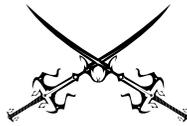


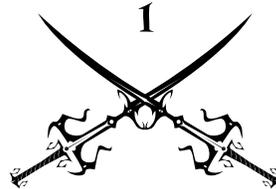


R·A·SALVATORE

THE THOUSAND
ORCS

THE HUNTER'S BLADES TRILOGY





ALLIANCE

He wore his masterwork plated armor as if it was an extension of his tough skin. Not a piece of the interlocking black metal was flat and unadorned, with flowing designs and overlapping bas-reliefs. A pair of great curving spikes extended from each upper arm plate, and each joint cover had a sharpened and tri-pointed edge to it. The armor itself could be used as a weapon, though King Obould Many-Arrows preferred the greatsword he always kept strapped to his back, a magnificent weapon that could burst into flame at his command.

Yes, the strong and cunning orc loved fire, loved the way it indiscriminately ate everything in its path. He wore a black iron crown, set with four brilliant and enchanted rubies, each of which could bring about a mighty fireball.

He was a walking weapon, stout and strong, the kind of creature that one wouldn't punch, figuring that doing so would do more damage to the attacker than to the attacked. Many rivals had been slaughtered by Obould as they stood there, hesitating, pondering how in the world they might begin to hurt this king among orcs.

Of all his weapons, though, Obould's greatest was his mind. He knew how to exploit a weakness. He knew how to shape a battlefield, and most of all, he knew how to inspire those serving him.



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And so, unlike so many of his kin, Obould walked into Shining White, the ice and rock caverns of the mighty frost giantess, Gerti Oreldottr, with his eyes up and straight, his head held high. He had come in as a potential partner, not as a lesser.

Taking his lead, Obould's entourage, including his most promising son Urlgen Threefist (so named because of the ridged headpiece he wore, which allowed him to head-butt as if he had a third fist), walked with a proud and confident gait, though the ceilings of Shining White were far from comfortably low, and many of the blue-skinned guards they passed were well more than twice their height and several times their weight.

Even Obould's indomitable nature took a bit of a hit, though, when the frost giant escort led him and his band through a huge set of iron-banded doors into a freezing chamber that was much more ice than stone. Against the wall to the right of the doors, before a throne fashioned of black stone and blue cloth, capped in blue ice, stood the giantess, the heir apparent of the Jarl, leader of the frost giant tribes of the Spine of the World.

Gerti was beautiful by the measure of almost any race. She stood more than a dozen feet tall, her blue-skinned body shapely and muscled. Her eyes, a darker shade of blue, focused sharp enough to cut ice, it seemed, and her long fingers appeared both delicate and sensitive, and strong enough to crush rock. She wore her golden hair long—as long as Obould was tall. Her cloak, fashioned of silver wolf fur, was held together by a gem-studded ring, large enough for a grown elf to wear as a belt, and a collar of huge, pointed teeth adorned her neck. She wore a dress of brown, distressed leather, covering her ample bosom, then cut to a small flap on one side to reveal her muscled belly, and slit up high on her shapely legs, giving her freedom of movement. Her boots were high and topped with the same silvery fur—and were also magical, or so said every tale. It was said they allowed the giantess to quicken her long strides and cover more ground across the mountainous terrain than any but avian creatures.

"Well met, Gerti," Obould said, speaking nearly flawless frost giant.

He bowed low, his plated armor creaking.

"You will address me as Dame Oreldottr," the giantess replied curtly, her voice resonant and strong, echoing off the stone and ice.

"Dame Oreldottr," Obould corrected with another bow. "You have heard of the success of our raid, yes?"



“You killed a few dwarves,” Gerti said with a snicker, and her assembled guards responded in kind.

“I have brought you a gift of that significant victory.”

“Significant?” the giantess said with dripping sarcasm.

“Significant not in the number of enemies slain, but in the first success of our joined peoples,” Obould quickly explained.

Gerti’s frown showed that she considered the description of them as “joined peoples” a bit premature, at least, which hardly surprised or dismayed Obould.

“The tactics work well,” Obould went on, undaunted. He turned and motioned to Urlgen. The orc, taller than his father but not as thick of limb and torso, stepped forward and pulled a large sack off his back, bringing it around and spilling its gruesome contents onto the floor.

Five dwarf heads rolled out, including those of the brothers Stokkum and Bokkum, and Duggan McKnuckles.

Gerti crinkled her face and looked away.

“I would hardly call these gifts,” she said.

“Symbols of victory,” Obould replied, seeming a bit off-balance for the first time in the meeting.

“I have little interest in placing the heads of lesser races upon my walls as trophies,” Gerti remarked. “I prefer objects of beauty, and dwarves hardly qualify.”

Obould stared at her hard for a moment, understanding well that she could easily and honestly have included orcs in that last statement. He kept his wits about him, though, and motioned for his son to gather up the heads and put them back away.

“Bring me the head of Emerus Warcrown of Felbarr,” Gerti said. “There is a trophy worthy of keeping.”

Obould narrowed his eyes and bit back his response. Gerti was playing him and hard. King Obould Many Arrows had once ruled the former Citadel Felbarr, until a few years previous, when Emerus Warcrown had returned, expelling Obould and his clan. It remained a bitter loss to Obould, what he considered his greatest error, for he and his clan had been battling another orc tribe at the time, leaving Warcrown and his dwarves an opportunity to retake Felbarr.

Obould wanted Felbarr back, dearly so, but Felbarr’s strength had grown considerably over the past few years, swelling to nearly seven



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thousand dwarves, and those in halls of stone fashioned for defense.

The orc king fought back his anger with tremendous discipline, not wanting Gerti to see the sting produced by her sharp words.

“Or bring me the head of the King of Mithral Hall,” Gerti went on. “Whether Gandalug Battlehammer, or as rumors now say, the beast Bruenor once again. Or perhaps, the Marchion of Mirabar—yes, his fat head and fuzzy red beard would make a fine trophy! And bring me Mirabar’s Sceptrana, as well. Isn’t she a pretty thing?”

The giantess paused for a moment and looked around at her amused warriors, a wicked grin spreading wide on her fine-featured face.

“You wish to deliver a trophy suitable for Dame Orelsdotr?” she asked slyly. “Then fetch me the pretty head of Lady Alustriel of Silverymoon. Yes, Obould—”

“*King* Obould,” the proud orc corrected, drawing a hush from the frost giant soldiers and a gasp from his sorely out-powered entourage.

Gerti looked at him hard then nodded her approval.

They let their banter go at that, for both understood the preposterous level it had reached. Lady Alustriel of Silverymoon was a target far beyond them. Neither would put her and her enchanted city off the extended list of potential enemies, though. Silverymoon was the jewel of the region.

Both Gerti Orelsdotr and Obould Many Arrows coveted jewels.

“I am planning the next assault,” Obould said after the pause, again, speaking slowly in the strange language, forcing his diction and enunciation to perfection.

“Its scope?”

Obould shrugged and shook his head. “Nothing major. Caravan or a town. The scope will depend upon our escorting artillery,” he ended with a sly grin.

“A handful of giants are worth a thousand orcs,” Gerti replied, taking the cue a bit further than Obould would have preferred.

Still, the cunning orc allowed her that boast without refute, well aware of her superior attitude and not really concerned about it at that time. He needed the frost giants behind his soldiers for diplomatic reasons more than for practical gain.

“My warriors did enjoy plunking the dwarves with their boulders,” Gerti admitted, and the giant to the side of the throne dais, who had been on the raid, nodded and smiled his agreement. “Very well, King Obould,



I will spare you four giants for the next fight. Send your emissary when you are ready for them.”

Obould bowed, ducking his head as he did, not wanting Gerti to see his wide grin, not wanting her to know how important her additions would truly be to him and his cause.

He came up straight again and stomped his right boot, his signal to his entourage to form up behind him as he turned and left.



“They are your pawns,” Donnia Soldou said to Gerti soon after Obould and his orc entourage had departed.

The female dark elf, dressed head to toe in deep shades of gray and black, moved easily among the frost giants, ignoring the threatening scowls many of them assumed whenever she was about. Donnia walked with the confidence of the dark elves, and with the knowledge that her subtle threats to Gerti concerning bringing an army to wipe out every living creature in the Spine of the World who opposed her had not fallen on deaf ears. Such were the often true tactics and pleasures of the dark elves.

Of course, Donnia had nothing at all to back up the claim. She was a rogue, part of a band that included only four members. So when she threw back her cowl and shook her long and thick white hair into its customary place, thrown to the side so that the tresses covered half her face, including her right eye, she did so with an air of absolute certainty.

Gerti didn't have to know that.

“They are orcs,” Gerti Orelsdottr replied with obvious disdain. “They are pawns to any who need to make them so. It is not easy to resist the urge to squash Obould into the rock, simply for being so ugly, simply for being so stupid . . . simply for the pleasure of it!”

“Obould's designs strengthen your own,” Donnia said. “His minions are numerous. Numerous enough to wreak havoc among the dwarf and human communities of the region, but not so overwhelming as to engage the legions of the greater cities, like Silverymoon.”

“He wants Felbarr, so that he can rename it the Citadel of Many Arrows. Do you believe that he can take so prosperous a stronghold and not invoke the wrath of Lady Alustriel?”

“Did Silverymoon get involved when Obould's kin sacked Felbarr the



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last time?” Donnia gave a chuckle. “The Lady and her advisors have enough to keep them concerned within their own borders. Felbarr will be isolated, eventually. Perhaps Mithral Hall or even Citadel Adbar will choose to send aid, but it will not be substantial if we create chaos in the neighboring mountain ranges and out of the Trollmoors.”

“I have little desire to do battle with dwarves in their tiny tunnels,” the frost giant remarked.

“That is why you have Obould and his thousands.”

“The dwarves will slaughter them.”

Donnia smiled and shrugged, as if that notion hardly bothered her.

Gerti started to respond, but just nodded her agreement.

Donnia held her smile, thinking that this was going quite well. Donnia and her companions had stumbled upon the situation at exactly the right time. The old Grayhand, Jarl Orel of the frost giants, was very near death, by all accounts, and his daughter was anxious to assume his mantle. Gerti was possessed of tremendous hubris, for herself and her race. She considered frost giants the greatest race of Faerûn, destined to dominate. Her pride and racism exceeded even that Donnia had seen from the matron mothers of her home city, Ched Nasad.

That made Gerti an easy mark indeed.

“How fares the Grayhand?” Donnia asked, wanting to keep Gerti’s appetite whetted.

“He cannot speak, nor would he make any sense if he did. His reign is at its end in all ways but formal.”

“But you are ready,” Donnia assured the already self-assured giantess. “You, Dame Gerti Oreldottr, will bring your tribes to the pinnacle of their glory, and woe to all of those who stand against you.”

Gerti finally sat down upon her carved throne, resting back, but with her chin thrust high and strong, a pose of supreme pride.

Donnia kept her smile to herself.



“I hate them damn giants as much as I hate them damn dwarves,” Urlgen proclaimed when he and the others were out of Gerti’s caves. “I’d spit in Gerti’s face, if I could reach it!”

“You keeps you words to yourself,” Obould scolded. “You said them



giants helped in you's raid—didn't you like their bouncing boulders? Think it'll be easier like going after dwarf towers without those boulders softening them up?"

"Then why is we fighting the damn dwarves?" another of the group dared to ask.

Obould spun and punched him in the face, laying him low. So much for that debate.

"Well, let's see how much them giants'll be helping us then," Urlgen pressed. "Let's get them all out on a raid and flatten the buildings above-ground at Mirabar!"

A couple of the others bristled and nodded eagerly at that thought.

"Need I remind you of the course we have chosen?" came a voice from the side, very different from the guttural grunting of the orcs, more melodic and musical, though hardly less firm. The group turned to see Ad'non Kareese step out of the shadows, and many had to blink to even recognize how completely the drow had been hidden just a moment before.

"Well met, Sneak," said Obould.

Ad'non bowed, taking the compliment in stride.

"We met the big witch," Obould started to explain.

"So I heard," said the drow, and before Obould could begin to elaborate, Ad'non added, "All of it."

The orc king gave a chortle. "Course you's did, Sneak. Can get anywhere you wants, can't you?"

"Anywhere and anytime," the drow replied with all confidence.

Once he had been among the finest scouts of Ched Nasad, a thief and assassin with a growing reputation. Of course, that distinction had eventually led him to an ill-fated assassination attempt upon a rather powerful priestess, and the resulting fallout had put Ad'non on the road out of the city and out of the Underdark.

Over the past twenty years, he and his Ched Nasad associates, fellow assassin Donnia Soldou, the priestess Kaer'lic Suun Wett, and the newcomer, a clever fellow named Tos'un Arngo sent astray in the disastrous Menzoberranzan raid on Mithral Hall, had found more fun and games on the surface than ever they had known in their respective cities and more freedom.

In Ched Nasad and in Menzoberranzan, the four had been hire-ons and pawns for the greater powers, except for Kaer'lic who had been



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fashioning a mighty reputation among the priestesses of the Spider Queen before disaster had blocked her path. Up among the lesser races, the four acted with impunity, ever with the threat that they were the advance for great drow armies, ready to sweep in and eliminate all foes. Even proud Obould and prouder Gerti Orelsdottr would shift uncomfortably in their respective seats at the slightest hint of that catastrophe.

“So we push up that course a bit,” Urlgen argued against the drow. “Choice ain’t you’ses, Sneak. Choice is Obould’s.”

“And Gerti’s,” the drow reminded.

“Bah, we can fool the witch easy enough!” Urlgen declared, and the others nodded and grunted their agreement.

“Fool her into bringing about complete destruction for her designs and for your father’s,” the drow calmly replied, ending the cheering session. Ad’non looked at Obould as he continued, “Small forays alone, for a long while. You asked my opinion, and I have not wavered on it for a moment. Small forays and with restraint. We draw them out, little by little.”

“That might be taking years!” Urlgen protested.

Ad’non nodded, conceding the point.

“The minor skirmishes are expected and even accepted as an unavoidable by-product of the environment by all the folk of the region,” he explained, as he had so often in the past. “A caravan intercepted here, a village sacked there, and none will get overly excited, for none will understand the scope of it. You can tickle the gold sacks of the dwarves, but prod your spear too deeply, move them beyond a reasonable response, and you will unite the tribes.”

He stared hard at Obould and continued, “You will awaken the beast. Think of the three dwarf strongholds joined in alliance, supplying each other with goods, weapons and even soldiers through their connecting tunnels. Think of the battle you will face in reclaiming the Citadel of Many Arrows if Adbar lends them several thousand shield dwarves and Mithral Hall outfits them all in the finest of metals. Why, Mithral Hall is the smallest of the three, yet she fended the army of Menzoberranzan!”

His emphasis on that last word, a name to strike terror into the hearts of any who were not of Menzoberranzan—and in the hearts of a good many who *were* of the city—had a couple of the orcs shuddering visibly.

“And through it all, we must take care, wise Obould, not to invoke the wrath of Silverymoon, whose Lady is a friend to Mithral Hall,” the drow



advisor went on. "And we must never allow an alliance to form between Mithral Hall and Mirabar."

"Bah, Mirabar hates them newcomers!"

"True enough, but they do not fear the newcomer dwarves in any but economic ways," Ad'non explained. "They will fear you and Gerti with their very lives, and such fear makes for unexpected alliances."

"Like the one between me and Gerti?"

Ad'non considered that for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, you and Gerti understand that you'll both move closer to your goals by allying. You are not afraid, of course."

"Course not!"

"Nor should you be. Play the game as we've discussed, as you and I have planned it all along, my friend Obould." He moved closer and whispered so that only the orc king could hear. "Show why you are above the others of your race, why you alone might gather a strong enough alliance to reclaim your rightful citadel."

Obould straightened and nodded, then turned to his kinfolk and recited the litany that Ad'non had taught him for months and months.

"Patience . . ."



"I'll not even bother to ask how your parlay with Obould progressed," priestess Kaer'lic Suun Wett remarked when Ad'non finally arrived at the comfortable, richly adorned chamber off a deep, deep tunnel below the southernmost spurs of the Spine of the World, not far from the caverns of Shining White, though much deeper.

Kaer'lic was the most striking member of the group. Heavysset, which was very unusual for a dark elf, and with broad shoulders, Kaer'lic had lost her right eye in a battle when she was a young priestess nearly a century before. Rather than have the orb magically restored, the stubborn Kaer'lic had replaced it with a black, many-chambered eye pried from the carcass of a giant spider. She claimed the orb was functional and allowed her to see things that others could not, but her three friends knew the truth of it. Many times, Ad'non and Donnia had sneaked up on Kaer'lic's right side, completely undetected, for no better reason than to tease her.



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Still, the two assassins had gone along with Kaer'lic's ruse to their newest companion for many tendays. Spiders, after all, made quite an impact on dark elves from Menzoberranzan, and Tos'un Armgo had remained suitably impressed for a long time, until Ad'non had finally let him in on the ruse—and that, only after the three long-term friends had come to understand that Tos'un was one who could be trusted.

Ad'non shrugged in response to Kaer'lic's remarks, telling the other three that it had gone exactly as they would all expect when dealing with an orc. Indeed, Obould was more cunning than his kind, but that wasn't really saying much by drow standards.

"Dame Gerti holds the course, as well," Donnia added. "She believes it to be her destiny to rule the Spine of the World and will follow any course that may lead her to that place."

"She might be right," Tos'un put in. "Gerti Orelsdottr is a smart one, and between Obould's masses and the stirring trolls from the moors, enough chaos might be created for Gerti to step forward."

"And we will be ready to profit, in material and in pleasure, whatever the outcome," Donnia said with a wry grin, one that was matched by her three friends.

"It amazes me that I ever considered returning to Menzoberranzan," Tos'un Armgo remarked, and the others laughed.

Donnia and Ad'non were staring rather intently at each other when that laughter abated. The lovers had been apart for several days, after all, and both of them found such talk of conquest, chaos and profit quite stimulating.

They practically ran out of the chamber to their private room.

Kaer'lic howled with renewed laughter as they departed, shaking her head. She was always more pragmatic about such needs, never reducing them to overpowering levels, as the two assassins often did.

"They will die in each others' arms," she remarked to Tos'un, "coupling and oblivious to the threat."

"There are worse ways to go, I suppose," the son of House Barrison Del'Armgo replied, and Kaer'lic laughed again.

These two were part-time lovers as well, but only part time, and not for a long, long time. Kaer'lic wasn't really interested in a partner, in truth, far preferring a slave to use as a toy.

"We should expand these raids to the Moonwood," she remarked



lewdly. “Perhaps we could convince Obould to capture us a couple of young moon elves.”

“A couple?” Tos’un said skeptically. “A handful would be more fun.”

Kaer’lic laughed yet again.

Tos’un leaned back into the thick furs of his divan, wondering again how he could have ever even considered returning to the dangers discomforts and subjugation that he, as a male, could not avoid, along the dark avenues of Menzoberranzan.