War, of the countless dead in the dozens of battles that had been fought here for the control of the southern portion of the kingdom.

As Teron walked the ruined meadows, he paced a familiar cerebral landscape, a drear and brooding path of mental flagellation. He hearkened back to the Last War, and the guilt and pain and shame whipped his soul, serving to purge and purify his mind.

So much blood shed, he thought, with every nation locked in a brutal struggle for dominance. So much carnage spread over so many decades, yet for all the brutalities, only the Crying Fields bear this terrible scar . . . a cold reminder of how far we have fallen from grace. The Sovereign Host has cursed us for what we are. For what we have done, they have cursed this place above all the lands.

Rather, he reminded himself, taking a rare side excursion in his dark thoughts, this place was cursed above all lands save Cyre. Then again, Cyre has the advantage of being truly and completely dead. Ah, to be dead instead of merely scarred, twisted into a dark revenant of the Last War. Ruined by one's choices. Ruined, like the monastery, and forever doomed to lurk in this blighted land, fighting the old battles, again and again.

Mists twined around his ankles as he walked. At first, the mists merely swirled in the wake of his stride, but as the night deepened they began to writhe of their own accord, manifesting from nothing and rising like sinister serpents to tarnish the darkness.

Somewhere, an indeterminate distance away, Teron heard a wail. He couldn't tell if it was several voices crying out in unison or one voice shredded into strips. After a few steps, the sound was followed by a faint howl of triumph.

Teron glanced up at the moons. Several were below the horizon, the rest spread across the luminous Ring of Siberys like tokens on a shaman's necklace. Sedate Olarune lingered on the horizon, waxed full, pregnant with power. Her pale orange color seemed to mock the sun. Slow-moving Vult hung almost directly overhead, while splinters of Sypheros and Barrakas lurked in the moody hues of the sunset.

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He pressed on, moving quickly across the rolling hills. The noises around him grew in strength and clarity. Groans, shrieks, shouts. The darkness was almost complete, the colors draining from the sky, and the tiny secluded vale that Teron sought was just ahead. As he crested the last hill, he paused to look back toward the remnants of the ruined monastery. It stood on the hilltop, its jagged lines looking like a shivered fang. Faint glimmers of light shone from a few windows, twinkling like stars brought from the sky to live in Aundair.

Teron smiled cynically. There were a few left, he supposed, a few glimmers of hope. Keiftal was one. He knew the old man was watching, staring into the darkness. He always did. Then there was that young boy who scrubbed the pots; he counted. Definitely Flotsam, such good-heartedness in such an ugly wrapping.

He descended into the shadowy draw, out of sight of the monastery. Down where no one could see, ask questions, come looking . . . find out. More sounds crawled through the night—the bitter clash of swords, the whetstone flare of spells, the shouts of the desperate, and the pitiful wails of the dying.

It was fully dark, and the tendrils of mist rose and congealed into a fog, thick and somehow greasy. Teron took a deep breath, let it out, then stripped off his shirt. Soon his test would come, but tonight he would practice.

He slowly spun one hand at his side, stirring the supernatural mist. Burgundy curls of smoky energy coalesced as he did so, trailing from his hand like the tresses of a lover. The familiar nausea returned to the pit of his stomach, and he steeled himself to endure the torment.

A translucent figure loomed out of the mist, glowing faintly. It looked human enough, arrayed in old-fashioned Thrane armor, but the utter madness in its glowing eyes spoke otherwise. It opened its black pit of a mouth, and Teron heard a wail of anguish crawl forth as if from an infinite distance.

Teron clenched his fist as the apparition readied a hazy, shifting sword.



A light rain drizzled on the nighttime streets of Wroat. The mellow golden glow of the everbright lanterns washed across the wet cobbles, adding some cheer to an otherwise cold and damp evening. Caeheras wiped his sleeve across his brow and turned from the main road into a side street and then again into a wide alley. As he left the last of the everbright lanterns behind, he pulled a torch from his pack and ignited it with a tindertwig. It flared to life, illuminating the dark alley. Caeheras didn't need the torch. His elf eyes easily pierced the darkness. But he figured he was being followed, and the least he could do was make it easy for those shadowing him.

He moved through the alleyways with practiced ease. He knew the area well—far enough from the Street of Worship to avoid any unwanted interlopers, near enough to the Foreign District and its plethora of diplomatic bodyguards that the presence of the city constabulary was still greatly diminished.

Caeheras didn't want interruptions. At least, none that he hadn't planned.

He found the appointed court, a narrow square surrounded by multistory warehouses and manufactories. A wagon, empty of anything save a crumpled tarp, stood against the wall to one side, its empty harnesses dangling in a puddle. A few open crates and barrels littered an area near the center of the quadrangle. In the far corner from Caeheras stood an array of smaller wooden boxes filled with new goods. Caeheras noted the subtle emerald sheen of a warding spell protecting them against theft. The wizard who owned that particular building was well known for his inventive and vengeful methods of dealing with thievery, and the boxes stood unmolested.

Caeheras placed the torch on the ground in the center of the square, then walked across to the warded boxes and stood with his back to them. Their warding spells were as good as a

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Deneith bodyguard for protecting one's back. He pulled his cloak a little tighter and waited, shifting his weight from one foot to the other to keep warm. As expected, he soon heard approaching footsteps.

Caeheras smiled as his richly dressed client stepped into the square. Though taller and a tad more robust than many gnomes, the newcomer was still a good two heads shorter than Caeheras.

"Praxle," said Caeheras.

Praxle's smile shone in the darkness. "A torch," he said. "How rustic. I never would have thought you were a romantic, Caeheras."

"The Undying Court reminds us that the old methods often work best."

"Indeed," answered Praxle. He stepped to the center of the plaza so that the torch illumined him from below. "I didn't think I'd be hearing back from you for another year or two, maybe longer."

"I, uh, I work fast."

Praxle blinked, his mouth open in amused surprise. He doffed his cap and swept it low in a formal bow. "Caeheras, I am truly impressed. You've found the answer already?"

"You brought the payment?"

Praxle slid a hand into the folds of his rain cloak and pulled out a small pouch. He reached in and removed a gem. Across the plaza, Caeheras couldn't tell what kind it was, but he saw the tell-tale sparkles as Praxle turned it between his fingers to catch the torchlight. "My answer is yes, if your answer is yes. Good wages, especially considering how short a time you worked on it."

Caeheras wiped his sleeve across his brow again, then ran his hand through his sodden hair. "I found its location for you," he said, "but I had a bit of a problem."

"I don't pay you to find problems, Caeheras," said Praxle. "I pay you to find information."

"That is true, Praxle," said Caeheras, "but I ran into some extra expenses. This was very difficult, you see. Very difficult. And my fee has gone up. A lot."

Praxle clucked his tongue. "A contract is a contract, Caeheras," he said, "and I'm very disappointed that you'd think otherwise. But if you give me what you have, we'll see about paying you a bonus for your efforts."

"No," said Caeheras. "I need the entire fee up front. If you don't have enough with you, we'll consider what you have a down payment." Caeheras drew his thin rapier, and as he did, three armed humans entered the quad, cutting off Praxle's escape routes. "Make your choice, Praxle."

Praxle smacked his lips. "Caeheras," he said as he looked over the other thugs, "this is definitely a breach of contract. We agreed that neither of us would bring anyone else in on our meetings."

"The contract price changed," said Caeheras, "so I felt some other changes might also be wise."

Praxle shook his head. "I'm very disappointed, Caeheras."

"That I worked things to my advantage?"

"No," said Praxle with a weary sigh, "that you forgot with whom you're dealing."

Caeheras started to retort but only uttered one unintelligible syllable before concern clouded his brow.

Praxle looked at the thugs surrounding him. "Since Caeheras didn't teach you one very important lesson, I will. So remember this, each of you, and it will serve you well: Whenever you deal with one gnome, you deal with all of them." He made a small hand gesture, and the noise of a tiny bell chimed in the night. The warded boxes behind Caeheras faded away, the illusions unraveling into a thousand tiny motes that glittered like diamond dust being swept away by a whirlwind. In the boxes' stead stood a half-dozen gnomes armed with cocked crossbows. At such short range, each was powerful enough to send a bolt of iron-tipped wood clean through someone's breastbone. At the same time, the tarp on the wagon rustled, and three more gnomes stood up from beneath it, each armed with a brace of hand crossbows. And above, someone spoke an arcane hex, and light suddenly shone forth to bathe the entire square.

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Praxle smiled and drew a blade from beneath his cloak. It shone wetly in the light. "Did I ever mention that my uncle is an herbalist?" he asked as he turned the blade back and forth. "Brews all kinds of interesting substances. Helps counter-balance all the overwrought strength of too-big folks like your hired hands."

Caeheras glanced at his compatriots. One was clearly nervous, looking skyward and wondering what other hazards might await them beyond the magical light. The second, the most veteran of the group, was calm, accepting. The third, however, looked like a cornered beast and tensed herself to strike.

"Wait, you three," said Caeheras. "No hasty actions. The clever d'Sivis has the better of me this day." He smiled ruefully at the gnome and tilted his head. "I thought it was a breach of contract to bring someone else along."

Praxle shrugged. "If we'd just done our business politely, you never would have known they were here. Just remember who first broke the agreement."

"We could both make more gold . . ." started Caeheras.

"I have . . . enough wealth," said Praxle in a long-suffering tone. "With what I pay you, you should know that. So give me what you have, and I'll give you your payment."

Caeheras winced in defeat, reached into his cloak and pulled forth a small sheaf of parchment, carefully wrapped in waxed paper and tied with twine. "That's terribly generous of you, Praxle, considering the situation," he said.

"The situation hasn't really changed, Caeheras," said the gnome. "It's just become clearer to all involved." He held out both hands and spoke, loudly enough that the gnome on the rooftop could also hear. "Attend, people. Caeheras and I must conclude our business, so no—"

A loud twang interrupted Praxle, and a long arrow from above suddenly pierced Caeheras's neck and imbedded itself inside his shoulder. He stumbled forward, guttering, one hand rising to his neck as the other, clutching the papers, pointed accusingly.





For the merest instant, Praxle wondered which of his people had loosed the deadly shaft. Then he saw the fletching on the arrow and heard the flat twang of other bows loosing. Interlopers! He knew that at least one arrow was aimed at him, standing as he was perfectly exposed in the center of the square.

Praxle moved, but not fast enough. He felt a burning flash of pain strike his thigh just above the knee. His leg gave, causing him to stumble and fall on top of the torch. Rolling quickly off the oily fire, Praxle snatched up the torch and flung it into the air as hard as he could, incanting words of power. The firebrand twirled ten feet upward, then exploded in a blinding starburst of brilliant sparks as Praxle's frantic spell caught up with it.

Praxle already had a hand up to shield his eyes from the flash, and he used the distraction to scramble, his leg twitching painfully with every move, toward Caeheras. As the light from the flare died, Praxle saw a shadow sweep down from above and snatch the bundled papers from Caeheras's trembling hand. The mortally wounded spy fell to his knees, the shock and betrayal fading from his eyes as blood welled through his fingers.

Praxle jerked his head about to follow the shadowy figure. At that moment, another arrow grazed the gnome's scalp and shattered on the cobbles. He rolled to one side and scrambled for the cover of the empty crates, wedging himself into the gap between two of them as another arrow imbedded itself in the wood.

Breathing heavily—both from fear and from the pain in his leg—Praxle glanced at the quivering arrow. Making a quick judgment of the archer's location, Praxle wove another incantation, then leaned out from his cover. His sharp gnomish eyes saw someone rise up on the rooftop, bow in hand, and Praxle let fly with his spell.

A wad of acid, conjured into existence and held into a missile by the thinnest sheath of mystic energy, flew from Praxle's

outstretched hand. Praxle paused, poised to duck back behind his cover, saw the archer draw the bow . . . and heard the distinctive splash and sizzle of the acid hitting the mark. Confident that the archer would be out of the fight for at least a moment, Praxle stuck his head out to find the thief who'd stolen the papers from Caeheras.

There he was, climbing a knotted rope dangling down the wall of the warehouse on the far side of the quadrangle. He was thin, almost wiry, and dressed head to toe in dark gray, a shade that faded almost to nonexistence in the dim rain-washed light.

Praxle glanced about. Caeheras lay dying in the open, and Praxle could see two or three other gnomes likewise slain, as well as one of Caeheras's thugs. A bristled clot of arrows showed where two other gnomes huddled for cover against the unknown archers. Praxle glanced back at the thief then scrambled over to where the other gnomes were cowering.

"Get your bows ready," he hissed, clamping one hand on his injured leg. "Tinka's on top of that wall!"

"Then why doesn't she blast that damned bandit while he's climbing?"

Praxle looked up again, wary of new arrows. "Probably waiting for the best time," he answered. "Wait until he's close to the top of the rope and—"

A high-pitched scream interrupted him, and a small flailing shape dropped past the thief and landed with a thud on the cold cobbles.

"*Tinka!*" yelled Praxle as the gray-clad thief disappeared onto the roof. He turned to the gnomes with him. "You, see if she's alive," he said. "You, see who else is left."

"But—"

"Shut up and do it!" said Praxle. He rose and limped over to Caeheras's body. "They're smart, whoever they are, so they're already making a getaway."

Caeheras was still breathing, a testament to his vitality and willpower. The elf lay in a pool of rainwater, one that grew redder

## EDWARD BOLME

with every passing heartbeat. His eyes tried to focus on Praxle as the gnome kneeled beside him.

"Caeheras, you know that wasn't me, right?" Praxle asked.

Caeheras nodded slightly.

"You're not going to make it, friend," he said. "You've lost too much blood. So tell me what you know, and I'll pay double the fee to your kin."

The elf closed his eyes in defeat. "Aundair," he whispered, his breath burbling in his chest. "Prelate . . . has it."

"Which prelate?" persisted Praxle in a whisper. "Answer me!"

"Hey, Praxle," called one of the other gnomes. "Jeffers caught one of the elf's sidekicks!"

Praxle turned his head. "Shut up!" he snapped. He turned back to Caeheras, imploring. "Who is it?"

"Monastery," said Caeheras. "Crying Fields. He—"

The rest of the answer got swept away as the elf's last breath rattled its way to freedom.