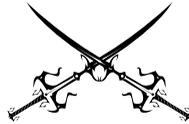




R·A·SALVATORE

THE LONE DROW

THE HUNTER'S BLADES TRILOGY



The Hunter's Blades Trilogy, Book II
THE LONE DROW

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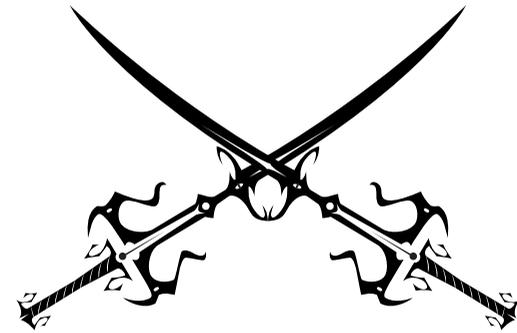
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“The three mists, Obould Many-Arrows,” Tsinka Shrinrill shrieked, her eyes wide, eyeballs rolling about insanely. She was in her communion as she addressed the orc king and the others, lost somewhere between the real world and the land of the gods, so she claimed. “The three mists define your kingdom beneath the Spine of the World: the long line of the Surbrin River, giving her vapors to the morning air; the fetid smoke of the Trollmoors reaching up to your call; the spiritual essence of your long-dead ancestors, the haunting of Fell Pass. This is your time, King Obould Many-Arrows, and this will be your domain!”

The orc shaman ended her proclamation by throwing up her arms and howling, and those many other mouths of Gruumsh One-Eye, god of orcs, followed her lead, similarly shrieking, raising their arms, and turning circles as they paced a wider circuit around the orc king and the ruined wooden statue of their beloved god.

The ruined *hollow* statue used by their enemies, the insult to the image of Gruumsh. The defiling of their god.

Urlgen Threefist, Obould’s son and heir to the throne, looked on with a mixture of amazement, trepidation, and gratitude. He had never liked Tsinka—one of the minor, if more colorful shamans of the Many-Arrows tribe—and he knew that she was speaking largely along the lines scripted by Obould himself. He scanned the area, noting the sea of snarling orcs, all angry and frustrated, mouths wide, teeth yellow and green, sharpened and broken. He looked at the bloodshot and jaundiced eyes, all glancing this way and that with excitement and fear. He watched the continual jostling and shoving, and he noted the many hurled insults, which were often answered by hurled missiles. Warriors all, angry and bitter—as were all the orcs of the Spine of the World—living in dank caves while the other races enjoyed the comforts of their respective cities and societies. They were all anxious, as Urlgen was anxious, pointy tongues licking torn lips. Would Obould reshape the fate and miserable existence of the orcs of the North?

Urlgen had led the charge against the human town that had been known as Shallows, and he had found a great victory there. The tower of the powerful wizard, long a thorn in the side of the orcs, was toppled, and the mighty



wizard was dead, along with most of his townsfolk and a fair number of dwarves, including, they all believed, King Bruenor Battlehammer himself, the ruler of Mithral Hall.

But many others had escaped Urlgen's assault, using that blasphemous statue. Upon seeing the great and towering idol, most of Urlgen's orc forces had properly prostrated themselves before it, paying homage to the image of their merciless god. It had all been a ruse, though, and the statue had opened, revealing a small force of fierce dwarves who had massacred many of the unsuspecting orcs and sent the rest fleeing for the mountains. And so there had been an escape by those remaining defenders of the dying town, and the fleeing refugees had met up with another dwarf contingent—estimates put their number at four hundred or so. Those combined forces had fended off Urlgen's chasing army.

The orc commander had lost many.

Thus, when Obould had arrived on the scene, Urlgen had expected to be berated and probably even beaten for his failure, and indeed, his vicious father's immediate responses had been along those very lines.

But then, to the surprise of them all, the reports of potential reinforcements had come filtering in. Many other tribes had begun to crawl out of the Spine of the World. In reflecting on that startling moment, Urlgen still marveled at his father's quick-thinking response. Obould had ordered the battlefield sealed, the southern marches of the area cleared of signs of any passage whatsoever. The goal was to make it seem as if none had escaped Shallows—Obould understood that the control of information to the newcomers would be critical. To that effect, he had put Urlgen to work instructing his many warriors, telling them that none of their enemies had escaped, warning them against believing anything other than that.

And the orc tribes from the deep holes of the Spine of the World had come running to Obould's side. Orc chieftains had placed valuable gifts at Obould's feet and had begged him to accept their fealty. The pilgrimages had been led by the shamans, so they all said. With their wicked deception, the dwarves had angered Gruumsh, and so many of Gruumsh's priestly followers had sent their respective tribes to the side of Obould, who would lead the way to vengeance. Obould, who had slain King Bruenor Battlehammer, would make the dwarves pay dearly for their sacrilege.

For Urlgen, of course, it had all come as a great relief. He was taller than his father, but not nearly strong enough to openly challenge the mighty orc leader. Add to Obould's great strength and skill his wondrously crafted, ridged and spiked black battle mail, and that greatsword of his, which could burst into

flame with but a thought, and no one, not even overly proud Urlgen, would even think of offering challenge for control of the tribe.

Urlgen didn't have to worry about that, though. The shamans, led by the gyrating priestess, were promising Obould so many of his dreams and desires and were praising him for a great victory at Shallows—a victory that had been achieved by his honored son. Obould looked at Urlgen more than once as the ceremony continued, and his toothy smile was wide. It wasn't that vicious smile that promised how greatly he would enjoy torturing someone. Obould was pleased with Urlgen, pleased with all of it.

King Bruenor Battlehammer was dead, after all, and the dwarves were in flight. And even though the orcs had lost nearly a thousand warriors at Shallows, their numbers had since swollen several times over. More were coming, too, climbing into the sunlight (many for perhaps the first time in their lives), blinking away the sting of the brightness, and moving along the mountain trails to the south, to the call of the shamans, to the call of Gruumsh, to the call of King Obould Many-Arrows.

"I will have my kingdom," Obould proclaimed when the shamans had finished their dance and their keening. "And once I am done with the land inside the mountains and the three mists, we will strike out against those who encircle us and oppose us. I will have Citadel Felbarr!" he cried, and a thousand orcs cheered.

"I will send the dwarves fleeing to Adbar, where I will seal them in their filthy holes!" Obould went on, leaping around and running along the front ranks of the gathered, and a thousand orcs cheered.

"I will shake the ground of Mirabar to the west!" Obould cried, and the cheers multiplied.

"I will make Silverymoon herself tremble at the mention of my name!"

That brought the greatest cheers of all, and the vocal Tsinka grabbed the great orc roughly and kissed him, offering herself to him, offering to him Gruumsh's blessing in the highest possible terms.

Obould swept her up with one powerful arm, crushing her close to his side, and the cheering intensified yet again.

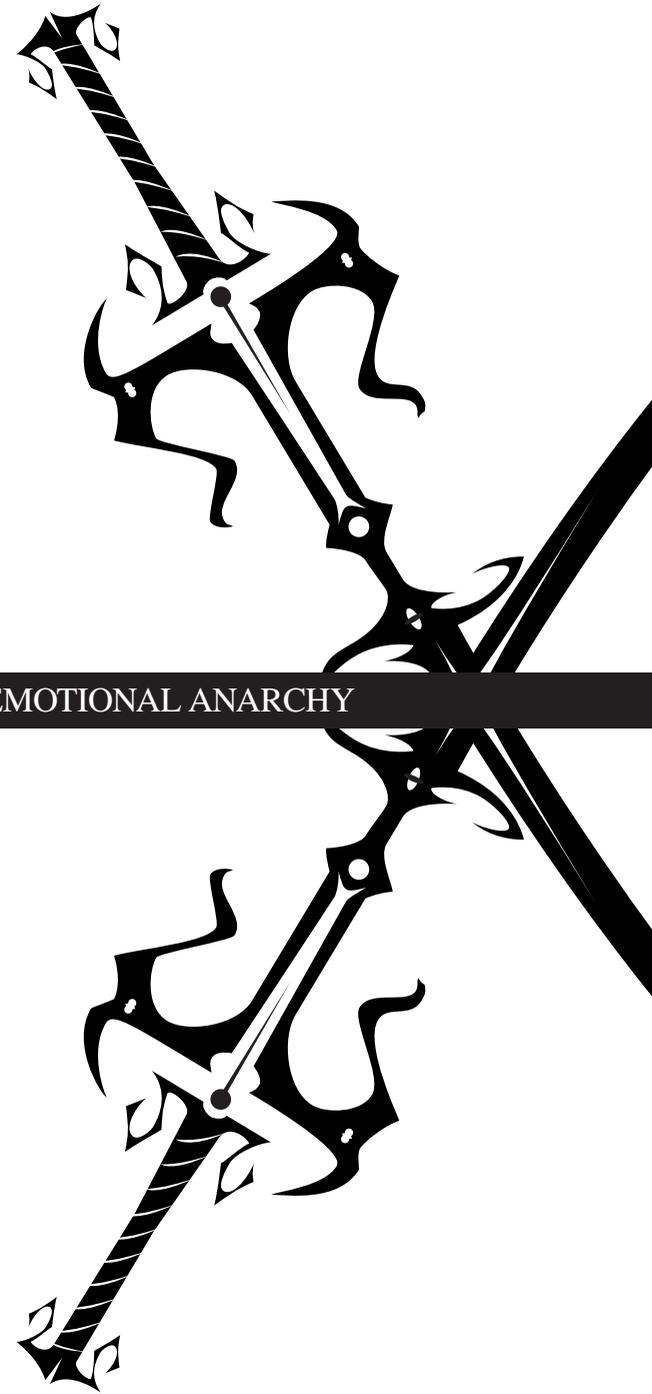
Urlgen wasn't cheering, but he was surely smiling as he watched Obould carry the priestess up the ramp to the defiled statue of Gruumsh. He was thinking how much greater his inheritance would soon become.

After all, Obould wouldn't live forever.

And if it seemed that he might, Urlgen was confident that he would find a way to correct that situation.

PART ONE

EMOTIONAL ANARCHY



I did everything right.
Every step of my journey out of Menzoberranzan was guided by my inner map of right and wrong, of community and selflessness. Even on those occasions when I failed, as everyone must, my missteps were of judgment or simple frailty and were not in disregard of my conscience. For in there, I know, reside the higher principles and tenets that move us all closer to our chosen gods, closer to our definitions, hopes, and understandings of paradise.

I did not abandon my conscience, but it, I fear, has deceived me.

I did everything right.

Yet Ellifain is dead, and my long-ago rescue of her is a mockery.

I did everything right.

And I watched Bruenor fall, and I expect that those others I loved, that everything I loved, fell with him.

Is there a divine entity out there somewhere, laughing at my foolishness?

Is there even a divine entity out there, anywhere?

Or was it all a lie, and worse, a self-deception?

Often have I considered community, and the betterment of the individual within the context of the betterment of the whole. This was the guiding principle of my existence, the realization that forced me from Menzoberranzan. And now, in this time of pain, I have come to understand—or perhaps it is just that now I have forced myself to admit—that my belief was also something much more personal. How ironic that in my declaration of community, I was in effect and in fact feeding my own desperate need to belong to something larger than myself.

In privately declaring and reinforcing the righteousness of my beliefs, I was doing no differently from those who flock before the preacher's pulpit. I was seeking comfort and guidance, only I was looking for the needed answers within, whereas so many others seek them without.

By that understanding, I did everything right. And yet, I cannot dismiss the growing realization, the growing trepidation, the growing terror, that I, ultimately, was wrong.

For what is the point if Ellifain is dead, and if she existed in such turmoil through all the short years of her life? For what is the point if I and my friends followed our hearts and trusted in our swords, only for me to watch them die beneath the rubble of a collapsing tower?

If I have been right all along, then where is justice, and where is the reciprocation of a grateful god?

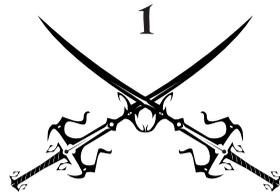
Even in asking that question, I see the hubris that has so infected me. Even in asking that question, I see the machinations of my soul laid bare. I cannot help but ask, am I any different than my kin? In technique, surely, but in effect? For in declaring community and dedication, did I not truly seek exactly the same things as the priestesses I left behind in Menzoberranzan? Did I, like they, not seek eternal life and higher standing among my peers?

As the foundation of Withegroo's tower swayed and toppled, so too have the illusions that have guided my steps.

I was trained to be a warrior. Were it not for my skill with my scimitars, I expect I would be a smaller player in the world around me, less respected and less accepted. That training and talent are all that I have left now; it is the foundation upon which I intend to build this new chapter in the curious and winding road that is the life of Drizzt Do'Urden. It is the extension of my rage that I will turn loose upon the wretched creatures that have so shattered all that I held dear. It is the expression of what I have lost: Ellifain, Bruenor, Wulfgar, Regis, Catti-brie, and, in effect, Drizzt Do'Urden.

These scimitars, Icingdeath and Twinkle by name, become my definition of myself now, and Guenhwyvar again is my only companion. I trust in both, and in nothing else.

—Drizzt Do'Urden



ANGER'S REMINDER

Drizzt didn't like to think of it as a shrine. Propped on a forked stick, the one-horned helmet of Bruenor Battlehammer dominated the small hollow that the dark elf had taken as his home. The helm was set right before the cliff face that served as the hollow's rear wall, in the only place within the natural shelter that got any sunlight at all.

Drizzt wanted it that way. He wanted to see the helmet. He wanted never to forget. And it wasn't just Bruenor he was determined to remember, and not just his other friends.

Most of all, Drizzt wanted to remember who had done that horrible thing to him and to his world.

He had to fall to his belly to crawl between the two fallen boulders and into the hollow, and even then the going was slow and tight. Drizzt didn't care; he actually preferred it that way. The total lack of comforts, the almost animalistic nature of his existence, was good for him, was cathartic, and even more than that, was yet another reminder to him of what he had to become, of whom he had to be if he wanted to survive. No more was he Drizzt Do'Urden of Icwind Dale, friend to Bruenor and Catti-brie, Wulfgar and Regis. No more was he Drizzt Do'Urden, the ranger trained by Montolio deBrouchee in the ways of nature and the spirit of Miellikki. He was once again that lone drow who had wandered out of Menzoberranzan. He was once again that refugee from the city of

dark elves, who had forsaken the ways of the priestesses who had so wronged him and who had murdered his father.

He was the Hunter, the instinctual creature who had defeated the fell ways of the Underdark, and who would repay the orc hordes for the death of his dearest friends.

He was the Hunter, who sealed his mind against all but survival, who put aside the emotional pain of the loss of Ellifain.

Drizzt knelt before the sacred totem one afternoon, watching the splay of sunlight on the tilted helmet. Bruenor had lost one of the horns on it years and years past, long before Drizzt had come into his life. The dwarf had never replaced the horn, he had told Drizzt, because it was a reminder to him always to keep his head low.

Delicate fingers moved up and felt the rough edge of that broken horn. Drizzt could still catch the smell of Bruenor on the leather band of the helm, as if the dwarf was squatting in the dark hollow beside him. As if they had just returned from another brutal battle, breathing heavy, laughing hard, and lathered in sweat.

The drow closed his eyes and saw again that last desperate image of Bruenor. He saw Withegroo's white tower, flames leaping up its side, a lone dwarf rushing around on top, calling orders to the bitter end. He saw the tower lean and tumble, and watched the dwarf disappear into the crumbling blocks.

He closed his eyes all the tighter to hold back the tears. He had to defeat them, had to push them far, far away. The warrior he had become had no place for such emotions. Drizzt opened his eyes and looked again at the helmet, drawing strength in his anger. He followed the line of a sunbeam to the recess behind the staked headgear, to see his own discarded boots.

Like the weak and debilitating emotion of grief, he didn't need them anymore.

Drizzt fell to his belly and slithered out through the small opening between the boulders, moving into the late afternoon sunlight. He jumped to his feet almost immediately after sliding clear and put his nose up to the wind. He glanced all around, his keen eyes searching every shadow and every play of the sunlight, his bare feet feeling the cool ground beneath him. With a cursory glance all around, the Hunter sprinted off for higher ground.

He came out on the side of a mountain just as the sun disappeared behind the western horizon, and there he waited, scouting the region as the shadows lengthened and twilight fell.

Finally, the light of a campfire glittered in the distance.



Drizzt's hand went instinctively to the onyx figurine in his belt pouch. He didn't take it forth and summon Guenhwyvar, though. Not that night.

His vision grew even more acute as the night deepened around him, and Drizzt ran off, silent as the shadows, elusive as a feather on a windy autumn day. He wasn't constricted by the mountain trails, for he was too nimble to be slowed by boulder tumbles and broken ground. He wove through trees easily, and so stealthily that many of the forest animals, even wary deer, never heard or noted his approach, never knew he had passed unless a shift in the wind brought his scent to them.

At one point, he came to a small river, but he leaped from wet stone to wet stone in such perfect balance that even their water-splashed sides did little to trip him up.

He had lost sight of the fire almost as soon as he came down from the mountain spur, but he had taken his bearings from up there and he knew where to run, as if anger itself was guiding his long and sure strides.

Across a small dell and around a thick copse of trees, the drow caught sight of the campfire once more, and he was close enough to see the silhouettes of the forms moving around it. They were orcs, he knew at once, from their height and broad shoulders and their slightly hunched manner of moving. A couple were arguing—no surprise there—and Drizzt knew enough of their guttural language to understand their dispute to be over which would keep watch. Clearly, neither wanted the duty, nor thought it anything more than an inconvenience.

The drow crouched behind some brush not far away and a wicked grin grew across his face. Their watch was indeed inconsequential, he thought, for alert or not, they would not take note of him.

They would not see the Hunter.



The brutish sentry dropped his spear across a big stone, interlocked his fingers, and inverted his hands. His knuckles cracked more loudly than snapping branches.

"Always Bellig," he griped, glancing back at the campfire and the many forms gathered around it, some resting, others tearing at scraps of putrid food. "Bellig keeps watch. You sleep. You eat. Always Bellig keeps watch."

He continued to grumble and complain, and he continued to look back at the encampment for a long while.

Finally, he turned back—to see facial features chiseled from ebony, to see

a shock of white hair, and to see eyes, those eyes! Purple eyes! Flaming eyes!

Bellig instinctively reached for his spear—or started to, until he saw the flash of a gleaming blade to the left and the right. Then he tried to bring his arms in close to block instead, but he was far too slow to catch up to the dark elf's scimitars.

He tried to scream out, but by that point, the curved blades had cut two deep lines, severing his windpipe.

Bellig clutched at those mortal wounds and the swords came back, then back again, and again.

The dying orc turned as if to run to his comrades, but the scimitars struck again, at his legs, their fine edges easily parting muscle and tendon.

Bellig felt a hand grab him as he fell, guiding him down quietly to the ground. He was still alive, though he had no way to draw breath. He was still alive, though his lifeblood deepened in a dark red pool around him.

His killer moved off, silently.



"*Arsh*, get yourself quiet over there, stupid Bellig," Oonta called from under the boughs of a wide-spreading elm not far to the side of the campsite. "Me and Figgle is talking!"

"Him's a big mouth," Figgle the Ugly agreed.

With his nose missing, one lip torn away, and green-gray teeth all twisted and tusk, Figgle was a garish one even by orc standards. He had bent too close to a particularly nasty worg in his youth and had paid the price.

"Me gonna kill him soon," Oonta remarked, drawing a crooked smile from his sentry companion.

A spear soared in, striking the tree between them and sticking fast.

"Bellig!" Oonta cried as he and Figgle stumbled aside. "Me gonna kill you sooner!"

With a growl, Oonta reached for the quivering spear, as Figgle wagged his head in agreement.

"Leave it," came a voice, speaking basic Orcish but too melodic in tone to belong to an orc.

Both sentries froze and turned around to look in the direction from whence the spear had come. There stood a slender and graceful figure, black hands on hips, dark cape fluttering out in the night wind behind him.

"You will not need it," the dark elf explained.



“Huh?” both orcs said together.

“Whatcha seeing?” asked a third sentry, Oonta’s cousin Broos. He came in from the side, to Oonta and Figgle’s left, the dark elf’s right. He looked to the two and followed their frozen gazes back to the drow, and he, too, froze in place. “Who that be?”

“A friend,” the dark elf said.

“Friend of Oonta’s?” Oonta asked, poking himself in the chest.

“A friend of those you murdered in the town with the tower,” the dark elf explained, and before the orcs could even truly register those telling words, the dark elf’s scimitars appeared in his hands.

He might have reached for them so quickly and fluidly that the orcs hadn’t followed the movement, but to them, all three, it simply seemed as if the weapons had appeared there.

Broos looked to Oonta and Figgle for clarification and asked, “Huh?”

And the dark form rushed past him.

And he was dead.

The dark elf came in hard for the orc duo. Oonta yanked the spear free, while Figgle drew out a pair of small blades, one with a forked, duel tip, the other greatly curving.

Oonta deftly brought the spear in an overhand spin, its tip coming over and down hard to block the charging drow.

But the drow slid down below that dipping spear, skidding right in between the orcs. Oonta fumbled with the spear as Figgle brought his two weapons down hard.

But the drow wasn’t there, for he had leaped straight up, rising in the air between the orcs. Both skilled orc warriors altered their weapons wonderfully, coming in hard at either side of the nimble creature.

Those scimitars were there, though, one intercepting the spear, the other neatly picking off Figgle’s strikes with a quick double parry. And even as the dark elf’s blades blocked the attack, the dark elf’s feet kicked out, one behind, one ahead, both scoring direct and stunning hits on orc faces.

Figgle fell back, snapping his blades back and forth before him to ward off any attacks while he was so disoriented and dazed. Oonta similarly retreated, brandishing the spear in the air before him. They regained their senses together and found themselves staring at nothing but each other.

“Huh?” Oonta asked, for the drow was not to be seen.

Figgle jerked suddenly and the tip of a curving scimitar erupted from the center of his chest. It disappeared almost immediately, the dark elf coming

around the orc’s side, his second scimitar taking out the creature’s throat as he passed.

Wanting no part of such an enemy, Oonta threw the spear, turned, and fled, running flat out for the main encampment and crying out in fear. Orcs leaped up all around the terrified Oonta, spilling their foul foods—raw and rotting meat, mostly—and scrambling for weapons.

“What’d you do?” one cried.

“Who got the killing?” yelled another.

“Drow elf! Drow elf!” Oonta cried. “Drow elf kilt Figgle and Broos! Drow elf kilt Bellig!”



Drizzt allowed the fleeing orc to escape back within the lighted area of the camp proper and used the distraction of the bellowing brute to get into the shadows of a large tree right on the encampment’s perimeter. He slid his scimitars away as he did a quick scan, counting more than a dozen of the creatures.

Hand over hand, the drow went up the tree, listening to Oonta’s recounting of the three Drizzt had slain.

“Drow elf?” came more than one curious echo, and one of them mentioned Donnia, a name that Drizzt had heard before.

Drizzt moved out to the edge of one branch, some fifteen feet up from the ground and almost directly over the gathering of orcs. Their eyes were turning outward, to the shadows of the surrounding trees, compelled by Oonta’s tale. Unseen above them, Drizzt reached inside himself, to those hereditary powers of the drow, the innate magic of the race, and he brought forth a globe of impenetrable darkness in the midst of the orc group, right atop the fire that marked the center of the encampment. Down went the drow, leaping from branch to branch, his bare feet feeling every touch and keeping him in perfect balance, his enchanted, speed-enhancing anklets allowing him to quickstep whenever necessary to keep his feet precisely under his weight.

He hit the ground running, toward the darkness globe, and those orcs outside of it who noted the ebon-skinned figure gave a shout and charged at him, one launching a spear.

Drizzt ran right past that awkward missile—he believed that he could have harmlessly caught it if he had so desired. He greeted the first orc staggering out of the globe with another of his innate magical abilities, summoning purplish-blue flames to outline the creature’s form. The flame didn’t burn at the flesh,



but made marking target areas so much easier for the skilled drow, who, in truth, didn't need the help.

They also distracted the orc, with the fairly stupid creature looking down at its flaming limbs and crying out in fear. It looked back up Drizzt's way just in time to see the flash of a scimitar.

Another orc emerged right behind it and the drow never slowed, sliding down low beneath the orc's defensively whipping club and deftly twisting his scimitar around the creature's leg, severing its hamstring. By the time the howling orc hit the ground, Drizzt the Hunter was inside the darkness globe.

He moved purely on instinct, his muscles and movements reacting to the noises around him and to his tactile sensations. Without even consciously registering it, the Hunter knew from the warmth of the ground against his bare feet where the fire was located, and every time he felt the touch of some orc bumbling around beside him, his scimitars moved fast and furious, turning and striking even as he rushed past.

At one point, he didn't even feel an orc, didn't even hear an orc, but his sense of smell told him that one was beside him. A short slash of Twinkle brought a shriek and a crash as the creature went down.

Again without any conscious counting, Drizzt the Hunter knew when he would be crossing through to the other side of the darkness globe. Somehow, within him, he had registered and measured his every step.

He came out fast, in perfect balance, his eyes immediately focusing on the quartet of orcs rushing at him, his warrior's instincts drawing a line of attack to which he was already reacting.

He went ahead and down, meeting the thrust of a spear with a blinding double parry, one blade following the other. Either of Drizzt's fine scimitars could have shorn through the crude spear, but he didn't press the first through and he turned the second to the flat of the blade when he struck. Let the spear remain intact; it didn't matter after his second blade, moving right to left across his chest, knocked the weapon up high.

For Drizzt's feet moved ahead in a sudden blur bringing him past the off-balance orc, and Twinkle took it in the throat.

Drizzt continued without slowing, every step rotating him left just a bit, so that as he approached the second orc, he turned and pivoted completely, Twinkle again leading the way with a sidelong slash that caught the orc's extended sword arm across the wrist and sent its weapon flying. Following that slash as he completed the circuit, his second scimitar, Icingdeath, came in fast and hard, taking the creature in the ribs.

And the Hunter was already past.

He went down low, under a swinging club, and leaped up high over a thrusting spear, planting his feet on the weapon shaft as he descended, taking the weapon down under his weight. Across went Twinkle, but the orc ducked. Hardly slowing, Drizzt flipped the scimitar into an end-over-end spin, then caught the blade with a reverse grip and thrust it out behind him, catching the surprised club-wielder right in the chest as it charged at his back.

At the same time, the drow's other hand worked independently, Icingdeath slashing the spear-wielding orc's upraised, blocking arm once, twice, and a third time. Extracting Twinkle, Drizzt skipped to the side, and the dying orc stumbled forward past him, tangling with the second, who was clutching at his thrashed arm.

The Hunter was already gone, rushing out to the side in a direct charge at a pair of orcs who were working in apparent coordination. Drizzt went down to his knees in a skid and the orcs reacted, turning spear and sword down low. As soon as his knees hit the ground, though, the drow threw himself into a forward roll, tucking his shoulder and coming right around to his feet, where he pushed off with all his strength, leaping and continuing his turn. He went past and over the surprised pair, who hardly registered the move.

Drizzt landed lightly, still in perfect balance, and came around to the left with Twinkle leading in a slash that had the turning orcs stumbling even more. His weapons out wide to their respective sides, Drizzt reversed Twinkle's flow and brought Icingdeath across the other way, the weapons crossing precisely between the orcs, following through as wide as the drow could reach. A turn of his arms put his hands atop the weapons, and he reversed into a double backhand.

Neither orc had even managed to get its weapon around enough to block either strike. Both orcs tumbled, hit both ways by both blades.

The Hunter was already gone.

Orcs scrambled all around, understanding that they could not stand against that dark foe. None held ground before Drizzt as he rushed back the way he had come, cleaving the head of the orc with the torn arm, then dashing back into the globe of darkness, where he heard at least one of the brutes hiding, cowering on the ground. Again he fell into the world of his other senses, feeling the heat, hearing every sound. His weapons engaged one orc before him; he heard a second shifting and crouching to the side.

A quick side step brought him to the fire, and the cooking pot set on a tripod. He kicked out the far leg and rushed back the other way.

In the blackness of his magical globe, the one orc standing before him



couldn't see his smile as the other orc, boiling broth falling all over it, began to howl and scramble.

The orc before him attacked wildly and cried for help. The Hunter could feel the wind from its furious swings.

Measuring the flow of one such over-swing, the Hunter had little trouble in sliding in behind.

He went out of the globe once more, leaving the orc spinning down to the ground, mortally wounded.

A quick run around the globe told Drizzt that only two orcs remained in the camp, one squirming on the ground, its lifeblood pouring out, the other howling and rolling to alleviate the burn from the hot stew.

The slash of scimitars, perfectly placed, ended the movements of both. And the Hunter went out into the night in pursuit, to finish the task.



Poor Oonta fell against the side of a tree, gasping for breath. He waved away his companion as the orc implored him to keep running. They had put more than a mile of ground between them and the encampment.

"We got to!"

"*You* got to!" Oonta argued between gasps.

Oonta had crawled out of the Spine of the World on the orders of his tribe's shaman, to join in the glory of King Obould, to do war with those who had defaced the image of Gruumsh on a battlefield not far from that spot.

Oonta had come out to fight dwarves, not drow!

His companion grabbed him again and tried to pull him along, but Oonta slapped his hand away. Oonta lowered his head and continued to fight for his breath.

"Do take your time," came a voice behind them, speaking broken Orcish—and with a melodic tone that no orc could mimic.

"We got to go!" Oonta's companion argued, turning to face the speaker.

Oonta, knowing the source of those words, knowing that he was dead, didn't even look up.

"We can talk," he heard his companion implore the dark elf, and he heard, too, his companion's weapon drop to the ground.

"I can," the dark elf replied, and a devilish, diamond-edged scimitar came across, cleanly cutting out the orc's throat. "But I doubt you'll find a voice."

In response, the orc gasped and gurgled.



And fell.

Oonta stood up straight but still did not turn to face the deadly adversary. He moved against a tree and held his hands out defenselessly, hoping the death-blow would fall quickly.

He felt the drow's hot breath on the side of his neck, felt the tip of one blade against his back, the other against the back of his neck.

"You find the leader of this army," the drow told him. "You tell him that I will come to call, and very soon. You tell him that I will kill him."

A flick of that top scimitar took Oonta's right ear—the orc growled and grimaced, but he was disciplined and smart enough to not flee and to not turn around.

"You tell him," the voice said in his ear. "You tell them all."

Oonta started to respond, to assure the deadly attacker that he would do exactly that.

But the Hunter was already gone.